Preface

The aim of this book is simply stated: to rehabilitate a thinking of negativity through an immanent critique of contemporary Continental theory. This could appear to be a deliberately quixotic gesture. If we consider contemporary theory as polarised between the antithetical figures of Alain Badiou and Antonio Negri – an austere Platonism versus a joyous Spinozism – this apparent antagonism conceals their shared commitment to affirmation. In very different forms they both affirm the creation of unashamedly metaphysical ontologies, the inventive potential of the subject, the necessity for the production of novelty, and a concomitant suspicion of the negative and negativity. Beyond these two figures, and unnoticed in all the disputes, debates and metaphorical wars that have wracked contemporary theory, this ‘affirmationism’ constitutes a dominant and largely unremarked *doxa*. Outside of high theoretical positions a more dispersed affirmationist consensus operates in the contemporary humanities and social sciences. Although proclaiming its opposition to the supposed abstractions of high theory, this ‘low affirmationism’ does so in the name of affirming historical density, complexity and materiality – thereby simply replacing one form of affirmation and construction with another, that is supposedly more nuanced. The result is that any rehabilitation of negativity faces an inhospitable environment, in which it is at best condescended to as the sign of the last remnants of a paleo-Hegelianism, or at worst regarded as the endorsement of nihilistic destruction. Reifying negativity into *the* negative, which is treated as synonymous with what is outdated or purely destructive, these ideological mystifications serve their purpose in blocking any thinking of negativity as a practice.

We can easily adduce internal reasons for the hegemony of affirmation: the persistence of a dispersed quasi-Nietzscheanism and neo-Spinozism, a continuing fear of the supposed totalising effects of dialectical thought, and a general turn to historicism, especially the historicisation of difference. A more speculative answer also suggests

itself: the politics and metaphysics of affirmationism are indicative of a response and resistance to the dynamics of contemporary neo-liberal capitalism. What Marx had identified as the dissolutive logic of capital – ‘all that is solid melts into air’ – has, once again, come to the fore after the brief and localised hiatus of supposed stability that was Fordism. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have provided a resonant re-statement of Marx’s point in their analysis of capitalism as operating through an axiomatic of deterritorialisation – the filtering, interception and concentration of decoded flows. This ‘return’ of capitalism to the primacy of decoded flows has not gone unopposed: the Chiapas uprising of 1994, the emergence of what is called in Italy ‘*Il popolo di Seattle*’ in 1999, the anti-war protests of 2004 and the experiments of ‘laboratory Latin America’, have all been signs of resistance, although ambiguous in terms of their success. I would argue that the affirmative theorisations of Badiou, Negri and others, including the continuing resonance of the thought of Deleuze, also belong to this cycle of contestation.

These orientations, which were formed by the anti-systemic struggles of the 1960s and 1970s (usually condensed in the figure of ‘May ’68’), have endeavoured to adapt to new conditions of defeat and dispersion. In particular they have sought to resist capitalism’s pseudo-dialectic, in which the globalising logic of the commodity is predicated on the management and distribution of difference. Resistance to this dialectic, which found its mirror in poststructuralist theorisations of difference, has often taken the form of the affirmation of new generic forms of universality. Negri, inspired by Deleuze, insists on a superior form of difference – the monstrous multitude of immanent singularities – that exceeds any form of capitalist control. For Badiou resistance requires the thinking of an egalitarian communist politics of the ‘Same’, subtracted from capital and indifferent to socially sanctioned difference. We could also add Jacques Rancière’s affirmation of an axiomatic egalitarian politics available to all, which ruptures the ordered policing of social hierarchies, and Giorgio Agamben’s invocation of generic *potentia* as an ontological politics of refusal of the state and capital. Despite all the differences and tensions between these theories they form an affirmationist bloc committed to affirming new points of resistance supposedly intractable to capitalist capture or deterritorialisation.

While I am in sympathy with this desire for resistance it is precisely the affirmation of some positive, primary and productive point, or points, of resistance that first aroused my suspicion. The mantra-like repetition of Deleuze’s maxim that ‘resistance comes first’ by Negri and others, evaded, it seemed to me, the complexity of the question of

resistance in the face of capital's powers of recuperation. The irony was that the very desire to refuse the recuperation of difference by invoking a superior power of positive difference *qua* resistance brought this thinking into alignment with the ideology of contemporary 'creative capitalism' – one predicated on invoking the inexhaustible value-creating powers of novelty, production and creativity. The same is true of Badiou's invocation of rare events as unique sites requiring affirmation, which leads to a surprisingly similar model of resistance couched in the terms of construction and production. The wider tendency in affirmationism to ontologise resistance as a perpetually occluded actuality left that resistance all too vulnerable to the cunning of capitalist reason.

Of course there is a rich alternative history of dialectical theory attuned to a thinking of immanent negativity: from Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, to contemporary figures such as Slavoj Žižek, Fredric Jameson and Alenka Zupančič. While I draw inspiration from this tradition, especially such heterodox figures as Benjamin and Guy Debord, I am sceptical of its ability to fully come to terms with the problem of affirmationism. On the one hand, figures like Žižek concede too much to affirmationism by reconstituting the dialectic of negativity – the 'negation of negation' – as a superior form of affirmation. Here resistance is again couched within the terms of a discourse of production, construction and novelty. On the other hand, Adorno's mordant posing of negative dialectics courts convergence with the softer forms of affirmationism, in its embrace of weak thought, finitude and the pathos of the suffering subject. Here we have the ironic affirmation of human finitude as the essential operator of resistance. This risks not only a defanging of negativity, but also bringing negativity into alignment with the ideologies of militarised humanism and tolerated difference, which are predicated on the model of a weak and suffering humanity.

Due to my scepticism with these existing alternatives I have instead decided to contest affirmationism on its own ground. My wager is that the traversal of affirmationism offers the best opportunity to sharpen a thinking of negativity that is resistant to re-coding under the sign of affirmation, while avoiding a 'weak negativity' that leaves us unable to grapple with the ideological operations of capital. This is a local and conjunctural intervention, which aims to problematise the way in which the recourse to the affirmative has become second nature. Instead, I argue that it is only through the reconfiguration of negativity as a practice that we can develop more supple and precise forms of resistance and struggle within and against capitalism. To put it bluntly, any theoretical or political project committed to a radical egalitarian

politics requires a thinking of negativity if it is to be truly able to think the conditions of possibility of the *change* necessary to achieve that politics, and the potential forms of *agency* to carry out that change.

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