

Call for Papers

Un-titled

Affirming Negations – Negating Affirmations

Conference: July 1-3, 2010

Abstracts Due: March 28, 2010

“When we say not-being, we speak, I think, not of something that is the opposite of being, but only of something different.”

(Plato, *Sophist* 257B)

How can we speak of non-being if to speak at all implies saying “some thing”? Would we not thereby impart being to the object of our utterance and thus contradict the very claim of our assertion? This linguistic and ontological difficulty raises the broader question of the nature of negation as a rhetorical, logical and political act. Negation cannot simply be opposed to or absolutely independent from affirmation but must instead be intertwined with positivity, since negation always involves a thing which is negated. But this can be called into question by asking whether every affirmation might only be achieved by negating other properties. Rather than starting from the premise that affirmation and negation are mutually exclusive, we wish to explore the possibility of a more intricate relationship between them. How might affirmation be expressed through negation and vice versa? This conference will focus on concepts of complex affirmations and negations in domains including rhetoric, logic, ontology, and politics.

Three forms of complex negations provide an initial impetus for our investigation:

- First, we are interested in exploring what are known as “infinite judgments,” in which the property of not-possessing a particular attribute is ascribed to the subject of the judgment, placing this subject in an infinite “outside.” For instance, the sentence “The soul is not mortal” seems to have a different logical form from the sentence “The soul is immortal.” In the latter case, the form of judgment appears to be positive, but this attribution is that of not-possessing the characteristic.
- Second, how do we “affirm the impossible” in the construction of utopias? Utopias cannot, by definition, take place – the *ou-topos* is that which has no place – yet utopias are also the “good” places. But this affirmation of what cannot take place itself occurs through a negation of the social status quo, of that which is the case.
- Finally, how can we account for forms of “incomplete negation” as in the judgment that something possesses a *je ne sais quoi*. In making such an assertion, we recognize that an object has a property that I can only identify by saying that it is *that* which I cannot know. The final word of this phrase, *quoi*, renders the form of assertion even more complex, however, since it indicates that what I cannot know is in *what* this quality consists. This inability to identify a *quidditas*, a “whatness,” of the quality becomes its very mark.

The ICI core project, *Tension/Spannung*, provides a conceptual frame for our investigation. Complex negations traverse the border between affirmation and denial, positivity and negativity, confirmation and rejection. These oscillations raise the question of a tension between the positive and the negative in language itself. Rather than mutually exclusive forms, positivity and negativity are perhaps coexisting forces, interacting in tensile relations to form complex constructions. We are interested in exploring this hypothesis through case studies as well as theoretical inquiries.

Possible topics include but are not limited to:

- Negation in philosophy, e.g. dialectical negation, forms of “nothing”, theories of judgment (contradictions, contraries, subcontraries)
- Linguistic forms of negation from prefixes such as *un-*, *non-*, *ou-*, through negation on the level of the sentence, and rhetorical devices such as *apophasis*, *litotes*, or double negation, to the empty signifier
- Aesthetics and negation: *Je ne sais quoi*, *presque rien*, *n’importe quoi*, the uncanny, poetics of the ineffable
- Political conceptions of negation, e.g. utopia: no-place and its place, *über-*affirmation towards negation, inclusion as exclusion
- Historical theories of negation, e.g. Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Freud, Frege

Further information can be found at <http://negation.ici-berlin.org> . Please send an abstract of no more than 400 words along with a short biographical note to negation@ici-berlin.org by **March 28**.

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