

## From Joy to Negativity: Yet Another Turn in Social Theory

Paul Kaletsch

SOAS University of London

63428@soas.ac.uk

### Abstract:

Negativity characterizes the contemporary. Today, elections, referenda, and political practice *prefer not to*; they reject and resist what is offered instead. The planetary polycrisis, on the other hand, limits what politics can do and reduces it to a condition of being limited. Therefore, *The Big No* and *Negative Geographies* engage in a theoretical conceptualization of negativity and explore negative phenomena from the perspective of political theory and cultural geography, respectively.

### Noch ein ‚Turn‘: Die Wendung von der fröhlichen hin zur negativen Theorie

#### German Abstract:

Negativität zeichnet unsere Gegenwart aus. Heutige Wahlen, Referenda und politisches Handeln lehnen Angebote entweder ab oder leisten Widerstand. Die planetarische Multikrise hingegen begrenzt, was Politik tun kann, und reduziert Politik zu solch einer Kondition der Begrenztheit. Deshalb untersuchen Kennan Ferguson in *The Big No* und David Bissell, Mitch Rose und Paul Harrison in *Negative Geographies* negative Phänomene empirisch und konzeptualisieren Negativität theoretisch durch die Blickwinkel der kulturellen Geographie und politischen Theorie.

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SOAS University of London

Bissell, David, Mitch Rose and Paul Harrison (eds.): *Negative Geographies. Exploring the politics of limits*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2023. 318 pages, 35 USD. ISBN: 978-1-4962-2782-9. & Kennan Ferguson (ed.): *The Big No*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022. 168 pages, 25 USD. ISBN: 978-1-5179-0929-1.

Since the early 2000s, cultural geography has undergone a paradigm shift from discourse and representations to bodies, matter, processes, and relations (Bissell et al., p. 142). Today, such geographical work falls under the rubric of nonrepresentational geography (Bissell et al., pp. 67–91). Recently, cultural geographers embracing negativity began to contest the dominance of such nonrepresentational work and coined the polemical label of affirmationism for it (Bissell et al., pp. 7–13). Affirmationism in cultural geography, according to these critics, is defined by its study of what bodies *can do* and the reconceptualization of bodies as unbounded arrangements of relations between inorganic and organic components that are never finished but always becoming (Bissell et al., p. 142; Thomas Dekeyser and Thomas Jellis: “Besides Affirmationism? On Geography and Negativity,” 53/2, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12684>, p. 318). Yet affirmationism extends beyond cultural geography; it includes “immanentist poststructuralist philosophy” (Bissell et al., p. 93) and “vitalist philosophies” (Ferguson, p. 112), such as Deleuze and Guattari, Latour, or other (more) contemporary thought drawing on Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Bergson. ‘Negativist’ critics contest affirmationism ideologically – due to its blind spot of limits, vulnerabilities, and exhaustion – politically – because of its ignorance of race and disability both ontologically and epistemologically – ethically – since it cannot convincingly account for intersubjective care – and epistemologically – as it identifies the production of affects in the reader/researcher that increase creativity as the sole merit of research (Bissell et al., pp. 47, 15, 24–25, 93, 2–3, 14, 95).

Two recently published edited volumes turn to negativity. David Bissell, Mitch Rose, and Paul Harrison edited *Negative Geographies: Exploring the Politics of Limits*. The publication introduces negativity as a valid epistemic response, particularly the study of limits, to the

predominance of affirmationism in the field of cultural geography and as a possible remedy for the shortcomings of affirmationism. In contrast, the theoretical study of negative political practices, processes, and phenomena in Kennan Ferguson's edited volume, *The Big No*, considers negativity on its own rather than as the opposite of positivity or a reaction to it.

While the conceptual argument concerning the negative that Mitch Rose, David Bissell, and Paul Harrison develop in the introduction of *Negative Geographies* incorporates negative phenomena, that is, the failure to recall what has passed that disregards the wish to remember, the social production of higher death rates from COVID-19 among Black people in the US, or what a specific body *cannot do*, it extends conceptual negativity beyond these empirical manifestations (Bissell et al., pp. 14–15, 18). Posing the negative solely in the form of concrete obstacles, vulnerabilities, and limits conceptualizes negativity as something that one can and *should* surpass. In contrast, Bissell et al. frame negativity as the “unknowable” *as such* that limits “*what can be known* [emphasis in original]” (p. 12). On this basis, the editors put forward two theoretical research questions: How to ontologically conceptualize that which does not hold being (Bissell et al., pp. 4–7)? And how to think *with* the negative as that which structures the human condition as one of limitation, and, thus, remains irresolvable, despite its constant elicitation of an insufficient but necessary negotiation of these limits (Bissell et al., p. 12)?

The introduction argues for negativity as an analytical supplement to relationality and not as its replacement: “Seen from the perspective of relational ontologies, living beings seem infinitely creative and capable, and perhaps they are. But if so, we also have to acknowledge how they are infinitely vulnerable” (Bissell et al., p. 19). A negative stance acknowledges that the relationality of human bodies exposes them as much to disabling as enabling encounters. Negativist inquiries prioritize limits over potential, such as displayed by studies attending to the incapacitation of bodies, the absence of factories in the post-industrial city, or death and irretrievable loss (Bissell et al., pp. 14–19).

The first chapter also delineates a negativist notion of politics. The incessant acceleration of the polycrisis of the contemporary constantly and increasingly imposes limits on bodies and political thought and action. In the face of such unmanageable problems, politics – whether in the form of a radical revolution, totalizing power, or technocratic reformation – loses its omnipotence (Bissell et al., pp. 1–2). Instead, political practice transforms into “small gestures

striving to respond to that over which nothing can be done” (Bissell et al., p. 21). Understanding politics as a precarious effort leads the authors to think about how to research something or someone without ignoring its or their unknowability or shoving it aside (Bissell et al, p. 25–26). Moreover, they ask what follows from epistemic practices that reflect on what imposes limits on what they can know and embrace unknowability as a condition of study.

Chapters two, four, five, and six put the introduction’s abstract conceptual, epistemological, and political reflection on negativity into practice. In chapter two, Chris Philo engages with Simone Weil’s – a 20th century “French intellectual and religious guide” (Bissell et al., p. 49) – cosmology of a world created by a divine being only to be abandoned and left to its own devices of the laws of physics and the chance event (Bissell et al., pp. 41, 56–57). In other words, even the tiniest component was willed by God, and thus remains basked forever in a divine light. And yet, at the same time, every being is stranded in a cold and cruel universe marked by an absence of God and a lack of meaning, and structured by the fight for survival, accident, and the determination by physics (Bissell et al., pp. 52–61). Based on these ontological commitments, Philo proposes a peculiar kind of negative geography: “An imagined geography of miniscule glints shaded by darkened patterns is also how I might depict my current sensibility” (Bissell et al., p. 61). To illustrate the latter, Philo points to the precarity of neoliberal academia, while he exemplifies the former with the small things in life: a kind word, the sight of an animal, a walk (Bissel et al., p. 39).

*Negative Geographies* permits the contributors transdisciplinary liberties that result in a few methodologically and stylistically very unconventional chapters. Chapter four and five feature among those. This liberal approach of the edited volume broadens its audience beyond readers interested in cultural geography, negativity, or critiques of affirmationism to scholars with an interest in the incorporation of heterodox writing techniques into academic knowledge production and fiction or non-fiction writers with an interest in transdisciplinarity.

For instance, Vickie Zhang’s chapter four auto-ethnographically explores her own fieldwork experience in the People’s Republic of China. Working with this material, the author reflects on translation – in the sense of “translation as shuttling between cultural worlds, broadly understood” (Bissell et al., p. 95) – on a conceptual and practical level. Both negativist and affirmative epistemologies demand from Zhang a once and for all decision prior to translation

either for surrender as doing the work to get to know the translated on their terms rather than that of the translator or for a repairing reading that creates a pleasing research object to mobilize affects that enable the translator. The chapter, instead, proposes that an ethics of translation means to constantly negotiate these mutually exclusive demands and choices (Bissell et al., pp. 111–115). Each decision also forces the translator to bear the consequences of forfeiting the other in practices of self-love or sacrificing one’s well-being to do the other justice.

Chapter five by Avril Maddrell provides an autobiographical narrative about loss, grief, and volunteering with the Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Society. On this basis, the author investigates how bereavement, on the one hand, disables, and, on the other hand, facilitates actions that negotiate this existential experience (Bissell et al., p. 121). The chapter reconceptualizes agency as “*to act where and when one can*” (Bissell et al., p. 133, emphasis in original). Such a formation of agency is contingent on one’s relations, experiences, and vulnerability, and wavers between incapacitation and being called into action (Bissell et al., p. 123). Both chapter four and chapter five successfully navigate the balancing of academic and non-academic writing. The narration creates an immersive reading experience, a sense of intimacy, and, at the same time, drives forward an argument and contribution to the study of translation and the political.

David Bissell explores exhaustion as a fundamentally geographical concept and phenomenon with a distinct temporality, for example, “a body out of time with the demands of a changeable world” (Bissell et al., p. 140), and spatiality, for instance, “a body incapacitated by a heavy object” (ibid.). The sixth chapter continues to outline how the meaning of corporeal exhaustion changed from a positive sign of one’s efforts to an unproductive, and thus, negative side effect of labor. Bissell then develops how exhaustion along the dimensions of corporeality, spatiality, and the possible operates both as the “*negation of vitality*” and the “*condition of vitality*” (Bissell et al., p. 160, emphases in original). The chapter offers a rich overview of theories and studies of exhaustion and possible trajectories for considerations of exhaustion in the field of geography instead of confining itself to *one* reconceptualization of exhaustion, showing that it is impossible to exhaust exhaustion.

The introduction of *Negative Geographies* and chapters two, four, five, and six either systematically investigate or conceptualize negativity or – often creatively – practice negative ways of knowing. Therefore, anyone interested in the downsides of affirmationism, or the concept of negativity and its analytical and normative purchase should start with this volume. Although chapters seven, nine, ten, and eleven work well on their own, these four chapters only seem to peripherally relate to negativity and lack an explicit conceptual or empirical engagement with the negative. Hence, they dilute the volume’s thematic coherence.

Chapter seven and eleven offer theoretical reflections. In chapter seven, Jessica Dubow starts from Žižek’s discussion of “the refusal of fifty-one officers and reservists of the Israel Defense Forces to fight beyond the ‘Green Line’ of Israel’s pre- 1967 border” (Bissell et al., 2021, p. 167) in 2002 as an ethical miracle with theological heft. Drawing on Franz Rosenzweig, “the German-Jewish philosopher and theologian” (Bissell et al., 2021, p. 169), the chapter contrasts a conceptualization of the miracle as a temporary irruption of a negative temporality that “asks only that we live in the weakest, most woundable, of presents” (Bissell et al., 2021, p. 167) to Carl Schmitt’s, the legal theorist of the Nazis, notion of the exception that suspends the legal order and underpins unchecked state sovereignty (Bissell et al., 2021, pp. 168–169). Chapter eleven sets out with a discussion of the collapse of a coalition between “liberals and Islamicists” (Bissell et al., 2021, p. 264) in 2012 after Egypt’s January Revolution in 2011, followed by a coup by the military. The second part reads Stanley Cavell and Chantal Mouffe to conclude with a tragic reconceptualization of democracy: “How do we reckon with submitting to those who will misunderstand us, miskonow us, and inevitably fail us?” (Bissell et al., 2021, p. 265)

Chapters nine and ten explore negativity in empirical contexts of violence. In chapter nine, Richard Carter-White investigates the genocidal mass killings of “groups including Jews, Communist Party leaders, and suspected partisans” (Bissell et al., 2021, p. 234), perpetrated by Nazi *Einsatzgruppen*, “SS paramilitary death squads” (Bissell et al., 2021, p. 234), during Germany’s invasion of Eastern Europe. In chapter ten, Mikko Joronen reconceptualizes power and techniques of governmentality in his investigation of warnings of the civilian population issued by Israel’s Defense Force in the 2014 Gaza War and a 2012 strategy of controlling the supply of food to Gaza by Israel’s Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Health.

In contrast to chapters four and five's apt integration of non-academic writing into an academic text, chapters three and eight fail to achieve this. After an insightful and succinct genealogy of non-representational theory and critique of its affirmationist bias, Paul Harrison's chapter three transforms into an account of the author's personal history with the *non-* in non-representational theory and unfortunately becomes very hard to follow. Similarly, at the beginning of chapter eight, John Wylie very captivatingly narrates how his daughter dislocated her shoulder when she slipped during a hike. The following unsystematic etymological reflections about dislocation, disorientation, disappearance, and distance, however, do not convincingly explore the possibility of a negative geography.

Kennan Ferguson's *The Big No* engages with negative epistemic and political practices, that is, practices that do not affirm the world or produce an alternative but refuse options or negate the status quo (Ferguson, 2022, p. ix). The book makes a theoretical and philosophical case for the political sufficiency of the negative, the no, and refusal (Ferguson, 2022, p. ix). The no, from this perspective, serves an important ideological function: it reveals that the world as it is depends on the yes "as a modality of power" (Ferguson, 2022, p. x) that affirms or reproduces it.

In the introduction of *The Big No*, Ferguson proposes three different nos: The no of resistance engages in political refusal despite being hopelessly overpowered (Ferguson, pp. xi–xii). "[T]he no of forking paths" (Ferguson, p. xiii) denies an axiom, replaces it with another, and, on that basis, imagines a fully-fledged alternative. Epistemologically, for instance, Katerina Kolozova, in the fourth chapter, suspends the humanist concept of the human and replaces it with "the human as determined by the reality of humanity, that materially determined reality of species of 'objects' called human" (Ferguson, p. 61). This epistemic move enables the author to detach humanism from the tenets of philosophy and Enlightenment and to rethink it from the perspective of humanity as a species (one of many). Lastly, chapter five and chapter six engage with the abolitionist no. The abolitionist no uncompromisingly negates the entire imagined community of the social due to its operation as a form of domination (Ferguson, pp. xi–xii, xvi). While these different kinds of nos may not work in concert but compete and contradict each other, all of them share the form of the big no. They are not uttered on a whim but are matters of principle and operate "uncompromising, unreconciling, unbending" (Ferguson, 2022, p. xix).

The first chapter, by Joshua Clover, studies the *lumpenproletariat*, “those decisively rather than momentarily outside the formal wage” (Ferguson, p. 7). The ‘*lumpen*’ constitute a surplus population within capitalism, that is, “surplus to capital and its needs” (Ferguson, p. 5). The unemployed, for instance, hold only a negative value within capitalist logic for they are ‘unproductive.’ Such an excluded population holds at least a revolutionary potential and Joshua Clover studies the relations between different regimes of managing this ‘threat.’ While the policing of coloniality permanently excludes the ‘*lumpen*,’ the promise of absorption into the labor market disciplines the *lumpenproletariat* in capitalism (Ferguson, p. 9). Instead of the expected capitalist conversion of coloniality, the author observes the colonization of global capitalism: “more people globally find themselves circling the towns, never to be granted admission” (Ferguson, p. 10). Whereas the chapter begins with a discussion of how a worker rejects capitalism and how, despite being tortured, an imprisoned Algerian revolutionary refuses to answer the colonial interrogators, the core of the chapter unfortunately loses sight of resistance as a form of negativity.

Chapter two works with the assumption that the Reagan brand of neoliberalism could only take hold in the US because, in the 1940s and 1950s, US politics, economics, and society pivoted from “the New Deal principles of economic equality and a strong regulatory state” (Ferguson, p. 24) to a public policy that delegated social welfare to the market, and concentrated “on promoting growth and boosting consumption” (Ferguson, p. 23). Theodore Martin contends that in this period US society disposed of its own concept of society and the necessity of a society at all, and increasingly viewed the political solution of problems as fundamentally impossible. Thus, it only makes sense that the chapter analyzes novels that “suggest that society doesn’t exist” (Ferguson, p. 20) from this time. Accordingly, Martin compares three post-World War II US-American crime novels to develop the phenomenon of antisociality as a response to a society that has relinquished the very idea of society. Similar to the first chapter, this chapter offers more on literary antisociality as “a violent record of the very inescapability of social determination” (Ferguson, p. 21) than on antisociality as a form of negativity.

The title of Laruelle’s third chapter announces a critique of Deleuze’s and Derrida’s conceptualization of difference. Unfortunately, the chapter never takes the time to introduce the concepts of either author that it refers to, even though the complexity and opaqueness of both oeuvres clearly warrant such a slow and close reading. The pace of Laruelle’s writing



consequently makes it hard for the reader to follow what he critiques and why. Despite my familiarity with Derrida and Deleuze and patient reading of Laruelle's chapter, I could not grasp the argument of this chapter on a substantive level. Apparently, Laruelle's school of non-philosophy is renowned for such obscurantism. However, especially for readers unfamiliar with non-philosophy, the volume's lack of an attempt at a definition or introduction of non-philosophy will prove discouraging, particularly because the introduction, and chapters three, four, and six draw on this line of thought.

As the Afro-pessimist analysis of Frank B. Wilderson III's auto-theoretical fifth chapter points out, even radical politics exploitatively recruits Blackness for the 'universal' agendas of anti-racism/anti-capitalism, based on the claim that these projects somehow automatically facilitate "Black liberation" (Ferguson, p. 88). The author argues that, since the narratives of subaltern redemption of the intersectional left center on the restoration of something lost – of land and/or labor power – they inevitably depend on the exclusion of Black people whom slavery – as a "relational dynamic" (Ferguson, p. 94) of violent commodification – structurally deprives of the capacity for ownership and loss (Ferguson, p. 91).

Afro-pessimist ontology asserts that society is founded on anti-Blackness: "the gratuitous violence used to conserve the structural positionality of the slave as constituting the anti-Black world" (Ferguson, p. 105). Since the social rests on a violent differentiation between beings and non-beings, there is no reason to reform society or build another social structure in a revolution (Ferguson, p. 112). As Andrew Culp states in the sixth chapter, Afro-pessimism, therefore, practically and theoretically commits to the ending of the world (Ferguson, p. 113). For example, since Black people suffer from deracination, that is, "natal alienation" (Ferguson, p. 109), the abolitionist project of "general deracination" (Ferguson, p. 114) commits to the uprooting of everyone and everything in order to spread deracination. Afro-pessimism does not answer how this works practically and what future this might result in because these questions commit to the sustenance of an anti-Black world, while abolitionism invests in Black liberation qua an undoing of this world (Ferguson, p. 117).

In the introduction and chapters four to six, *The Big No* successfully introduces contemporary political thought on negativity and epistemic and practical modes of negativity. The reader can easily follow how the introduction's framework of the three different nos turns into an actual

through line that ties the volume together, since chapter four explores the rejection of humanism as a no of forking paths, and chapters five and six discuss the abolitionist no in Afro-pessimism and non-philosophy, respectively. However, I felt the lack of a dedicated chapter on the no of resistance. Moreover, chapter one and two do not explicitly discuss negativity empirically or theoretically. Even though both chapters work well on their own, they read more like articles than as parts of the volume. Some editing to explicate the negativity implicit in the texts might have benefited them.

Since Laruelle's constant framing of Derrida's thought as "Judaic" (Ferguson, p. 50) in *The Big No* reads irritating, some contextualization and explanation here might have proven useful. Furthermore, chapter two provides a compelling conceptual differentiation between coloniality and colonialism (Ferguson, p. 6). Joronen's references to "Israel's colonial project" (Bissell et al., p. 207) in chapter nine of *Negative Geographies* might have benefited from similar conceptual and normative clarification.

*Negative Geographies* by Bissell et al. points out that the trans- and interdisciplinary return of the negative exceeds the domain of mere cultural geography and extends to Afro-pessimism, nihilism, accelerationism, and contemporary literature (Bissell et al., p. 13). Ferguson, likewise, situates *The Big No* in the trajectory towards negativity initiated by queer theory's refusal of "procreative sexuality" (Ferguson, p. x) and rejection of the social as a system constituted by heterosexual men's denial of their same-sex desire and the exclusion of women. In their introductions, both books point out that we are not just witnessing yet another turn in academia but truly negative times in the world. Ferguson's *The Big No* insists on the prevalence of the no in contemporary politics that connects Brexit, Trump, "French Yellow Vests Protests" (Ferguson, p. ix), and the Native American resistance against the Dakota Access Pipeline. *Negative Geographies* similarly invokes politics but to demonstrate the negative within politics, that is, the limits of politics, in the face of the crises, such as "right-wing nationalism" (Bissell et al., p. 1), "ecological destruction" (ibid.), structural racism, economic inequality, and the militarization of the borders of the Western world, that seemingly cannot be stopped. The volumes, hence, contribute to a larger conversation that challenges modernity, progress, and the affirmationist re-enchantment of the world.

Reading both volumes together creates a dialogue between two different conceptions of negativity and power. *Negative Geographies* responds to affirmationism's worship of power. For instance, with regards to corporeality, the affirmative love for the body's power of acting grants epistemic visibility only to what *the body can do*, the connections that the body forms, and its current productivity and processes of transformation (Bissell et al., p. 14). The geographical volume, instead, develops a conceptualization of negativity as an ontological form that limits what the body can do and, thus, grants visibility to what *the body cannot do*, and allows to think corporeality as being limited.

*The Big No* conceptualizes power as an affirmative force that sustains the world as it is – often through the cooptation of reformist and revolutionary changes (Ferguson, p. x). Negative practices, accordingly, say no to power – and/or to this world – and remain self-sufficient in their rejection of the demand to provide alternatives. Accordingly, *The Big No* provides the politics of the negative (resistance, rejection, and withdrawal) to *Negative Geographies'* ontological conceptualization of negativity as corporeal limitation (being as being vulnerable, finite, and hurting).