

PREFACE

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Etienne Balibar begins his study of Spinoza's philosophy with the argument that it cannot be understood as if it existed only on the transhistorical, if not ahistorical, plane of pure theory and that, on the contrary, each of his major texts must be understood as an intervention in a specific political and philosophical conjuncture. For this reason, according to Balibar, it is impossible to separate Spinoza's metaphysics from his politics, as if the latter were an application of the former. Instead, Spinoza's philosophy must be seen as political in its entirety: even its most speculative utterances constitute responses to certain political imperatives and are tied to specific historical stakes. Thus, Balibar's title, *Spinoza and Politics* (as opposed to "Spinoza and Political Philosophy"), refuses at the outset the separation of philosophy into the speculative and the practical, a separation that is itself a perfect expression of the dualisms of mind and body and of the universal and the particular that Spinoza so vehemently rejected: all philosophy is political, inescapably embodied, no matter how it may strain to deny this fact, in the practical forms of its historical existence. Such an approach to philosophy demands much (perhaps too much, it will be said) of the reader: not only must we reconstruct the internal order of arguments that confer upon a given text its coherence and thus its self-sufficiency, but we must simultaneously understand the way a text belongs to and depends on a history outside itself whose play of forces, indifferent to the charms of reason, may precisely undermine the very coherence we thought we had discovered, surging up, as Balibar has put it elsewhere, to discompose or "incomplete" a given text.¹ Such notions will not surprise those

¹ Etienne Balibar, "The Infinite Contradiction", *Yale French Studies*, no. 88, 1995

familiar with Balibar's intellectual itinerary, which is undeniably marked by a concern for the act of reading philosophical texts.

Of course, it is not only Spinoza's work that we must read as simultaneously conjunctural and "eternal" ("from the point of view of eternity", as Spinoza put it), but Balibar's as well. For given the close attention to the letter of Spinoza's Latin texts (and the reader will note how frequently Balibar's translator, Peter Snowdon, has been compelled to retranslate the citations from Spinoza, not because the existing translations are inadequate but because Balibar's argument is so closely tuned to the subtleties of Spinoza's Latin) and to the baroque complexities of power and politics in late-seventeenth-century Holland, it is easy to forget Balibar's text possesses its own conjunctural reality. It cannot be understood simply as a commentary on Spinoza but is also an intervention in the historical field to which it belongs.

At this point, readers are likely to recall Balibar's early career as a student and later a colleague of Louis Althusser, during which Balibar produced a significant body of work on Marx and Marxism. When the collective work *Reading Capital* appeared in 1965, its audience puzzled over the repeated references to Spinoza, a philosopher whose concerns seemed suspiciously distant from, if not antithetical to, those of Marxism. It was widely suspected that behind the texts of this period lay a fully developed interpretation of Spinoza, even a full-blown Spinozism that was offered to unwitting readers in the guise of Marxism. Perry Anderson spoke for many when he argued in *Considerations on Western Marxism* that "the systematic induction of Spinoza into historical materialism by Althusser and his pupils was intellectually the most ambitious attempt to construct a prior philosophical descent for Marx and to develop abruptly new theoretical directions for contemporary Marxism from it."²

Anderson did admit, if only in a footnote, that Althusser and company were not the first to assign Spinoza a privileged role in the "prehistory of dialectical materialism", to use August Thalheimer's phrase. Following Lucio Colletti,³ however, he relegated

² Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: New Left Books, 1976). p.65.

³ Lucio Colletti, *From Rousseau to Lenin: Studies in Ideology and Society* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972).

interest in Spinoza to the theoreticians of the Second International (notably the Russian Marxist Plekhanov, who claimed to have discussed Spinoza with Engels, shortly before the latter's death), who presumably derived from Spinoza the "implacable determinism" that inspired their revision of Marx's thought.⁴ In fact, as Spinoza scholar (and former pupil of Althusser) Andre Tosel has argued recently, the history of Marxist "detours" through Spinoza (to use Althusser's metaphor) is far richer and more complex than Anderson's note suggests;⁵ a definitive account of this history remains to be written. In each succeeding period of crisis within Marxism, usually occasioned by a stabilisation and expansion of capitalism after an economic and/or political crisis that was hailed as "final", in the 1890s, the 1920s, the 1970s and 1980s, prominent Marxists, many of whom (from Thalheimer to Negri) do not fit the profile of the Western Marxist painted by Anderson, turned to Spinoza's philosophy.

Why, of all the seventeenth-century philosophers, some of whom, such as Hobbes and Gassendi, appear far more "materialist" than Spinoza (whose *Ethics*, after all, begins with a discussion of God), have Marxists been drawn to Spinoza? Beginning with Feuerbach, whose theory of alienation is far more Spinozist than has heretofore been acknowledged, there was a recognition that Spinoza's treatment of "God, or Nature" was far more thoroughgoing in its elimination of every form of transcendence and ideality than the work of many self-described materialists. In declaring God to be the immanent cause of the world, Spinoza rejected not only every dualism of spirit and matter, but also the dualisms of unity and diversity, of the temporal and the eternal. In short, Engels seemed to be speaking as a Spinozist rather than as a Marxist when he defined materialism as the effort to "conceive nature just as it is, without any foreign admixture",⁶ that is, nature as an infinity of singular existences. And while, until recently, Marxist readings of Spinoza tended to focus on the *Ethics* at the expense of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (TTP) and the *Tractatus Politicus* (TP), the materialism of Spinoza's approach to nature extends to his examination of

⁴ Anderson, p. 65.

⁵ Andre Tosel, *Du materialisme de Spinoza* (Paris: Editions Kimé 1994).

⁶ Friedrich Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers. 1969), p. 67

social life: indeed, it could not be otherwise given Spinoza's insistence that the human world is not a "kingdom within a kingdom", part of nature but somehow not subject to its determinations. From this refusal of transcendence comes Spinoza's argument that political right can only have meaning when it is coextensive with power in the physical, actual sense. Society then ceases to be characterised by a given set of rights or laws and becomes instead a relation of conflicting forces. Further, when right ceases to be formal, the central political relation can no longer be that between the individual as possessor of right and the state; when right is co-extensive with power, the individual who alone exercises little power is supplanted by what Spinoza in his last work calls, following Tacitus, Sallust and Machiavelli, the multitude or, as the term is rendered here, the masses. Thus, at a time when the conceptual foundations of liberalism were in the process of being established, Spinoza had already denounced the "constitutional illusions" (to borrow Lenin's phrase) of formal democracy in which powerless individuals "possessed" rights that "thousands of obstacles" prevented them from ever exercising.⁷

But if Balibar and his colleagues were once suspected of advancing Spinozism in the guise of Marxism, today it will rather be the opposite that is suspected of *Spinoza and Politics*: Balibar, with his emphasis on the centrality of "the fear of the masses" in Spinoza's philosophy (which signals a recognition that the masses and their movements constitute the primary object of political analysis), will undoubtedly be viewed by critics and admirers alike as "advancing Marxism by other means" in the 1980s, a time marked by its own fear of the masses and a consequent return to classical liberalism in both politics and economics. Indeed, in 1985 Balibar published an essay in the independent Left journal *Les Temps Modernes* entitled "Spinoza, the Anti-Orwell: The Fear of the Masses" in which he cites the untimely (intempestif) nature of Spinoza's politics in a time that sees "in mass movements only the figure of a radical historical evil".⁸ In the anglophone world especially, where the few to have taken an interest in Spinoza's

⁷ V. I. Lenin, *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press. 1970), p. 26.

⁸ Etienne Balibar. "Spinoza l'anti Orwell". *Les Temps Modernes*, no. 41. September 1985, p. 37.

political writing tend to see him as a classical liberal in whose work one may discover the tenets of methodological individualism and rational choice theory, Balibar's arguments may well be taken as an attempt to put Leninist words in the mouth of one of Adam Smith's most illustrious forebears.

Both interpretations - Spinoza in the guise of Marx or the inverse - if inevitable, may now be said nonetheless to be wrong. It is true that Balibar, together with Althusser and others such as Pierre Macherey, during their period of collective activity viewed Spinoza as a privileged reference point in their project of reading Marx. It is not difficult to see the allure of Spinoza, who, as conceived by this group, was perhaps the most thoroughgoing materialist in the history of philosophy (even if his materialism, as Balibar remarks, was profoundly heterodox). In addition, Spinoza was one of the few philosophers to acknowledge the political stakes not only of the content of his work, that is, the arguments of which it is composed, but perhaps even more importantly of the form in which these arguments are realised, a form which will determine whether the philosopher's words will fall on deaf ears or whether they will allow readers to both recognise and seize the opportunity for improvement. As Spinoza remarked of Scripture, a text is to be judged sacred or profane, good or evil, not by virtue of what it says, or even its truth, but by its power to move people to mutual love and support. A philosophical work is thus always an intervention in a concrete situation and is to be judged by the effects it produces in this situation. This much can be gleaned from the works published by these philosophers in the sixties, from their scattered but provocative references to Spinoza. While they certainly read Spinoza with Althusser's encouragement, if not his guidance, they nevertheless did not produce any sustained work on Spinoza, certainly nothing resembling their "readings" of other philosophers. Indeed, despite rumours to the contrary, it appears that Althusser himself wrote and even lectured very little on Spinoza (although it is worth remarking how many of the most important Spinoza scholars in France today were members of Althusser's circle). Althusser's assertion in *Elements of Self-Criticism* that he, Balibar and Macherey "were Spinozists", which Anderson took as confirmation of his worst suspicions concerning Althusser's reliance on pre-Marxist thought, was nothing more than a retrospective

construction, the very condition of which was a renaissance in French Spinoza studies that took place at the end of the sixties.

For, of course, they were not the only philosophers of note in France to have "discovered" Spinoza in the sixties. Another Marxist, although of an orientation different from and even opposed to Althusser's, laboured on what would become one of the monuments of contemporary Spinoza scholarship. Alexandre Matheron's *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza* (1969) argued that Spinoza's project was one of "disalienation", whose ultimate goal was a "communism of minds", defined as the whole of humanity becoming "a totality conscious of itself".⁹ At the same time, Matheron's close reading of Spinoza's political texts (long neglected in favour of his so-called "metaphysical" writings, especially the *Ethics*) and his insistence on the importance of the multitude and of mass movements for Spinoza certainly influenced the young philosophers around Althusser. In fact, at Althusser's invitation, Matheron was a frequent guest lecturer at the Ecole Normale Supérieure (where Althusser was for many years head of the philosophy programme), together with another philosopher whose highly original reading of Spinoza attracted Althusser's interest: Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze's *Spinoza et le problème de l'expression* (1968), by focusing on the relatively marginal notion of expression in Spinoza, taught an entire generation of scholars to read Spinoza against the grain. In the interstices of the geometrical order of the *Ethics*, that is, in the prefaces, appendices and scholia to the propositions, could be found a second ethics, not so much offsetting the first as distilling its most important themes. Probably the most important work of the period, however, was the first volume of Martial Gueroult's Spinoza (*Dieu: Ethique I*) (1968), a nearly eighthundred-page commentary on part I of the *Ethics*. Gueroult's approach shared with other "readings" (of Marx and Freud, for example) of the time a scrupulous attention to the letter of Spinoza's text, attempting to account for the totality of what Spinoza said (in part I) and to do so exhaustively, in a way that would in an important sense render all future commentary superfluous. This procedure, far from producing a dry (and prolix) copy of Spinoza's text, yielded some very surprising results. Gueroult

⁹ Alexandre Matheron, *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza* (Paris: Minuit, 1969), p. 612.

showed that the most common interpretations of Spinoza's conception of substance and its constituent attributes and modes did not correspond to Spinoza's philosophy as it was actually stated. In the most fundamental sense, it appeared that no one before had really read Spinoza to the letter.

Even as these three works recast the study of Spinoza, however, they shared a concern to demonstrate the architectonic unity of his major works. Paradoxically, the very care with which they adhered to the letter of Spinoza's texts opened the way to a new set of readings, equal in importance to the first, which began by acknowledging that certain undeniable contradictions, conflicts and tensions, overlooked or explained away by the philosophers named above, traversed his texts. The first of these, Pierre Macherey's *Hegel ou Spinoza*, appeared in 1979. Macherey took Hegel's reading of Spinoza, as presented in *The History of Philosophy* and *The Science of Logic*, as one of the most rigorous and coherent interpretations of Spinoza ever presented and an interpretation based solidly on textual evidence. Hegel's critique of Spinoza centred on the absence from the *Ethics* of two key concepts. First, substance as subjectivity: Spinoza did not recognise the *Bildung* of substance striving to become itself through the interiorisation of itself as other. Second, substance could only become subject through the operation of the second absent concept: "the labour of the negative" that alone would permit substance to become itself through the negation of its own negation. Macherey argues that the absences Hegel claimed to see were in fact his own blind spots (and perhaps even Spinoza's as well): Spinoza had already formulated a critique of the very positions that Hegel rightly regarded as necessary to his own dialectic, even if it was left to Spinoza's readers to elaborate it fully.

Did this mean that Spinoza's proleptic rejection of substance as subject and the labour of the negative invalidated any notion of history as dialectic? Macherey's spirited answer to this question was a resounding no:

It is Spinoza who refutes the Hegelian dialectic. But does this mean that in doing so he refutes every dialectic? Might it not just as well be said that what he refutes in the Hegelian dialectic is precisely what is not dialectical, what Marx himself called its idealism? For it is necessary

to set aside the idea according to which every dialectic would be in itself idealist or reactive as absolutely without philosophical interest: for a material history of thought, the expression "every dialectic" is completely devoid of meaning.¹⁰

From the confrontation between Hegel and Spinoza emerges the possibility of a dialectic without the negation of the negation and thus without the overcoming of contradiction, without finality of any kind, a dialectic of the positive.

Two years later the conversation continued with the publication of Antonio Negri's *L'anomalia selvaggia*, which was translated into French the following year, equipped with prefaces by Deleuze, Macherey and Matheron. This "extraordinary Marxist analysis", as Matheron called it,¹¹ marked the first recent attempt to move beyond textual analysis to a consideration of the historical and material circumstances of Spinoza's philosophical writing. Negri argued that the Spinozist anomaly was linked to the anomalous role of Holland in the world economy, specifically to its prematurity as a society that had consciously abandoned itself to the utopian lure of the capitalist market. The early Spinoza, argued Negri, exhibited a tension between a Neo-Platonism that was the philosophical expression of market ideology and an incipient materialism. His Neo-Platonism emphasised the priority of unity over diversity, the one over the many, the same over the different. Further, unity, the one and the same were all the outcome of a mediation that overcame diversity and difference. Such an idealism persisted even into the first two parts of the *Ethics*, constituting what Negri called Spinoza's first philosophical foundation. The *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, in turn, exhibited a tension between a juridical ideology of the social contract and a recognition of the power (and simultaneously the right) of the multitude. These philosophical tensions finally found their resolution in the materialism of the mature Spinoza (parts III-V of the *Ethics*, together with the unfinished *Tractatus Politicus*), a materialism of surfaces and singularities without mediation or transcendence and a political theory of the constitutive power of the multitude.

It is this context that allows us to appreciate the power and

¹⁰ Pierre Macherey, *Hegel ou Spinoza* (Paris: Maspero, 1979), p. 259

¹¹ Antonio Negri, *L'anomalia sauvage: Puissance et pouvoir chez Spinoza* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1982). p. 19.

originality of Balibar's *Spinoza and Politics*. To a far greater extent than any other previous work, Balibar's is marked by a refusal to dissociate the internal world of the texts from history conceived as an exterior, as if they constituted in their ensemble a "kingdom within a kingdom". Instead, he posits a continuity between writing and history, treating the first as a prolongation of the second. To separate nature/history (for nature, far from being an eternally recurrent constant, is fully historical, just as history, that is, human history, is part of nature considered as a process without a subject or goals) from the world of ideas, even if only to establish correspondences between them, would be to reinstate precisely the dualism that Spinoza criticises at such length. Balibar is compelled to establish in far greater detail than earlier commentators the conflicts and contradictions of the Dutch Republic in the latter half of the seventeenth century, for these are the very contradictions that form and inform Spinoza's philosophical project, even at its most "metaphysical".

Balibar describes a society apparently divided into two camps: on the one side, the urban and maritime bourgeoisie, who accumulated tremendous wealth during the Netherlands' "Golden Age" of commercial expansion and who were united around a political doctrine of republicanism and a peculiarly tolerant form of Calvinism that embraced religious pluralism and scientific progress; on the other, primarily rural landowners, grouped around the House of Orange, the Netherlands' would-be royal family, supported by the majority of Calvinists who hoped to end republican government and install a monarchical-theocratic system. While it is true that Spinoza supported the former bloc against the "Orangists" (and was friend and tutor to many members of the most prominent Republican families), neither his philosophical project nor, indeed, Dutch society itself can be reduced to this apparently simple opposition between democracy and absolutism, and between superstition and enlightenment. If we follow Balibar's reading of the first and only exposition of Spinoza's theological and political views published during his lifetime, the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, we may see it as both a critique of and a warning to his putative allies. Certainly most of the work (fifteen of its twenty chapters) was devoted to diminishing the power of superstition and thereby the ability of the clerical enemies of the Republic to exploit religion in

their attempts to mobilise the people against the Regents. Spinoza systematically undermines every possibility that God's will (which he defines as the regular workings of nature) can be deciphered in unusual natural occurrences (miracles) or by a "deeper" interpretation of Scripture. Those who claim to be divinely inspired or who claim to see or know the real meaning of nature (its destiny) or Scripture have simply taken and attempted to persuade others to take their own imagination for reality. But the attack on any possibility of an appeal to the supernatural, as Balibar argues, had one extraordinary characteristic: it was carried out in the name of religion, that realm of the imagination that impels all people to look for hidden meanings and ultimate ends in the occurrences of nature (which, for Spinoza, includes society) and which is thus to some extent inescapable. The most powerful and effective arguments against religion must therefore be formulated in religious terms, systematically translating the language of theology into a language of reason or at least struggling to make such translation possible. Much, although by no means all, of his argument expressed views shared by a significant number of Republican supporters.

The political chapters of the *TTP* are a different matter altogether. When Spinoza announces that right is co-extensive with power and that big fish eat little fish by sovereign right, there can be little doubt that he is speaking not about individual subjects or citizens but about the "rightful" rulers of the Dutch Republic. For they appear to believe that their legality, their "legitimacy", offers some guarantee or protection against their enemies, even as their enemies have mobilised a substantial majority of the population against them, rendering the Regents' exercise of some of their rights impossible. Hence Spinoza's axiom that right equals power not only serves as a warning to Holland's Republican rulers that their right to rule is diminishing daily in proportion to the increase in the physical power of their enemies, but also reminds them that the only effective defence of their regime is a counter mobilisation rather than increasingly impotent appeals to legality. Such a warning, however, only revealed the undemocratic nature of Dutch democracy. The Republicans in fact constituted an oligarchy whose wealth gave them, for a time at least, the power to rule but which increasingly served to alienate popular support, especially as the defence of their extensive overseas commercial interests from

English and French interlopers necessitated a series of wars opposed by the rural elites and the urban masses. And there has been no state, Spinoza recalls at the beginning of chapter XVII of the *TTP*, that has not had more to fear from its own people than from any external enemy. Caught between a Republican party of progress whose democratic features were more formal than real and whose policies were dictated by the needs of a fabulously wealthy minority, on the one hand, and a party of monarchical reaction and religious fundamentalism with the active support of the masses, on the other, Spinoza in fact, as Balibar shows, expressed the perspective of a "freedom party still to be created".

In 1672, two years after the publication of the *TTP*, the Republic fell under the blows of a mass movement whose strength and ferocity startled contemporary observers. The *Tractatus Politicus*, arguably Spinoza's response to and analysis of the fall of Dutch republicanism, remained unfinished. There was no urgency attached to its appearance: it was not a work designed for the consumption of the literate reading public at large, as was the *TTP*. There is little or no mention of religion in the *TP*; it is strictly a treatise on politics. It is no accident, as Balibar maintains, that the work ends with a fragment of a chapter on democracy - all the more so given Spinoza's attempt to move beyond the conception of democracy as a formal system and to grasp it as an actuality subject to the ebbs and flow of mass movements, whose desires and actions cannot be predicted in advance. It is in the *TP* that Spinoza takes his postulates concerning power in the *TTP* to their logical conclusions. If right equals power, then the individual cannot be the unit of analysis: individuals alone have little power. Instead, at the centre of Spinoza's political analysis is the multitude, whose support, acquiescence or opposition determines the right of the (individual or collective) sovereign. In opposition to readers like Lewis Feuer who see in Spinoza a pure fear of the masses, Balibar argues that if a mass movement overthrew the Republic, a fear of the masses and their power equally prevented the solidification of a monarchic-theocratic system in post-Republican Holland. The multitude, which will not permit a violent or irrational ruler to rule very long, therefore must be considered at least potentially as the collective bearer of reason against the destructive passions of a single individual or small group of individuals. But what is the

function of reason in human life and in human society? And since few follow the guidance of reason generally and no one follows it always, how do we increase its power? These are some of the questions that Spinoza takes up in the *Ethics*.

To begin to examine Spinoza's treatment of these problems we must first understand what sets him apart from nearly all of his contemporaries, who from Descartes to Hobbes and Locke regarded the isolated individual as the starting point of knowledge and society. For Spinoza there is no pre-social state of nature from which previously isolated individuals could emerge only through the juridical mediation of a contract. The atomic individual is the purest of fictions given that individuality or, better, singularity, a term that prevents us from taking the individual, indeed all individuals, as copies of a single model (self-interested, altruistic, depraved), is an effect of social existence. Just as we need a great many things external to us for the survival of the body (oxygen, water, nutrients) so our singular character (our ingenium) is formed by the rational and affective currents that flow through the collective. Neither reason nor the affects (or emotions) can be said in any rigorous sense to originate in the individual. Instead, Spinoza describes the process of the "imitation of the affects", the involuntary process of identification (which, although a mental phenomenon, is inseparable from our necessary corporal interactions with others), with its mechanisms of introjection, projection and projective identification: hatred and love, fear and hope, happiness and sadness circulate without origin or end.

What is the place of reason in all of this? As Balibar argues, reason, for Spinoza, in no way transcends the affects, which it would then have to master in order to be effective. Instead, Spinoza displaces the traditional opposition between reason and the emotions or affects with the opposition between passive and active affects. The latter increases the power of the body to act and simultaneously the power of the mind to think (the two powers for Spinoza are inseparable: there is no liberation of the mind without a liberation of the body), that is, in Spinoza's words, our ability to affect and to be affected by other bodies. Passive affects or emotions, in contrast, diminish our power to think and to act. Reason in a sense is thus immanent in active affects, in a kind of will to power that far from pitting us against individuals, as if

power were a possession to be fought over, leads us to unite with them to increase our power: "there is nothing more useful to man than man" (*Ethics*, IV). Is it possible then that a certain corporeal-affective organisation of society would, if not insure, at least promote rational community (that is, the tendential dominance of active over passive affects)? It is. Is there any guarantee that such an organisation of society will ever come about or that were it to come about that it would endure? None whatsoever.

To read Spinoza carefully, that is, to enter the world of his philosophy, is to find oneself in a bewildering landscape bereft of all familiar reference points. Those who choose to follow Balibar's path, however, will discover in that landscape our own present, but in a form so defamiliarised that we can imagine the possibility of moving beyond it.

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Warren Montag's "Preface" to Etienne Balibar's *Spinoza and Politics* [[Verso](#), 1998].