



Centre of Full Employment and Equity

Working Paper No. 06-17

Why Spinoza

James Juniper

December 2006

Centre of Full Employment and Equity
The University of Newcastle, Callaghan NSW 2308, Australia
Home Page: <http://e1.newcastle.edu.au/coffee>
Email: coffee@newcastle.edu.au

Introduction

This paper examines recent work by Continental philosophers that has been inspired by the writings of Benedict de Spinoza, a Dutchman of Jewish decent, born in 1632, who lived for a mere 45 years before succumbing to a disease that was most likely to have been Tuberculosis . Spinoza made his living by grinding optical lenses, a highly skilled craft, which enabled him to write without fear or the necessity for compromise that an academic career would have imposed upon him. His close personal friends included the physicist Christian Huygens and the De Witt brothers, administrators of the enlightened Dutch oligarchy who in 1672, were to be killed by supporters of the Orangist restoration.

The paper seeks to uncover the meaning and significance of Spinoza's work for a variety of contemporary philosophers and radical political theorists. This inquiry is motivated by Negri's point that Spinoza, as a pre-Modern, grappled with issues of collective action and political freedom that have particular resonance for those seeking to understand and criticize the ethico-political legacy bequeathed to us by Modernity.

The narrative of this paper will be framed by a particular interrogation of the paradoxes and contradictions of reason. Descartes is recognized for introducing the distinction between *res cogito* and *res extensa*. However, what should also be acknowledged is the fact that this distinction reflects the coexistence, within Cartesian philosophy, of two seemingly exclusive metaphors: an organicist (transcendent) holism and a mechanistic (materialist) notion of transitive causality. It was this very dichotomy between the deterministic causality of nature or the *phenomenal* realm and the freedom of will or the *noumenal* realm, which Kant attempted to overcome through his analysis of the dynamic antinomies of reason: the thesis being: *causality according to the laws of nature is not the only causality operating to generate the phenomena of the world, there is also a causality of freedom*; and the antithesis being: *there is no such thing as freedom, but everything happens according to the laws of nature*. Kant's 'resolution' of the paradox is to embrace it. This he does by deeming *each* of the seemingly opposed statements to be *true*: the apparent contradiction, which reflects the fact that the human subject, as a phenomenal entity, is bound by the causal chain, but as a noumenal entity, is free (interrupting the causal chain), is simply denied. While both moments are logically true they are impossible (i.e. they cannot both apply to same empirical world): thus one must be repressed.

In the case of the mathematical antinomies (e.g. the statement that the world has no beginning in time and no limits in regard to space and its contrary), which arise when we attempt to think the 'world' as both the mathematical total of all phenomena and the totality of their synthesis, he rejects the implicit assumption that the world as a totality exists. Thus Kant *negates each* of the opposing statements. Both moments are false because the limit cannot be totalized, as such, one side of the antinomy must be disavowed: the apparent truth or falsity of one is the guarantee of the other's falsity or truth.

For Hegel, the antinomies are a sign that philosophical thought has not passed over from understanding, which posits determinations through negation, to its Other, Absolute Reflection (i.e. by realizing how understanding progressively turns its negating powers against itself in history). Through this historicization of the logical categories constituting reflexivity, Hegel contends that the aporias of reflection are overcome by reflection itself. Spinoza's approach is very different. Gilles Deleuze has expressed the issue with notable clarity,

In the reproach that Hegel will make to Spinoza, that he ignored the negative and its power, lies the glory and innocence of Spinoza, his own discovery. In a world consumed by the negative, he has enough confidence in life, in the power of life, to challenge death, the murderous appetite of men, the rules of good and evil, of the just and the unjust. [...] In his view, all ways of humiliating and breaking life, all the forms of the negative have two sources, one turned outward and the other inward, resentment and bad conscience, hatred and guilt. 'The two archenemies of the human race, Hatred and Remorse.' He denounces these sources again and again as being linked to man's consciousness, as being inexhaustible until there is a new consciousness, a new vision, a new appetite for living. Spinoza feels, experiences, that he is eternal." (Deleuze, 1994: 51).

In a stimulating paper, Kordela has applied Kant's antinomic reasoning to the Cartesian dilemma¹. She sets out Spinoza's distinction between apodictic or syllogistic and tautological reason. While the former mode of reasoning, to be found in Descartes, ignores its own error by conceiving of it as something represented but not representable (i.e. as ontologically and epistemologically ungrounded) the latter mode she associates with Spinoza, acknowledges the gap in its own reasoning (it recognizes it as a legitimate part of itself) but then disavows it (Kordela, 1999: 792).

In Descartes we see that the subject is apparently grounded in radical doubt (including the doubt of God as a potential deceiver) but the doubting subject ultimately requires God for its grounding (unconsciously). Expressed in antinomic form Descartes is arguing the following: "I am" because I doubt everything (there is no Other of the Other) based on the excluded (unrepresentable) antithesis that "I am" because I am grounded by God as first cause (thus God is unconscious) (Kordela, 1999: 799).

¹ In this regard Kordela is following a precedent set by Copec (1995) and Žižek (1994), who both discuss Lacan's application of the antinomies to his 'formulas of sexuation'. Kordela takes this analysis further by applying it both to the determination of the Symbolic and Imaginary registers, and to the critique of the Cartesian *cogito*. In an interesting paper Kornbluh (2002) has adopted a similar technique to analyse the ideological role of love within capitalism. In his seminars, Lacan regularly returns to the Cartesian *cogito* as a central motif. Specific discussions that lend some support to Kordela's interpretation are to be found in Lacan (1988: 54, 224).

Spinoza recognizes the logical gap as a false moment in syllogistic reasoning so that it can be disavowed, thereby yielding tautological truth: truth as such becomes the standard both of itself and of the false (Kordela, 1999: 792, citing *E* II, P43, Schol)². Spinoza's tautological reasoning can be expressed as follows: I can doubt everything (I can question the limits of life) only insofar as I am certain that God exists (only insofar as I already know the limits of life)³.

Kordela notes that this radical shift in discourse—from one consciously grounded in God (as the transitive first and last cause) to one disavowing God as ground (thus retroactively and unconsciously grounding itself on God as a non-representable and immanent cause)—has real effects (Kordela, 1999: 793).

The following section of the paper examines Warren Montag's interpretation of Spinoza's notion of *immanent causality* in more detail, situating it within a broader critique of philosophical idealism. This sets the scene for a critical analysis of how Louis Althusser adopted the notion of immanent causality to provide leverage in his efforts to overturn the Hegelian dialectic. It argues that Althusser's efforts in rethinking the basis for a Marxist critique of idealism failed because he applied Spinoza's notion of immanence to the economic instance, rather than to *Deus sive Natura* as the infinite power to act. Later theorists such as Montag, Deleuze, Negri and Balibar conformed more closely to Spinoza's development of this critical concept. In two of the most important sections of the paper, Negri's reading of Spinoza is reviewed in some detail to highlight the relationship between Spinoza's theory of knowledge and temporality, and his political ideas about democracy and collective action. The final section examines concerns raised by Lacan about the inadequacy of Spinoza's philosophical itinerary for what might be called a transformative politics.

Spinoza's Anti-Teleological Metaphysics

Hegel's resolution of antinomies departs from Spinoza's critique of metaphysics, most obviously embodied in the philosophical notion of *immanent causality*. However, Hegel was taken with Spinoza's political thinking and spent much time attempting to subsume it within his dialectic of absolute government. According to Pierre Macherey, though, Hegel's defensive misreading of Spinoza was 'symptomatic' of a teleological, subjective, idealism. Spinoza was attempting to found an anti-teleological, anti-subjective notion of metaphysics, and his philosophical endeavor was not a road successfully 'sublated' within Hegel's dialectic, but simply a road 'not taken'! After 'belatedly' reading Spinoza in the Summer of 1881, Nietzsche recognized in him a kindred spirit:

² In accordance with convention, citations of Spinoza's work identify the relevant publication (*E*, *TP*, *TTP*), as per the bibliography, followed by section and page number. In relation to the *Ethics* the citation further identifies axioms (*A*), definitions (*D*), postulates (*P*), and if relevant, the respective scholia (*S*).

³ Some support for this interpretation of Spinoza's relation to Cartesian doubt can be gained by comparing it with the reference Negri makes to Guérout's treatment of this same issue in *The Savage Anomaly* (Negri, 1991: 13 and footnote 42).

Not only is his overall tendency like mine—making knowledge the *most powerful* affect—but in five main points of his doctrine I recognize myself; this most unusual and loneliest thinker is closest to me in precisely these matters: he denies the freedom of the will, teleology, the moral world order, the unegoistic, and evil...(Norris, 1991: 13, citing Kaufman, 1964: 92)

As Warren Montag (1989) demonstrates, *immanence*—as the materialist opponent of philosophical *idealism*—is not a theory or a doctrine so much as a ‘mode of strategic maneuver through the philosophical field’. Theism, the religious counterpart to idealism, is predicated on a distinction between substances—those of the creator and the creation—made on chronological, logical and hierarchical grounds. All things and ideas are ordered in accordance with their distance from the origin, priority or externality to *eidōs*, Oneness, or God. The ‘transcendental apparatus’ constructs a spiritual, immaterial dimension of being that is variously conceived as deeper, higher, behind or beyond, and ontologically or epistemologically more original than the world of social action or human knowledge; it envisages a realm operating as the source and rational synthesis of human meaning and the essential determinant of history (Fourtounis, 2005: 102). Congruent with this hierarchical ordering, knowledge is conceived as a form of hermeneutics, an unveiling of truth with respect to what is more or less real, more or less illusory.

Yet in response to this idealistic ordering, Spinoza refuses a mere inversion. Instead, Spinoza positions God as an antidote to hierarchy. What Althusser admired most in Spinoza is the particular way that he took over the core concepts (God) of his enemies (the conservative Calvinists), at a time when political battles were fought using the language of theology, turning the cannons around against the occupants of the fortress: something that Althusser also attempted to achieve in his own struggle against the economic *diamat* of the Stalinist Communist Party in France (Thomas, 2002: 89). The other target of Althusser’s critique was the Hegelian Marxism either of existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone De Beauvoir, which drew upon a psychological interpretation of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*’s Master-Slave Dialectic, or those who turned to a materialist reading of the *Logic*, with its categories of sublation, negation, and mediation, Being, Essence and Notion.

Montag provides an invaluable interpretive guide to this insurrection within theological discourse. First, Spinoza contends that whatever is, is in God, and cannot be conceived without God (Montag, 1989: 93, citing Spinoza, *E I P15*). He further establishes that one substance cannot be produced by another, thus, there is only one absolutely infinite substance. Moreover, the infinite attributes (which include those of thought and extension) are those of this infinite and single substance. Thought cannot be reduced to matter, nor can matter be reduced to thought: each is real, parallel, and intelligible.

In turn, Spinoza rejects the notion of God as *ousia* (the internal essence of perfection) because a principle cannot pre-exist its own realization or existence: the very notion

of a potential existence implies weakness (Montag, 1989, citing Spinoza, *E I*, P11). As such, God/Nature cannot operate as a prior cause or *arche*: it is the immanent, not the transitive, cause of things (*E I*, P18). For Spinoza, *Deus siva Natura*, is necessarily self-caused, existing only in realization. Substance as the infinite power to act is conceived not as Hegel's 'Bad Infinity'—the abstract negation of all particularity (e.g. the *te on* of the Eleatics who counted Plato amongst their membership)—but as the expressive unity of an infinity of attributes (Montag, 1989: 94). The attributes are the interior elements and moments through which Substance is constituted; they are the prioritized conditions of Substance's self-production. Montag endorses Pierre Macherey's conception of the existence and diversity of attributes as the irreducibly real and infinite diversity of substance itself (Macherey, 1979: 114). Even the immanent transcendence of dialectical mediation (as the unity of actual being in its diversity) is replaced by a conception of unity realized through diversity: each thing as *essence*, is immanent in its *existence*.

Moreover, Spinoza rejects the conception of perfection as what does not yet exist and must accordingly be brought into existence, replacing it with the notion that what exists *is* perfection: ideals, norms and imperfections in nature 'disappear' in the pure positivity of the present (Montag, citing Spinoza, *E II D6*). Given that God/Nature acts by the same necessity whereby it exists, in Spinoza there can be no teleological principle or conception of origin (*E IV* pref). The existence of a thing follows from its essence, its definition, and its efficient cause. While its existence can appear to us as contingent, Spinoza argues, this is due to the deficiency in our knowledge (the causal chain of events is hidden from us).

While notions of telos may be used as benchmarks of intelligibility, Spinoza transfers transcendental final causes to the domain of superstition. Montag contends that in this way, Spinoza frees up infinite regions of the real arguing that all that exists is determinate, exposing their various forms of necessity to the scrutiny of knowledge (Montag, 1989: 96). In this regard, Montag suggests that Spinoza anticipates the *German Ideology*: erroneous beliefs in an ordering of events either through final causes or the will of God, themselves, have a determinant existence and are thus intelligible. In Book I of the *Ethics*, Spinoza develops a rigorous theory of ideology, which is seen to have two causes: the first of these is ignorance of the causal chain, which leads us to take refuge in the reassuring conception of God's will as an incarnate causal principle; the second is the imputation of free-will and objectives to God due to the illusory perception of our own free-will. The latter arises because we have an awareness of our own volitions and desires without knowing their determinant causes. For example, Spinoza describes how the desire to build a house is seen to cause the act of building, but the initiating desire to build is itself caused (*E III P2 Schol*). Our ignorance of determinant causes leads to the imputation of specious norms of conduct and feeling, giving rise to moralistic behavior, reflecting the manner in which the discrepancy between 'is' and 'ought' blocks access to knowledge. The emergent 'mystery' of causal relations, in turn, necessitates continual interpretation on the part of those 'supposed to know' (Montag, 1989: 98, citing Spinoza, *TPT* pref).

Althusser on Immanent Causality

For Althusser, the most valuable achievement of Spinoza's thinking is the development of the notion of immanent cause. For him, Spinoza provided the first solution to the problem of determining the category of "the global expressive causality of a universal inner essence immanent in its phenomenon", specifically in the Spinozist sense of the term "*the whole existence of the structure consists of its effects*" (Althusser and Balibar, 1970: 187, 189).

George Fourtounis identifies in a comprehensive fashion, the similarities and subtle differences between Althusser's notion of *structural causality* and Spinoza's notion of *immanent causality*: the latter conveying the idea of a cause that is equally and exhaustively expressed in its effects (Fourtounis, 2005: 103). He sees this philosophy of immanence as profoundly subversive of the transcendental, which in orthodox eyes had been constituted as the ruling power holding sway over the three realms of Man (Soul), Society (the Sovereign) and Nature (God). In *Reading Capital*, structural causality is defined as the effectivity of a whole over its elements. Where atomism asserts the priority of elements over the whole, and holism asserts the priority of the whole over its parts, the introduction of a third term mediating between the other two moments implies the determination of each of the elements of the whole by the structure of the whole—but Althusser contends that this critical insight into the nature of causality is in need of a concept. He finds that concept in Spinoza's notion of a cause immanent in its effects, where the structure's effects are not pre-existing or external to the structure nor does the structure exist outside its effects (Fourtounis, p. 189, citing Althusser and Balibar, 1970: 189). More generally, Althusser explains his attraction to Spinoza in the following terms:

The first man ever to pose the problem of *reading*, and in consequence, of *writing*, was Spinoza, and he was also the first man in the world to have proposed both a theory of history and a philosophy of the opacity of the immediate. With him, for the first time ever, a man linked together in this way the essence of reading and the essence of history in a theory of the difference between the imaginary and the true. This explains to us why Marx could not possibly have become Marx except by founding a theory of history and a philosophy of the historical distinction between ideology and science, and why in the last analysis this foundation was consummated in the dissipation of the religious myth of *reading*. (Althusser and Balibar, 1970: 16)

In his paper, Fourtounis is effectively responding to Montag's (1998: 70-71) complaint that the Spinozist conception of immanent causality institutes an antinomic opposition between a structured whole (where the whole is at least in some sense conceived to be greater than its parts) and immanent cause. This is because the former inevitably implies some spiritualist, essentialist remainder of transcendent meaning or

centering principle by virtue of the need for the establishment of an overarching coherence while the latter implies a pure positivity of being, a surface without depth, an assemblage which does not totalize its elements (Fourtounis, 2005: 106).

In contrast, Fourtounis argues that what appears to be an antinomy is rather a constitutive inner tension within immanence itself. He sees Althusser's text as arguing *a contrario* by opposing a Cartesian atomistic and mechanistic system of transitive causality with a Leibnizian-Hegelian system of essentialist and spiritualist notion of causality: one predicated on the 'absolute condition' that the whole is not a structure! What Althusser has attempted to construct, Fourtounis suggests, is a double counter-distinction between a *transitive atomism* (one based on a trivial conception of immanence without transcendence) and a *transcendental holism* (a transcendence without immanence where the planar space of things is one of immanence rather than one of transitivity). Thus, immanent causality situates each opposing term within a creative frame where each is essential to the other. Because Spinozist immanence always refers to causality, Fourtounis observes that 'it cannot denote the inert identity of the self-same' (Fourtounis, 2005: 108). Refusing to concede the prospect of a transcendent doubling, he posits the concept of an *annihilated*, but *noneliminable* duality: immanent causality has to affirm what it negates: the 'between' lying between its poles, the gap between substance and its modes, without any identification to prevent the transformation of substantial modes into a merely transitive causality. As such, the locus of this structure is situated somewhere between surface and depth.

Another important philosophical resource Althusser finds to be of value in Spinoza is the distinction between between the object of knowledge and the real object:

Against what should really be called the latent dogmatic empiricism of Cartesian idealism, Spinoza warned us that the *object* of knowledge or essence was in itself absolutely distinct and different from the *real object*, for, to repeat his famous aphorism, the two objects must not be confused: the *idea* of a circle, which is the *object* of knowledge must not be confused with the circle, which is the *real object*. In the third chapter of the 1857 *Introduction*, Marx took up this principle as forcefully as possible.

Marx rejected the Hegelian confusion which identifies the real object with the object of knowledge, the real process with the knowledge process (Althusser and Balibar, 1970: 40-41)

Next, Althusser quotes from Marx to emphasize the continuity between the latter's thinking and that of Spinoza:

Hegel fell into the illusion of conceiving the real (*das Reale*) as the result of thought recapitulating itself within itself, deepening itself within itself, and moving itself from within itself, whereas the method that allows one to rise from the abstract to the concrete is merely the mode (*die Arte*) of thought which appropriates the concrete and reproduces (*reproduzieren*) it as a spiritual concrete (*geistig Konkretes*) (*Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie*, Berlin, 1953, p. 22)

Althusser specifically rejects the notion that Marx's contribution to the critique of classical political economy solely amounted to the historicization of its categories so that "Marx would be 'Ricardo set in motion' as Hegel was 'Spinoza set in motion'" (Althusser and Balibar, 1970: 92). Instead he suggests that Marx accomplished a thoroughgoing critique of the Hegelian conception of historical time. Moreover, in regard to Marx's notion of the "complex-real", Althusser argues that the synchronic is "eternity in Spinoza's sense, or the adequate knowledge of a complex object by the adequate knowledge of its complexity" (Althusser and Balibar, 1970: 107).

The New Readings of Spinoza

While sharing the urge to restore the 'Althusserian moment' to its rightful place within Marxist historiography, Peter Thomas (2002) raises strong reservations about the appropriateness of Althusser's application of immanent causality to the economy (as mode of production), which he situated as the immanent cause within the social formation as a totality. For Althusser, society is a decentered (though not an essential) structure in dominance, whose relatively autonomous elements are subject to contradiction, uneven development, and overdetermination (i.e. each of the instances—political and ideological—must be redefined for each particular mode of production, and all elements are present in the economic instance in their materiality). However, while Spinoza was concerned with Substance as infinite power to act, Althusser is concerned with the social totality. Thomas points to the fact that, for Spinoza, society is merely a finite modification within Substance, not sufficient unto itself: one that must be comprehended *sub specie aeternitatis* (Thomas, 2002: 108-9, citing Spinoza, EIII, pref) . Thomas foreshadows forthcoming research that will examine the alternative approaches that other studies of Spinoza have taken to grasping the nature of society as an object of critical analysis and political transformation (Thomas, 2002: 109). These interpretive strategies are critical for the new Spinozists.

Montag observes that Spinoza departs from 17th century concern with the rights and obligations of both state and citizen; his work resides 'elsewhere'. The specificity of his philosophy is defined by an emerging duality of meaning: at times 'terrified' by, and effectively turning away from implications of own theoretical apparatus, Spinoza recognizes the mediating role of sovereign as something which imposes both imperatives and obligations. However, in his thinking the conventional contractarian notion of 'right as a prior norm' is replaced by 'right as the power to act' (Montag, 1989: 100, citing Spinoza, E IV P37, S2). As such, right can neither guarantee nor

institute, because no right exists prior to the relationship of forces that is established: the former is an effect not a cause of latter and any ‘contract’ that is established merely registers this simple fact. Moreover, if this underlying relationship alters then the associated contract will be invalidated. Here, Montag instances the 1672 killing of Spinoza’s friend Jan de Witt, the leader of the Dutch Free Parliament who, along with his brother, was the victim of the murderous rage of a Calvinist mob of Orangist sympathizers (Montag, 1989: 101, citing Spinoza, TPI 1).

Similarly, Balibar sees in Spinoza the first thinker who went beyond an analysis of the masses as a threat to the security of the state to investigate and explain the causes, modalities and the logics of the mass movements in which they participated (Balibar, 1989: 106). Balibar suggests that Spinoza’s ambivalence towards the multitude was both inspired by, evinced a fear of, and was itself experienced by the masses inspiring the search for a more constructive arrangement of forces: the masses are both a support for the monarchists’ subversion of Dutch Republic and a force constituting democracy (Balibar, 1989: 107, 111).

In Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise (TPT)* the multitude is conceived as the unity of both the *vulgus* (ignorant) and the *plebian* (an ‘inferior’ mass opposed to the government). This notion of the multitude is then subsequently deployed in relation to: superstition, the circle of death, and the dialectic of contract (Balibar, 1989: 113). Citing the Preface of the *Treatise*, Balibar first discusses the strategic use of superstition, where religion is deployed as a cultic fear to ensure that the masses become willing to die for the vainglory of tyrants (*TPT*, pref). Second, he notes Spinoza’s account of how revolutions often devour their own children and thus lead to the restoration largely as a consequence of prior history and the inversion of human desire (Balibar, 1989: 114, citing Spinoza, *TPT*, XVIII). Finally, he details Spinoza’s concerns about the inconstancy of the multitude as evidenced by its desire to abandon work and seek pleasure, facing a state now seen to be governed by rational and affective means (*TPT*, XVII): an inconstancy that could ultimately lead to the uncontrollable violence of the mob (*TPT* XVII-III). Mitigating these destructive, inconstant and manipulable traits Spinoza instances the stability of Hebrew state, which he suggests is an attribute that arises due to a patriotic hate born of devotion (Balibar, 1989: 115-6, citing *TTP*, XVII) . In the *Treatise*, the principal danger to the state is always conceived as internal—the historical process makes people exist as the multitude and, additionally, controls its evolution. However, no practical means can be found that corresponds to task of developing the constitution, requisite unity, and the mutual relations necessary to liberate citizens from fear and violence (Balibar, 1989: 116-7).

With the drafting of the *Political Treatise (PT)*, however, natural law is now thought in terms of the power of the mass, the right of number, and the interaction of forces, both in terms of the modalities of the existence of the mass and those of the functioning of the state (Balibar, 1989: 118). Balibar explains that Spinoza now grounds the contract between the sovereign and the mass—the latter envisaged by Hobbes to be the sum of a multiplicity of constituent atoms (initially situated in a state of nature—on the mass reconceived as an historico-political reality, as an expression

of the 'general will'. Moreover, this general will is not seen as something metaphysical, rather, it is constructed as a function of the very constraints governing the soul of the masses, and is seen to be supplemented by 'civic virtue' understood as a love of laws, these laws being the very 'soul of state' (Balibar, 1989: 119-20).

In Spinoza's physics, the multitude is conceived as a complex of interactions, fluctuations, and combinations attaining higher degrees of complexity. As a social construct, however, the multitude undermines any contractarian basis for grounding political authority or sovereignty. The multitude can only become a political subject through an idea of reason or imagination predicated in turn on principles of tolerance, solidarity, and the coexistence of singularities. Each of these singularities becomes a foundation for democracy through the introduction into society of the values of freedom which each has in their possession (Negri, 1991: 43-44). In Hobbes, by way of contrast, a contractarian politics is forcibly imposed over a mechanistic physics to ground a politics of *necessary servitude*: moreover, Liberalism always operates within this contractarian vortex!

Negri's Analysis of Constitutive Power

The Spinozist philosophical trajectory pursued by Antonio Negri, is first set out in his 1981 book on Spinoza, *The Savage Anomaly*, but it has been revisited and substantially revised in many of his later papers, many of which have been brought together in the 2004 compendium of essays, *Subversive Spinoza*. Suffice to say that Negri's interpretation of Spinoza's work relies on a demarcation between a First Foundation, in which Spinoza embraces a Neo-Platonist affirmation of transcendental order (*pars constuens*) and a Second Foundation, in which he sets out a more radical Materialist philosophy of constitution as organization (*pars destruens*). The 'First Foundation' is chronologically situated between his writing of the *TTP* and the 3rd and 4th parts of the *Ethics*. The second is a materialist or 'ascetic' interpretation conceived during the writing of the 5th Part of the *Ethics* and the *TP*. This materialist 'Second Foundation' is characterised by a focus on the constitution of reality and the democratic expression of the multitude (*multitudo*). In *The Savage Anomaly* Negri argued that the Second Foundation effectively destroyed the First. In his later work (Negri, 2004) he explicitly rejects this earlier notion of a frontal opposition between each of the two Foundations, now viewing each as engaged in a 'reciprocal nourishment' if not a 'convergence' and a 'suturing'. What springs out of this suturing operation is his conception of 'democracy as a becoming-eternal' (101). Negri concedes that his renewed conception of this interweaving serves to "corroborate certain interpretations from which I have sometimes distanced myself (Matheron & Deleuze)" (Negri, 2004: 102).

Likewise, in *The Savage Anomaly* Negri discerns a concrete antagonism between two forms of power in Spinoza's work, which amounts more to a distinction between forms of authority and organization than subjective capability. Constituted Power (*potestas*) is conceived as a centralized, mediating, transcendental force of command (i.e. the power of capitalist relations of production) and Constitutive power (*potentia*) is conceived in a collective dimension as a local, immediate, active force of constitution (i.e. the power of democratic social authority, of forces of production).

Negri contends that the second part of the *Ethics* undermines Neo-Platonism on two fronts: the first front moves along a pathway from power to Power, extending from metaphysics to history (see Hardt's forward to Negri, 1991). In parts III and IV of the *Ethics*, power is interrogated as *conatus* or striving: proceeding through love, desire and the imagination to the power to think or act as a collective and productive force. Here, the multitude appears as a social subject manifesting an ethos and a common desires, constituting new social relations. The second front moves from Power to power, extending from history to metaphysics. Here, Spinoza's *Political Treatise*, written shortly after the *Ethics*, plays an important role. From the perspective of attaining peace and freedom, Spinoza demonstrates that supreme Power is best moderated by the constitutive power of multitude, as we progress from monarchy, through aristocracy to democracy. In other words, constituent Power must now be constituted by the very power of the multitude.

Negri skillfully argues for the relevance of Spinoza's thinking for our current era by contrasting his interpretation of temporality with that of Martin Heidegger in relation to the latter's interpretation of *Dasein*: the there-being of human beings. Heidegger analyses *Dasein* and the disclosure of what is ready-to-hand within-the-world in terms of a primordial unconcealment that is prior to reflexion or inner perception⁴. As Negri sees it, *Dasein* is "temporality that is ruptured and rediscovered at each point as presence, a presence which is autonomous stability and rootedness against any dispersive mobility of the 'they' and to any form of cultural disorientation" (Negri, 2004: 85). For Heidegger, temporality makes the 'factically thrown' existence of *Dasein* possible as possibility in the form of a self-projection into the time that is to come. In this context the ownmost and most authentic possibility of *Dasein* becomes death, conceived as the 'impossibility of a possibility', as the impossibility of presence⁵. For Negri,

This is the way the Hegelian theme of modernity comes to conclusion: in nothingness, in death, the immediate unity of essence and existence is given (Negri, 2004: 85)

⁴ In his later work, Heidegger (like Derrida after him) attempts to ground *Dasein*'s self-disclosure in a yet more fundamental history of Being: as an openness permitting the articulation of a structurality of structures. It is a transcendental opening in the sense that it establishes the conditions of possibility of structures, the precise manner of their perturbations, the very matrix within which metaphysical oppositions and contradictions are engendered. Thus, it is both pre-ontological and pre-logical accounting for the very possibility of self-reflection and all of its accompanying aporias, along with any possible solutions. The very difference between the structurality of structures and reflection cannot be subsumed within a greater unity: it is a pure heterology, a set of conditions that precedes thinking as the thinking of meaning (determinate reflection), thinking as the thinking of being (external reflection), and thinking as being (positing reflection). Nevertheless, Negri would contend that this philosophical heterology does not extricate thinking from the horizon of modernity that has already been subverted by Spinoza.

⁵ Hegel's attempt to overcome the aporias of reflexive thought by subjectivizing them has also come under attack from Nietzsche, through his identification of a breach between knowledge and self-cognition. For Nietzsche knowledge is not predicated on a reflexive understanding but rather on a misunderstanding of ourselves—to arrive at conventional truth we must avoid knowing ourselves.

However, Negri insists that this is not the only way that presence can operate, presence is not merely “being present in truth, in the unveiling of being, but rather the projection of the present, authenticity, the new rootedness in being” (Negri, 2004: 86). From this Spinozian perspective, time ‘aspires’ to power, alluding to its productivity and energetic force,

Without even having entered into the modern, Spinoza exits it from here, by overturning the conception of time—which others wanted to fulfill in becoming or nothingness—into a positively open and constitutive time. Under the very same ontological conditions love takes the place of ‘care’. Spinoza systematically overturns Heidegger: to *Angst* (anxiety) he opposes *Amor*, to *Umsicht* (circumspection) he opposes *Mens*, to *Enschlossenheit* (resolution) he opposes *Cupiditas*, to *Anwesenheit* (being-present) he opposes the *Conatus*, to *Besorgen* (concern) he opposes *Appetitus*, to *Möglichkeit* (possibility) he opposes *Potentia*. In this confrontation, an anti-purposive presence and possibility unite that which different meanings of ontology divide. At the same time, the indifferent meanings of being are precisely divided—Heidegger aims at nothingness, and Spinoza at Plenitude (Negri, 2004: 86)

Negri argues that love, for Spinoza, “expresses the time of Power, a time that is presence insofar as it is action that is constitutive eternity”. To explicate this thesis, Negri cites a series of propositions taken from part IV of the *Ethics* that are worthy of reproduction (Negri, 2004: 87):

Whatever the Mind understands under a species of eternity, it understands not from the fact that it conceives the Body’s present actual existence, but from the fact that it conceives the Body’s essence under a species of eternity (*E V*, P29).

[...]

Insofar as the Mind knows itself and the Body under a species of eternity, it necessarily has knowledge of God, and knows that it is in God and is conceived through God (*E V*, P30).

[...]

From the third kind of knowledge, there necessarily arises an intellectual Love of God. For from this kind of knowledge there arises (by P32) Joy, accompanied by the idea of God as its cause, that is (by Def Aff. VI), Love of God, not insofar as we imagine him as present

(by P29), but insofar as we understand God to be eternal. And this is what I call the intellectual love of God (*E V P32 Corr*).

[...]

Although this Love toward God has had no beginning (by P33), it still has all the perfections of Love, just as if it had come to be (*E V P33 S*).

[...]

If we attend to the common opinion of men, we shall see that they are indeed conscious of the eternity of their Mind, but they confuse it with duration, and attribute it to the imagination, *or*, memory, which they believe remains after death (*E V P34 S*).

[...]

This Love the Mind has must be related to its actions (by P32C and IIP3); it is, then, an action by which the Mind contemplates itself, with the accompanying idea of God as its cause (by P32 and P32 C)... so (by P35), this Love the Mind has is part of the infinite love by which God loves himself. (*E V P36 Dem*).

Eternity and the Multitude

In the *Ethics*, Negri contends, the third kind of knowledge, this intellectual love of God, though unrelated explicitly to a political argument, is intrinsically political insofar as it is associated with the *multitudo* (in the form of a multitude of causes) through a “demonstration of the power of the mind over the affects in the construction of the intellectual love of God, a demonstration that this power is all the stronger as the number of people that we imagine engaged in the process of knowledge (*conoscenza*) is increased” (Negri, 2004: 41). Negri emphasizes here, the shift in spiritual tension from an ascetic to a collective horizon: a paradoxical ‘oscillation’ and a ‘contradictoriness’ that are characteristic of Spinoza’s thought.

This oscillation and seeming contradiction are brought out with the greatest clarity in Negri’s essay on *Democracy and Eternity in Spinoza*. His explication how the two Foundations are sutured commences with an examination of Spinoza’s definition of democracy as *omnino absolutum imperium* (the totally absolute state; *TTP XI,1*). Negri discerns a doubled meaning in Spinoza’s use of the term ‘absolute’. The first meaning is quantitative in so far as it supports a conception of the multitude as a whole or a totality (*TP II, 17*). The second, in contrast, is qualitative in so far as it refers to the State’s purpose of providing security and freedom from fear (*TTP XX 231-2*). In relation to this objective the multitude is seen to operate as the unity of minds (Negri, 2004: 103, citing *TP III/2*), and as an expression of freedom, the multitude guarantees the realization of the best of all states (*TP V*).

However, Negri goes further in identifying a third meaning, which ‘comprehends and develops the first two’. This enveloping conception points to the radicality of democracy (*TP VIII/12*). Now absoluteness is conceived as pertaining neither to the conception of a separate state within a state, nor to an unrestricted product of absolute will (*TP VI on Stoics; XI/2*); rather it is a dynamic totality, a free becoming, a collective acting, living and preserving of being under the guidance of reason, *sub quadam aeternitas specie*, united against the otherwise destructive obstacles of isolation, war and power (Negri: 103). In this passage towards eternity, Negri relates the laws of nature, as described in the *Treatise (TTP VI)*, to the conception of reason outlined in part II of the *Ethics (E II, P44CII)*. Here, reason is effectively conceived as a form of transcendental reflection guaranteeing the concept. Nevertheless, Negri discerns another conception of reason at work here: one that is captured by the notion of “a *cupiditas* that cannot be excessive”, explicitly introduced in Part 5 of the *Ethics (E IV P61-68)*. Spinoza deploys this alternative conception to found anew the common life of the state, insofar as a man guided by reason is more free, living in accord with common decision, common life and common advantage rather than in isolation (*E IV P73*). This conception of democracy as free collective life under the command of reason grounds what Negri chooses to call “a praxis of the absolute”. He is naturally led to ask, “What motivates this transformation in the nature of reason?” “What grants this passage?” (Negri: 105).

In opening itself to eternity *Cupiditas* encounters death (*E IV P67*) and it is this encounter, Negri contends, which displaces the ontological order onto the very terrain of praxis, “When eternity is opposed to death, freedom is revealed as becoming-eternal” (Negri, : 105). He plots the trajectory of Spinoza’s line of reasoning as it moves from the fact that the free man meditates on life not on death (*E IV P67*), to an acknowledgement of the opposition holding between freedom and morality (*E IV P68*). Negri notes that the tension between joy and sadness, introduced in Part 4 of the *Ethics*, had already touched upon the issues of death and society (*E IV P39-41*). There, death is seen to be rendered less harmful by clear knowledge (love of God): operating within the perspective of ‘becoming eternal’ we are able to overcome isolation, war, and power. The Fifth Part of the *Ethics* takes up, and then reinforces, the three inter-woven themes of the experience of death, a *cupiditas* without excess, and political socialization (*E V P38-41*), whereby the activity and perfection of a mind, multiplied in plurality, “wrest it from death and render it eternal” (Negri: 106).

Nevertheless, at this point of his analysis Negri cautions that although we have identified the *formal* cause of the ‘becoming-eternal’ in democracy we have yet to grasp the *material* cause. Within the real, Spinoza conceives of the experience of death as contradictory with respect to the *cupiditas* that knows no excess. On one hand, it is evil and negativity (*E IV P39*); on the other hand, in its positivity it presages a mutation or metamorphosis (*E I P33SII; II L 4,5,6,7; III Post2, III P11 S; IV P4 & Dem; IV P39S; IV App VII; Ax IV A1*). Death does not function solely as destructive of the proportion that composes the different movements of body, for this very destructiveness raises the prospect of good metamorphoses (*E IV P39 S*), those entailing conservation and maturation. Already in Part IV there is reference to the later arguments of Part V pertaining to the social body, which has the potential to either attain a life of harmony or suffer from death and discord (Negri, 2004: 107,

citing *E IV P40*). The next proposition introduces the opposition between joy as good and sadness as directly evil, constituting *in advance* of proposition 61, the notion of a *cupiditas* without excess (*E IV P41*). The Scholium to Proposition 45, in defining a hate can never be good or just, then establishes a clear link between individual and social life (*E IV P45 SII*). A subsequent series of Propositions goes on to develop the notion of a positive, constitutive metamorphosis, accomplished through *cupiditas* as an absolutely affirmative power, qualified by eternity, and opposed to fear and death as absolute enemies (*E IV P61-73*). Social life and individual life are inter-woven: man is not born free but becomes so through a constitutive and collective praxis, as a ‘becoming eternal’, based on the knowledge of God and love in reason. Where Spinoza warns that the mob is terrifying if unafraid, Negri provides a plausible anti-Hobbesian interpretation (Negri: 108, citing *E IV P54S*): Spinoza submits the superstitions of the multitude to a critique of imagination on behalf of the ‘tendency of reason’. Although the multitude is born coarse and bestial it is subject to a metamorphosis through the power of community, the knowledge of God, and the plenitude of love (Negri: 209, *E IV P68; P54*).

In the Fifth Part of the *Ethics*, the problem of death, *cupiditas*, and the social-individual nexus are once again brought together within a metaphysics of mutation. Here, Negri proclaims that the mystical is ‘cancelled out’ within an ascetic and materialist celebration of collective praxis but, significantly, he argues that eternity is *internal* to this praxis! We know by experience that we are eternal, outside of duration (*E V P22-3; P34; P38; P31 S*). Here, Spinoza traces the constitution of eternity within bodies. Power expresses itself (increases) in this becoming eternal, when *mens* and *amor* are united. The more the mind loves God, the more perfect it is and the less it is subject to evil and fear of death (Negri, : 110, citing *E V P39; P40*). In becoming eternal it is acted on more by the second and third kinds of knowledge and, thus, a mind the greater part of which is eternal is capable of great many actions. In Part Five, echoing the same numbered proposition in Part Four (*E IVP39*), Spinoza foreshadows a progression like the growth of child to adulthood, in which action attains independence and greater perfection (*E V P39S; P40*). It is this interpretation of the third kind of knowledge that so obviously sets Negri apart from Althusser. Although Negri raises concerns that the role of the imagination has been excluded from any discussion of this process of maturation, he warmly embraces Spinoza’s conception of democracy as a form of non-government, as a metamorphosis without end (Negri, 2004: 111). Negri interprets Spinoza’s conception of eternity as follows,

In the infinite richness of the constitutive articulations of the world, there was no longer a place for the before or the after, for a transcendent divinity or for a kingdom of transcendental purposes that could be placed beyond the creative experience of the existent. This intramundane path of creative experience was eternal, an experience of freedom. In this perspective, genealogy asserted itself against every teleology. (Negri, 2004: 114)

The Lacanian Critique of Spinoza

An alternative philosophical interpretation of Subjectivity and causality to that provided by Spinoza, Kant or Hegel is to be found in the work of Jacques Lacan. In regard to the Lacanian interpretation of Spinoza, Žižek has observed the following,

Lacan says that Kant was right historically about the Spinozian universality of the signifier. It was a kind of false leap, but if your question implies that today's world is paradoxically closer to the neo-Spinozist universality of the signifier, I agree. The ultimate Spinozist idea is that you have a field of knowledge in the Lacanian sense, as the binary signifier without the Master signifier — in speech-act theory we would call it the “order of the performative.” I think this was the ultimate Spinozist dream, what he called “love of God” or “perfect rational knowledge”, which is a kind of knowledge that is not obliged to have recourse to a Master signifier, to a point of order, which is performative (Žižek, 2004).

Lacan makes one of his most detailed observations on Spinoza in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. It is preceded by a discussion of the meaning that can be attributed to the holocaust that is worthy of a detailed consideration. Lacan argues that,

No ‘meaning given to history, based on Hegeliano-Marxist premises’ is able to account for the resurgence of the drama of Nazism, the holocaust, the sacrifice to obscure gods. It is here that we ‘try to find evidence for the presence of the desire of this Other that I call here the dark God. It is the eternal meaning of the sacrifice, to which no one can resist, unless animated by that faith, so difficult to sustain, which, perhaps, one man alone has been able to formulate in a plausible way—namely, Spinoza, with his *Amor intellectualis Dei*’ (Lacan, 1979: 275).

Lacan goes on to claim that,

What, quite wrongly, has been thought of in Spinoza as pantheism is simply the reduction of the field of God to the universality of the signifier, which produces a serene, exceptional detachment from human desire. In so far as Spinoza says—desire is the essence of man, and in the radical dependence of the universality of the

divine attributes, which is possible only through the function of the signifier, in so far as he does this, he obtains that unique position by which the philosopher—and it is no accident that it is a Jew detached from his tradition who embodies it—may be confused with a transcendent love.

This position is not tenable for us. Experience shows us that Kant is more true, and I have proved that his theory of consciousness, when he writes of practical reason, is sustained only by giving a specification of the moral law which, looked at more closely, is simply desire in its pure state, that very desire that culminates in sacrifice, strictly speaking, of everything that is the object of love in one's human tenderness—I would say, not only in the rejection of the pathological object, but also in its sacrifice and murder. That is why I wrote *Kant avec Sade* (Lacan, 1979: 275-6).

While he recognised the importance of Spinoza's notion of immanent causality, in formulating his conception of the Kantian Thing (*das Ding*) Lacan attempts to identify something implicit in Freud's work, something that he sees as fundamentally ethical in nature. However, it is an ethos situated beyond any conventional notions of the 'good'. While the moral law, in Freud's works, affirms itself in opposition to pleasure, Lacan emphasizes it is orientated to something beyond the pleasure principle. In a movement which starts with the opposition between the pleasure principle and the reality principle, it gravitates towards the "opaque surface" that is the death instinct: the vanishing point of any reality.

In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan traces the development, within Freud's own work, of what he calls *das Ding*: that which lies beneath the oscillations and repetitions of desire. The Thing is a real that never enters the constitution of reality through language, but is nevertheless present. It is something strange to the subject, something that, on the level of the unconscious only a representation can represent: it is the element which is situated at the heart of the subjective "only in the sense that it excluded". In the form of a sign, of representation as a function of apprehending, it is indicated by the *vorstellungsrepräsentanz*—Freud's representative representative—which is the way in which every representation is represented insofar as it evokes "the good that *das Ding* brings with it" (Lacan, 1979: 71-2). It is that which, in regard to desire, man must "go around". It is what permits reality testing—the hallucinated reinvestment of what had previously been a satisfying hallucination experience (Lacan, 1979: 137). It is the vacuole or void created in the centre of signifiers (Lacan, 1979: 150). And in relation to narcissism, it is the mirror that can never be crossed (Lacan, 1979: 151). It is differentiated from the narcissistic object that is interchangeable between the *Real-Ich* and the *Ideal-Ich*, in as much as it is the "excluded interior" of the *Real-Ich*, which is given over to the *vorstellungsrepräsentanz*.

Excluded from the signs in which the subject will hereafter locate the search for his or her satisfaction, it is not merely the lost object of satisfaction—the mnemonic trace motivating desire—but pure loss itself, the loss which is prior to that which is lost.

It is to the extent that the function of the pleasure principle is to make man always search for what he has to find again, but which he will never attain, that one reaches the essence, namely, that sphere or relationship which is known as the law of the prohibition of incest.

As such, ensnared within the dialectic of law and transgression, it represents both the sovereign good and the inaccessible, forbidden good. To the extent that *das Ding* is the beyond of the signified prior to any repression, the choice of neurosis is determined by the first orientation to the Thing. For the hysteric, who acts only to serve as a means for the reproduction of love, but all the time focused on the Other (that no one will reach), it is the object which functions as the support of an aversion. In obsessional neurosis, it is the object which literally gives too much pleasure, so that behaviour is motivated by avoidance. And in the paranoiac, it is the object of disbelief. (Lacan, 1979: 54).

Lacan contends that for Kant it is the pathological object, from which morality must detach itself through acting in such a way that the maxim for one's action can be accepted as a universal, as a maxim which may be taken as the principle of laws that are valid for all (Lacan, 1979: 77). Similarly, in *Philosophy in the Boudoir* the Marquis de Sade commands us to “take as the universal maxim of our conduct the right to enjoy any other person whatsoever as the instrument of our pleasure”: a pursuit we must carry out to the “limit of the limits of our desire” (Lacan, 1979: 78-9). Kant purifies the moral judgment of all interest or social consequence, leaving the remainder, the field of the void within which the unconditional imperative “Thou shalt...” arises. Similarly, in the Sadean fantasm the *jouissance* of desire is raised to an imperative (Lacan, 1979: 317).

For Kant, the sentient correlative of the moral law in its purity is a feeling one could call pain (Lacan, 1979: 80). Similarly, for the Divine Marquis, when we force access to *das Ding* we expose ourselves to an extremity of pleasure that can only be experienced as pain. In sublimation it becomes the basis for a spiritual evaluation, which entails raising an object to the dignity of the Thing, within a specific historical context of social valuation. In sublimation, the Thing appears veiled like the beloved object within the medieval tradition of courtly love. Here, the signifier is fashioned in the image of the impossible Thing, defined as what must always escape desire, as the ‘refound object’ which is always and already lost so that it can only be represented by something else along the defile of the signifier. Operating beyond the limit, beyond the pleasure-principle's will to return to equilibrium, the Thing is the embodiment of the will to destruction, of the will to make a fresh start from zero.

This perspective was not alien to Freud, who famously expressed his aversion to the Christian command to “love thy neighbour as thyself”. In traditional morality the “path to the good is blazed by pleasure” (Lacan, 1979: 185). However, for Freud no less than for Lacan, the good is what keeps us at a distance from our *jouissance*. Given that my good is not your good, what I want is to make your good into the image of my own. Lacan emphasises the reality that my neighbour’s *jouissance*, to the extent that it differs from mine, is what always poses problems for my love (Lacan, 1979: 187).

In relation to the Kantian moral law, Lacan introduces his famous re-interpretation of *Romans*, Chapter 7, Verse 7, where St. Paul articulates the relationship between sin and the law. In this text Lacan, equates sin with the Kantian Thing to demonstrate how the dialectical relation between Desire and the Law causes desire to flare up only in regard to the Law, through which it becomes the desire for death (Lacan, 1979: 84). Within the paradoxical and parasitic domain of the Kantian ethos, the insatiable malice of the moral conscience becomes ever yet harsher, the greater are the sacrifices made in its name. A similar malice can be discerned within artistic sublimation, a spiritual evaluation represented in psychoanalytic terms as a change in the object of the drive, that escapes both symptom and repression, but only to the extent that it entails a certain “reaction-formation”: the object is endowed, through social recognition, into something of public utility, but behind this social evaluation stands the Thing as that which man must ‘go around’ (Lacan, 1979: 95). Lacan considers a certain kind of hatred to be correlative of the relation between *das Ding* and the Law: a hatred manifestly present in Luther’s declaration of God’s eternal hatred of man, and he relates this hatred to the Father who is the tyrant of the Primal Horde, the one who becomes, at an unconscious level, the target of the original crime (Lacan, 1979: 97).

In Sade’s ethical world, crime is a collaboration in nature’s creations, which “wipes the slate clean”, disrupting beyond propagation, beyond the natural cycle of fecundity and decay. Where murder takes the first life, the most useful crimes take the second life, attaining absolute annihilation (Lacan, 1979: 210). For the Divine Marquis, eternal suffering is the fundamental fantasy: the subject of unrelenting pain and torture is strangely indestructible (Lacan, 1979: 261). Lacan discerns a similar notion of the second death at play in the work of religious writers such as St. Augustine no less than in the heretical theology of the Cathars. For Augustine, only the sovereign good escapes the corruption that can be inflicted on lesser goods (Lacan, 1979: 219). The Cathars were motivated by the desire to escape the world of generation and corruption introduced into God’s creation by the transformative work of the demiurge (Lacan, 1979: 215). As with courtly love, beauty emerges through reflection at this limit of the second death (Lacan, 1979: 260).

In a justifiably acclaimed analysis, Lacan identifies a similar motif expressed in the lamentations of the condemned heroine of Sophocles’ play, *Antigone*. Suspended in that second death between life and death, beyond hope, *Antigone* bewails her fate conveys her regret for everything in life that is refused her—children, marriage, the conjugal bed—because her life is approached from the other side of the limit, as

something already lost (Lacan, 1979: 280). Once again, Antigone is transformed by a process of anamorphosis from a victim into something fascinating and powerful through her positioning beyond the limit: while all is decomposed around the mirror of her transgression and sacrifice, beauty emerges beyond the mirror (Lacan, 1979: 273). A terrifying autonomy is conferred upon her through the ‘signifying cut’, which embodies the pure desire of death as such (282). However, in this way her beauty operates as a barrier holding the subject back from confronting the absolute destruction beyond putrefaction (Lacan, 1979: 216-217).

Knowledge of this death arises, Lacan argues, due to the action of the primordial signifier through which the subject disappears from the chain of his or her being (Lacan, 1992: 295). He investigates this notion of the *aphinisis* or disappearance of the subject in more detail in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, where he discusses the *vels* of alienation and separation. For Lacan, what appears as antinomic in reflexivity is a function of the different “*I*’s represented by the enunciation (the *I* as the one who speaks) and the statement (the *I* who is the subject of the statement). This splitting of the subject, however, occurs prior to the acquisition of language. For the infant, the mirror stage separates the unity of thought (as image) from the chaos of the body as an infinity of sensations and uncoordinated movements. The *I* is constituted primordially through misrecognition and imaginary, specular self-alienation. Kordela argues that this oscillation reflects the subject’s entrapment within the mathematical antinomy. It can neither identify completely with the specular image (finitude), in which case it would lose its body, or with the movements animating the body (infinity), in which case it would lose its total form (Kordela, 1999: 803). Both moments presuppose tautological knowledge of the *I*’s limits (much as both capital as value in exchange and as the means of production and its superstructure antinomically constitute the subject).

In this light Kordela suggests that Lacan’s notion of symbolic castration is somewhat ‘redundant’. Under symbolic castration, the *I* is compelled to oscillate ceaselessly between each of two alternatives manifesting the death drive as “repetition compulsion”. She argues that the signifier—in its radical ambiguity and undecidability, and initially relating to defile of the mathematical antinomy—must provide the matrix for both the Imaginary and the Symbolic registers (Kordela, 1999: 804). Under the mathematical antinomy, the untruth and impossibility of each opposing statement precludes representation of reality as a precondition for truth. The mathematical antinomy must accordingly give way to the dynamic antinomy: myths of castration and the Law-of-the-Father, insofar as they prohibit the impossible, thus render it possible (805). The Master Signifier, through its prohibitions, brings about the closure of the ideological field, insofar as it designates the sovereign good. It is this designation that enables the subject to cease its repetitive search for meaning (Kordela, 1999: 806).

It is at this point that Kordela's antinomic interpretation of the Lacanian mirror stage begins to unravel⁶. The oscillations between an imaginary unity, on one hand, and infinite chaos of sensations, on the other, are pre-linguistic: although partially inscribed by symbolization through the self-alienating image, they can only be conceived as falling under the dominion of the mathematical antinomy retrospectively (i.e. after the acquisition of language). As such, the Symbolic register is far from 'redundant'.

Lacan, for his part, discusses the antinomies of reflection in relation to the *vels* of alienation and separation. However, while the *vels* give rise to the antinomies of reason "this doesn't go to the heart of the matter" (Lacan, 1979: 210-211). The *vel* of alienation is the correlative of the fact that the signifier with which one designates the same signifier is not the same as the one with which one designates the other. The *vel* or logical 'or' at play here designates neither the inclusive nor the exclusive 'or': instead, it represents the perennial opposition of the subject between meaning and being. Like the highwayman's interrogation, "Your money or your life?" it represents the choice between meaning and non-being on one side or being and non-sense on the other (Lacan, 1979: 211). As such, the subject first appears in the Other as the unary signifier resulting from *aphinisis* of the subject: passing into the unconscious it becomes the point of attraction through which all other repressions are possible (Lacan, 1979: 218). This choice between meaning and being is revealed in Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic where the subject must decide between slavery as a life without social recognition (meaning) or mastery through recognition and a willingness to confront death.

In contrast, the *vel* of separation stands for the superposition of two lacks: one real the other symbolic (Lacan, 1979: 205). The symbolic lack reflects the fact that the subject is dependent on the signifier in the field of the Other (i.e. the unconscious, the structure of language, or relations of kinship affiliation and commodity exchange: each represented as a network of signifiers external to, but constitutive of, the subject). The real lack is taken up as the part lost to the living being in sexual reproduction. For Lacan, this is symbolized by the *lamella*—the amoebic, immortal 'organ' of the drive, surviving a-sexual division, and existing as the libido, as what is subtracted from the living being by virtue of the fact that is subject to sexual reproduction and death, as pure life-instinct (Lacan, 1979: 198). Because desire is always desire of the Other, it either slips or crawls away along the path of metonymy or displacement—it is that which doesn't work, that which eludes the questioning of the hysteric, "What does he want from me?" In response to this interrogation, Lacan observes that the subject brings forward the answer of his previous lack or disappearance, and this very response enshrines the second lack, the fantasy of the subject's own loss, his death (Lacan, 1979: 213). In accordance with this analysis of the *vels*, Lacan argues that the flaw of philosophical idealism—the Hegelian lure that proceeds from the Cartesian *cogito*—is that there can be no subject established within the dialectic without *aphinisis*: no mediation is possible between the level of meaning

⁶ A condensed overview of the mirror stage and its relationship to the symbolic is set out in Lacan's well-known analysis of Freud's dream about Irma's injection (Lacan, 1988: 166-170).

and the locus of the Other (the unconscious), and thus no prospect of successive syntheses (Lacan, 1979: 222).

Conclusion

This paper began from a consideration of the presence of the dynamic and mathematical antinomies of reason at the very kernel of the Cartesian *cogito*. This set the scene for an analysis of Spinoza's notion of *immanent causality* and its role in the Spinozian critique of philosophical idealism. An evaluation of the inadequacies of Althusser's development and application of this notion of immanence in the renewal of Marxist philosophy prepared the ground for a detailed analysis of Negri's interpretation of the philosophical basis for Spinoza's radical democratic politics. Psychoanalytic concerns about Spinoza's political philosophy were addressed in relation to Lacan's notion of *Kant avec Sade* and the Kantian 'Thing'. This review brought out the way that Lacan's interpretation of the antinomies of reason provided him with leverage to question both the Cartesian *cogito* and Hegel's dialectical philosophy. A critical role in this critique is played by Lacan's analysis of the *vels* of alienation and separation.

The doubt's raised about the pertinence of Kordela's antinomic reductionism, as she applies it to the mirror stage can equally be directed against her interpretation of syllogistic and tautological causality. While her treatment of the Cartesian *cogito* has considerable merit, what needs to be highlighted is the presence of a very different notion of causality in Lacan's writing, namely: the absent (anamorphic) cause. The anamorphic cause—a cause whose influence is only revealed in its absence through the anamorphic distortions that it introduces into the signifying field—can be observed whenever the subject is proximate to the impossible, Kantian Thing. The distortions elicited by what can only be represented by emptiness include the repression (*verdrangung*) of the Thing in Art; the displacement (*verschiebung*) of the Thing in Religion; and the foreclosure (*verwerfung*) of the Thing in Science (Lacan, 1979: 129-131). Moreover, although the *vel* of alienation can readily be linked to the antinomies of reflexion, the same cannot be argued about the *vel* of separation. Yet each pertains with equal force to the relationship between the subject and desire.

The issue of transference indicates another concern that could be raised against Kordela's analysis of Lacan's *schema-L*: a schema Lacan draws on to highlight the manner in which the imaginary relationship (between the ego and its identificatory objects) intervenes to block communications between the subject and the Other (Lacan, 1988: 243, 248, 255, 323-324). However, a more detailed exposition of this critique will have to be set aside as the topic for another paper.

This overview of the philosophical debate around the antinomies of reason, in its entirety, brings us back to the concerns Lacan has raised about the relevance for us of Spinoza's thought. The ultimate grounds for Lacan's critique of Spinoza—a philosopher who undoubtedly commands from him the greatest reverence and admiration—is surely that his third kind of knowledge demands too much of us. There is insufficient space in this paper to articulate Lacan's interpretation of the role played by transference, resistance, and repetition-compulsion in Freud's theoretical legacy

and practice. However, it is this reading that would provide the necessary insight into the trajectory that must be followed in a successful analysis. A tentative conjecture, in this regard, would have to be that Lacan is concerned about the absence within Spinoza's writing of an efficacious set of practices, which would enable the Analyst (or social revolutionary) to navigate between the shoals of the Scylla and Charybdis, namely: between the two *vels* of separation and alienation. It is perhaps this absence that finally makes Lacan choose Freud over Spinoza.

Bibliography

- Althusser, L. and Balibar, É. (1970) *Reading Capital*, (trans.) Ben Brewster, London: Verso.
- Balibar, Étienne (1985) *Spinoza et la politique*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- (1989) 'Spinoza, The Anti-Orwell: Fear of the Masses' *Rethinking Marxism*, Fall, 2(3).
- Copjec, Joan (1995) *Read my Desire: Lacan against the Historicists*, The MIT Press, Cambridge Mass.
- Deleuze, Gilles. (1988) *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, (trans.) R. Hurley, San Francisco: City Lights.
- Deleuze G. and Félix Guattari (1994) *What is Philosophy*. (trans.) Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Fourtounis, G. (2005) On Althusser's immanentist structuralism: reading Montag reading Althusser reading Spinoza", *Rethinking Marxism*, January, 17(1): 101 – 118.
- Kordela, Kiarina (1999) "Political Metaphysics: God in Global Capitalism (the Slave, the Masters, Lacan, and the Surplus)" *Political Theory*, 27(6): 789-839.
- Anna Kornbluh (2002) "For the Love of Money", *Historical Materialism*, 10(4):155-71.
- Lacan, J. (1992) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan (ed. Jacques-Alain Miller): Book VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-60*, English translation with notes by Dennis Porter, Routledge, New York. Originally published in French as *Le Séminaire, Livre VII, L'éthique de la psychoanalyse, 1959-1960* by Les Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1986.
- (1988) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan (ed. Jacques-Alain Miller): Book II, The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954-55*, English translation by Sylvana Tomaselli, with notes by John Forrester. Originally published in French as *Le Séminaire, Livre II, Le moi dans la théorie de Freud et dans la technique de la psychoanalyse, 1954-1955* by Les Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1978.
 - (1979) *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, (ed.) Jaques-Alain Miller, (trans.) Alan Sheridan. Originally published in French as *Le Séminaire, Livre XI, Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, by Les Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1973.
- Montag, Warren (1989) "Spinoza: Politics in a World without Transcendence", *Rethinking Marxism*, 2(3): 89-103.
- (1998a) Introduction to *In a Materialist Way: Selected Essays by Pierre Macherey*, (trans.) T. Stolze, ed. W. Montag, London:Verso.
 - (1998b) "Althusser's nominalism: Structure and singularity (1962-6)", *Rethinking Marxism*, 10(3): 64-73.
- Negri, A. (2004) *Subversive Spinoza: (Un)contemporary Variations*, Angelaki Humanities Series, Manchester: Manchester University Press,.
- (1991) *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics*, trans. Michael Hardt, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Norris, C. (1991) *Spinoza and the Origins of Modern Critical Theory*, Basil Blackwell.
- Thomas, P. (2002) "Philosophical Strategies: Althusser and Spinoza" *Historical Materialism* 10(3): 71-114.
- Spinoza, B. (1996) *(E) Ethics*, (ed. and trans) Edwin Curley, Penguin Books, Middlesex: Harmondsworth.
- (2000) *(TP) Tractatus Politicus: Political Treatise*, (trans.) Samuel Shirley, Indianapolis: Hackett.
 - (1991) *(TTP) Tractatus Theologico-Politicus: Theological-Political Treatise*, (trans.) Samuel Shirley, Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Žižek, S interviewed by Josefina Ayerza (2004), *Perfume*, <<http://www.lacan.com/perfume/Žižek.gif>>
<http://www.lacan.com/perfume/box1.gif>.
- (1994) *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays About Woman and Culture*, Verso, London.