



**SPINOZA**  
*for*  
**OUR TIME**

*Politics  
and  
Postmodernity*

**ANTONIO NEGRI**

*Translated by William McCuaig with a foreword by Rocco Gangle*

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# **SPINOZA FOR OUR TIME**

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## Politics and Postmodernity

Antonio Negri

Translated by William McCuaig



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# FOREWORD

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Time is restless.

—ANTONIO NEGRI, *Time for Revolution*, “kairòs”

Our relation to the seventeenth-century Dutch Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza via the twenty-first century Italian thinker Antonio Negri is to an unthought or barely thought radical democracy, a concrete potentiality and smoldering power of our time. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza provides us with an ontology and an anthropology of creative relations, a constructive account of immanent being on the one hand and, on the other, an affective, desiring conception of human liberation achieved through embodied joy and intellectual power. In his other great work, the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza leads us—against the mainstream modern political tradition and, today, against neoliberalism—to a concept of democracy understood as “a society which wields all its power as a whole” (ch. XVI, Elwes translation). Negri’s decade-long work on Spinoza aims to demonstrate both how these two sides of Spinoza’s vision cohere and how they mutually reinforce one another. For Negri, the genius of Spinoza was to have grasped at the epochal inception of modernity, among the forces of its incipient capitalism, globalization, the ultimate identity of an immanent, material, affective, and constructive conception of being and a unique idea of democratic political constitution.

For Negri, the word “democracy,” far from merely signifying one political system among others, one, say, in which individuals would be allowed the freedom to choose their governmental representatives and to engage freely in exchange-relations with others, designates instead an ontologically creative power, *the* universal human power—political, but equally social, cultural, linguistic, physical—to make and remake being itself. A cooperation without-synthesis of subjective and material forces acting in common, such democracy manifests the irreversible power to make the world itself a common space of creative endeavor, thereby forging new relations that amplify unlimitedly that very power itself. This form of action inhabits a unique temporality, the time of *kairòs*—the creative moment that ruptures the continuous flow of ordinary history and opens up not only new possibilities and new names but new realities. There is nothing abstract about this common power, or common power. It is the concrete, global interconnectedness of human labor and life, born in principle with the advent of modernity and yet immediately curtailed and distorted by the brutal history of modern capitalism. Among other things, democracy is a name—sullied, to be sure, but infinitely self-renewing—for action oriented not toward but within the affects of joy and love (*real* joy and *real* love, not the cheap substitutes proffered and withdrawn everywhere in the service of other ends). Democracy asserts the immanence of this world’s desiring multitude.

In developing such a concept of radical democracy across the dozens of books he has written over the past decades, Negri conjoins politics and ontology in a program of the noncapitalist production of a global common. And in this conjunction Spinoza remains for Negri the key thinker. Where Spinoza wrote *Deus, sive Natura*—*God, or Nature*—to mark the unqualified identification of two terms designating concepts usually held not only to be distinct but to be positively opposed to one another, Negri offers us a similarly momentous fusion of concepts, at once philosophical and political: *democracy, or communism*. For Negri, such

fusion does not represent some exterior synthesis or merely ideal approximation, but is rather the immanent naming of the constitutive and joyful power that Spinoza was the first to identify philosophically as the very substance of our world. This is indeed *our* ontology, the ontology of the multitude, a theory and praxis fusing objective and subjective genitives in a new political grammar.

The present work, *Spinoza for Our Time*, has roots in some of Negri's earliest projects. Already in books such as *Political Descartes* and, later, *Marx Beyond Marx*, Negri employs philosophy's embeddedness in large-scale social and historical processes as a way to advance a style of textual analysis and rigorous argumentation that takes the dynamics of such processes into account in the reading of the history of philosophy without reductionism or vicious circularity. In Negri's work an immanently political writing is thereby made manifest: a powerful inscription of historical materials and theory into channels of immediate political resonance. Like Machiavelli before him, Negri writes equally in the immediate political presence and in the attenuated presence of his historical interlocutors. And like Machiavelli, Negri knows the fierce immediacy of political struggle and the ineliminable need for the sharpest intellectual cunning, not to mention the negativity and brutality of reactionary power, of the forces of punishment and imprisonment that aim to crush bodies and minds that will not submit. Negri's writing, thought bodies forth the materiality of a rhythmic, driving assault. The clarity of his arguments and the detail of his textual examinations as well as the force and frequent brilliance of his rhetorical leaps at once exhibit and produce a distinctive intellectual camaraderie. One reads *with* him, and one is invited by the force of the argument and its narrativization to add one's own powers of thought to its uncompromising movement. Negri's writing, thought itself learns the impulse of its essentially political drive.

Negri's militancy is everywhere steeped in a deep erudition that draws upon multiple sources, including the Italian humanist tradition, the metaphysics and political thought of modern philosophy, and the most sophisticated theoretical developments of late modernity and postmodernity. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the roots of his rhetoric and argumentative power are to be found above all in the concrete political struggles Negri has waged and continues to wage on solitary and collective fronts. His work with the Autonomia movement in Italy in the 1970s and his direct engagement with workers' revolts and factory occupations during that time imbue his thinking with a firsthand understanding of the dynamics of collective resistance, a veritable physics and chemistry of revolutionary action. The tactics and strategy of Autonomia were in many ways opposed to those of the dominant leftist organization in Italy at the time, the Italian Communist Party (PCI), and the antagonistic difference internal to the left becomes for Negri one microcosm or synecdoche of a more general struggle of creative freedom against command, of immanence against transcendence, and of true communism against the Party and the State. In this way, Negri was able to bring the theoretical advances of the French philosophers of the 1960s and 1970s (in particular, Foucault, Deleuze, and Guattari) to bear on the concrete political concerns of his day, asserting a method of molecular resonance as against that of synthetic molarity. A new image of revolutionary praxis thus emerged, a seemingly paradoxical conjunction, as Negri put it at the time, of Rosa Luxemburg and Vladimir Lenin, an anarchist-collectivist broad-based vanguard. This distinctive viewpoint continues to inform Negri's more recent writings and collaborations, and both of these have been subject to a good deal of criticism from left and right. It may be noted here in passing that seldom have the critics of the



concepts of Empire and Multitude that grew out of this early work been themselves able to speak from such a first-person standpoint conjoining the most rigorous academic research with the experience of direct struggle, high-level academic production with effective factory takeover.

In the wake of the kidnapping and assassination of the Italian Christian-Democrat politician Aldo Moro by the radical leftist Red Brigades in 1978, Negri was accused under highly dubious pretenses of instigating terrorism and being involved with the murder. Although he was absolved of those charges, he was eventually convicted on separate, also quite dubious counts. He would later flee to France and receive political asylum there. While in Italian prison, however, awaiting his trial, Negri wrote *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics*, one of the finest works on Spinoza written in the twentieth century and a pivotal text in the renaissance of Spinoza scholarship that flourished in the 1960s with works by such thinkers as Matheron, Moreau, Althusser, Balibar, Macherey, and Deleuze and that continues today through the work of Zourabichvili, Vinciguerra, Montano Tosel, Kordela, Israel, and many others. The core argument of *The Savage Anomaly* depends upon a sustained analysis of the difference between two concepts of power in the *Ethics*: on the one hand, *potestas*, a capacity to act and create effects, a broadly “dialectical” power-linked definitively to transcendence—corresponding somewhat to Aristotelian *dynamis*, that is, a power that subsists as *possibility* and gathers itself essentially in its inhibition and in its self-restraint; on the other hand, *potentia*, the exercise of force *in situ* and *in actu*, the constitutive activity that coordinates subjective desire and objective construction in a genuinely immanent creation. This distinction of *potestas* and *potentia* serves as the basis for a coordination of the themes and arguments of Spinoza's *Ethics* and his *Theological-Political Treatise* in terms of a “phenomenology of revolutionary praxis constitutive of the future.” Negri takes the break in the composition of the *Ethics* in which Spinoza writes and publishes the *Theological-Political Treatise* as more than an accidental biographical detail, as instead the necessary passage in the construction of the ontology of the *Ethics* through the immediate political crisis that marks the composition of the *Treatise*. Spinoza and Negri's phenomenology of praxis thus becomes one of an immediate situating of thought within the crisis of capitalism. Only the clear-sighted confrontation with the contemporary political and economic crisis enables Spinoza's ontology to mark the thoroughgoing immanentization of thought, which Negri interprets, controversially, as an inversion of the relationship between the unity of substance and the plurality of its modes. For Negri, a privileging of the constitutive relationality of the modes over and against the unity of substance becomes the measure of a final shift in Spinoza's thought away from the residual transcendence still evident in the earlier work of the *Short Treatise* and the *Emendation of the Intellect*. With this constitutive modal turn, this *political* turn, in the composition history of Spinoza's *Ethics*, Negri thus identifies the very moment at which an irreversible ontological event inaugurates within philosophy the immanent singularity of the global common.

In 1997 Negri returned to Italy voluntarily from his political asylum in France to serve out the remainder of his sentence. He remained mostly under house arrest until 2003, when he became, after decades of imprisonment, exile, and then highly restricted mobility, at last relatively free to travel, meet with others, and speak publicly and in person at academic and political venues. This period from 1997 to the present has seen the publication of the three installments of Negri's collaboration with Michael Hardt—*Empire*, *Multitude*, and

*Commonwealth*—which have made Negri's work more widely known and discussed, and a number of other texts by him have appeared. Not surprisingly, among the many talks he has given during this period, he has returned frequently to Spinoza as to a comrade who has supported him in the past and continues to reside with him in the present.

*Spinoza for Our Time* collects four talks given by Negri on Spinoza at various colloquia and conferences between 2005 and 2009. This collection both continues and supplements the essays gathered in Negri's *The Subversive Spinoza*, published in 1992, which addressed, among other themes, the status of Spinoza's unfinished *Political Treatise*, the subterranean connections between Spinozan thought and the poetics of Leopardi, and the key contrast between philosophical approaches indexed by the names Spinoza and Heidegger. The texts of the four presentations in *Spinoza for Our Time* are preceded by Negri's extended introduction, which accomplishes several tasks concurrently: revisiting the main theses of *The Savage Anomaly*; reviewing the major figures in Continental Spinoza studies over the past several decades; and situating his ongoing philosophical project within the broader contemporary scene of Continental political philosophy. Regarding this last point, Alain Badiou, Emanuele Severino, and the Schmitt-influenced political theologies of Derrida and Agamben are directly confronted in striking contrast with Negri's own project and in particular his well-known collaborations with Hardt. The basic orientation of *The Savage Anomaly* is strongly reasserted as against these current philosophical trends, and in this way *Spinoza for Our Time* is intended both to clarify and to focus the perhaps better-known analyses of *Empire*, *Multitude*, and *Commonwealth*. The introduction is thus in part intended to demonstrate the continuity of the philosophical and political project that has carried Negri from his earliest writings and political activities through to the contemporary conjuncture.

The four essays that then follow, taken together, present the outline of a coherent intervention and reassertion of Spinoza's relevance to the contemporary debates outlined in the introduction. The first essay, "Spinoza: A Heresy of Immanence and of Democracy," revisits the primary philosophical-historical thesis of *The Savage Anomaly* and works to show the relevance of the anomalous event of Spinoza's thought in early modern philosophy to contemporary global politics. Negri does not shy away here from asserting a sharp dichotomy, which is not to say that his analysis is at all unnuanced or brutal. In the juxtaposition of Bodin and Hobbes on the one hand with Spinoza on the other, we see the clear break that separates a political vision grounded in transcendence from one operating within immanence. Negri shows how this difference at its heart concerns the key Marxist distinction between the social relations of production and the forces of production themselves, the former transfigured by ideology, the latter inalienable in principle. Negri demonstrates the belonging of the mainstream social contract tradition to an ideological and reactionary inhibition of production by way of its necessary detour through transcendence. In opposition to this—but it is a thoroughly asymmetrical and nondialectical opposition—Spinoza's ethical ontology (being as praxis) makes the cooperation and collision of forces the very substance of social order and thus traces *in its own actuality and effectivity* the political object it engages. The commonwealth replaces the public through its essentially creative and productive excess with respect to every constituted order.

Somewhat more polemical with respect to contemporary philosophical trends is the second text, "Potency and Ontology: Heidegger or Spinoza." Negri's title plays on that of Pierre Macherey's seminal study *Hegel or Spinoza*, demonstrating in a somewhat different way the

singularity of Spinoza's project of immanence, which forcefully opposes itself to every reaffirmation of transcendence, especially in the sophisticated forms marked by philosophers such as Hegel and Heidegger. Here, Negri attacks the Heideggerian interpretations of existential and post-*Kehre* temporality and argues that the supposed Heideggerian break with modern metaphysical conceptions of temporality is in fact far less radical than that of the apparently "eternalist" Spinoza, for whom *time* on Negri's provocative reading emerges as a constituent "time of power" productive of new being (as opposed to Heidegger's nihilistic "powerlessness of time"). Despite Heidegger's break with the Idealist tradition and his culmination in Hegel as well as his own partial self-overcoming in the "Turning," Heidegger, according to Negri, remains essentially bound to the dissociation of actuality and affirmation that characterizes modernity. The contrast here is never crude, but it is definitive and clear. Both Heidegger and Spinoza mark a "return to earth," a human belonging to Being, but in the case of Heidegger this belonging can only be decided and affirmed as a giving-up or giving-over to the unthought event. With Spinoza, however, the cooperative experience of human world-creation appears as "a dimension both unremarkable and strong," in other words as the *common* that is at once the ground and the creative object of democratic action.

The crucial figure of Nietzsche links the contrast of Spinoza and Heidegger to the theme of the third essay, "Multitude and Singularity in the Development of Spinoza's Political Thought." This essay—developed from a talk given at the Jerusalem Spinoza Institute—insists upon the ontological basis of Spinoza's radical democracy in an immanent monism, as distinct from any theologically oriented reinsertion of transcendence as an external guarantee of democratic political forms. Taking as his point of departure the instances in Nietzsche's texts where Spinoza is represented in negative terms as an idealist and denier of vital affirmations, Negri aims to reconstitute the genealogy of productive social desire in the *Ethics*. Negri here emphasizes the moment of "mutation" that characterizes the desire connecting singularities: the emergence of productive relationality *between and across* singularities as they act in common, this praxis itself performing in a strictly immanent fashion the connective role later thinkers such as Hegel will relegate to the field of "mediation." This moment of mutation is essential for Negri, and helps to explain how Spinoza's ontology may retain the rigor of its "rationalism" while supporting a materially creative and truly vital productivity. Thus the *political essence* of human striving becomes manifest, an immanent (super) naturalism: "not the reconstruction of the organic but the construction of the common."

Finally, "Spinoza: A Sociology of the Affects" draws upon the key Spinozan concepts of *conatus*, *cupiditas*, and *amor* in conjunction with a turn to Foucauldian genealogy to oppose the constitutive Spinozan conception of the social to every abstract and individualist model—such as that, in particular, of the dominant modern natural-right tradition—in which concrete social relations supervene upon first-order independent actors and institutions. Once again, the refrain is sounded of an opposition of transcendence and immanence, in this case a contrast between static, atemporal models of sociality and intrinsically antagonistic, temporalized discourses of social transformation. Here, this distinction operates such that "we can describe Spinoza ... a perspective on actuality and an initiation into the desire to gain cognizance of the structures of society and power that are evolving right now." Importantly, Negri points to a variety of theorists in this context—Simmel, Becker, Bourdieu, Simondon, Althusser, Macherey, Foucault—who have already in one way or another made such an immanent terrain of social analysis their own. Each of these references indicates a path to follow,

channel for further research and creative, practical deployment.

The critical and affirmative force of Negri's thought is evident on every page. His canonical strategy is simple—and infectious: identify some form of thought inhibiting constructive and revolutionary political theory and praxis, and dismantle its theoretical presuppositions by way of Spinoza's positive and constitutive ontology. This strategy is at once historical, ontological, and political. Throughout these essays it is the coordination of three axes of interpretation that underlies Negri's view of Spinoza: an attention to the social and political context of early modern Europe, within which Spinoza worked; a profound immersion in the complexities, singularities, and overall topography of Spinoza's texts; and an unflagging sense of urgency via sustained reference to present and future political postmodernity.

The "we" invoked by the title *Spinoza for Our Time* is neither a generalized collective nor a narrow scholarly circle but instead a singular cross-section of a new kind of cooperative social and political subject defined primarily by its immanent forces of creative resistance rather than its composition through distinctive identities. It is perhaps Negri more than any other living intellectual who has best charted both the constitutive dynamics and the affirmative prognosis of such a subject. On the one hand, the relative informality of these texts (in comparison, for instance, with *The Savage Anomaly*) makes this collection a fine introduction to Negri's quite unique reading and application of Spinoza's metaphysics. Yet on the other hand the arguments laid out here also speak incisively to the growing community of advanced Spinoza scholarship that treats Spinoza's thought *in and of the present*, a scholarly community for whom the stakes of Spinoza's philosophy are also the stakes of the contemporary global political conjuncture.

This is thinking of and for our time. In the wake of the global economic crisis in 2008, radical political thought is undoubtedly in the midst of a resurgence in Europe, the United States, and throughout the world. Today, when "austerity" has become a faith-cry of increasing desperation beyond any principle of reason in the face of neoliberal default, it is time for renewed attention to the original bourgeois capitalist fracture that was opened in the age of Spinoza as well as to the heretical path charted by Spinoza's thought in response to this fractured opening, a response pregnant with futures largely obscured and postponed by the dominant traditions of metaphysics and ontology on the one hand and political philosophy on the other. Today Spinoza's—and Negri's—political and ontological conception give impetus to our present all-too-necessary dismantling of the current order and—in the face of an undeniable reactive consolidation of economic and political *potestas*—the conjugation, at local and planetary levels, of noncapitalist modes of survival with strategies for the revolutionary construction of postcapitalist society.

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# TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

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The translation is based on the text published in French, *Spinoza et nous*. Although Judith Revel is credited as the translator of this book from the original Italian, and discusses the nuances of her Italian-to-French translation in several footnotes (which I omit here), her French text is considered definitive by the author. All that appears within square brackets is a gloss by me; all that appears within round brackets is a parenthetical remark by the author.

Antonio Negri quotes Spinoza's *Ethics* (in Latin, *Ethica*) frequently, the *Tractatus politicus* a handful of times, and the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* just once, all from published French translations. The English translation in the public domain of Spinoza's major works is by R. M. Elwes, and dates from the late nineteenth century. All the Elwes translations of Spinoza's works are available at the website of the Online Library of Liberty, a project of Liberty Fund, and his translation of the *Ethics* is also available at a valuable website hosted by Middle Tennessee State University, with hypertext coding of Spinoza's own complicated system of bracketed internal cross-references. These cross-references do not appear here because Antonio Negri follows the convention of silently omitting them from quoted passages.

I use the Elwes translation of Spinoza's *Ethics*, but I have occasionally seen fit to modify it slightly after comparing it to the Latin original. The Latin is easy to find online, but the edition I use is Spinoza, *Opera/Werke*, ed. and trans. Konrad Blumenstock, vol. 2 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967).

# INTRODUCTION

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## *Spinoza and Us*

### 1. IN DEFENSE OF *THE SAVAGE ANOMALY*

Thirty years have now gone by since the publication of *The Savage Anomaly*.<sup>1</sup> I wrote it in prison, and when they ask me today how I managed that, I am sorry to have to say that the answer is still the same: resistance. Call it an instantiation of *potentia* if you like. Nor does my astonishment lessen as I leaf through *The Savage Anomaly* today, for not only does it remain relevant and hold its place in the scholarly literature on Spinoza, but even those critics (to my marvel to note) who did react negatively to some of my positions or lines of interpretation were able to do so while remaining fully conscious that the reading in question—the interpretation of Spinoza I was proposing—had irresistible force: it is Spinoza who grasped the energy that constructs modal singularities in absolute being; it is Spinoza who perceived, in the manner in which these come together with one another, the ontological unfolding of forms of life and institutions; it is Spinoza for whom notions held in common are simply deployed in the name of rationality.

Of course there have also been comments from people prepared to treat any reading of Spinoza grounded in the overarching continuity of *potentia* (in its ascent from the materiality of *conatus* to the corporality of *cupiditas* and on to the intelligence of *amor*) as no more than a sort of spiritual business venture—as though one were a peddler of false hope and illusionary comfort to people grappling with the tough job of living.<sup>2</sup> The reactionary rage of others is palpable as they try to deny that Spinoza attributed to the *democratia omnino absoluta* of the multitude the political role he did attribute to it.<sup>3</sup> Finally, I have been accused of exaggerating the opposition between *potentia* [potency, *puissance*] and *potestas* [power, *pouvoir*], and the opposition (which is in reality more interactive than oppositional) is supposed to have lured me into a species of Manichaeism.<sup>4</sup> I must say, I do not think that my critics have landed any really telling blows.

The reason—I think it must now be acknowledged—that *The Savage Anomaly* was able to impose a new perspective on the interpretation of Spinoza was that it was part of a wider process of renewal of the traditions of thought about transformation. In other words it was swept up in the *epistémè* of innovation and revolution dating roughly from 1968 that rebuilt the foundations of the science of mind, in the wake of the brilliant highs and dark lows of “renewed socialism.” But the main reason for the success of *The Savage Anomaly* must be that the perspective on Spinoza defended there revives the possibility of willing and acting consciously to transform or overthrow the capitalist mode of production, of asserting human equality as the human common.

Far from being isolated, I was just one of many who were working at the time of constructing the *epistémè* of a communism for tomorrow. Nor was I alone in working on Spinoza: let me mention the revered names of Alexandre Matheron<sup>5</sup> and Gilles Deleuze,<sup>6</sup> who also labored at a reconstruction of human history, from the depths of the *cupiditates* up to the summit of renewal and democracy. They in turn had been preceded by certain

phenomenological and structuralist schools that had already grappled, post-1945, with the interconnection between the great theoretical and practical contradictions and the contemporary struggles by workers in Europe and throughout the advanced capitalist world to achieve absolute democracy.

Spinoza and 1968. The reinterpretation of Spinoza amid and after 1968. There you have a couple of fetching subtitles, a charming topos for the history of philosophy. It might not do for the sort of historiography whose functional purpose is to neutralize the living body of philosophy, and those of philosophers, to confine them once and for all in the realm of the transcendental spirit, but it would do for philosophy that, through the critical adventure of reason and the experience of the multitudes, is there to pragmatically help us advance toward the realization of liberty.

Today we are living a new epoch. After the fall of “real socialism,” capitalism tried to give itself a new aspect: the hegemony of cognitive labor, the expanding dimension of finance, the theme of imperial extension. Every one of these transmutations of capital is in crisis. Capitalism and its civilization have failed. Through new wars and new devastation, neoliberalism and its elites have brought the world to ruin. If he were alive, Baruch Spinoza would call them *ultimi barbarorum*. We have a real paradox here: Spinoza’s tools for thinking, which seemed “abnormal” at the start of the modern era, have today become—at the boundary of modernity, on the edge of a “post-” that has turned contemporary—radically “alternative,” *concretely* revolutionary. In the seventeenth century, when the critical and constructive experience of Spinozan thought sat alone in one pan of the balance, with all the weight of counter-reformation religiosity and the rise of absolute sovereignty on the other, it was branded as “savage.” Today the word has a different ring, evoking multiple experiences of subversion and the arousal of the living potency of the multitudes.

When I reread it, I am no longer surprised by *The Savage Anomaly*: because this book is pregnant with self-realizing desire; because it is a *dispositif* captured in the act of constituting itself. As Deleuze put it so well,<sup>7</sup> it may be that once the infinite has been ripped free of all its divinized trappings, it is realized in us, in the coincidence of desire and reality. But that, Spinoza, is also the common name of revolution.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. EXTENDING *THE ANOMALY* INTO POSTMODERNITY

Spinoza and us, then. Two critical moments in particular demand to be reckoned with. The first receives its reckoning in sections 3 and 4 of this introduction, which seek to outline what might be called a postmodern usage of Spinoza, following his trajectory from “abnormal” philosopher of modernity in the seventeenth century to “alternative” philosopher of the twentieth-century crisis. In this perspective, it is essential to focus on the concept of potency and to perceive the production of subjectivity at the heart of Spinozan ontology. The objections advanced by those with an opposing research program boil down to promoting individualism as a primary theme in Spinozan philosophy—but if it were, Spinoza’s ontology and political philosophy would not be any different from all the other schemes for social, political, and economic organization proposed and imposed by seventeenth-century thinkers.

[Chapter 2](#) (which is discussed in greater detail in sections 5 and 6 of this introduction) attempts a fresh definition of Spinoza as the subversive philosopher who, from the



seventeenth century through to the twenty-first, maintains ever more effectually the opposition between the positivity of being on one hand and the metaphysical or transcendental reduction of ontology on the other. There is no better way to show what postmodernity owes to Spinoza. Political society (in both its political and its economic dimensions) is a product of desire: there you have the truly subversive process. In Spinoza we have the creative reprise of Machiavelli's realism, just as, much later, we will witness, with Gramsci and with heterodox and libertarian Marxism, the creative reprise of Spinozism.

At the opposite extreme, there is man imprisoned by negative ontology. We still have the image and these metaphysical functionalities inside our heads, just as we have since antiquity when the word *archè* designated both "principle" and "command." In the twentieth century Heidegger was the most acute and compelling figure of this negative thought, and he left a mark that has not been effaced. An enemy of socialism, he pretends to accept its critique of the capitalist and technological world of reification and alienation, only to switch the polarity and claim that existence entails abandonment to the purity and the nakedness of being. Being and substance are never either pure or naked: they are always made of institutions and history, and the truth issues from struggle, and from the human construction of temporality itself. If there exists a tragedy of the present labeled "alienation" or "reification," it is not determined by the being-for-death of human existence, but by the producing-for-death of capitalist power. Reactionary thought reconstructed itself around Heidegger and it reproduced itself in the ontology of nihilism. Subversive thought reconstructs itself around Spinozan ethics and politics and ontology. It is Spinoza whose breath reanimates both Machiavellian realism and Marxist critique.

### 3. SPINOZA BEYOND INDIVIDUALISM

Was Spinoza a philosopher of individualism, a thinker snugly fitting into that particular strain of modernity that the natural law tradition makes room for somewhere between Hobbes and Rousseau? Certain contemporary thinkers are prepared to contend that he was, especially when they focus on the relation that exists in Spinoza between the modal singularities and the more or less constructive expressivity of his ontology. For them the relation between the potencies arises in a flat and neutral manner in Spinoza, as a purely temporary and provisional relation, a transindividual relation, but never as anything more than a relation *between*, in other words, a horizontal relation. Now, even if that were the case, how would one account for the historicity of institutions in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, for example? Or again: how would one grasp the formulation of the *summa potestas* in the *Ethics* and the *Tractatus politicus*? In order to supply a response to these obvious objections, our individualist interpreters speak of the process of potency as an "accumulation." This is a key point for them: it allows them to ground and develop a constitutive dynamic that is proper to political institutions and radically critical with respect to the transcendental conception of power proper to the Hobbesian current of political philosophy that held sway in modernity until the Rousseauist turn. The accumulation of the products or effects of social potencies is presented *monistically*, which mirrors the immanentist refusal of any form of "contract" between State and society. Thus our individualist interpreters suppress any possibility of transferring part of immanent potency to transcendental power. To put it even more starkly: by laying stress on



the idea of an accumulation of potency, they succeed in sloughing off all the theological ideologies—more or less in the style of Carl Schmitt—that accompany the postmodern restoration of the concept of sovereignty, both on the right and on the left.

So how does accumulation come about? For the individualist interpreters of Spinozism, it comes about through the tendential unification of constitutive potency and juridical positivism. This, viewed from a certain angle, is not false: the tendential unity of *potentia* and *iuris* is indeed outlined more than once in Spinoza. But against this potential unity must be set the declaration in the *Tractatus politicus* (chap. 2, section 13, reprising the *Ethics* on this point) that potency grows as the association broadens. There can never be a zero-sum game through the association of the singularities and the accumulation of potencies, for the latter *produce*. But then, how is it possible to maintain both the flat neutrality of the interrelation among individuals, and the ethical enrichment that follows the institutional accumulation of social cooperation? The argument is self-contradictory, inasmuch as the *positive* identity of potency and law [*droit*] can never be flattened in *positivist* fashion.

It is this contradiction that warrants our opponents in their refusal of any finalism or determinism in Spinozan theory. Clearly there is nothing teleological in his ontology. But it is also clear that the defense of liberty constitutes a value for Spinoza, and this defense of liberty indubitably represents the telos of his thought—and even, according to Spinoza himself, that of political activity in general. The question is whether this teleology of praxis can be avoided. And, from the point of view of ontology (but equally that of a very Spinozan “sociology of the affects”), the discovery that the social process is anything but a zero-sum game, that it represents a real collective strategy, requires a material basis. Better yet: it is a process that forces the singularities to pass over into the social ensemble, and that modifies, transforms, and informs collective institutions. Spinozan immanence is itself constitutive. This is what Laurent Bove has very recently shown to great effect.<sup>9</sup> Filippo Del Lucchese has gone on to highlight the reprise of Machiavelli by Spinoza, not under the figure of “Machiavellianism” (that is, of a neutralizing political science, of a positivist formalism, of an apology for force, of a philistine reason of State), but rather as an inexhaustible instance of liberty constructed through resistance and struggle.<sup>10</sup>

Here we come to another essential point about the concept of *potentia*. As the reader will no doubt recall, the constitutive process of *potentia* unfolds through a series of successive integrations and institutional constructions, from *conatus* to *cupiditas* and finally to the rational expression of *amor*. So *cupiditas* stands at the heart of this process. It is in fact the moment where the physical determination of *appetitus* and the corporality of *conatus*, because they are organized in the social experience, produce *imagination*. The imagination is an anticipation of the constitution of institutions; it is the potency that borders on rationality and structures its trajectory—or more exactly: that expresses it. Gilles Deleuze calls the thought of Spinoza a “philosophy of expression.”<sup>11</sup> It is the imagination that draws the singularities from resistance toward the common. And it is there that *cupiditas* acts—because, in this action, “desire which springs from reason cannot be excessive.”<sup>12</sup> Immanence is here asserted in the most fundamental manner, and the strategy of *cupiditas* here reveals the asymmetry between *potentia* and *potestas*, in other words, the irreducibility of the development of constitutive (social, collective) desire to the production (however necessary) of the norms of power. All the theories aiming to neutralize the transformative radicality of the thought of Spinoza and to restrict it to a pure individualism manage to avert their gaze from this asymmetry, this excess

or surplus or overflow. Yet it is this perpetual excess of liberatory reason that, through the imagination, is constructed between the action of *cupiditas* and the tension of *amor*—on the edge of being, in eternity.

Let me pause here for an aside. All those who make it their business to try to conceal or erase Spinoza's ethical *cupiditas* have the odd habit of grounding their analysis of his political thought on his political texts rather than on the *Ethics*. They need to be forcibly reminded that the political thought of Spinoza is to be found in his ontology, meaning in the *Ethics*, much more than in any other parallel or posterior work. It is precisely on the relation between *cupiditas* and *amor* that all those who wish to neutralize political *potentia* seem to founder—because, to the extent that they push aside the *Ethics*, they forget the existence of the relation; and they remain unaware that that which *cupiditas* constructs as *summa potestas* and *amor* outstrips as *res publica*, as commonwealth. The asymmetry between *potentia* and *potestas* can thus be grasped with the same intensity whether one considers it from above (the reality of the *cupiditas-amor* bond that exalts its productivity) or from below (when *potentia* is formed and acts in the perspective of an infinite opening).

Let us resume. The individualist interpreters of Spinozan immanentism maintain that for Spinoza the political is a “medium,” endowed with ubiquity, and that it therefore cannot be defined either as an element of action or as a property of structure. To me, on the contrary, it seems that in Spinoza the political absolutely cannot be defined as a medium of the social and that the political is instead both the permanent source and the continual constitutive rupture of the social, a potency exceeding all measure—an excess that is in reality an ontological asymmetry. If this were not the case, we would effectively be condemned to the acosmism of the political, and by that I don't just mean the acosmism of the pantheist conception of being in Hegel—although I mean that too. For another thing, these interpreters insist on the fact that, in Spinoza, the political can never be instrumental, and that it is constructed in the rapport between individuals and groups, in the complex dynamic that binds them. No doubt they are right. But that does not suffice to qualify the “event” of Spinoza's politics. This dialectic (which is not a dialectic) always yields a *surplus* of the constitutive process, as I see it. A *surplus* that is institutive and communicative, and that is thus neither individual nor interindividual; an accumulation not of substantial (individual) segments but of modal (singular) potencies. Spinoza's monism is nourished by the divine potency. Is it not precisely this claim to render divinity *operative*—following a rigorously immanentist line—that makes “the Jew of Amsterdam” a heretic?

It is no coincidence that in Spinoza positive potency and negative potency, “power over” and “power to,” are quite indistinguishable: for him there does not exist any static antinomy, or more simply still, from the ontological point of view, *the negative does not exist*. There is only potency (meaning liberty), which is opposed to nothingness and which constructs the common. “The man, who is guided by reason, is more free in a State, where he lives under a general system of law, than in solitude, where he is independent.”<sup>13</sup>

What then does it signify “to measure the force of the impact of Spinozan ontology on the traditional conceptual grid of politics”? “The right of resistance, political liberty, seditious obligations or bonds—and their rational legitimation—are obvious key terms of modern political thought, exactly as they are for Machiavelli.”<sup>14</sup> This is how certain materialist interpreters have responded recently—and of course I share their conclusions. The task ahead will be to consider these concepts over the span of time from Machiavelli to Spinoza.

while holding them steadfastly apart from modern natural-law doctrine as formulated by Hobbes and Rousseau. What is a democracy, what is a multitude? And what are the “internal trajectories” one must traverse to find an answer to these questions?

Our interpreters choose to give primacy to the thought of Machiavelli and Spinoza. These two authors “represent a veritable anomaly in the first stage of the modern epoch. They construct a rhetorical thought of conflict—a veritable political lineage of *sedition*—that causes the foundations upon which the dogmas of modern politics have been constructed to tremble. Modern politics is, in effect, represented as a thought of order and the neutralization of conflict. ... On the contrary, the relation between law and conflict, for Machiavelli as for Spinoza, possesses a complex rhythm ... a recursive relation ... beyond any dialectical schema of reconciliation and synthesis of the two terms.”<sup>15</sup> Del Lucchese, whom we are quoting here, continues by opening his analysis to the postmodern: “in the contemporary epoch, Foucault expressed better than anyone else the conflictual character of history and its amphibious sense: on one hand, as the expression of conflicts, struggles, and revolts ... of the other, as an instrument of the theoretical struggle through the modern political order. ... In modern political philosophy, war comes to overlay law totally.”<sup>16</sup> Law [*droit*] is the power of the winner of the war—but nobody ever really wins the war. In consequence, history presents itself as a mass of entanglements and confrontations, in other words, as a dualism rather than as a unitary process; and in truth the rapport between Machiavelli and Spinoza defines the sole paradigm that still allows us to bind future struggles and a future revolutionary project to the past and the present: *sedition sive ius*.

One is therefore obliged to ask: how could all that have been forgotten in the periods of revolutionary political debate nearest to us?<sup>17</sup> How was it possible to force the political under the yoke of a putative “autonomy” and replace Machiavelli with Carl Schmitt? How was it possible to lose the sense of duplicity and ambiguity that characterizes the rapport between ontological potencies and political institutions—or, rather, between the productive forces and the relations of production?

This is the barrier between us and “the autonomy of the political,” the representative traditions of the modern constitutional State; this is where the attempt to represent the dynamic force of the political understood democratically, *sedition*, through its contractual and constitutional limitation, falls short. The limit is not in the nature of things but in their distortion.

Del Lucchese continues to work this terrain, seeking to show that the strategy of *conatus* is not grounded in an ontological priority, and that it must be read rather as a rapport internal to the potency of the multitude. “This movement brings out the immanent rationality of institutions: ‘ontogenetic point of view of the law [*droit*] of nature and not of the law [*loi*], of potency and not of power.’ ... The law [*loi*] itself is the ‘necessary mediation of the potency of the multitude in its affirmation, in the same way that it is the symptom of its present state.’” That means that the institutional process arises from within struggle. It is out of swelling indignation that sedition arises, but it is from swelling sedition that the revolutionary expansion of liberty opens up: there we have the basis from which to oppose the developmental potency of a true revolutionary democracy of the struggles of the multitude against *imperium*. The institution of this democracy rests on nothing that is not internal to this development. “Sedition must be thought as internal and co-existing with law and the State, and may thus be conceived outside any dialectical mechanism. ... *Libera multitudo* to the extent that *liberatio* is *sedition*. Behold the monstrous character of the challenge that Machiavelli and Spinoza have

launched, in tracing different lines of division within the semantic field of politics. And it truly a battlefield."<sup>19</sup>

I believe that this reading adds the coherent finishing touches to the one I tried to develop starting from the same set of problems, in *The Savage Anomaly*. My effort to foreground the concept of *potentia* may sometimes have produced an equivocal effect, inasmuch as it appeared to endow it with a certain anteriority vis-à-vis the concept of power. And if this anteriority were then applied to the analysis of the juridical systems of the contemporary world, there would arise a further risk of equivocation, of conceiving the relation between the constituent power and the formalism of the law in an antinomian manner, of creating a Manichaean tension. May I therefore lay any such equivocation, which was mentioned above, definitively to rest.

Let us turn to another matter. The subversive current of thought at the heart of modernity, from Machiavelli to Spinoza to Marx, drains a whole set of concepts of their meaning and force as it sweeps us from contract to potency and from *sedition* to democracy. Yet today, paradoxically, we see these wisps being reintroduced into the debate through the channel of certain theologico-political experiments (that present themselves as merely hermeneutics but that are really engaged in foundation-laying).

Thus, for example, our good old “modern” age (the modernity of contracts and pacts) is today readmitted and reconfigured by some as a *katechon*, as the experience of necessity, as the force or institution standing as a bulwark against ineluctable evil.<sup>20</sup> I would like to mention here a few contributions that reacted, from a materialist and Spinozan point of view, to the threat once it emerged; and it is with a certain enthusiasm, I confess, that I say bluntly enough already with this *katechon*! The core of my reasoning is this: once we surrender to the *katechon*, we are no longer engaged in conflict, we slump back onto defeat and interiorization. Long ago I analyzed certain variants of this maneuver of seventeenth-century thought when it was faced with the crisis of the humanist revolution.<sup>21</sup> Augusto Illuminati has also addressed the matter with great intelligence, moving from Heidegger—he who blocked, in nihilistic fashion, the immanent sense of the movement of being—to the recent revival of the Pauline apologetic for the *katechon*, which seems to recognize the apparition of transcendence on the edge of being. (“Contingency is lived as anguish and resolved through obedience—do we not here detect participation in the movement that resolves being-for-death, once conscious, into Heidegger’s great heeding of Being? And is heeding not then the height of obedience?”)<sup>22</sup>

“The autonomy of the political.” What did this slogan ever signify except the autolimitation of struggle (in the past) and the revival of the theme of “that-which-cannot-be-surpassed” (in the present)—of that which contains within itself its own limit: radical evil? indispensable primitive accumulation? changeless forms and modes of production? In sum: how was this slogan ever interpreted to mean anything except the renunciation of any transformative potency?

On the contrary, the only admissible “autonomy of the political” is that which is produced by the “free multitude.” François Zourabichvili has brought out very clearly the enigma of the free multitude against any individualistic limit. There is no multitude in the “state of nature.” There is no multitude before the “civil state.” The multitude is not some sort of intermediate concept between individuals and the instituted community. “But then, why is the multitude any more than just a conceptual chimera? By virtue of the natural tension of individuals towards the



community (that is, of their common horror of solitude). The logic is familiar: it is that common notions. The consistency of the concept of multitude is to be found, then, in the tension of a common desire. And it is in this common desire that the institution is grounded.” Thus there is only a *multitude-making* [*faire-multitude*, italics in the original], which is equal to an *institution-making*, because the making [*faire*] is the very reality of the multitude. From one perspective, there is no multitude but for liberty and in liberty, and there is thus no *katechism* worth anything, and the historical conditions of a free multitude have to do with the fact that the multitude constructs itself in an ongoing manner, in producing common experience and institutions. There is no “State within the State,” said Spinoza. We could add: “except for the free multitude.” There lies the road of exodus that the multitude, because it conquers liberty and constructs institutions, ceaselessly travels.

This brings us to the next point: starting with a critique of individualism, we have now established a certain consistency in Spinozan thought, which is absolutely irrecoverable within the categories of modernity (if we regard “individualism” as an essential attribute of the definition of what “modern” thought is).<sup>24</sup> The “anomaly” in the thought of Spinoza is not simply an ideal figure capable of utilization in the historical interpretation of his thought; it is a living anomaly that anticipates and can construct a different path for the development of thought and liberty. And one might add here that this path breaks with the theoretical and political will to keep on defining modernity as the indispensable horizon of history. Of these indispensable horizons of history we have had far too many! There is beauty in discovering, without any sort of nostalgia or illusion, a hard foundation for subversive thought: the one that Spinoza offers postmodernity. An irrecoverable thought, a thought irreducible to modernity.

#### 4. THE ALTERNATIVE OF A LIVING MATERIALISM

From the individualistic interpretation of the thought of Spinoza, we must now shift our perspective to meet another challenge: an extremely complex and articulated operation that is trying to guide the definition of the political thought of Spinoza onto ontologically neutral terrain—terrain metaphysically individualistic once again. Metaphysics against ontology. What this means is that, rather than constructing an individualistic Spinoza by digging into his thought and confronting his ontology in an intensive manner (which is one way of falsifying Spinoza), they advance an individualistic position by drawing upon “modern thought” in general. Shunning any critical, philosophical, or conceptual stance, they present us with a historicizing, encyclopedic profile, in the style of the “history of ideas.”

As a result we are offered the figure of an individualistic Spinoza as an *ideal-type* of modernity. On this view, Spinoza becomes a modern tout court: he is modernity and not an alternative within modern thought or in relation to it. It is not just Hobbes and Hegel who are modern: Spinoza is too. Even better, he is both modern and subversive. Margaret Candès Jacob<sup>25</sup> and Jonathan Israel<sup>26</sup> have worked this seam. They are excellent historians, but the ground they are treading is full of landmines they cannot recognize. Their shared insistence on the “making of modernity” is the badge of the hypothesis they strenuously maintain: that the philosophy of Spinoza is the foundation of the radical Enlightenment and Spinozism represents the living structure of the age of Enlightenment. Unhappily, this thesis will not hold up, and is in part false. I shall not enter here into the details of the controversy; from the poi

of view of strict historiography of philosophy, Laurent Bove has subjected it to a review both benevolent and harsh.<sup>27</sup> And from the point of view of historiography tout court, it has been critiqued—and in fact demolished—by the remarkable analysis of Antoine Lilti.<sup>28</sup> For my part, I have no doubt that Spinozism does indeed include a line of radical philosophical polemic taken up by atheists and pantheists, freemasons and republicans, throughout the prehistory of the French Revolution. But that is not the problem that the philosophy of Spinoza poses.

The problem that Spinoza poses is whether, at the heart of modernity, there exists the possibility of democratic thought, whether there exists the hypothesis of government by the multitude, whether the institutionalization of the common is possible. It is the problem of whether it is possible for these elements to eventuate in immanence, in contradiction to the assertion of sovereign transcendence. Or: it is the problem of the possibility, the necessity, even, of grounding the ethical (and the ethical-political in particular) in bodies, in the materiality of desire, and in the fluxes of their encounter and their clash. It is the question of the manner in which love, which rips us free of solitude and permits us to construct the world together, can be imposed as the rationale of this development.

It is evident that fragments of this type of reasoning do turn up from time to time over the history of modernity, before and after Spinoza. What I am trying to show is that such political reasoning, Spinozan after a fashion, was never dominant (was indeed very much in the minority) in the centuries from the crisis of the Renaissance to the French Revolution, and on to the worker insurrections of the nineteenth century. The stream of political reason that did prevail was that of Hobbes, Rousseau, and Hegel: from the point of view of political philosophy, we know of course that they were individualists and hence contractualists; but it is just as evident that they were opportunists, transcendentalists, and dialecticians as they strove to ground sovereignty. And it is clear that modernity constructed itself here on the synthesis between bourgeois individualism and sovereign power. Descartes, more than anyone else, shed light on the importance of this dichotomy while reasonably enclosing the contradiction within the cloistered walls of theology.<sup>29</sup> Spinoza does not even take this dialectic into consideration. His stance is located radically outside it. But he is *outside* modernity because he is *beyond* modernity. Radical individualism is foreign to him. What he disdains is contractualism is what he would have disdained in the materialism of the Enlightenment—because Spinozan materialism is a far cry from the wretchedly individualistic, mechanistic, and physicalist materialism of the thought of the eighteenth century. Spinoza's materialism is much more akin to the fresh and vital force of the materialism of a Bacon, or to the (stoic humanist) materialism of a Machiavelli or a Galileo. That is all; there is nothing more. Spinoza is an alternative to modernity; he is inside modernity only in order to train his gaze on values that modernity precisely cannot express, because it has excluded them from its own foundation.

It is important to pay attention here. The question of Spinozan materialism goes well beyond the dimensions and figures of Enlightenment materialism (from this point of view, only Diderot is truly Spinozan), but it has never been approached with clarity. Quite the contrary, because the terms of the comparison have been reversed, and the materialism of the Enlightenment has been taken as the paradigm, there is generally a hesitation (and of course it could hardly be otherwise) to attribute materialist characteristics to Spinozan immanentism, as though materialism could never be any different from the particular version of materialism—polemical and mechanistic, that is proper to the eighteenth century (and, by extension, to the

nineteenth). Now, this particular materialism (here I am thinking specifically of the nineteenth century version) is either the plebeian product of an anticapitalist and antireligious polemic, or the tenacious residue of attempts to constitute a metaphysics of science. If one's point of departure is extravagant in that way, then of course it seems difficult to imagine the possibility of conjoining immanentism and materialism. But did the hylozoism or the ontology of the pre-Socratics not present, however primordially, this articulation? And did the passage from Epicurus to Lucretius not take place along this axis of thought? Or again: in late scholastic Aristotelianism at Paris and at Padua, and in the maturation of European humanism right to the core of modern thought, do we not find precisely this vivacious materialist immanentism working to achieve an interpretation of the new potency of life?

The effort by Spinoza to draw from this secret current of ontology (which grounded modernity but does not succeed in fully realizing itself in modernity), his capacity to defend its outlets even from within the failure of the Renaissance (and humanism) against the triumph of the baroque (and sovereign absolutism), and finally, his reproposal of the religion of liberation through articulation between the singularity and the community (against individualism)—all this makes the immanentism and materialism of Spinoza impossible to fit into the structures of modernity, while opening it up to the *postmodern*.

One last remark. In the 1960s and 1970s, we lived through an epoch of profound crisis in socialist ideology, and of self-critique by Marxist thought. Perhaps today we can rediscover the Spinozan origins of this reflection. A simple example: when Althusser posits a radical “caesura” in the development of Marxist thought, he does not yet think that the solution of the rupture between the scientific methodology of the mature Marx and his initial humanism can be interpreted in Spinozan terms. But later, at the most radical phase of his post-Marxist conversion, he does suggest something of this kind, and makes it a decisive element in his reworking of his own materialism.<sup>30</sup> This allusion to Spinoza on Althusser's part is extraordinarily telling. It signifies that Spinozan immanentism can finally liberate us from all forms of dialecticism, from all teleology; that his materialism is not narrow, but aleatory and open to the virtualities of being; that through the avowed articulation between immanentism and materialism, knowledge will henceforth rely on resistance, and happiness on the rational passion of the multitude.

This is why, when the tableau of the struggle for the emancipation of mankind widens, and the critique becomes that of the development of capitalism in its postmodern phase (when it really subsumes society; capitalism in its imperial, postcolonial phase), the Spinozan “matrix” palpably overrides the Marxist “caesura.” What is clearly voiced here is a materialism of ontological dispositifs, of the production of subjectivity. And it is a historical shift encompassing all those who have constructed a thought of difference that begins with emancipation and is both antiteleological and immanentist. This is the moment at which the new materialism of Spinoza starts to yield its fruits, and where it shows us—through the articulations of substance—the productivity of the modes, that is to say, the singular and revolutionary fold that each of them presents.

Let us sum up. The analyses that seek to foreground individualism in the thought of Spinoza are no more able to position Spinoza within the broad mainstream of modernity than are the more or less teleological “history of ideas” approaches. That he lived in the seventeenth century and therefore in the modern era is certainly true, but only in the chronological sense. Spinoza actually opposes—or more precisely, he sets his ontology

against—all the paradigms of modern thought. From our perspective, he represents a ~~alternative to the modern, an interruption within his century, and he beckons to us today from the postmodern.~~ Not out of the potency of the individual, but out of the potency of the common and of love.

## 5. WHO IS AFRAID OF A POSITIVE ONTOLOGY?

With the constructive aspects of the political ontology of Spinoza firmly stated (and the fundamentally anti-individualistic bias emphasized), we must now try to understand how certain amount of counterfire has been directed at this ontology—in other words, against the positive and productive conception of being. This counterfire reacted not so much to the reading of Spinoza we have just been discussing (and that we naturally defend), as against the theoretical and political effects of the Spinoza renaissance.

The first counterblast, then: the Platonizing attempt, endlessly rehearsed by theologians of the most petulant kind in their campaign against the “damned Jew,” to portray substance Spinoza as compact, undifferentiated, and incapable of articulation. Nietzsche demolished this type of reading with ironic relish. Yet today we have Alain Badiou raising the same theological hue and cry, and posing as the ultimate champion of this interpretative stance.<sup>31</sup> As early as *Theory of the Subject* (1982), Badiou wasn’t shy about attacking both Althusser and Deleuze in the same fashion, despite claiming them as his masters, on account of their interest in Spinoza. And if he did grant some moral value to Spinozan “audacity,” it was only so that he could immediately set up a vulgar comparison between Spinoza and Malebranche, in the most sarcastic manner imaginable. Badiou’s text leads the reader to assume that by 1982 he was acquainted with Malebranche, and we may suppose that he was. But it is plain to see that the readings of Spinoza produced after 1968, and echoing 1968, were still as remote from him then as a distant galaxy; no doubt he read them later. Yet in *Deleuze* (1997) he still portrays Spinoza as unrecognizable in Deleuze’s reading of him (and this despite his own attempt to bring Deleuze into the Maoist orbit). In his *Briefings on Existence* (1998), Badiou finally explains himself in detail on the whole question. He first denies that the event could open up to heterogeneous multiplicity, then accuses Deleuze of defending, in his reading of Spinoza, an (irrationalist) ontology of the forms of becoming, and Spinoza of developing a closed ontology, shut in on itself. It is interesting to note how Badiou’s ontology of the event shuns any materialist reference and takes refuge in an ideology of communism for which only the mystical affirmation *credo, quia absurdum* can account. It is the return of Malebranche.

And it gets better. An Italian philosopher (half-Platonic and half-Heideggerian in his approach to Spinoza) feels compelled to insist on the drastic alternative between God and nothingness. Hence, Emanuele Severino (for it is he) informs us, when Spinoza excludes divinity from the substance of religion, he must inevitably tend toward nothingness!<sup>32</sup> One would dearly love to know why. Severino naturally endorses the traditional view that Spinoza’s philosophy represents “the most radical and alternative system in the history of Western philosophy since Jesus Christ”; but, as reactionary historians of philosophy often do, precisely so as to neutralize this potent alternative radicality, he adds that Spinozan immanence inclines toward nothingness, that the absolute of production appears to be confused with that of destruction, and that these opposing drives “share the decisive and abyssal conviction th



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