Radical Spinoza: Interpretations by Althusser, Deleuze, Negri, Balibar, Macherey, and Matheron

by Gary Zabel

It is not news that Spinoza is a radical. His philosophical, religious, and political views challenged the social order in the 17th century Netherlands so deeply at its root that he was excommunicated, in the most emphatic way, from the Jewish community in which he grew up, and vehemently condemned by the right-wing Calvinists who were on the ascendant at the time. Part of the rabbis' edict of excommunication reads: "The Lord will not spare him; the anger and wrath of the Lord will rage against this man, and bring upon him all the curses which are written in this book, and the Lord will blot out his name from under heaven…" The condemnation of his book, *Theological-Political Treatise*, by the Calvinist Synod of Dort judges that it was "written in hell by a renegade Jew and the Devil." He would undoubtedly have been murdered by the Calvinist-monarchist mob along with the chief pensionary of Holland, Jan DeWitt and his brother had Spinoza's landlord not locked the philosopher in his room when he wanted to protest at the site of the murders. His death from pulmonary disease at the age of forty-four may very well have saved him from execution by the emboldened religious and political Right. All of this in spite of the fact that Spinoza had a personal aversion to conflict and held civic peace in the highest regard.

In the aftermath of his death, the conservative Calvinists in the States General of the United Provinces, along with the Roman Catholic Church in much of the rest of Europe, tried to destroy Spinoza's influence by banning his writings. However, in the eighteenth century, the copies of his work that survived went on to inspire the most radical wing of the Enlightenment. The culmination of the Enlightenment in the French Revolution demonstrated that the monarchists and religious obscurantists of Spinoza's own day were right to fear the philosopher.

If Spinoza's own work represents the first phase of Spinozist radicalism, and the radical Enlightenment the second phase, then we have been experiencing a third phase since the mid-1970s, largely a result of the efforts of French and Italian Marxist philosophers (Deleuze is an exception). What follows is an attempt to provide a very brief introduction to those interested in exploring this material in the form of paragraph-length synopses of the relevant writings of six of these recent radical Spinozists: Louis Althusser, Gilles Deleuze, Antonio Negri, Etienne Balibar, Pierre Macherey and Alexandre Matheron.

The themes the New Spinozists address are varied. Each of their interpretations of Spinoza stands on its own footing as something unique. They nevertheless share a common attempt to found a radical politics in ontology, in face of the crisis of late twentieth-century Marxism, which culminated in the collapse of the Soviet-style regimes in 1989-91 and China's conversion, well underway at the time, to a unique form of state-managed capitalism. The metaphor of foundation should not be taken too literally here, because the project of founding a radical politics in ontology is at the same time one of

founding an ontology in radical politics. This attempt at a reciprocal “foundation” is precisely where Marx and Spinoza converge. They both raise the question of being in relation to that of the proper way for people to organize their large-scale relations with one another. And the normative end that guides each of the great thinkers is that of augmenting the powers and sensibilities of the individual who has no existence apart from a social context. It is perhaps true that Aristotle blazed the trail that Marx and Spinoza walked, but he was not a radical, and he did not live in that radical age that Marx and Spinoza shared, an age in which capitalism was putting an end to all “fixed, fast-frozen relations,” all traditional ways of inhabiting the world. When “everything solid melts into air,” the question of being and that of the polis must be raised anew.

Althusser: Spinoza as Critic of Ideology

It is difficult to overstate the controversial impact of the philosopher Louis Althusser on the Western Marxist intellectuals of the 1970s. He began by rejecting the "humanist," Hegelian Marxism that had played such an important role in inspiring the revolutionary uprising of May 1968 in Paris, and, more broadly, the entire New Left of the 1960s, whether in the name of Lukács, Marcuse, Gramsci, or Jean-Paul Sartre. Instead Althusser attempted to renew the "scientific" dimension of Marxism by purging it of an Hegelian heritage that involved, according to him, such central and ultimately idealist concepts as that of society as an "expressive totality," the proletariat as the subject of history, revolution as the transcendence of alienation, and the historical process as development toward a telos, a consummating end or goal. He proposed instead a rigorous form of "anti-humanism" centered on concepts of society as an articulated totality of complex and heterogenous elements, or "instances," "structural causality" in which the economy is determinate "in the last instance," and history as a process without a subject or goal. Many interpreters saw Althusser as the representative of an ascendant structuralist tendency in European thought that included such thinkers as the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, the anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss, and the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. However Althusser himself always rejected the structuralist label, and instead identified Spinoza as the primary inspiration for his philosophical revolution, for example in an article titled by its editors, “Althusser’s Spinoza” in his *Essays on Self-Criticism*. In that rather brief treatment, he claims to have discovered in Spinoza a radically materialist approach to philosophical theory, one that rejects the primacy of consciousness and subjectivity as well as teleological causality as genuine categories of knowledge. But above all, Althusser sees in Spinoza's critique of "inadequate ideas" a forerunner of Marx's critique of ideology as an ensemble of imaginary representations through which people adopt a false and distorted relationship to their real conditions of life. Though Althusser's use of Spinoza lacked scholarly sophistication, it nevertheless initiated the turn to Spinoza that inspired the far more sophisticated and extensive interpretations of a younger generation of radical intellectuals, including Deleuze, Negri, Balibar, Macherey, and Matheron.

Gilles Deleuze: Spinoza, Pure Immanence, and the Critique of the Sad Passions

With Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze was one of the premier philosophers of the generation in France that followed that of Jean-Paul Sartre. The author of innovative works on metaphysics, philosophy of language, psychology, film theory, painting, and literature, Deleuze is perhaps best known for his collaborative work with the psychoanalyst and political militant, Felix Guatari on the strange, humorous, and often illuminating books, *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*. He was also the author of a series of important monographs on key philosophers, including Leibniz, Hume, Bergson, Nietzsche, Foucault, and, of course, Spinoza. Actually he wrote two books on Spinoza, the 400-page work, *Expressionisn in Philosophy*, and the much shorter *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*. Deleuze makes many advances in these books, but two of these are especially significant.The first is that he identifies Spinoza as the most powerful exponent of an approach to metaphysics that had precursors in some of the Neoplatonists, and that is defined by its rejection any form of transcendence. Spinoza is a philosopher of "pure immanence," of the idea that there can be no legitimate appeal to an ordering or creative principle beyond the world of our experience because that world, as the totality of being, is the ground or source of itself. Spinoza's infinite Substance is not a Creator-God that exists outside its creation, but rather is present within every finite mode, just as reciprocally finite things exist only within Substance. Because God, or Nature is equally present within everything that exists, reality exhibits no hierarchical structure. Nothing is more or less real or valuable than anything else. Being is fundamentally egalitarian. Deleuze's second achievement lies in his interpretation of Spinoza's account of the passions. Human liberation demands the conquest of what Deleuze calls the "sad passions," such as hatred, remorse, despondency, and so on, passions that stem from a decrease in our power to exist and act. In Spinoza's account, my power lies in my ability to maintain the proportion of motion and rest between the parts of my body that makes it the expression of my "singular essence." As a finite mode, however, I am caught up in encounters with other finite modes. Some of these modes enter into combinations with me that foster my ability to maintain the proper relation of motion and rest that realizes my singular essence - in other words, they augment my power, and others decompose that relation, thereby diminishing my power. A sad passion is the result of a bad, decomposing encounter. For Deleuze, the task of Spinoza's ethical and political theories is to guide us in entering into good encounters, encounters that combine our power with that of others, in the process enhancing both.

Antonio Negri's Subversive Spinoza

Antonio Negri, author with Michael Hardt of the international bestseller, *Empire*, is one of the most influential political philosophers of the 21st Century. Active in the Italian "workerist" movement of the 1970s, Negri was accused of being the mastermind behind the *Brigate Rosse* (Red Brigades), including their assassination of the former Italian Prime Minister, Aldo Moro. Convicted in a trial that independent observers, including Amnesty International, judged to be grossly unfair, Negri was sentenced to thirty years in prison. After being incarcerated for four years awaiting trial, he was elected to the Italian Parliament and released from prison on the basis of parliamentary

immunity. Aware that he was about to be stripped of immunity, Negri escaped to Paris, where he taught for fourteen years, before returning to Italy to serve out his sentence in 1997. However, he was soon released from prison under curfew, and in 2003 regained his full freedom. He achieved wide international fame with the publication of *Empire* in 2000. While in prison awaiting trial in the late 1970s, Negri wrote *The Savage Anomaly*, a major study of Spinoza's metaphysics and political philosophy. In the book, he argues that there are two phases in the development of Spinoza's philosophy. In the first phase, which includes all of his writings from the *Treatise on the Correction of the Understanding* to Book I and part of Book V of the *Ethics*, Spinoza develops an "emanationist" philosophy focused on the relationship between substance, attribute, and mode. According to Negri, the difficulties involved in the substance-attribute relationship are especially important because they indicate the failure of Spinoza's early work to introduce a principle of order into the universe. This is the metaphysical expression of a social and economic experience that was being played out in the late 1600s. The unregulated market of early capitalism had resulted in the first major crisis of the system, including a dramatic stock market crash. While the rest of continental Europe responded to this crisis by developing an institution capable of imposing political command in the form of the absolutist state, the Dutch Republic alone attempted to combine the principle of market exchange with that of political freedom. On the one hand, Spinoza's inability to organize substance by giving an intelligible account of the pluralism of its attributes is a theoretical expression of the inability of the Dutch bourgeoisie to introduce order into the market. But on the other hand, his refusal to structure substance by appealing to some transcendent agency left him in position, in his second phase, to leap over the market, and thereby to shift focus from what Marxists call the relations of production to the productive forces that tend to blow those relations apart. In the second phase, Spinoza conceives of productive force as the *conatus*, the drive toward existence and power, that is the essence of every singular, finite mode. In the process of expressing this drive, the singular modes generate forms of collective life, including political collectivity: they become what Spinoza calls the "multitude." According to Negri, the generation of the collective life of the multitude is the theme of Books II, III, and IV of the *Ethics*, of parts of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, and of Spinoza's unfinished final work, the *Political Treatise*. In these writings, he develops a theory of the constitution of social reality through the human passions, of the antagonisms that are created in this process, and of democracy as the political framework within which the antagonisms can be mastered and human freedom won. By pointing beyond the boundaries of capitalist society in the direction of a radical democracy capable of liberating the productive forces on the level of both singular and collective life, Spinoza develops what Negri calls a "philosophy of the future."

Balibar: Spinoza and Politics

Etienne Balibar is probably best known for his co-authorship with Althusser of the influential book, *Reading Capital* in the late 1960s. He has since written on a wide variety of political topics, including racism, nationalism, immigration, war, democracy, and the European Constitution. His relatively short book, *Spinoza and Politics*, is a rare

and welcome model of clarity of expression on the French intellectual scene. In the work, Balibar takes great pains to locate Spinoza within the concrete political struggles that wracked the Dutch Republic during his lifetime, as well as to shed light on the unique character of his theory of politics. According to him, Spinoza's great achievement was to place the masses – in Spinoza's Latin, the "multitude" – at the center of modern politics. Every form of state organization, whether democratic, aristocratic, or monarchical, rests on the consent of the multitude, though only democracy, which Spinoza champions, locates state authority directly in the multitude as a whole. But according to Balibar, Spinoza conceives of the multitude, not only as the positive foundation of state power, but also as a problematic force, given to irrationality, divisiveness, and destructive outbursts of passion. Spinoza was well aware of the fact that, in his own period, the multitude had enlisted on the side of the Calvinist preachers and monarchists and against that of Republican liberty, ultimately being responsible, in the form of a mob, for the assassination of the De Witt brothers. In his political writings Spinoza raises two important questions: 1) Why do the masses struggle for their servitude as though it were their liberation? and 2) How is it possible to create a state that enlists the power of the multitude on behalf of its real freedom? According to Balibar, in his final and unfinished work, *A Political Treatise*, Spinoza continues to regard democracy as the only "absolute" form of government, i.e. as the only one in which the power of the multitude is fully expressed. But he also regards freedom as compatible with both monarchical and aristocratic states, provided that the democratic element within them - the expansion of state authority to the widest possible groups - is maximized. This is an advocacy, not so much of democracy, as of democratization, and therefore of regarding the achievement of democracy as a perpetually unfinished task.

Macherey: Spinoza as an Alternative to Hegel

Pierre Macherey, another member of Althusser's circle, is best known for his attempt to develop a materialist theory of literature in *A Theory of Literary Production* and *The Object of Literature*. However he also produced a major and influential interpretation of Spinoza, *Hegel ou Spinoza*, in which he defends Spinoza against the critique Hegel launches in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. In this respect, he shares with Althusser the project of detaching Marxism from its Hegelian heritage, especially its teleological conception of history and its view of the central role negation plays in the dialectical enrichment of what Hegel calls the Absolute Idea. In his book, Macherey attempts to demonstrate that Hegel misreads Spinoza, especially the latter's supposed claim that "every determination is a negation," a version of which Spinoza limits to the apprehension of finite modes by the imagination, and not, as Hegel believes, to their true comprehension by the understanding. According to Macherery, negation is merely a "being of reason," in other words, a mental construct that has no independent place in reality. Being, whether that of substance, or of the attributes and modes that issue from it, is absolutely full, lacking nothing that would bring it to completion. Negation plays a role in what Hegel himself calls his "theodicy," i.e. his justification of the ways of God to man. In the unfolding of the dialectic in the *Phenomenology of Spirit,* for example, the negative in the form of limitation, suffering, evil, destruction, and so on is

redeemed by fact that its overcoming results in a deepening of spiritual experience. But for Spinoza, who rejects the idea that the negative has any substantial existence at all, Hegelian dialectic would appear to be a form of speculative and theological mystification. By contrast, the "sad passions" have no positive role to play in either the *Ethics* or Spinoza's political writings. The task of the wise person is not to preserve the sad passions in their supersession (*aufhebung*), as moments of internal richness, but rather to abolish them so that joy and intellectual comprehension may assert themselves. Related to his critique of Hegel on Spinoza's view of negation, Macherey challenges Hegel's claim that Spinoza's substance is an abstract absolute – i.e. one without definite content – and that the attributes are distinctions made by the external reflection of the mind. According to Macherey, Spinoza's substance possesses an infinite richness that Hegel fails to see. For attributes are internal determinations, aspects of an autonomous articulation that does not depend upon negation and its overcoming. In their comprehensive infinitude, the attributes are in fact precisely what substance concretely *is*. By unhooking the genetic self-constitution of the absolute from the motor of negation and its supersession, Spinoza offers an alternative to Hegelian dialectic that Macherery believes is a superior framework for the development of Marxist thought.

Matheron: Spinoza and Collectivity

Though Alexandre Matheron has written a great deal on Spinoza's political philosophy, his most influential work is still his first book on the subject, *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza*. For a specialized work of scholarship, it is remarkable just how much controversy the book has caused, drawing the ire of conservatives and liberals alike from the time of its first publication in 1969 down to the present. At the center of the controversy is Matheron's challenge to the prevailing view that Spinoza, like Hobbes, is a classical liberal theorist, in other words, an individualist and proto-utilitarian for whom individuals create the political community as an instrument for the protection of their egoistic interests. Matheron rejects this version of what, in English and American economics and philosophy, is called “rational choice theory” by pointing out that Spinoza locates the origins of the political community in the emotional life of people rather than in the rational decisions they make to maximize their utility. Our passions bind us together in collectivities, including political ones, and so there is no need for a social contract that would enable us to exit the state of nature, since we are always already social beings. Spinoza explicitly draws this conclusion in the *Political Treatise*. The collective life of people bound together by their passions is subject to certain laws of change and development, for example the law that the exercise of tyrannical power elicits indignation in the multitude, which leads to the overthrow of the tyrant and a struggle to reconstitute the state on a new foundation. The various kinds of states - monarchy, aristocracy, theocracy, democracy - are distinguished from one another by the specific set of passional laws that govern their transformations. Since each state is a collectivity consisting of human parts whose motions with respect to one another are regulated by laws, the state, in Matheron's account of Spinoza's political views, meets the definition of an individual finite mode. Perhaps Matheron's most controversial thesis, then, is that states, like human beings, are individuals. They have a coherence that any mere

association for the satisfaction of egoistic interests would lack. Moreover, the law-governed character of their passional lives is what makes a science of politics possible.