

# The Politics of Spinozism

## Composition and Communication\*

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Let me begin by extending my sincere thanks to Ramin Jahanbegloo and the Cultural Research Bureau for having invited me to this unique occasion. I cannot fail to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to Toni Negri who, before Deleuze, was the first 'intercessor' in my own encounter with Spinoza. Some years ago, at the very beginning of my studies in philosophy, I devoured his book *The Savage Anomaly* with the somewhat undisciplined passion of the neophyte. It remains for me a model, both stylistic and methodological, of how to transmit the inner tension, historical embeddedness and contemporary urgency of a philosophical thought. It is quite a privilege to be sitting with him here today.

My own 'scholarly' encounter with Spinoza's philosophy has always taken the guise of looking at Spinoza *in* or Spinoza *with* other thinkers (for example Schelling, Deleuze, Althusser). Today I would simply like to address – guided, alas, by my passions and prejudices – the role and the different guises taken by Spinoza's thought, over the past 35 years or so, within the ambit of European philosophy. I do not wish, however, to subject you, in the register of the history of ideas, to a painstaking reconstruction of the most recent Spinoza renaissance and the various guises it has adopted over the years (for which I highly recommend the collection *The New Spinoza*, edited by Warren Montag). Rather, I want to give you a preliminary sense of some of the ways in which the thought of Spinoza, and his *political* thinking in particular, has been revitalised and re-actualized in the last few decades. Remaining wedded, to a considerable extent, to Gilles Deleuze's definition of philosophical practice as a *creation of concepts*, I would like to focus on two concepts that have emerged as deeply significant in recent readings of Spinoza's work, the concepts of *composition* and *communication* (my original

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\* Paper presented at the Cultural Research Bureau of Iran, Tehran, January 4, 2005. Abstract: As many scholars have noted, Spinoza's relation to the history and practice of philosophy is unique. Though often portrayed in the academy as a thinker integrated into the 'rationalist' tradition, Spinoza has repeatedly emerged as what Antonio Negri famously called a 'savage anomaly'. Whether in the radical enlightenment of the late 17th and 18th centuries, the Pantheism controversy that played such a formative role within German Idealism, or in the philosophical radicalism catalysed by May 1968, Spinoza has been repeatedly invoked as a point of reference and inspiration at moments when the very meaning of philosophy and its link to the contemporary world was at stake. My initial question will thus be the following: How is it that a philosopher renowned for thinking, with supreme detachment, 'sub specie aeternitatis', could play such a forceful part in debates over what Michel Foucault called 'the ontology of the present'? In order to address this matter, I wish to concentrate specifically on the latest 'wave' in the long history of Spinozism, and focus on three thinkers who have played a crucial role in the recent resurgence of interest in the work of the Dutch philosopher: Gilles Deleuze, Etienne Balibar, and our guest in this colloquium, Antonio Negri. More specifically, I will be concerned with how Spinoza has served as a spur for these 3 thinkers in their radical interrogations of the meaning of politics, democracy and the common. I will do this by fleshing out three concepts through which Deleuze, Balibar and Negri respectively affirm the relevance of Spinoza's ontology and ethics to any reflection on the contemporary status of the political: composition, communication and constitution.

intention was to consider the notion of *constitution* in Negri's work, but time constraints have forced me to truncate this trinity and let Negri speak for himself).

Not only – and despite the academic attempt to depict him as a straightforward 'rationalist' – is Spinoza convincingly characterized as an *anomaly* in his own time and in the 'timeless time' of philosophy, as both Negri and Deleuze have affirmed, but the history of Spinoza's reception is also wholly unique. To take some of the more striking, if anecdotal, cases, three great German philosophers – Schelling, Nietzsche and Marx – underwent genuine transformative encounters with the thought of Spinoza. In 1795, Schelling, as a precocious philosopher trying to construct a philosophy that would provide an 'immanentistic affirmation of the infinite' (Semerari 1996: 83) and undermine the strictures of dogma, dashed off a letter to his then close friend Hegel, enthusiastically confessing: 'I have become a Spinozist!'. In 1881, Nietzsche himself, in a letter to Overbeck, remarked on Spinoza: 'I am amazed, delighted! I have a precursor, and what a precursor!', before listing his closeness to the fundamental tenets of Spinoza's thought. Marx himself, in his formative years, once composed an entire notebook consisting of a complete rearrangement of one of Spinoza's treatises, and then quixotically entitled it 'Tractatus Theologico-Politicus by Karl Marx'. Yirmiahu Yovel, in his study *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, has provided a useful account of these strange allegiances and affinities. In terms of movements, rather than figures, Spinoza functioned as the sometimes subterranean catalyst behind the many-headed movement for radical enlightenment that swept Europe in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century, and as the elusive centre of the polemics out of which the various strands of German idealism were woven – to take two notorious and crucial instances, painstakingly investigated by Jonathan Israel and Frederick Beiser, respectively<sup>1</sup> – Spinoza's very name was the disputed currency in some of the fiercest philosophical, political and theological controversies. And yet, we might be tempted to argue, this did not, in most cases, entail a critical appropriation of his concepts and of the intricate, often forbidding, dynamic of his thought. Rather, as is the case with most polemics, here Spinoza became a metaphor of a host of badly defined complexes: atheism, pantheism, materialism, idealism... And even for some of his partisans, his philosophy became a kind of motivating myth in the struggle against the inertias of tradition. But, as the Argentine poet Jorge Luis Borges wrote in his poem 'Spinoza', this was a thinker 'freed from myth and metaphor'. Indeed it is both the crystalline conceptual rigour (recall that

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<sup>1</sup> 'Until the publication of Jacobi's *Briefe über die Lehre von Spinoza* in 1785, Spinoza was a notorious figure in Germany. For more than a century the academic and ecclesiastical establishment had treated him "like a dead dog" as Lessing later put it. The *Ethica* was published in Germany in 1677, and the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* in 1670 (though it appeared anonymously, Spinoza was known to be the author). Until the middle of the eighteenth century it was de rigueur for every professor and cleric to prove his orthodoxy before taking office; and proving one's orthodoxy demanded denouncing Spinoza as a heretic. Since attacks on Spinoza became a virtual ritual, there was an abundance of defamatory and polemical tracts against him. Indeed, by 1710 so many professors and clerics had attacked Spinoza that there was a *Catalogus scriptorium Anti-spinozanorum* in Leipzig. And in 1759 Trinius counted, probably too modestly, 129 enemies of Spinoza in his *Freydenkerlexicon*. Such was Spinoza's reputation that he was often identified with Satan himself. Spinoza was seen as not only one form of atheism, but as the worst form. Thus Spinoza was dubbed the "Euclides atheisticus," the "princeps atheorum" (Beiser 1987: 48).

*Ethics*, his principal work, is subtitled *More Geometrico Demonstrata*) and the singular realism of his philosophy that might account for his singular place in contemporary thought.<sup>2</sup>

How then are we to characterize the 'actuality' of Spinoza? Why is the relationship of Spinoza to the present (not just our own, but that of 18<sup>th</sup> century Italian radicals or 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosophers) of a different order than that of, say, Descartes or Leibniz? In what sense could we even say that Spinoza is always ahead of us, that he is even a 'philosopher of the future'? This question is not simply that of the political and historical insertion of Spinoza's thought into various contexts and conjunctures, *it is a profoundly philosophical question* which has occupied those thinkers who have sought to understand the power of Spinoza's ethics and politics as tools for intervening in the present. After all, the most obvious image of Spinoza is as a philosopher of eternity ('a god-intoxicated man', even), and one wedded to a radical system of determinism which undermines any postulate of free will, if not freedom *tout court*. How then could such a figure, seemingly the least 'historical' of philosophers, provide thinkers concerned with transformation, novelty, the event, with the wherewithal to advance radical projects of thought? Why is Spinoza repeatedly be invoked in the most urgent of political and ideological polemics? How could a philosophy turned toward the eternity of being (an ontology) link up with the attempt to understand the collective construction of a common political space and the sometimes catastrophic incursion of worldly events?

Permit me then, to read to you a longish quote from Pierre Macherey's perspicuous treatment of Spinoza's actuality:

Perhaps then we shall take note that the eternity of substance is not, as Spinoza himself reflected, directly assimilable to the permanence of a nature already given in itself, in an abstract and static manner, according to the idea of "substance which has not yet become subject" developed by Hegel regarding Spinoza; but, to the extent that this substance is inseparable from its productivity, that it manifests itself nowhere else than in the totality of its modal realizations, in which it is absolutely immanent, it is a nature that is itself produced in a history, and under conditions that the latter necessarily attaches to it. Thus for the soul to attain the understanding of its union with the whole of nature is also to recognize historically what confers on it its own identity, and it is in a certain way, then, to respond to the question "Who am I now?" (Macherey 1998: 134)

It is perhaps the forbidding but crucial theme of *immanence* that allows an inroad into the ever renewed force of Spinoza's thought. It is in this concept, which traverses physics, ethics and politics, that we can discern the clue to the idea of a being that is both eternal and radically in and of the now, of a praxis and a temporality that would not separate an immaculate realm of eternal values and ideas from the vicissitudes of collective human life. To

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<sup>2</sup> We should not forget the very 'intimate' and non-philosophical experience of Spinoza, which also sets him apart from most other philosophers: 'He is a philosopher who commands an extraordinary conceptual apparatus, one that is highly developed, systematic, and scholarly; and yet he is the quintessential object of an immediate, unprepared encounter, such that a non-philosopher, or even someone without any formal education, can receive a sudden illumination from him, a "flash". Then it is as if one discovers that one is a Spinozist: one arrives in the middle of Spinoza, one is sucked up, drawn into the system or the composition. [...] What is unique about Spinoza is that he, the most philosophic of philosophers [...] teaches the philosopher how to become a non-philosopher' (Deleuze 1998: 129).

paraphrase Yovel, immanence is not a kind of static indifference, but is always caught in dynamisms, in adventures, and some of these adventures are the adventures of men. By approaching the enigma of immanence, of a thought (and indissociably, a practice) that would not refer to some form of external legitimation, to a supplementary dimension of any sort, we could perhaps begin to unravel the seeming paradox of Spinoza's reception. This is also perhaps why, in its singular mix of exacting scholarship and practical urgency, recent Spinozism is qualitatively different than its precursors and has really begun to articulate what is most puzzling and potent about this great philosopher. It has done so precisely in its emphasis on the consequences and uniqueness of the thesis of *immanence* and on the key, and previously underestimated, role of Spinoza's *political* thought, more precisely on the resources that Spinoza provides for rethinking the very concept of *democracy* in our present conjuncture. To be more precise and anticipate some of the themes I will introduce shortly, what is at stake in this 'new Spinoza' is a way of thinking Spinoza's philosophy, and even his concept of eternity, in terms of what, for want of a better term, I would call *forms of interaction*, ways of moving beyond the immediate linking of ontology and ethics toward a thought of how the collective construction of political relations *socializes* both the ethical and the ontological, how politics amplifies or interferes with the expression and affirmation of power, both at the ontological and ethical level. Politics – and the immanent tendency of politics, *democracy* – is thus arguably the privileged way of relating Spinoza's ontology to what Foucault once called the 'ontology of the present'.

As the French philosopher Louis Althusser wrote in his 1976 *Essays in Self-Criticism*, much late 20<sup>th</sup> century Spinozism has proceeded by 'attributing to the author of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* and the *Ethics* a number of theses which he would surely never have acknowledged, though they did not actually contradict him. But to be a heretical Spinozist is almost orthodox Spinozism, if Spinozism can be said to be one of the greatest lessons in heresy that the world has seen!' (Althusser 1976: 132). Though Spinozists have existed ever since the radical circles that rippled through Europe in the wake of Spinoza's death, I think it is fair to say that only in the past 50 years or so has there been a Spinozism to match in hermeneutic rigour and creative interventions the history of Kantianism or Hegelianism, that only now has the hereticism that Althusser referred to been complemented by the labour of the concept. Arguably, it is only now then that the scope of his thought and its relevance to our social and political existence can be truly appreciated, at a historical juncture when the communicative power of the multitude and of what Marx called the *general intellect* is so intensified that the physics, ethics, ontology and politics of Spinoza (what are ultimately indissociable facets of his philosophizing) can be thought simultaneously. Today more than ever, one might argue, is Spinoza, as Pierre Macherey puts it, 'an irreplaceable reactor and developer' (Macherey 1998: 135). To follow another of Althusser's suggestions, we could pose that much of what is most living in the European philosophy that followed upon the structuralist episode is imbued by this Spinozist element, and that it is a certain understanding of the articulation of politics and ontology, an articulation which simultaneously eschews the turn to straightforward political liberalism and the seductions of Heidegger's ontology

which is at the heart of the turn to Spinoza initiated by Deleuze and Matheron, following Gueroult, in the late 60s.<sup>3</sup> Digging deeper, and remaining with our Althusserian reference, we must also consider the crucial role that Spinoza's metaphysics played in the ideological struggles, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, against the domination of dialectical thought. One of the century's guiding philosophical alternatives, to borrow the title of one of Macherey's books: 'Hegel or Spinoza'. And inasmuch as dialectics can be regarded as the culmination of a certain variant of philosophical and political modernity, we can begin to see why Spinoza's has been presented as a singular alternative, a thinker of a kind of anti-modernity. Let me now turn to two points, two concepts, through which the Spinozan alternative has been identified. This is the alternative represented by a philosophy of affirmation, both at the ontological level (dynamic plenitude of the single substance) and the ethical level (the struggle of joy against the sad passions) – what Macherey has called 'Spinoza's positivism', the intellection of being 'without mediation, that is, without the intervention of a negative relation of *self* to being' (Macherey 1998: 128).<sup>4</sup> As Balibar notes, we can thus argue there is a profound *political* significance in the difference between Spinoza's and other philosophies.

### **Balibar: Communication**

Étienne Balibar approaches Spinoza as a thinker of interaction, of the constitutive character of relations. Spinoza's question, in Balibar's view, is the following: 'What is the mode of reciprocal action that characterizes the existence of a body politic?'<sup>5</sup> In this respect, the uniqueness of Spinoza is that of taking the movement (both outer and inner, so to speak) of the masses as the object of political science, and not just the legitimacy of sovereignty or the claims of order. (Of course, we may be tempted to ask, *to what extent are the masses, or rather the multitude, the subject or object of politics?*)

From here derives, in Balibar's reading, both the centrality and aporetic character of the notion of *democracy*. Democracy is defined as a 'united body of men which corporately possesses sovereign right over everything within its power', as the combination of the reciprocity of duties *and* the equality of rights. As both Macherey and Negri note, this is not to be understood simply as another figure in a political *typology* of forms of government, but is an immanent *tendency* of political life, inscribed in the dynamic of reason and into the vicissitudes of human nature. Or, as Balibar puts it, democracy is both a

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<sup>3</sup> We should not forget here that Spinoza has also served as a 'negative' foil for a number of contemporary philosophers, chiefly, and not surprisingly, among those faithful to some aspect of critical theory and dialectical, if not straightforwardly Hegelian, thought: Horkheimer and Adorno, in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, for whom *conatus* as self-preservation is a key figure in the ravages and barbarisms issuing from a rationalist and instrumentalist West, a key to Western instrumentalism; or Slavoj Žižek who, in *Tarrying with the Negative*, portrays the full positive immanence of Spinoza's ontology as isomorphic with the 'logic of late capitalism'. We could also consider the whole tradition, present in the Anglo-American setting, of considering Spinoza as a liberal or conservative thinker.

<sup>4</sup> Politically, this struggle against the negative is also, as Negri and Deleuze painstakingly demonstrate, a struggle against the One, against the 'monarchical' principle in philosophy (domination of the one *over* the multiple versus power of the one *in* and *as* the multiple), even prior to the denunciation of the imaginary character of monarchy in politics.

<sup>5</sup> Or, in Deleuze's inflection: 'How can men come to meet one another in relations that are compatible, and so form a reasonable association?' (Deleuze 1992: 265).

kind of political order and the *truth* of every political order. Democracy can also be understood as the power of the multitude coordinated, cultivated and instituted without the imaginary displacement represented by sovereignty, by the alienation of the power of human singularities into the empty and formally unified place of power (the Hobbesian option, as it were). Whence the radical novelty of Spinoza's question: *How does power originate in the multitude?* And, one should add, how does it continue and persevere, how is power not just originated, but also continuously constructed, in and by the multitude?

The key notion at this juncture is that of the striving for self-preservation, of the *conatus* of both individual and State, which is intimately connected in Spinoza to the extremely provocative thesis of the identity of right and power (though, as ever we should understand this as *potentia*, power to, and not *potestas*, power over). Natural right is recast by Spinoza as the power to act. How then does this equation of right and power translate into a treatment of the mass or multitude? And how does the role of the passions, or rather affects, the cornerstone of Spinoza's theory of human nature, contribute to this treatment? What are we to do with Spinoza's theory of the passions of the body social (Matheron)? Balibar broaches these question in his discussion of the 'fear of the masses'. He writes: 'It is the fundamental purpose of democracy to *avoid* the follies of appetite and to *keep men within* the bounds of reason, as far as possible, so that they may live in peace and harmony'. But, we may ask, is there a dichotomy then between the *construction* and the *restriction* of the multitude? Or could we think both in term of immanent practices of self-limitation?<sup>6</sup> These questions are then complicated by the reciprocal fear of the masses and of political authorities, as well as by the strife and antagonism at the heart of the multitude itself. But for Balibar, the key question, even in the midst of antagonism, remains that of self-preservation: 'The excess of antagonistic passion is, essentially, a perversion of the desire to maintain and to safeguard the existing order' (39).

In this framework, institutions are always *ambivalent*, though their first role is to stem the tide of fear arising out of our mortal awareness of chance and of *violence*. Behind this view lies the idea that the 'desire of the multitude is to live in a state of civil peace.' As to the ambivalence, the entire question is how we understand the obsessive need, voiced by Spinoza, to keep the multitude 'within bounds'.<sup>7</sup> The ambivalence is also ontological, since it turns out that individual and State are just two divergent modalities of the power of the multitude, 'the decisive concept in the analysis of the State' (69). Rulers and ruled, sovereign and citizens, all belong to the multitude. However, Balibar remains sceptical about the multitude *qua* multitude. He thinks it 'a contradictory power, internally divided against itself: as such, it is unable to decide anything', 'an unstable aggregate of individual passions'. It is a medium for the amplification of passions and the imitation of the affects. Embedding decision in the masses is thus a strategy of stability (which

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<sup>6</sup> This could be understood in terms of the passage from a 'structure of civil obedience' in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, still founded on some transference, albeit an immanent one, of rights, to the *Political Treatise*, in which transference and thus any remainder of classical sovereignty is left behind. However, Balibar reverses this when he sees the *Theological-Political Treatise* as having the role of the State being *freedom*, while in the *Political Treatise* it is 'simply peace and security of life'.

<sup>7</sup> This ambivalence is also understandable in terms of Foucault's concept of governmentality.

monarchy is immanently led towards, for instance). But what are we to make of the seemingly un-democratic and anti-libertarian thesis that 'the fundamental social relation is the production of obedience' (88)? As Balibar shows, in democracy this obedience cancels itself out in the reciprocal love of men and the love of God. Not only, but obedience to the State, for Spinoza, converges with the 'collective construction of the common interest'. So, rather than spuriously opting for either the rights of the individual or the stability of the State, in Balibar's reading Spinoza presents us with a relational idea of right or law, rather than one founded on coercion or an autonomous domain of values and commands. This is why Balibar holds that *transindividual* (and not the monolithic Leviathan) is the key dimension that requires to be thought: 'Those rights are compatible which express powers that can be added or multiplied together; those rights are incompatible which correspond to powers that will mutually destroy one another.'

There is nothing more miserable, sadder, than intellectual, moral and political solitude. Contrary to the ascetic image of Spinoza, but in line with the fortunes of his thought, we never think alone, the production of 'common notions', a necessary component of ethical knowledge, is, in principle at least, a collective, or open, activity. Or, as Balibar has it, 'to know really is to think ever less by oneself.' This is where Spinoza is not simply advancing another version of the negative freedom implicit in the notion of a *freedom of opinion*, but a far stronger thesis of the *freedom of thought*, which holds that it is the expansion and empowerment of citizens' capacity for thought which *strengthens* the State and renders peace and security – the peace and security of a burgeoning, dynamic State and not a State of fear – more stable. Thought contributes to the cohesion of sovereignty, understood as a 'continuous process of collective production'. Furthermore, thought is, in the final analysis, de facto inalienable, any attempt to strip this minimum of humanity (or irreducible minimum of individuality) and autonomy can only result in the eventual explosion of antagonism and the ruin of the commonwealth. Freedom<sup>8</sup> of thought thus lies behind the collaboration which is essential to the combination of State and society: 'Reason counsels us to seek peace and security by pooling our individual powers, and this will in turn bestow upon us the greatest possible degree of real independence.'

Finally, via Spinoza, Balibar produces a theory of communication which, unlike those produced by the likes of Habermas and Apel is not 'transcendental' and which could even be said to be ahead of its time. The concept of communication allows us to move beyond the false antithesis, so prevalent in classical political theory, between natural and institutional sociability. In the construction of society as an extension, resolution and amplification of human nature men communicate affects and reason to one another. Passion and reason are 'modes of communication between bodies and between ideas of bodies', a political regime is in turn defined as 'an order of communication'. What is at stake in political change is the transformation of collective temperament. Politics, in this Spinozan framework, can be redefined

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<sup>8</sup> Freedom defined as 'the right of the individual for whom *reason* is stronger than *passion* and whose independence is greater than his dependency' (63). The genesis of society is in any case both reasonable and passionate, for such is human nature.

as the struggle over the 'transformation of the mode of communication', replacing mass passions with collective reason, via common notions, which allow us to find joy (the affirmation of activity as ruled by reason and aware of necessity) in the life of the multitude.<sup>9</sup> This allows us to juxtapose the reason embodied in a communicable good and the barbarism which dominates a community of fear and of non-cooperative imitation (imitation of fear, or fascination).

In communication we thus see how conatus of self-preservation and cooperation turn out to be one and the same. Now the multitude can move beyond its fear and its ambivalence and be communicatively redefined as an exchange and free communication between irreducibly singular beings. So what we are dealing with is not just the freedom of thought but necessarily the *freedom of communication*. In conclusion, for Balibar:

The theory of the 'body politic' is neither a straightforward 'physics' of power, nor a psychological analysis of the submission of the masses, nor a method for formalising a juridical order, but the search for a strategy of collective liberation, whose guiding motto would be: as many as possible, thinking as much as possible.

### **Deleuze: Composition**

Perhaps no author like the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze – in my view the contemporary philosopher whose temperament is closest to Spinoza – has emphasized the presence in Spinoza's work of an ethics of the encounter, an ethics of joy, undermining the pernicious and debilitating influence of the sad passions. In Deleuze, we encounter most powerfully the notion that Spinoza does away with a pre-existence of Good and Evil as external standards for disembodied judgment, for the sake of an understanding of ethics as *an immanent evaluation of ways of life*. As he writes:

There is in Nature neither Good nor Evil, there is no moral opposition, but there is an ethical difference. This ethical difference appears in various, equivalent forms: that between the reasonable man and the foolish, the wise and the ignorant, free man and slave, strong and weak. And wisdom or reason have in fact no other content but strength, freedom. This ethical difference [...] *relates to the kind of affections that determine our conatus* (Deleuze 1992: 261).

In other words, it relates to the effect of encounters on our affective composition, on our capacity to act with joy or our propensity to suffer in sadness (and this suffering can also qualify certain activities: domination can

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<sup>9</sup> In his review of a recent Italian collection of Balibar's writings, Augusto Illuminati usefully summarises this concept of communication: 'The decisive element, as explained in the essay 'Politics and Communication', is precisely communication, which annihilates isolation and ignorance: the circular, mimetic-imitative communication of affects, the cognitive communication of the common notions and the political-institutional communication of a structure for advice that might favour the information and rational consensus of citizens. But the very idea of communication now loses any hint of liberalism, becoming a superior transindividual quality of the experienced cooperative power in which we become aware that we are eternal. We will then be able to experience the *omnino absolutum imperium* of democracy not as utopia, limit-stage or promised land, but rather in our everyday life, in an intellectual and affective activity in which we are the adequate cause of our own preservation.' Published in the daily *Il Manifesto*, May 28, 2002.

be a deeply sad pursuit, for Spinoza and Deleuze; as Deleuze notes, like Lucretius, 'Spinoza assigns to philosophy the task of denouncing all that is sad, all that lives on sadness, all those who depend on sadness as the basis of their power').

In his essential 1981 essay 'Spinoza and Us', Deleuze deepens the common theme of Spinozan immanence by postulating the construction of what he calls a *plane of immanence*, the idea of an ethical and political space without any reference to a 'supplementary dimension', a space where relations and encounters address one another without calling upon external sources of legitimation or meaning. The plane of immanence is juxtaposed to a plan or plane of organisation, where every relation and every production is always referred back to an independent and external principle, a principle which is itself immune from relationality and construction. The first plan of organisation, of course, would be the one that would separate the mind as a deciding principle from the body as an executive organ, a position undermined by Spinoza's theory of parallelism. As always with Spinoza this is not simply an ontological or epistemological thesis but has profound ethico-political consequences. As Deleuze says, the 'primary significance' of parallelism '*taken as a model* [...] is juridical and ethical. If we manage to pose the problem of rights at the level of bodies, we thereby transform the whole philosophy of rights in relation to bodies themselves' (Deleuze 1992: 257). This juxtaposition of plane of immanence and plan of organisation is also expressed as the crucial distinction between ethics and morality. Moreover, it also implies a completely different understanding of the concept of law, whether in scientific (e.g. laws of nature) or juridical (e.g. the law of the land) terms. When Spinoza equates right and power he is not justifying a cynical doctrine of 'might is right', but eliminating any reference to a transcendent source or justification of power. As Deleuze comments, 'the law of nature is never a rule of duty, but the norm of a power, the unity of right, power and its exercise'. In other words law (and sovereignty) is never separable from its execution, from its power of application. And this power of application is best understood in terms of an effort to 'organize encounters' such that they maximise the power and freedom of one and all (Deleuze 1992: 261). It is in this immanence of encounters and relations that we can undertake, in the absence of any transcendent moral norms, what Deleuze calls 'the slow effort of discovering our joys' (Deleuze 1992: 262). This is, for Deleuze, the very meaning of *culture* as an apprenticeship where passion and reason are commingled under the guidance of the latter.

If the common plane of immanence is one on which 'all bodies, all minds, all individuals are situated' (Deleuze 1988: 122), then the task of ethics – not as a system of norms, but as a way or form of life – is to allow us to learn how to compose ourselves, our capacities and our desires, with other bodies, minds and individuals in such a way as to increase our power (defined as a capacity to affect and to be affected<sup>10</sup>) and thus to persevere in our being. Ethics is a kind of lived science of connections, it is 'a long affair of experimentation, requiring a lasting prudence, a Spinozan wisdom that implies the construction

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<sup>10</sup> 'You will define an animal, or a human being, not by its form, its organs, and its functions, and not as a subject either; you will define it by the affects of which it is capable' (Deleuze 1988: 124).

of a plane of immanence or consistency. Spinoza's ethics has nothing to do with a morality; he conceives it as an ethology [a science of behavioural capacities, possible relations and the environment of action], that is as a *composition* of fast and slow speeds, of capacities for affecting and being affected'; with Spinoza ethics is 'a question of knowing whether relations (and which ones?) can compound directly to form a new, more "extensive" relation, or whether capacities can compound directly to constitute a more "intense" capacity or power. It is no longer a matter of utilizations or captures, but of sociabilities and communities. How do individuals enter into composition with one another in order to form a higher individual, ad infinitum?' (Deleuze 1988: 125-6, my emphasis).

Despite the considerable beauty and force of Deleuze's magisterial reading, we may nevertheless wonder about the consequences of the comparatively little attention he lavishes on the effects that political constitution has on ethical composition. Is it not the case that the political dimension introduces fresh challenges and aporias, such as the one of the collective construction of freedom, into the serenity of ethical apprenticeship? Arguably, there is a qualitative leap involved in the passage to politics, which is not at all, as Balibar and Negri amply demonstrate, a merely supplementary dimension – either providing a continuity between the individual organization of joyful encounters and its collective amplification, or, in a kind of Rortyan 'liberal ironism' *avant la lettre*, the provision of a context of public peace for a private path to the third kind of knowledge. In other words, what happens to the plane of immanence when it is fully socialized? Or again when we move from the ethical individual's 'private' organization of encounters to the citizen's commitment to '*common collective affections*' (Deleuze 1992: 267)? When we realize that the striving of reason as the art of organizing encounters can ultimately not rest with the isolated free man, but that the formation of 'a *totality* of compatible relations' is a political task, perhaps the political task *par excellence*? This is, I would venture, perhaps the best point of approach into the interpretive project of Antonio Negri.

## **In Conclusion**

Via Spinoza we are thus confronted, in this contemporary Spinozism, with a concept of the *composition* of behaviour, of ethical life not built upon the identity of a fixed subject (Deleuze), with a notion of *communication* that does not restrict it to the transmission of content or the deliberation among rational beings, but conceives as the rational *and* passional medium of politics (Balibar) and finally with a concept of *constitution* as the persistent collective construction of a common political project of the multitude, as opposed to a fixed set of norms regulating, a priori and externally, the behaviour of subjects (Negri). I hope these perspectives have begun to convey to you what might still be alive and indeed still to be explored in Spinoza's thought today.

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