

Spinoza and the Politics of the Future

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Antonio Negri. *Spinoza for Our Time*. Columbia University Press, 2013. xix + 125 pp.

Hasana Sharp. *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*. University of Chicago Press, 2011. xii + 241 pp.

Nowhere has the capacity of Baruch Spinoza's philosophy to enable radical politics been asserted more forcefully than in Antonio Negri's *The Savage Anomaly*. Published in 1981, the book marked a turning point in Spinoza scholarship by establishing Spinoza as a thinker of revolutionary immanence. Although *Spinoza for Our Time* carries little of the innovative power of *The Savage Anomaly*, it once again throws into relief a distinctive reading of Spinoza as a philosopher of living labor and social activity. With its emphasis on the universal human power to make itself and the world, Negri's new book contrasts interestingly with Hasana Sharp's turn to a more-than-human Spinozism. Her feminist intervention repositions the human as a being not different in kind from other beings, and whose capacity to act is impinged upon many diverse natural powers. The juxtaposition of these volumes makes explicit the existence of two intersecting trajectories of current radical Spinozism: (1) an established neo-Marxist line of thought that celebrates the transformative dimension of human productive forces and (2) an emerging tendency that puts Spinoza's break with human exceptionalism at the center of the analysis and reflects on its implications for politics. This review traces affinities and divergences between these two strands of Spinozism to explore how they could complement each other and contribute to a politics of the future.

Savage Spinozism

Spinoza for Our Time is the third book on Spinoza written by Antonio Negri. If *The Savage Anomaly* and *Subversive Spinoza*, written ten years apart, offer respectively a systematic treatise in political theory and important self-reflections and elaborations of key themes, this third volume dedicated to Spinoza's philosophy is a much less ambitious collection of four talks given by Negri between 2005 and 2009.

What is it about Spinoza's thought that makes it so attractive for a committed,

albeit heretical, Marxist like Antonio Negri? *The Savage Anomaly* was written in prison as the author awaited trial on the spurious charge that he had masterminded the Red Brigades' assassination of the former Italian prime minister Aldo Moro. Behind Negri's turn to Spinoza was the need to find new sources of political creativity in the aftermath of the insurgencies against state, capitalist and patriarchal disciplinary regimes that rocked Italy between 1968 and 1977. Negri was one among hundreds of militants arrested in the country in a sweeping campaign of state repression executed with the full support of the Communist Party. In the face of defeat, some activists looked for new tools for orienting themselves in a landscape radically altered by the irruption of new political subjectivities –precarious workers, proletarian youth, women, and a myriad of counter cultural groups. In such circumstances, Spinoza's ontology of immanence provided Negri with the resources to profoundly renew Marxist thought.

Negri was not alone in the pursuit of a materialist Spinozism. In France, Gilles Deleuze and Alexandre Matheron had paved the way for such endeavour with the publication in 1969 of *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza and Individu et communauté chez Spinoza*. Louis Althusser, on his part, wrote very little on Dutch philosopher but famously argued that his seminar Reading Capital was more indebted to Spinoza than structuralism. Such influence is reflected in the work of Althusser's students Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey, authors of influential books on Spinoza. Negri's groundbreaking contribution in *The Savage Anomaly* lies in the connection between the thought of Spinoza and the development of capitalism in the Dutch Republic of the seventeenth century. Spinoza's ontology allows Negri to qualify being as the inexhaustible human capacity to produce, as constitutive *potentia*, that always exceeds *potestas*, the transcendental power of command. This interpretation has some far reaching implications for politics. First and foremost, it revitalizes the Spinozian figure of the multitude and asserts the primacy of its constituent power over the *potestas* of the State. As site of convergence of ontology, ethics and politics, the multitude becomes a powerful antidote against the liberal notion of society as association of free and equal individuals and of politics as a matter of representation, law and rights. In Negri's words "Spinoza's politics participates in a true Copernican revolution: the multitude is an infinity, its power is a continuous movement – an infinite movement that constitutes a totality but is identified in it only as the actuality of a passage; it is not closed but open; it produces and reproduces" (Negri 2004, 40).

These themes return in *Spinoza for Our Time* with few variations. The book opens with a long introduction that sets the tone for the remaining chapters. Here Negri offers some caustic responses to his critics and argues against what he sees as misguided interpretations of Spinoza. His first target is the contemporary understanding of Spinoza as the ideal-type rather than an alternative to modernity. According to this

interpretation, advanced by Jonathan Israel among others, Spinoza is the precursor of the radical wing of Enlightenment, the theorist of a fully-fledged individualism who breaks with the Old Regime of absolutism with the embrace of the modern ideas of democracy, equality and free expression of thought. While this position credits Spinoza as a crucial influence on liberal democratic ideals, Negri claims that the novelty of his political theory can only be apprehended from a post-modern or alter-modern perspective. Spinoza poses a problem that sets him against all political paradigms of modern thought: the problem of “whether there exists the hypothesis of government by the multitude, whether the institutionalization of the common is possible” (17). Indeed, as we will see in a moment, the daring idea of Spinoza as a precursor of a politics of the common resulting from the activity of the multitude is what drives *Spinoza for Our Time*.

The second target of Negri’s criticism is Alan Badiou. If in Hegel’s eyes Spinozist ontology ended up annihilating human subjectivity in an undifferentiated totality because of its lack of negativity, in Negri’s view Badiou commits a similar mistake in portraying substance in Spinoza as incapable of articulation. Against this position, Negri reaffirms that the Spinozian substance (also called God and nature) is a productive force, mobilized and constituted as multiplicity by the ceaseless activity of its modes. Finally, a third criticism is directed toward those authors—Balibar but also Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito (but one could also add Paolo Virno’s nuanced assessment of the ambivalence of the multitude to the list)—who, in different manners and degrees, express skepticism about the eventuality that the multitude might accomplish Negri’s project of absolute democracy. Negri readily acknowledges that: “it falls not to us but to the multitude itself to decide what it wants to be” (30). Yet he also declares that the optimism about the possibility to achieve an anthropological metamorphosis springs from the observation of the transformation of labor.

The chapters that follow the introduction reiterate these points in various ways. The book’s first chapter begins by asserting, once again, the destabilizing force of Spinoza’s thought vis-à-vis the modern political philosophy of transcendence represented by Descartes, Hobbes, Rousseau and Hegel. While the tradition of modern sovereignty tells us that society needs power to be constituted, in Negri’s eyes Spinoza reverses this account by suggesting that resistance precedes power. In developing this argument in characteristically *workerist* fashion,¹ Negri returns to one of the key insights of The

¹ Workerism (*operaismo*) is the “heretic wing” of Italian Marxism developed in close connection with workers’ movements of the 1960s. Key figures include Raniero Panzieri, Mario Tronti, Romano Alquati and Negri. In contrast with the longstanding argument that capital is the driving force of the process of production, workerist theorists claim that living labor and workers’ struggles compel capital to transform.

Savage Anomaly: Spinoza's constitutive ontology provides the matrix for foregrounding the leading role of the productive forces over the relations of production. The advance beyond previous statements of this argument is that, in *Spinoza for Our Time*, the notion of the primacy of *potentia* over *potestas*, of living labor over capitalist command, is reframed to include the struggle for the common. The central axis of Negri's recent work, the common is "both the milieu in which occurs the rupture that we are constructing against the power that dominates us, and the result of this rupture" (50). In other words, the common refers both to the cooperative dynamic that ties together the multitude, and the always evolving material formation that emerges out of this process.

Chapter two stages the philosophical encounter between Spinoza and Heidegger. Despite their similarities in providing an exit from the modern illusion of transcendence, Negri suggests that their conceptions of being diverge profoundly. Spinoza's ontology, with its emphasis on the productive capacity of being, privileges the plentitude of life. Conversely, Heidegger's ontology of the void tends toward death. Chapter three returns to the making of absolute democracy, that is, the government of the multitude by the multitude. Chapter four presents the attempt to disrupt sociological notions of individual interrelations through the Spinozian philosophy of composition of bodies. Negri qualifies social relations in terms of the "ontological impulse" that animates them, and traces the constitutive route that though the complex physics of the *conatus* (the strive to persist and increase one's power), leads to the expansive collective powers of love. For Negri this movement corresponds to the passage from the social production of subjectivities to their articulation in the political common.

The combative spirit of *Spinoza for Our Time* is not new to Negri's readers. His style, particularly as a public speaker, is informed by a political urgency that has few parallels in the Anglo-American academia. Yet, one cannot help but notice the contrast with the more nuanced and generous tone adopted in the *Empire* trilogy co-authored with Michael Hardt. Despite its brevity, *Spinoza for Our Time* is not the best book for those seeking a point of entry into Negri's engagement with Spinoza. It neither does justice to the sheer complexity of Spinoza's constellation of concepts, with its immanent relation between substance, attributes, and modes; nor does it fully render the novelty of Negri's materialist approach to Spinoza. At times, the lack of in-depth discussion of key ideas may pose some difficulties to readers who are not familiar with Negri and Spinoza. The flaw of the book, as sometimes happens with collections of texts originally composed for public talks, is that the chapters are simultaneously disjointed and repetitive. Without a doubt, however, what emerges from these various texts is the intensity of Negri's investment in social praxis as a constitutive process tending toward the construction of the human common.

Inhuman Politics

Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization, the first monograph by Hasana Sharp, takes a different path, one that poses considerable challenges to Negri's fundamentally humanist approach. The two authors share considerable affinities, most notably their inclination to consider Spinoza's ontology as a source for politics. Further, they both incite readers to assume an activist posture in an epoch marked by precarity and dispossession. Throughout her text, Sharp draws on Marxist scholarship and cites Negri's work approvingly. Yet, there are also considerable divergences. Whereas Negri puts forward an ontology of the social grounded on living labor as the human capacity for transforming the world, Sharp broadens the frame of reference beyond social relations and proposes a politics that connects us with more-than-human forces and beings. Her work resists the assumption of much of contemporary political theory, including Negri's, that the world in which we live is a human artifact. In cutting across Marxist, feminist, and ecological approaches, Sharp fully engages with Spinoza's key argument that the human is part of Nature. In one of most powerful passages of the *Ethics*, Spinoza writes "Most of those who have written about the affects, and men's way of living . . . seem to conceive man in Nature as a dominion within a dominion. For they believe that man disturbs, rather than follows, the order of Nature, that he has absolute power over his actions, and that he is determined only by himself" (E III Pref).

Sharp explores the political consequences of Spinoza definition of nature. This is not an entity out of history or a closed system tending toward equilibrium that has to be protected from the devastating impact of the human. On the contrary, nature is a power of mutation that enables human thought and action. Rather than thinking human history as the result of the overcoming of nature, the project of renaturalization is a practical theory that "seeks the nonhuman forces operating within everything we think is ours, or our own doing" (Sharp 9).

Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization is divided in two parts. The first, "Reconfiguring the Human," sets out to rethink the concepts of agency, ideology and reason through a rigorous analysis of Spinoza's texts. Human action is redefined in light of Spinoza's theory of affect. Agency is the capacity to affect and be affected, to increase or diminish one's power to act upon other bodies. From this perspective, agency pertains to all bodies in nature, it stems from an affective milieu and bounds infinitely many beings in a system on mutual causality. Ideology is reconfigured as an ecosystem of ideas that thrive or dry out depending on the vital support provided by a specific environment. The critique of ideology is thus understood as a struggle to support the vitality of some idea and diminish the power of others. Finally, the analysis of reason is situated in relation to Spinoza's peculiar understanding of human nature.

Here, Sharp argues that for Spinoza there is no human essence but only singular essences of similar beings that are called “human” (86). Reason is the power of a mind that always accompanies a body actively engaged with other bodies. It is produced, but never guaranteed, through a process of composition, that is, the joining of forces among a variety of bodies, particularly, but not exclusively, human bodies. Although *man* still retains a special place for Spinoza, reason and human nature are constituted rather than discovered.

After establishing the lexicon for the project of renaturalization, in the second part of the book, “Beyond the Image of Man,” Sharp proceeds to supplement Spinoza’s work with feminist philosophies of nature in the effort to articulate a politics grounded on the enabling power of nature, that is, on a plane that enables the connection rather than opposition of *physis* and *techne*. She acknowledges the importance of feminist, queer and anti-racist efforts to dismantle “naturalist ideologies” and yet privileges a politics built upon a non-dialectic relationality, a politics of difference that takes into account human and nonhuman forces. The politics of renaturalization is not interested in questions of recognition and rights so much as it is concerned with an affirmative politics of bodies and capacities, of synergy and composition, oriented toward the constitution of new forms of life, of new categories beyond the dialectic of master and slave.

Sharp is firm in distinguishing her project of renaturalization from the post-Hegelian politics of recognition articulated by Judith Butler and other feminist thinkers. From the standpoint of renaturalization, politics does not necessarily start from the shared interrogation of the boundaries of universality, or the claim to rearticulate the terms of inclusion of the categories of personhood and humanity. However useful the politics of recognition might be in certain circumstances, it is by no means the only one. Taking a cue from Elizabeth Grosz, Sharp turns instead to the potential of “a politics of imperceptibility,” that places emphasis on the circulation of affects and forces rather than subjects and intersubjectivity. Such a position shifts attention to the impersonal combinations of bodies and affects that over time may produce new values and new modes of existing. Thus, the project of renaturalization helps to reconfigure struggle “as a question of the conditions under which desires for perseverance, human and nonhuman, combine and form enabling or disabling assemblages” (153).

Sharp’s project of renaturalization radicalizes Spinoza’s dispersion of the human into nature. Yet, she also argues that Spinoza’s naturalism erodes those models of man that produce hatred by suggesting that we are either a perversion of the natural order or the ultimate reason for nature’s transformation. Following feminist philosopher Genevieve Lloyd, Sharp acknowledges that the human still plays a significant role in Spinoza’s thought. Human beings are brought together by affective affinities, that is,

the tendency to join forces with those beings whose affects agree with ours. Thus, she proposes a form of “philanthropic posthumanism” defined as “a collective project by which we can come to love ourselves and one another as part of nature” (5). The idea of “philanthropic posthumanism” might sound a little naïve when compared to Negri’s uncompromising embrace of revolutionary humanism, or Grosz’s incitement toward the undoing of the human. Behind this concept, however, lies the important question of imagining forms of politics that are not governed by the old images of *man* and the human but still pursue the project of *organizing* our collective powers and pleasures.

Reliqua desiderantur

The virtue of Sharp’s book is that it pushes the Spinozist political trajectory beyond itself and helps to formulate some puzzling questions: How do impersonal forces impact political practices? How does the vitality of the nonhuman enter the realm of politics? How can we account for the enabling impact of nature on politics without falling back into the realm of representation? Sharp is not alone in asking these questions. Her book is part of a larger turn toward the “rematerialization of political theory” (Braun and Whatmore 2010) that illuminates a political space densely populated by disparate existents. Occasionally, her examples of politics of renaturalization are tentative and not always fully articulated. But this should be taken as an indication of the difficulties of such an enterprise. Certainly, she deserves credit for contributing to a much needed discussion on the subject. Specifically, she deserves credit for bringing into conversation neo-Marxist and feminist strands of Spinozism that rarely or only cursorily speak to each other. After reading Negri next to Sharp, one feels compelled to ask what multitude would emerge should the divide between natural and social forces be displaced.

As those familiar with Spinoza’s work will know, he did not complete the chapter on democracy of the *Political Treatise*. His anonymous editor ended it with the words “reliqua desiderantur” (the remainder is lacking). One can conceive of Negri and Sharp’s work as additions to that chapter, interventions that tirelessly mobilize the force Spinoza’s ontology to forge a new vocabulary for politics. These are interventions that maximize the “untimely” character of Spinoza’s philosophy, the way it counters our time, acting upon our time and on a time to come.

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