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Book Reviews

Reading Spinoza Today—Review Essay

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Books Under Review

Jonathan Israel *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, 810pp, ISBN 0-19-820608-9 (hbk).

Warren Montag *Bodies, Masses, Power: Spinoza and his Contemporaries*, London:Verso, 1999, 136pp, ISBN 1-85984-701-3 (hbk).

Genevieve Lloyd and Moira Gatens *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Past and Present*, London: Routledge, 1999, 169pp, ISBN 0-415-16570-9 (hbk), 0-415-16571-7 (pbk).

Etienne Balibar *Spinoza and Politics* Trans. P. Snowdon, Intro. W. Montag, London: Verso, 1998, 136pp, ISBN 1-85984-801-X (hbk), 1-85984-102-3 (pbk).

Steven Smith *Spinoza, Liberalism and the Question of Jewish Identity*. New Haven, C.T: Yale University Press, 1997, 270pp, ISBN 0-300-06680-5 (hbk), 0-300-07665-7 (pbk).

Introduction

The recent wave of interest in the political dimension of Spinoza's philosophy will surely be welcomed by political theorists. Spinoza has long been a marginal figure in the history of political thought, his position readily eclipsed by that of his contemporary, Thomas Hobbes, as it is in philosophy by the overwhelming presence of René Descartes. Despite this marginal status, Spinoza's philosophy has continued to fascinate, and his admirers over the centuries have been many. In his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* Hegel claimed that 'to be a follower of Spinoza is the essential commencement of all philosophy' and this sense of Spinoza's challenge was felt deeply by figures such as Lessing, Schelling, Jacobi, Goethe, Heine, Diderot, Kant, Nietzsche and Bergson.[1] The exact nature of this challenge is much more difficult to pin down with any precision; since his death in 1677 at the age of 45, the name of Baruch de Spinoza has been associated with almost every philosophical tendency, from atheism to pantheism, naturalism to materialism, and fatalism to determinism. His writings also scandalized his time and, as Jonathan Israel shows us in his epic

historical account of the tidal effects of Spinozism throughout the Enlightenment, it continued to do so well into the 18th century, where we find elements of it returning in the political thought of, among others, Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

What can Spinoza offer political theory today given the strong theological dimension of his writings and his deeply rationalist account of human life? On the one hand, it could be argued that our modern secular societies have thinned out this dense space of the sacred, replacing it with a vision of a minimalist shared cultural ethos and a conception of liberal citizenship to support it. On the other hand, many political theorists may prefer to set aside what is often viewed as Spinoza's resolutely rationalist project because it appears to reflect a somewhat optimistic stance in the face of growing cynicism regarding scientifically driven social projects. Could we instead offer Spinoza a (newly) recognized place in the canon of political thought, yet still conclude that his concerns are no longer ours? Such a decision would surely be taken too swiftly. Many of Spinoza's preoccupations continue to incite political reflection today. The selection of books gathered together in this review, at the very least, are indicative of Spinoza's enduring relevance.

Spinoza's philosophical vision, then, continues to fascinate and give rise to a wide range of interpretations and perspectives.[2] In 1960, Stuart Hampshire commented that every scholar of Spinoza, sensitive to their age and culture, has tended to seize on one particular element of his thought and then proceeded to develop the larger philosophy from this single element. In addition to the tendencies noted above to which Spinoza's thought has given rise, Hampshire adds the critic of Cartesianism, the free-thinker and destroyer of Judaeo-Christian theology, the pure deductive metaphysician, and the mystic. 'All of these masks have been fitted on him,' Hampshire notes, 'and each one of them does to some extent fit. But they remain masks, and not the living face. They do not show the moving tensions and unresolved conflicts in Spinoza's *Ethics*.'[3] Reflecting this, the recent books on Spinoza considered here are each informed by very different philosophical frameworks and have quite distinct concerns. They do not convey any unity in perspective but they do present some of the tensions inherent in the act of interpreting Spinoza. They differ not only in the degree to which their approach is primarily historical or analytical but also in the extent to which they bring their studies to bear upon contemporary political thought. For example, the books of Jonathan Israel and Steven Smith are primarily guided by a project of recuperating or retrieving Spinoza for the Enlightenment and liberal political philosophy, respectively, while Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd centre their analysis upon the concept of imagination and its entwinement with reason, engaging with Spinoza's thought 'in order to think our present differently.' In a similar vein, Warren Montag's

study draws out the way in which Spinoza's project of liberating the individual implies a collective liberty, while in emphasizing Spinoza's apparent elitism, Steven Smith views his politics as ushering in a form of liberal individualism. However, if there is a single characteristic that draws together these diverse interpretations (and it is most explicit in Etienne Balibar's study *Spinoza and Politics*), it is the attention given to the mutual imbrication of political theory and philosophical reflection that is itself so characteristic of Spinoza's own thought. If Spinoza's earlier commentators sometimes underestimated the ways in which the *Ethics* is underscored by the *Tractatus Theologico Politicus*, this is not the case with more recent scholarship. As we shall see below, each study, to varying degrees, finds its point of entry into Spinoza's philosophy by way of his political thought, specifically the *Tractatus Theologico Politicus* and the later, unfinished, *Political Treatise* (hereafter TTP and PT, respectively). Spinoza developed and refined the *Ethics* for 15 years and during this time diverted his attention from this task toward the writing of more concrete political works which in turn deepened the arguments of the *Ethics*. Significantly, the *Ethics* is not simply an ethical work; it contains an epistemology, a theory of nature, a political theory and a psychology. It is here that we find the rich and fascinating account of human nature and individuality, knowledge and freedom, and the relationship of each to God and the celestial order of the world. As it is through the posthumously published *Ethics* that most readers have come to know Spinoza, we will begin by offering a brief introduction to some of its key themes and ideas with a view to fleshing out their connection to Spinoza's politics in the subsequent discussion of the texts under review.

The most notable feature of Spinoza's thought, and that which was deemed most outrageous to his contemporaries, is his metaphysical monism. Unlike Descartes, Spinoza refuses to countenance any dualism between heavenly and human orders of being, or any separation between mind and body, thought and passion. There is only one substance in the world (he calls it 'God, *sive* Nature'); it is infinite and exists necessarily in all the attributes through which it is conceived. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza claims that what we call God, or Nature, can be expressed in two related ways. First, it is expressed as the *essence* of all things in the world (that become in turn its attributes, its diverse modes of being); second, it is expressed in the concrete realization of all things by underpinning their very *existence*. Nothing can be contingent in the world because the existence of everything is absolutely and necessarily determined by general universal laws. Particular, finite modes of substance, however (such as mind and body), may be causally remote from God; they will interact with other things in diverse ways (dependent upon their unique composition and disposition); they will generate their own specific effects, and eventually they will pass away or degenerate. With this conception of the immanence of substance unfolding in all things, Spinoza abolishes every transcendentalism

that seeks to prize the aspects of concrete life and worldly being apart. In its place, the *Ethics* depicts a complex, layered materialism where there is no privileging of the order of mind over that of the body, no hierarchy between our cerebral activity and our passionate engagement with the world. Our corporeal life then, intertwined as it is with the knowledge we have of the world around us, comes to take on special significance. The task of the *Ethics* becomes one of understanding the passionate life of individuals and its effects upon the social bond, analysing the origins of our distorted ideas in the constitution of knowledge, and exploring the role of the imagination as the vehicle through which our many (faulty) exchanges with the world are manufactured.

If the *Ethics* is also a theory of knowledge which is in turn understood as a rational understanding of the causes underlying our actions, Spinoza's 'individuals', themselves active composites of thoughts and passions, rather than discrete and atomistic beings, will strive not only to preserve themselves but also for joy (*laetitia*). It is this active emotion that signifies our rational grasp of the laws of necessity as adequate ideas, and it also brings us closest to what Spinoza calls an 'intellectual love of God.' The part of the *Ethics* that was most decried by ecclesiastics was the way in which belief, or knowledge of God, was made *identical* with a rational understanding of the laws of necessity underlying nature, hence doing away with divine providence and a notion of the hereafter, and linking Spinoza's name irrevocably to a form of philosophical naturalism that was largely viewed as atheistic. The sheer power of Spinoza's reflections far outstripped the intellectual horizon of his time, creating a situation which often generated interpretations contrary to his own intentions. The power of his thought proved too great, even in its fledgling form. Spinoza was excommunicated from the Jewish community in Amsterdam (at the time, one of Europe's more tolerant cities) at the age of only 23 — *and* prior to the publication of any of his theologico-philosophical reflections. This act of excommunication may have attempted to cast Spinoza to the margins of his age but, as we see from Jonathan Israel's recent work, it was here that Spinoza's radical philosophy was to thrive and have its greatest immediate influence.

The Spinoza Circle and the Enlightenment

Jonathan Israel's richly informative study *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* is admirable not just for its appreciation of early Enlightenment thought but also for the single-mindedness with which it pursues its endeavour, namely to position Spinoza as the 'intellectual backbone of the European Radical Enlightenment' (2001, p. vi).

Israel argues against what he perceives as the dominant tendency among Enlightenment scholars of privileging the ideas that emerged after 1750 in their studies. Thus: 'Whilst [this] story of the High Enlightenment after 1750 is more familiar to readers and historians, [it] does not alter the reality that the later movement was basically just one of consolidating, popularizing, and annotating revolutionary concepts introduced earlier. …[E]ven before Voltaire came to be widely known, the real business was already over' (p. 7). More than a few historians will doubtless be irritated by Israel's suggestion that the so-called High Enlightenment offers 'little more than footnotes to the earlier shift' (p. 7) but many will surely find his suggestion a compelling and provocative one. Israel's argument rests upon a distinction between two rival wings of the European Enlightenment. The first, the 'moderate mainstream', encompasses figures like Newton, Locke and Christian Wolff; each, in their own way, sought to accommodate the new scientific advances to religion, asserting alongside them the 'ceaseless workings of Divine Providence, the authenticity of Biblical prophecy, the reality of miracles, and the immortality of the Soul…' (p. 15). In contrast, the 'radical wing' scorned all forms of ecclesiastical authority, undermined the legitimacy of miracles, and desanctified notions of providence and reward and punishment in an afterlife. 'The ultimate goal of its endeavours, its very *raison d'etre*,' Israel concludes, 'was to emancipate society and the individual from bogus bonds of authority and by doing so reinstate human liberty' (p. 703). If it is Spinoza who is the precursor to this radical movement, how does Israel present and judge his significance?

One of the clearest measures of Spinoza's influence upon the High Enlightenment may be gleaned, Israel suggests, by looking at the space devoted to Spinoza in that most timely of ventures: the French *Encylopédie*. Here five times more space is devoted to Spinoza than that taken up with surveying Locke's philosophical contribution, which, for Israel, is more than a mere indication of Spinoza's impact. There are in fact two entries in the *Encylopédie*: a first one for Spinoza himself, which was unremittingly hostile, reflecting the highly negative tone of Pierre Bayle's influential reading of 1697,[4] and a second one written by Diderot on 'the Spinozists': that dispersed band of radical thinkers who sought to advance Spinoza's ideas in so many pockets of the European world and whose names include, among others, Johannes Koerbagh, Ehrenfried von Tschirnhaus, Johann Georg Wachter, Issac Vossius, Frederik van Leenhof, Lodewijk Meyer, John Toland, Anthony Collins and Pietro Giannone. The fact that Spinoza's name became associated with a *movement* rather than simply a *philosophy* is significant in itself, and the greater part of Israel's voluminous study is taken up with charting the reception across Europe to the TTP, the only work to be published during Spinoza's lifetime. Its first edition was clandestinely published in Latin in 1670, with a bogus title page and publisher. It circulated widely across Europe, and late 17th century

library catalogues confirm that the book penetrated all parts of central and western Europe despite its illegality and many national bans (p. 279). Spinoza himself stalled the Dutch translation of this work, recognizing that a more mainstream reception could intensify the religious ferment his ideas were already causing. A French edition of the TTP was produced in 1678, and a Dutch translation eventually appeared some 16 years after Spinoza's death, in 1693.

The TTP was a highly accessible work and its message a clear one: to assert the power of natural philosophical reason above superstitious belief and religious ritual. It also communicated the kernel of Spinoza's philosophy without the geometrical structure which was later favoured for the transmission of the ideas of the *Ethics*. The core argument of the TTP was a secular attack upon belief in revelation. Like Epicurus and Machiavelli before, and Marx and Nietzsche after, Spinoza argued that religion invests us with irrational hopes and fears, grounding these fluctuating emotions in religious rites and beliefs governed solely by superstition. At the same time, individuals invest God with anthropomorphic characteristics, so that he may become vengeful or benign, cruel or virtuous. Spinoza's attack on religion is arguably far more systematic than that of his fellow-demystifiers as he takes his argument right to the heart of biblical exegesis. Spinoza interprets the Scriptures as historical and literary works divesting them of their surrounding mystery. He claims that Moses could not have written the Torah in its entirety (because it narrates the latter's death, as well as describes places that did not bear the same name in his own time), and that religious prophets were simply pious, morally superior and essentially fallible individuals endowed with vivid imaginations and charismatic personalities rather than with supernatural powers. Israel certainly recognizes that Spinoza was participating in a well-established tradition of biblical exegesis that included, for example, Ibn Ezra, Maimonides and, of course, Hobbes (although none of these *denied* the existence of miracles). But what makes Spinoza's influence so powerful was his utilizing natural, philosophical reason and a modern notion of materialism, both quite distinctive given Spinoza's anti-Cartesianism. For Spinoza, miracles must now be understood 'as something the cause of which cannot be explained', while creation (and therefore motion itself) is viewed as inherent in substance, thereby denying in one fatal move the role of providence and an afterlife, as well as God as the prime mover of matter. In this way, Israel argues, 'Spinoza imparted order, cohesion, and formal logic to what in effect was a fundamentally new view of man, God and the universe rooted in philosophy, nurtured by scientific thought, and capable of producing a revolutionary ideology' (pp. 161–162).

Nevertheless, on reading *Radical Enlightenment* it is apparent that it is really Spinoz*ism* which interests Israel and is viewed as imparting a sense of order

upon early Enlightenment ideas. I would argue that Spinoza's thought, in so far as it is explicated by 'Spinozists' in a reliable and rigorous way, is perhaps best seen as indicative of a mood or tendency in its depiction of the growing rationalization of religion and naturalization of reason. The important issue for Israel (as the latter writes of Leibniz' own interest in Spinoza) is 'not *just* Spinoza but something considerably larger — Spinoza's circle, an underground, clandestine, philosophical movement' (p. 504). Indeed, when one looks closely at the history mapped out by Israel, it appears that very little remained of the *philosophical detail* of Spinoza's system as it journeyed across Europe in the many voices of his disciples. The overriding tendency in this reception was crudely to reduce Spinoza's thought to a mechanical and determinist materialism, offering a view of a godless and empty matter without divine agency. All those who pursued his thought certainly got tarred with the same atheist brush: all Spinozists were atheists and, by a strange inversion, all atheists were held to be Spinozists. The same fallacious logic followed for those who attacked Spinozist doctrines, such as Bekker, Bayle, Leibniz and Wolff. They were similarly viewed as guilty by association and, therefore, of doubtful sincerity. Israel's discussion of Bayle is instructive in this regard as it finds the general path of Bayle's thought to be thoroughly Spinozist. Israel interrogates the reception of the famous *Dictionnaire* which tended to view the combative essay on Spinoza therein as a deliberate misconstrual of the latter's ideas rather than a genuine rejection of them (see Chapter 18). The same was true of Leibniz, whose deeply theological notion of the 'pre-established harmony of the universe' was also understood by many German ecclesiastics as mirroring Spinoza's idea of determination (pp. 547–549). Even when the distance taken from Spinoza seemed certain, and the arguments clearly detailed, as in the French Abbé Claude-François Houteville's defence of Christianity (which was later translated into German, English and Italian), the verbatim quotation from large portions of Spinoza's works had the paradoxical effect of becoming key sources for the dissemination of Spinoza's ideas throughout mid-18th-century Europe (p. 499). The phenomenon of Spinozism provided a most fertile soil for the seeding of Enlightenment ideas, forcing the rise of scientific ideas to take cognizance of it and infiltrating all levels of intellectual discussion.

While Israel's book points to the emancipatory implications of Spinoza's political theory, it does not develop his notion of freedom. The heart of the book is much more concerned with exploring the intense struggle between theology and philosophy (say, in Newtonian debates regarding physico-theology) as it is played out in the *public* reception and reaction to Spinoza's TTP rather than with the detail of Spinoza's political theory. This concern with the public face of Spinozism and its function as a propaganda tool, rather than with the conceptual resources offered up by Spinoza's metaphysics and political theory, is more than compensated for in the books of Smith and

Montag, both of whom consider Spinoza's relation to emerging liberalism. Here, however, we find competing interpretations. While Smith seeks to retrieve Spinoza for the genealogy of liberalism and finds in his political theory a distinct conception of the liberated individual, Montag views him as being very much at odds with the liberal tradition and instead preoccupied with the figure of the multitude, that mass or collectivity which a sovereign ignores only at its peril.

Individual and Multitude

It is certainly the case that one finds in Spinoza's writings much of the conceptual terminology associated with modern liberal political thought. At times, although not always consistently across political tracts, Spinoza utilizes notions of the state of nature, the social contract and civil society, and he evaluates the institutions of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy in order to arrive at the *optima Respublica*. Given Spinoza's thorough-going materialism and his observation that human passions may have to be restrained by the state in ways that incite fear, together with what Smith refers to as Spinoza's 'ruthlessly naturalistic psychology' (p. 22), classifying Spinoza alongside Hobbes is a tempting course for interpretation to take. Montag and Smith nevertheless resist this superficial union of the two thinkers despite their apparent similarities. On closer investigation, not only is Spinoza's naturalism more far-reaching than that of Hobbes, requiring a deeper analysis of the passions and their complex social effects, but his preferred solution to the social contract is a democracy and arguably one closer in many ways to a Rousseauian model than to the nascent liberal democratic one.

Spinoza's relation to Hobbes and Rousseau is taken up in the course of Steven Smith's *Spinoza, Liberalism and the Question of Jewish Identity*. Smith does not want merely to claim Spinoza as the first liberal democrat by emphasizing the latter's interest in a form of rational autonomy, freedom of speech and opinion, and his advocacy of democracy as the *optima Respublica*. He also wants to present Spinoza as placing on centre stage one of the core problems of liberal political thought: its attempted separation of the theological from secular politics. Smith uses Spinoza's treatment of what he calls 'the Jewish Question' as an index of the latter's liberal political philosophy, and he measures its success through its efforts to nurture a rational, secular identity and a civil theology based upon Reason. Spinoza's Judaism is a complex matter, especially given that much of his attack on the revelatory truth of scripture in the TTP is directed towards the Jewish religion. Smith claims that many of Spinoza's readers (from Hermann Cohen to Emmanuel Levinas) have misinterpreted him as an anti-semitic thinker.

Spinoza directed his attack against *all* revealed religions and if his analysis appears more favourable to Christianity, he took from it only something from which he could draw practical religious lessons to inform his conception of a shared civil religion: virtues like justice, love and charity. Furthermore for Smith, Spinoza must be understood as continuing, albeit critically, Maimonides's project of constructing a more rational foundation for Judaism to overcome its humanization of God. Still further, he claims, even if Spinoza was rather less concerned to deconstruct the belief system of Christianity than that of Judaism, this was because he recognized 'the need to gain Gentile support for his universal religion of tolerance and obedience to the laws of a secular democratic state' (105). There is, then, a complex and multi-layered textual strategy underlying the TTP and not simply an anti-semitic agenda as many have claimed (see pp. 17–18).

Warren Montag's analysis of the TTP in *Bodies, Masses, Power: Spinoza and His Contemporaries* is broadly in agreement here as he also shows Spinoza occupying his opponents' position by using a rhetorico-philosophical strategy. Montag's reading, however, weaves together the *Ethics* and the TTP in a more explicit fashion. Smith and Montag both note how Spinoza broke off writing the *Ethics* in order to embark upon the more conjunctural analysis of the TTP, and the (inevitable) influence of it upon the final parts of the *Ethics*. But it is only Montag who describes the way in which the radical materialist metaphysics of the *Ethics* may be brought to bear upon the critique of scripture in the TTP. Indeed, there is a clear parallel between Spinoza's concern for man's voluntary servitude ('that men will fight for their servitude as if they were fighting for their salvation'), described in the Preface to the TTP, and his regard in Part IV of the *Ethics* for the individual's subservience or bondage to passive emotions that weaken and subordinate. What, however, are the implications of these different readings of Spinoza's critique of scripture in the TTP for his politics more broadly conceived through the *Ethics*?

For Steven Smith, the TTP 'presents itself as one of the great works of autoemancipation' (p. 17), where Spinoza's central aim is one of liberating the individual from the guile of superstition, the life of imagination, and the play of the passions. Through self-mastery of the passions and by appealing to the natural light of reason, rather than the distortive effects of the imagination, the individual can come to have an intellectual love of God which is at the same time a knowledge of natural causes. 'Such knowledge is redemptive because it liberates the knower from dependence on and submission to unrefined passions and emotions; it is secular because the love of God means essentially a kind of higher self-love' (p. 141). Clearly, Spinoza's project is partly an educative or therapeutic one, in that he wants to encourage the development of an enlightened reason and a rational individuality that may in turn come to understand the movement of the passions, cultivating those which joyfully

affirm human life and its place in nature, as well as generating an ethico-political bond between men. The central message of the *Ethics* is that the development of reason is intimately linked to our liberty. This project is far from the Hobbesian aim of containing irrational passions and curtailing their negative effects through the rule of an all powerful sovereign. Spinoza's more far-reaching naturalism disallows such an omnipotent secular authority and in the *Ethics* Spinoza places considerable distance between Hobbes and himself, particularly on the matter of the wholesale transfer of natural rights. Since Spinoza equates natural right with the *potentia* or power of all natural things, and since the human being is likewise a part of nature, such a complete transfer of rights to another person is logically impossible. The rights that individuals do surrender are transferred not to a sovereign but to the collective power of the people. It follows that democracy is the most natural regime for Spinoza because it is the political form that best approximates the individual's natural state where right and power co-exist. In this natural condition, we do not find a Hobbesian state of competition and antagonism. Of course, so long as we remain unprotected by a common power, the risk of injury and maltreatment is omnipresent, but there is within all natural beings a *conatus*, or striving to persist and persevere, that overrides the Hobbesian desire for glory and gain. As Smith points out, 'Reason is not just the ability for making sound calculations but is connected to the highest good, which is contemplation' (p. 128). Thus reason is a virtue, and as in Rousseau, it is one linked to human perfectibility, where the development of virtue and understanding is crucial to our freedom. Indeed, like Israel, Smith acknowledges an affinity between Rousseau's notion of the alienation of the citizen-subject in the general will and Spinoza's view that the social contract gives rise to 'one mind' (Smith, p. 132; Israel, p. 274, p. 717). In both contracts, citizens give themselves up to a common power, and in obeying the law obey none other than themselves. Like Rousseau then, 'Spinoza proposes …the classic recipe for positive liberty' (p. 134) hence entertaining the so-called paradox of freedom where true liberty consists in obedience to the law.[5]

It must be remembered that Spinoza is concerned not just to disqualify the foundation which yields the arbitrary power of government but also, in the *Ethics*, to liberate the self from bondage to the emotions. By understanding the ways through which our passions are swayed by interactions and events around us, and in coming to recognize the causes underlying our desires, the first step on the path of liberation is taken. This insertion of (self) knowledge into the uneasy dialectic between freedom and law where, to paraphrase Rousseau, individuals may be forced to be free, may also involve the practical manipulation of the passions. Spinoza shows himself to be quite Hobbesian (and indeed Machiavellian) here. If men are not induced to seek peace through their reason, they might be driven to do so through fear. 'By playing off one

passion against another, Spinoza offers a solution to the problem of political authority even in the absence of a controlling intellect' (p. 129). Smith observes a tension between Spinoza's vision of a democratic polity where mutuality, rational exchange and friendship must persist and his regard for self-knowledge, contemplation and self-understanding, in short to a form of rational, autonomous individuality. Yet Smith's own analysis ultimately flattens out this tension in favour of an individualist perspective. Thus, the task of politics consists in '…creating laws and institutions to prevent the multitude from giving free vent to their passions', rather than discovering an equilibrium between passion, reason and freedom (p. 137). In contrast to this interpretation of Spinoza as an individualist and the first modern exponent of liberal democracy, Montag's more speculative reading explores an opposing one by drawing out the collectivist implications of Spinoza's writings.

In *Bodies, Masses, Power*, Montag takes his lead from contemporary French Spinoza scholarship (particularly the work of Pierre Macherey and Alexandre Matheron) and investigates the wider political and metaphysical senses of the mechanisms of superstition and subjection.[6] If the *Ethics* dissolves the dualism between mind and body, passion and intellect, instead thinking them together and presenting each as interconnected aspects of the same human experience, then consent, or voluntary subjection, becomes a physico-corporeal matter as much as it is a mental decision of obedience to one's will. Thus, for Montag, '…the secret of despotism is not its ability to persuade minds but its ability to move bodies, to extract from them their force and power, or to turn that power to its own benefit, all the while producing the retroactive effect of a consent that conceives of itself as the origin of the actions of the body' (p. 49). Montag's view here is entirely consistent with the Spinoza of the *Ethics* for whom free will rests upon an imaginary fiction whereby men are ignorant of the causes that determine them to will (see *Ethics* Part 1, Appendix). Not only does Spinoza's account of the construction of free will and responsibility anticipate the Nietzsche of *The Genealogy of Morals*, the account of voluntary servitude also presages Marxist accounts of ideology's profoundly unconscious operations and effects (e.g. Althusser and Foucault). Certainly, a distance from liberalism is implied: 'Spinoza's insistence that the dispositions of the body are primary over mental decisions sets him at odds …with the entire current of liberal philosophy from Grotius to Hobbes and Locke' (p. 49).

Contra Smith, then, Montag's Spinoza is far from being the first liberal political philosopher. He deconstructs the liberal conception of rational individualism and the notion of free will which underpins its conception of freedom. In viewing the self as an *imperium in imperio* (a kingdom within a kingdom), as somehow independent of nature rather than a part of it, liberal political philosophy devalues and often excludes the corporeal sensibility of the individual. If, alongside Spinoza, Hobbes also appears to embrace the

materiality of the body, in the third part of *Leviathan* he, too, moves 'against the grain of his own philosophy, invent[ing] an internal world of freedom where every man may think and believe as he pleases, unconditioned by the merely physical forces that surround him' (p. 52). For Spinoza, the physical, natural environment that constructs individuality as a complex reality of infinite variation cannot be transcended; the Spinozist individual is always–already part of a greater natural whole or social body upon which it depends. It follows that not only can there be 'no liberation of the mind without a liberation of the body,' but also that there can be 'no liberation of the individual without a collective liberation' (Montag, p. xxi). While liberation certainly entails a self-transformation as the individual succeeds in understanding the true causes of its actions and affects, this is inseparable from an increase in the power and freedom of others. This identification of the collective power of reason shapes Spinoza's regard not merely for the liberty of the individual *per se* but for the political power of the multitude.

Montag draws on the TP (with only four sections of the chapter devoted to democracy completed at the time of Spinoza's death), as well as the TTP, in his discussion of the multitude. He traces the distinct terms used to designate different forms of collective life depending on its specific status or kind of activity, and he also explores the political usage of some of these terms in Roman writers such as Machiavelli, Tacitus, Quintus Curtius and Sallust. It was from these writers that Spinoza drew the terms *populus, plebs, vulgas, turbas and multitudo*. While the first two terms designated something like the populace or the people, and the labouring classes, respectively, the latter three terms all served to denote the crowd or mass and its immanent political power. Thus, 'the masses are inconstant, unpredictable, and yet, in their economic capacity, necessary to social life; they are therefore the abyss upon which every state is constructed' (Montag, p. 77). Unlike Hobbes and Locke, Spinoza recognizes this abyss when he writes that 'the right [*Jus*] of the state … is determined by the power [*potentia*] not of each individual but of the multitude' (Spinoza, TTP, cited in Montag, p. 75). As Montag's careful textual analysis illustrates, while Hobbes and Locke continue to utilize some notion of the *multitudo*, it is wholly suppressed as an *active* political force in Hobbes's political philosophy, and it remains the destructive double to the more legitimate category, the sovereign people in Locke's writings. It is Spinoza, in contrast, who is the political realist willing to confront the *fear of the masses* as a force internal to every regime, and directs his attention to 'the fear they inspire as well as the fear they experience' (p. 79).[7]

Spinoza's treatment of the multitude is hardly consistent. In the TTP, it is the multitude (as ignorant *vulgas*) who are most receptive to superstitious belief in miracles, and least likely to act according to reason, hence furnishing Smith's reading regarding Spinoza's apparent elitism, as well as the latter's more

Hobbesian concern with the manipulation of the masses through fear. Montag argues that a significant shift takes place in the later TP, where Spinoza focuses on the political *power* of the multitude, a power that may not be recognized as equivalent to political right but is nonetheless decisive. Political systems that exclude the masses, preferring to maintain them in a state of ignorance, are unlikely to remain peaceful regimes but merely to provoke their indignation. Thus, 'against the argument that to open politics to the multitude is an invitation to a chaos of conflicting opinions and endless disputation, Spinoza argues that because the power of thought of the many is necessarily greater than that of the few, it is correspondingly more likely for the multitude to follow the course of reason than for the few' (p. 81). There can be no retreat into a liberal individualism here because the power and freedom of one is inversely related to the power and freedom of all. We have thus identified an underlying tension in Spinoza's thought that is illustrated by the two interpretations of Spinoza discussed above. Smith's Straussian influenced perspective regarding the rarity of reason, and Montag's materialist reading of Spinoza influenced by contemporary Nietzschean/Deleuzean scholarship, represent these two poles of analysis.[8]

Etienne Balibar's *Spinoza and Politics* and Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd's *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Past and Present* also develop materialist readings of Spinoza. In contrast to Smith and Montag, both studies take very seriously what we may call the *philosophical anthropology* of the *Ethics*; that is, they highlight the complex relation of the affects or passions to the construction of individuality and community in Spinoza's writings. To this end, both are also drawn to the category of the imagination and its complex role in the construction of identity and in the constitution of political life. This new direction cuts across the individual–collective tension identified above and moves towards a deeper understanding of the intersection of Spinoza's politics with his philosophy.

Imagination, Passion and Politics

Imagination certainly occupies an important place in the *Ethics* and the TTP. We have alluded above to the way in which it is associated primarily with debilitating illusions. The imagination is the vehicle through which these fictions are enacted; it obstructs and deceives the mind as to the true, natural cause of things, and generates faulty or inadequate ideas that remain lacking in the reflective power of reason or intellect. Instead of associating imagination negatively with distortion and illusion, and as something to be overcome, Gatens and Lloyd prefer to emphasize its productive and positive function. Thus, 'Spinozistic imagination is double-edged — constructive as well as

destructive. [It] can be a source of distorting illusion, to be remedied by reason, but it can also make good a different kind of deficiency in reason itself. …The body, imagination and affect do not, in themselves, represent limits to reason and knowledge. In fact, they are the proper 'objects' of reflection through which we come to develop our powers of reason and increase our knowledge' (p. 4). The first part of *Collective Imaginings* explores the ontological sense Spinoza grants imagination by considering its relation to mind and body. 'Imagination involves the coming together of mind and body in the most immediate way: mind is the idea of the body' (p. 12). It is through imagination then, that mind has the body as its immediate object; it is, in the first instance, a form of bodily awareness and it connects the emotions, or affects, to understanding. Thus, our experiences of joy or sadness are always associated with certain (imaginary) ideas of something or someone. Indeed, all forms of knowledge will have this relation to imagination and affect, body and mind; this much follows from Spinoza's account of their essential entwinement. Given that the body is not distinct and self-contained but always made up of the traces and residues of many memories, interactions and events, imagination is also, in a sense that is both primary and natural, *already* social, being 'worked up' not through solitary imaginings but as *part* of an interactive process.

It is revealing that neither Montag nor Smith take up this more positive sense of imagination implied in Spinoza's notion of embodied mind or reason. In Montag, the concept of the imagination remains negatively bound up with the problem of superstition and he does not follow through its implications for the collective aspect of Spinoza's politics. Smith, on the other hand, does point to the psychological basis of imagination, even claiming that Spinoza views it in a Nietzschean way, as the 'sign language of the affects' (Smith, p. 30). As with Montag, however, he does not follow its significance through for Spinoza's project of liberation. I would argue that this is precisely where *Collective Imaginings* and *Spinoza and Politics* make novel contributions to Spinoza studies. Both consider the political consequences of the materiality of imagination for Spinoza's thought in a way that Montag and Smith do not, given their tendency to view imagination in a largely one-sided way.

In Balibar's *Spinoza and Politics* this focus on imagination entails a recognition that an analysis of the body politic and the principle of sociability itself begins with an account of the human passions and the patterns of interaction produced by them.[9] Balibar takes Part IV of the *Ethics* as his focus, where Spinoza traces the vacillation of the passions between love and hate, joy and sadness, hope and fear, and their constant source of conflict and instability. Indeed, given the constitutive function of this affective ambivalence at the heart of the social bond, it seems reasonable to ask whether the kind of democratic community envisaged by Spinoza is practically possible. If reason

always traverses the passions, and the latter is always implicated in any account of ethico-political life, then Spinoza's democracy will always be riven by competing passions that cannot easily be contained or excluded. The solution proffered by the absolutist state, where men are induced to act by fear rather than reason, seems a plausible one, as does one where the state manipulates ambivalent emotions through ideological illusions (be they religious or secular). Balibar broaches this problem directly in the fourth and fifth chapters of his book. He suggests that we understand Spinoza's body politic rather as we do his conception of the individual, that is, as an 'affective regime' where reason, passion and imagination interact and influence one another: '…since men are all, though to differing degrees, imaginative creatures, their communities must also rely upon mechanisms of identification, that is, on an (imaginary) *excess* of similarity' (p. 111). In the *Ethics* (IV, Prop. 27) Spinoza analyses this mechanism through what he calls the *affectum imitatio* (the imitation of the affects), anticipating psychoanalysis in significant ways as well as indicating how different affective regimes may give rise to different political forms.

Every individual is constituted by a process of imaginary identifications, or *affectum imitatio*, which communicate affects via the images each individual has of others with whom they agree or disagree in temperament and outlook. These images may be shared ones but they are also profoundly ambivalent ones, generating contrary emotions of love and hate in individuals dependent on their own specific projections regarding similarity and difference. Even a shared notion of a common good will generate this kind of fluctuating passion because it is also inseparable from a notion of a common evil or individual harm that may result were individuals to pursue their own particular good. The fundamental problem of politics becomes, for Balibar, the matter of knowing precisely *how* reason and imagination might interact, and how they contribute to sociability. 'Every real city,' he writes, 'is always founded simultaneously on both an active genesis and a passive genesis: on a 'free' …rational agreement, on the one hand, and an imaginary agreement whose intrinsic ambivalence supposes the existence of a constraint, on the other' (p. 112). Not only does this give an affective dimension to the paradoxical relationship between freedom and obedience discussed above in relation to positive liberty, it also sets the stakes for knowledge upon an understanding of this *mobility* of real–imaginary relations. For Spinoza and Balibar alike, these relations are entirely immanent in nature and they are to be explained, therefore, through an understanding of the determinate causes of the dialectic of reason, and imagination (or passion).

Collective Imaginings explores quite similar themes and clearly owes something to Balibar's treatment of imagination and passion. Gatens and Lloyd's analysis also points to instructive continuities in Spinoza's notion of imagination with contemporary conceptions of the social imaginary, where

images 'become lodged in social practices and institutional structures in ways that make it an anonymous feature of collective mental life' (p. 39).[10] For these discourses, as for Spinoza's own materialist account, the imaginary construction of individual or social identity does not render them illusory or false. 'Social fictions may be distorted or imaginary but [they are also] genuine attempts to grasp the complex relations within and between collective bodies, and between the present and past history of those collective bodies' (p. 90). We may be able rationally to transform or restructure the social fictions and imaginary relations which overlay natural relations but we cannot transcend them absolutely. Indeed, the more democratic a political system is, the more it should be able to bear criticism of its founding fictions. For all three authors, an understanding of the interactive logic of imagination and affect becomes implicated in Spinoza's project of liberation, as well as his account of a form of knowledge that understands itself as part of nature. The more a body politic creates active forms of (imaginary) identification between individuals (rather than ones that encourage passive affects), and nurtures relations of freedom based upon reason, individuals will come to recognize that their own particular power and striving (*conatus*) is *necessarily* inseparable from the power of the collective body.

Together, *Collective Imaginings* and *Spinoza and Politics* challenge interpretations of Spinoza that tend towards the containment of imagination and which occlude its constitutive power. It was precisely this aspect of imagination's creativity and power which was so appealing to German Romantics, where thought is given a dynamic quality it otherwise appears to lack.[11] This dimension of Spinoza's legacy remains unexplored in Israel's historical study which ends in the 1750s, as does Spinoza's later resonance as a precursor of the 'dark Enlightenment' of the 19th century where all anthropomorphic comforts are illusory, including that of individualism.[12] In common with Montag's anti-individualist reading, Gatens and Lloyd, and Balibar too, would reject Smith's reading of Spinoza that views the latter's philosophy as presaging liberal democratic thought, presenting instead an account of Spinoza's *relational* ontology and the collective politics engendered by it. If there is a tension marking Spinoza's thought between part and whole, individual and collective, for these studies it is one best viewed in the context of his general philosophy, where individuality is composed of multiple transindividual elements. There can be no notion of a self-sufficient singularity without a notion of interaction with others. A relation of reciprocity rather than antinomy characterizes the individual–collective tension. Indeed, it may be the case that Spinoza's consideration of action and affectivity is much closer to Nietzsche's account of the multiplicity of subjectivity, as well embracing the latter's sense of nature's perpetual generation. Contemporary interpretations show us that Spinoza does not sacrifice human freedom to causal necessity as

some of his own contemporaries assumed. No socio-political encounter can be pre-determined. If political life is built upon the flux of human passions and the power of imagination, then its institutional form and content will always be provisional and subject to transformation. It follows that democracy will always be a fragile achievement, tied as it is to a knowledge of the affective (imaginary) life of individuals and its communicative political power. However one interprets Spinoza's radical claims today, it remains clear that he wrote not just for his contemporaries (who mostly misread him) but also for posterity. It is in the context of this open testimony that we will continue to interpret and assess his writings.

Notes

1 G.W.F. Hegel *Lectures on the History of Philosophy Vol. III*, trans. E.S. Haldane and F.H. Simson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955) p. 257.

2 To the authors considered in this article, we could also add the names of Louis Althusser (who claimed that he was never a structuralist but always a Spinozist in theoretical outlook), Gilles Deleuze, Leo Strauss, Stuart Hampshire, Antonio Negri, as well as psychoanalysts Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan.

3 S. Hampshire 'Spinoza and the Idea of Freedom' reprinted in his *Freedom of the Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971) p. 183.

4 Many scholars have noted the overriding influence that must be attributed to Pierre Bayle in constructing the dominant reception of Spinoza as a radical atheist who reduces God to the condition of matter and jettisons man's moral responsibility by claiming that God participates in evil, as does Substance in the active existence of the modes. See 'Spinoza' in his *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, trans. and ed. R. Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991).

5 The context for some of Smith's argument here is usefully framed by the exchange between David West and Isaiah Berlin in *Political Studies*, Vol. XLI, No. 2, 1993, pp. 284–298.

6 Montag has brought together many of these French perspectives on Spinoza studies in a valuable recent collection edited with Ted Stolze: *The New Spinoza* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1997).

7 A concrete indication of the fearsome power of the crowd was felt by Spinoza himself when his friends, the Dutch republican Johann De Witt and his brother, were savagely murdered by an angry mob and the United Provinces nascent republic was once again subject to the monarchist influences of the Orangist party. For a discussion of the context of this and other political events surrounding the writing of the TTP and the *Ethics*, see Steven Nadler's recent biographical study *Spinoza: A Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and L.S. Feuer's *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1963).

8 The relevant sources here are Leo Strauss's *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, trans. E.M. Sinclair (New York: Schocken Books, 1965) and Antonio Negri *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics*, trans. M. Hardt (Minnesota University Press, 1991). Negri's recent collaboration with Hardt *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: University of Chicago Press, 2000) advances this treatment of the multitude in a global economic and political context.

9 This text is a translation of the 1985 French version. Balibar's other works on Spinoza also develop the theme. Of particular interest to the argument explored here is 'Spinoza: From Individuality to Transindividuality' *Mededelingen vanwege het Spinozahauis* (Delft: Eburon, 1997).

10 Examples here might include the notion of the social imaginary developed by Cornelius Castoriadis in *The Imaginary Institution of Modern Society*, trans. K. Blamey (Cambridge: Polity, 1987), as well as psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's discussion of the imaginary in *Ecrits: A Selection* trans. A. Sheridan (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977).
11 See, for example, J. Engell's *Creative Imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism* (New York: Harvard, 1981).
12 I take the phrase 'dark Enlightenment' from Yirmiyahu Yovel's *Spinoza and Other Heretics: Vol I: The Marrano of Reason* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) p. 165.