Mind, Body and Politics: Spinoza contra Liberalism

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Spinoza's philosophy, unlike the meta-narratives of the liberal tradition, describes in detail the political relations of individuals at the level of bodies and seeks to explain the course of history, not concerning the free will of individual or collective subjects, but to composite bodies moved according to the order and necessity of nature. For Louis Althusser, Spinoza's significance is represented by a conceptual revolution grounded in rejecting the subject-object, and spirit-nature oppositions. It offers an alternative to the direction of thought in which truth pertains to a subject individual or collective, immanent or transcendental, perpetually progressing towards absolute knowledge. Contrary to the idealist or liberal tradition of philosophy, the motor of history in Spinoza's philosophy is not the subject conscious of itself, but the necessity that emerges from perpetual encounters between singular things, in which bodies meet, unite, separate and go on to form new singularities, within what might be understood as an unbounded, infinite whole, a nature that has no telos, does not aspire to something outside of or lacking to itself because it is already perfect and infinite. Spinoza's substance is a space of corporeal networks, in which bodies encounter and affect each other.

For Spinoza, history is not defined by an ideal content or empty abstractions; rather, it is the field of human practical action and interaction between singular things.[1]

[1] Here we avoid using the term individual because Spinoza is not a proponent of "individualism" in the Liberal sense of the concept. Couples, groups, multitude and even state and Natura are individuals in a

The human individual is a finite mode, defined by chains of causes and effects, and he/she maintains his/her existence only through practice, speaking in Spinozist words, by affecting and being affected. For Spinoza, bodies are singular things and the body must be determined not by its idea or form, but by its capacity to affect other singular things and to be affected by them in turn. The common ground between the two modes can be found by analyzing and experiencing the capacity of receiving and transmitting affects. All beings, even if they are of the same species, have different capacities to affect and be affected.

As Marx wrote in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* "Hegel's task is not to discover the truth of empirical existence but to discover the empirical existence of truth, it is very easy to fasten on what lies nearest to hand and prove that it is an actual moment of the Idea."[2] Before Marx, Spinoza in his *Ethics* investigated the causes which condition such a disposition of the individual when "it is very easy to fasten on what lies nearest to hand and prove that it is an actual moment of the Idea."[3] In the Appendix of the first part of the *Ethics*,[4] Spinoza discusses the superstitions from which humanity has long suffered. Spinoza writes that according to popular belief, God governs everything for a specific purpose and does so for the good of man. According to him, due to ignorance of the laws of nature, humans think of events in terms of telos, which turns nature upside down.[5] Spinoza believes that the notion of telos also calls into question the perfection of God, as desire is compensation for the lack of something.[6] However, the fact that the concept of the anthropomorphic telos is irrelevant does not exclude the fact that there are certain orders and objective laws in nature.[7] But Spinoza rejects the idea of order as "harmony" in the case of objective laws, such as the law of gravity, or inertia, for their operation does not lead to order as imagined by human individuals. There are regularities in nature but they cannot be understood or explained by an imaginary universal order. Spinoza's position opposes any notion that things are means to the end of the realization of God's

Spinozist sense: "We shall readily conceive the whole of Nature as one individual whose parts – that is all the constituent bodies – vary in infinite ways without any change in the individual as a whole" (Spinoza, *Ethics* II, scholium after Lem. 7).

[2] Marx, *Early Writings*, 98.

[3] Ibid.

[4] "It is in the appendix to part I that Spinoza developed his admirable critique of religious ideology, in which the human subject endowed with finalized desires projects himself into God as the original and final cause of the Universe, as the cause (…) of all meaning, that is, of every finality, of the Universe (…) I saw in it immediately the matrix of every possible theory of ideology and profited from it (…)." (Althusser, "The Only Materialist Tradition," 7).

[5] Spinoza, *Ethics* I, App.

[6] Ibid.

[7] It should be noted that long before Spinoza, Lucretius in his "On the Nature of Things" criticized the teleological view of nature: "In fact, no part of our body was created to the end that we might use it, but what has been created gives rise to its own function. Sight did not exist before the birth of the eyes, nor speech before the creation of the tongue; rather the tongue came into being long before talking, and the ears were created long before a sound was heard. In short, I maintain that all the organs were in being before there was any function for them to fulfil. They cannot, then, have grown for the purpose of being used" (Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, 4.835-840).

will and that God directs all things to an end. Spinoza here as elsewhere is very close to Lucretius. According to the latter, there is no order or limit—only accidental conjunctions[8] that may form a temporary "system" whose persistence is always uncertain.

The critique of the teleological view of nature necessitates a critique of the illusion of free will. Spinoza begins his critique of free will by rejecting the popular view of God (God as the possessor of anthropomorphic intellect and will). In his critique of free will, he also implicitly criticises anthropomorphism, which is the main determinant of the reasoning and conception of God. In proposition XVII of the first part of *Ethics*, Spinoza claims that "God acts solely from the laws of his own nature, constrained by none."[9] Does this mean that God can do anything that he wills? It may seem paradoxical but in the Scholium of the same proposition Spinoza tells us that God is limited by himself, (God cannot be limited by anything else because there is nothing beyond him), by his nature, by the law according to which he acts. Spinoza states directly that God is not free, for example, in choosing to make the nature of a triangle different from what it is: "God does not act from freedom of will."[10] Therefore, God is only free because he acts out of necessity, not because he has the power to change the nature of a triangle: "Others take the view that God is a free cause because (…) he can bring it about that those things which we have said follow from his nature (…) should not come about, that is, they should not be produced by him. But this is as much as to say that God can bring it about that it should not follow from the nature of a triangle that its three angles are equal to two right angles, or that from a given cause the effect should not follow, which is absurd."[11] Those who believe that God acts according to his own free will or free decision attribute to God an intelligence and will that are imagined to be characteristic of human beings: "Some imagine God in the likeness of man, consisting of mind and body, and subject to passions. But it is clear from what has already been proved how far they stray from the true knowledge of God."[12] But it is of some interest to note that if it follows from the supreme power of God that the sum of the three angles of a triangle is necessarily equal to two right angles, it cannot be the case that human individuals have the power to act by their free will, to transcend the laws of nature or to make free decisions. In *Ethics*, Spinoza argues that "experience, as well as reason, shows no less

[8] "In this connection, I am anxious that you should grasp a further point: when the atoms are being drawn downward through the void by their property of weight, at absolutely unpredictable times and places they deflect slightly from their straight course to a degree that could be described as no more than a shift of movement. If they were not apt to swerve, all would fall downward through the unfathomable void like drops of rain; no collisions between primary elements would occur, and no blows would be effected, with the result that nature would never have created anything" (Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things,* 2.216-225).
[9] Spinoza, *Ethics* I, P17.
[10] Spinoza, *Ethics* I, Cor.1.
[11] Spinoza, *Ethics* I, P17S.
[12] Spinoza, *Ethics* I, P15S.

clearly that men believe themselves to be free only because they are conscious of their actions, but ignorant of the causes by which they are determined."[13]

Spinoza's understanding of the universe suggests a process without Subject or finality/goal, in which the singular Subject is not the agent of history, but, as Althusser puts it, subjects in the plural. The difference between Subject and subjects is of great importance to Althusser, for while in idealist philosophy the Subject is a free and constructive agent of reality, subjects are conditioned by the social relations of production and reproduction existing in different historical times.[14] The central concept in Spinoza is not the legal subject as it is in traditional metaphysics, but individuality, since only individual or particular things exist in nature. Substance in Spinoza's sense does not precede or transcend the infinite concatenation of finite things but is immanent in them, i.e., in their diversity and variation. The individual in Spinoza does not appear in the role of a subject governed by a certain telos but is simply a mode, an effect produced by a productive nature: "individuals are neither a given matter (a 'subject' in the traditional sense) nor perfect form or telos organizing an amorphous matter."[15] The belief in free will, the notion that the human individual is the cause of his or her actions, arises from ignorance of the true causes of these actions. From this arises an entire theological and political apparatus and the forms of superstition immanent in it.

The source of the argument that man has free will, which allows him to transcend the laws of nature, or make a decision that is determined only by his own will and the ability to carry it out, derives from the separation of body and mind/soul/will. According to popular belief, the human mind or soul can suppress bodily impulses, overcome the chain of physical causes to which the individual is connected and act according to the mind's decisions. Therefore, according to this belief, the soul/mind can govern or "command" the body. These views are well reflected in Spinoza's contemporaries, as well as in his predecessors. Thus, before we proceed to develop our argument about Spinoza's conception of the body, we need to briefly review the philosophical battleground that determined how Spinoza advanced his position concerning the body. Here, Spinoza shows that the relations between body and mind have political and philosophical implications, so the Spinozist revolution in understanding the relationship between body and mind can be understood as both a philosophical and political intervention.

To put it schematically, the practical/political aim of philosophy for Spinoza is to free humans from any superstitions and ideological dogmas. The problem, however, is that superstitions arise from nature and are explicable through its causes. The passive affects are the source of the superstitions that are accepted when we are the partial cause of some event. To adequately perceive nature, one must be free from superstitions, including the belief in the mind's ability to command the body. To adequately conceive

[13] Spinoza, *Ethics* I, App.
[14] Althusser, *Essays in Self-Criticism*, 94.
[15] Balibar, *Spinoza from Individuality to Transindividuality*, 8-9.

nature necessitates a study of the power of the body since according to Spinoza nobody has yet defined the limits of what the body can do: "however, nobody as yet has determined the limits of the body's capabilities: that is, nobody as yet has learned from experience what the body can and can't do."[16] But for the idealist tradition of philosophy body and mind are two opposing realms one of which necessarily dominates the other. This tradition is obvious in the philosophy of Descartes, in which the confrontation of body and soul is clear. According to its doctrines, the body is the source of sin and animal instincts, while the soul belongs to a realm above and beyond nature. Hence the widespread belief that corporeal substance does not pertain to God's essence. Most writers seek to prove that corporeal substance is unworthy of the divine essence and cannot pertain to it. Spinoza's revolutionary theoretical (and therefore political) intervention consisted of his statement in *Ethics* that "thinking substance and extended substance are the same substance, comprehended now under this attribute, now under that. So, too, a mode of extension and the idea of that mode are the same thing, expressed in two ways."[17]

The Cartesian view of the world is based on the assumption that while the body acts the spirit suffers and vice versa. In *The Passions of Soul,* he argues that "we ought to think that what is a Passion in the former is commonly an Action in the latter."[18] In his *Meditations*, Descartes describes the body as a mechanical, godless machine that can perform its typical functions without the interference of a will or mind: "I might consider the body of a man as a kind of machine (…) even if there were no mind in it, it would still perform all the same movements as it now does in those cases where movement is not under the control of the will or, (…) of mind."[19] Descartes does not stop here but take an additional step and argues that the mind can function independently of the body, and indicates in the *Meditations* that "I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it."[20] Thus, Descartes directly claims that 'Man' is non-extended, simply a thinking thing who can think himself without body and perceptions. This bifurcation of the human being, the hostile attitude of soul and body towards each other, creates the danger that the human being will be reduced to an inanimate, mechanical automaton: "the human body belongs to this world[21] and, insofar as it communicates this mechanicity to the mind, constantly threatens to reduce man to a machine."[22] The only way to get rid of the animal realm is to have a will that is capable of overcoming this material, mechanical state of human-animal: "that power is the will itself: it is this alone that allows us to raise ourselves above the corporeal world of automatons."[23] Thus, for Descartes, the body is not only

[16] Spinoza, *Ethics* III, P2S.
[17] Spinoza*, Ethics II,* P21S.
[18] Descartes, *Passions of the Soul,* I, 2.
[19] Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, V, 85.
[20] Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy,* VI, 78.
[21] Here 'world' means animal realm.
[22] Montag, "Commanding the Body: The language of Subjection in Ethics III, P2S," 151.
[23] Montag, ibid.

the external but also the internal enemy of the soul, which pushes the soul to do what it does not want. The separation of body and soul is accompanied by the separation of the order and regularity of these two dimensions. If the body and, at the same time, the soul are capable of acting independently of each other, they are also subject to a different order of action. The authentic victory of the soul is the death and annihilation of the corporeal body, which the body naturally resists in seeking self-preservation. In addition to the theoretical content, Descartes' standpoint also has a political implication. For instance, the soul/mind may aspire to the glorification of the sovereign, and individuals "will not think it humiliating but supremely glorious to spill their blood and sacrifice their lives for the glorification of a single man."[24] But the body resists death and seeks self-preservation. So, as Warren Montag puts it, for Spinoza, the separation of soul and body is not simply an illusion of consciousness even though this notion contains in itself an imaginary view of the order and laws of nature. The theoretical construction of the separation of body and soul has a certain material existence, basis, and effect, which affects the corporeal world through various institutions, laws, and several cultural codes: "the imaginary is inscribed in the corporeal realities of subjection, legal and otherwise, and the apparatuses in which they are realized."[25] Thus, according to Montag, although attributing to the soul the ability to control the body is based on erroneous assumptions, it is by no means an illusion. Granting the individual free will (the individual is free because he can think of himself without a body and independent of material and corporeal existence) makes him responsible for his actions, both causally and legally, and for which he is liable and in case of overstepping the law, punishable. Neither the legal definition of the individual as a subject nor the various means of coercion and punishment that this definition justifies are illusory; even if they are false, they are real and material. The conatus, as the persistence of the body, may conflict with the limits of the law, especially when respecting law and property threatens one's physical existence. For Descartes, the inclination that arises from the body to flee danger and seek safety (as in war) can and must be overcome, and individuals must be trained to allow themselves to be killed in the service of the Sovereign.

These postulates explain the constitutional illusions of the liberal and idealist tradition according to which legal, formal power determines and expresses actual power relations:[26] "An entire philosophical tradition has confused laws of nature which describe what necessarily exists with social laws which prescribe how things ought to, but may not, be and physical power with legal power."[27]

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[24] Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise,* Preface.

[25] Montag, "Commanding the Body: The language of Subjection in Ethics III, P2S," 156.

[26] In this sense, Leibniz, who according to Etienne Balibar belongs to the 'liberal' Christian tradition, also differs from Spinoza. Thus, Leibniz recognizes the original freedom of man, which is fully compatible with Divine Providence and Blessing: "And so, God's foreknowledge, and even his preordination, does not eliminate freedom. Furthermore, we must understand that the mind is not determined by something else, but by itself and that there is no other hypothesis which favours human freedom more than ours does" (Leibniz, P*hilosophical Essays*, 102).

[27] Montag, *Bodies, Masses, Power: Spinoza and His Contemporaries*, 37.

Spinoza's contemporary (and, in some sense, predecessor), Thomas Hobbes, rejects Descartes' ontological dualism, but, as Étienne Balibar writes, his work offers a "mere materialist inversion of theological schemes."[28] For instance, when in Chapter XIV of *Leviathan* Hobbes tells us that "each man" has naturally inherited *Liberty* which enables them to use their power according to their will and decision, Hobbes assumes a distinction between an internal world of freedom, determined by the will alone and an external world where the true impediments to the realization of an individual's exist:

> The RIGHT OF NATURE, which Writers commonly call Jus Naturale, is the Liberty each man hath, to use his own power, as he will himselfe, for the preservation of his own Nature; that is to say, of his own Life; and consequently, of doing anything, which in his own Judgement, and Reason, hee shall conceive to be the aptest means thereunto (…). By LIBERTY, is understood, according to the proper signification of the word, the absence of external Impediments: which Impediments, may oft take away part of a man's power to do what he would; but cannot hinder him from using the power left him, according as his judgement, and reason shall dictate to him.[29]

Furthermore, Hobbes' dualism is also situated in the political field. For example, he draws a strict distinction between the so-called *legal subject* and the irrational and disobedient individual, who is the *legal subject's* own other and represents a constant threat to the legal subject.[30]

John Locke, another representative of the liberal tradition, continues Hobbes' line of thought and attributes perfect freedom to the inner world of the individual: "All men are naturally in, and that is, a state of perfect freedom to order their actions, and dispose of their possessions and persons, as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the will of any other man."[31] The second part of the sentence requires our attention insofar as Locke ignores the effects of a bodily interaction here, he finds the order and regularity of an individual's action as the outcome of 'free will' that is independent of "any other man." In Locke's fragment, even the law of nature, intelligible through human reason, requires an act of will, that is, the will to "consult" reason, which "is that law."[32] Also, we can find here the political implication because the separation of mind and body is necessary to endow individuals with the freedom that allows them to be declared responsible for "their" actions.

It is here, above all, that the conceptual revolution undertaken by Spinoza can be found: "the body cannot determine the mind to think, nor can the mind determine the

[28] Balibar, "What is "Man" in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy? Subject, Individual, Citizen," 221.
[29] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chapter XIV.
[30] Balibar, "What is "Man" in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy? Subject, Individual, Citizen," 223.
[31] Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, Chapter II.
[32] Ibid.

body to motion or rest, or anything else."[33] According to Spinoza, such an assertion is certain to provoke the question of what determines the body to act, to change its position, to move or rest. Spinoza's response is perhaps even more shocking than the proposition itself: only a body can determine the actions of another body: "now the motion-and-rest of a body must arise from another body, which again has been determined to motion or rest by another body (…)."[34]

The theoretical foundation of these assertions lies in the second part of *Ethics*: "the order and connection of ideas are the same as the order and connection of things."[35] In *Ethics,* he begins to explore the political significance of his conceptual revolution by rejecting any notion of separation and hierarchical relation between body and mind. He excludes the idea that the mind is free from the constraints of the body and capable of free choice. In the scholium of Part III proposition 2, he claims that "mental decisions are nothing more than the appetites themselves, varying according to the varying disposition of the body."[36] So, when an individual attributes their political deeds to a free choice founded on their free will, they do so because they are ignorant of the fact that they are determined by material causes that they neither control nor even perceive. This, in turn, compels us to explain the existing arrangement of our political order and the regularity of our political constitution and political life not through the free will of the "legal subject" but through the disposition of bodies and forces.

According to Spinoza, if we want to understand the human mind we should apprehend its object – the body: "the object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body – i.e. a definite mode of extension actually existing, and nothing else,"[37] and "if the body were not the object of the human mind, the ideas of the affections of the body would not be in God."[38] Thus, the mind is more powerful when the body produces more affects and, at the same time, is affected by other bodies. We can conceive the mind's power through the body, but frequently humans have a very obscure idea about their bodily possibilities: "that is, nobody as yet has learned from experience what the body can and cannot do (…)."[39] So, to perceive the possibilities of the Mind, to define its power, at first, we should apprehend Bodily interactions and relations because "to determine the

[33] Spinoza, *Ethics* III, P2.
[34] Spinoza, *Ethics* III, P2Pr.
[35] Spinoza, *Ethics* II, P7. This Proposition is applied very often to claim that Spinoza invented the conception of parallelism. Montag, notes nowhere "in the Ethics does Spinoza employ the term "parallel" or parallelism to describe the relation between mind and body, and for good reason: such notions separate mind and body even as they link them, rendering them exterior one to the other" (Montag, *Bodies, Masses, Power: Spinoza and His Contemporaries,* 42). Thus, we have to reject the prevalent view that Spinoza uses the term of parallelism to resolve the relation between body and mind.
[36] Spinoza, *Ethics* III, P2S.
[37] Spinoza, *Ethics* II, P13.
[38] Spinoza, *Ethics* II, P13Pr.
[39] Spinoza, *Ethics* III, P2S.

difference between the human mind and others and in what way it excels them, we have to know the nature of its object (…) that is, the nature of the human body."[40]

The structure of the body consists of relations to other bodies: "the human body is affected by external bodies in a great many ways and is so structured that it can affect external bodies in a great many ways."[41] As Étienne Balibar has argued, individuals are always constructed and produced by the connections with other individuals (by which we can mean compositions and decompositions between two or more bodies): "since they are not 'given,' individuals are constructed (or produced); (…) their construction, as well as their activity, always involves a previous, originally connexion with other individuals (…)."[42] The same idea is conveyed by Spinoza in his *Ethics* when he says that "every individual thing, i.e. anything whatever which is finite and has a determinate existence, cannot exist or be determined to act unless it is determined to exist and to act by another cause which is also finite and has a determinate existence, and this cause again cannot exist or be determined to act unless it is determined to exist and to act by another cause which is also finite and has a determinate existence and so ad infinitum";[43] and also "the human body needs for its preservation a great many other bodies, by which, as it were (quasi), it is continually regenerated."[44]

But it is noteworthy here that in opposition to the linear causal chain of events which Hegel calls bad infinity, Spinoza holds that "the infinite connexion does not take the form of independent linear series or genealogies of causes and effects (…): it typically takes the form of an infinite network of singular Modi, or existences, a dynamic unity of modulating/modulated activities (…)."[45] Balibar addresses the question of the interrelation of individuals and bodies in the same context in another of his texts. Here Balibar emphasizes the fact that the interconnection of individuals forms a specific network so that there is no isolated individual. With this conception, Spinoza puts an end to atomistic theories and the notion of the autonomous individual. The transindividual network necessarily arises from the fact that "the human body needs for its preservation a great many other bodies, by which, as it were (quasi), it is continually regenerated."[46] Hence, the existence of the Body depends on its affecting and being affected; its ability to act derives from its connection with other Bodies. God's absolute, infinite power is conditioned by his infinite power of affection: "God is absolute causal power (potentia): it produces in itself (since nothing is external to it) everything that is not logically contradictory."[47]

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[40] Spinoza, *Ethics* II, P13S.
[41] Spinoza, *Ethics* II, P14Pr.
[42] Balibar, *Spinoza: from Individuality to Transindividuality*, 9.
[43] Spinoza, *Ethics* I, P28.
[44] Spinoza, *Ethics* II, Post.4.
[45] Balibar, *Spinoza from Individuality to Transindividuality*, 14.
[46] Spinoza, *Ethics* II, Post.4.
[47] Matheron, *Politics, Ontology and Knowledge in Spinoza*, 211.

The body maintains its centrality in Spinoza's political theory. On the one hand, this tendency is noticeable in Spinoza's claim that there is no spiritual dimension peculiar to humans and every creature/mode in nature obeys the same order; on the other hand, Spinoza argues that thought does not have any primacy over the body and cannot be separated from it. As Hasana Sharp writes,

> Spinoza's "parallelism," whereby mind and body do not interact but are determined by the same causal order, sets the stage for a radical naturalism that redefines human existence and agency in several ways: (a) thought is irreducible to matter, and yet does not have a unique spiritual logic that distinguishes it from (other attributes of) nature; (b) mental life is not confined to human, rational, or spiritual beings; and (c) thought and extension, mind and body, are not involved in a struggle for control.[48]

Further, Spinoza's political theory is impersonal since personhood or personal politics is essentially anti-natural. For Spinoza, to be a person (subject with free will) means standing above and being against the natural order. According to Sharp, when political theory is based on the idea of personhood, it is always normative. Conversely, impersonal political theory studies increasing and constraining affects that circulate in the social body: "impersonal forces include those affects that circulate in the social body, enabling and constraining the powers of bodies and minds."[49]

Moreover, for Spinoza the state is a composite individual who has its "body" and "mind": "in Political Order the whole body of the citizens should be conceived similarly as the individual who is in the natural state."[50] Also, it is not accidental that Spinoza shifts from the individual to the state in *Ethics*. We can explain this transition by the fact that reasonable life is impossible outside of society and the state, and as Spinoza brilliantly puts it "no one in solitude is strong enough to defend himself and produce the necessities of life."[51] Also, *Ethics* explicitly states that the human body, to sustain itself, necessarily needs many other bodies: "the human body needs for its preservation a great many other bodies, by which, as it were (quasi), it is continually regenerated."[52] Warren Montag argues that, for Spinoza, "society is not the effect of an act of will on the part of originally autonomous individuals; on the contrary, men are naturally determined to live in a society the existence of which is necessary to their survival."[53]

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[48] Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*, 3.
[49] Ibid, 13.
[50] Spinoza, *Political Treatise* VII, 22. But in the same place Balibar emphasizes the fact that perceiving the state as an individual is not unequivocal because this point of view "place[s] Spinoza squarely in the line of Hobbes (the Leviathan) and, more generally, of a whole tradition which defines the State as an individual and which runs from the ancient Greeks to the present day. However, we must press this point further, since such an assimilation covers in reality a wide range of different views" (Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, 64).
[51] Spinoza, *Political Treatise* VI, 1.
[52] Spinoza, *Ethics* II, Post.4.
[53] Montag, *Bodies, Masses, Power: Spinoza and His Contemporaries*, 68.

Thus, the political regime is always the field of bodily interactions and communications. The collective body (the state) undergoes the same relations as the singular body and the only difference between them is the magnitude of complexity. As Montag puts it, "from this perspective, social existence changes only the relations of power, enabling human individuals to accomplish certain things that alone would be impossible, and, in opposition, limiting their ability to perform other acts that alone or in small numbers they would have the ability to perform."[54] In the political theory of Spinoza, human beings have no right to do anything they cannot do. Right cannot be understood as a possession; it exists only in its exercise. For Spinoza, "the natural right of every individual, is coextensive with its power."[55] Spinoza infers this thesis from his metaphysical theory:

> Now from the fact that the power of things in nature to exist and act is the power of God, we can easily see what the right of nature is. For since God has the right to do everything, and God's right is simply God's power conceived as completely free, it follows that each thing in nature has as much right from nature as it has the power to exist and act; since the power by which it exists and acts is nothing but the completely free power of God.
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> By the right of nature, then, I mean the actual laws or rules of nature by which all things come to be; that is, the actual power of nature. Hence, the natural right of nature as a whole, and consequently the natural right of each individual, extends as far as its power. Hence, everything a man does by the laws of his nature, he does by the sovereign right of nature, and he has as much right against other things in nature as he has power and strength.[56]

Right for Spinoza is always actualized; it exists in the ability of an individual to act. Whatever an individual cannot do, he has no right to do:

> By the right and order of nature, I merely mean the rules determining the nature of each thing by which we conceive it is determined naturally to exist and to behave in a certain way. For example, fish are determined by nature to swim and big fish to eat little ones; therefore, it is by the sovereign natural right that fish have possession of the water and that big fish eat small fish. For it is certain that nature, considered wholly in itself, has a sovereign right to do everything that it can do, i.e., the right of nature extends as far as its power extends (…) since the universal power of the whole of nature is nothing but the power of all individual things together,

[54] Montag, "Who's Afraid of the Multitude?", 658.
[55] Spinoza, *Political Treatise* II, 4.
[56] Spinoza, *Political Treatise* II, 3, 4.

> it follows that each thing has the sovereign right to do everything that it can do, or the right of each thing extends so far as its determining power extends.[57]

Here, Spinoza argues that no matter what the law says, no matter how absolute the right conferred on the sovereign, not even the worst tyrant can exercise absolute power over his subjects. In the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Spinoza makes it clear that no one can transfer his power and rights to another in such a way that he/she ceases to be human. And there can never be a sovereign who acts as he pleases. The sovereign must act constantly to ensure the obedience of his subjects, not simply through the law, but through the organization of corporeal life, rituals, and practices. For liberal readers, the fact that despots rely on violence and the fear it instils to ensure the people's obedience, such a mode of subjection must ultimately fail because such rulers still have no control over what people think and feel.[58] For Spinoza, however, thus, the more the body is constrained, the less the mind can think: "whatsoever increases or diminishes, assists or checks, the power of activity of our body, the idea of the said thing increases or diminishes assists or checks the power of thought of our mind."[59] Thought cannot be free while the body is constrained and unable to break out of the ritualized movements of daily life, organization, and disciplinary ordering of bodies that tend to produce obedience or ways of thinking that affirm obedience. Only when the corporeal regimes break down through internal conflict or external events does thinking change. In the fifth chapter of the *TTP*, Spinoza uses the example of the Hebrew state to show the ways the sovereign can achieve a disciplined and obedient society. According to him, certain rites and ceremonies serve precisely to produce a subjected body and mind and prevent revolt: "they were not permitted to plough or sow or reap as they pleased, nor could they eat or dress or shave their heads or beards as they pleased, but all by a fixed and specific ordinance of the law."[60] That is the commandments to act or not to act in specific ways in the smallest activities of everyday existence.

But Spinoza points to an important factor that may have pushed the bodies subjugated by the sovereign into the abyss of social anxiety: "anyone with any experience of the capricious mind of the multitude almost despairs of it, as it is governed not by reason but by passion alone, it is precipitate in everything, and very easily corrupted by greed or good living."[61] But it is precisely the instability of the multitude that restrains even a tyrant who knows that tyrannical regimes cannot last long. Even if the sovereign's violent actions are legally recognized (for example, under the pretext of protecting the safety of the citizens or protecting property), if these actions cause the multitude to rebel,

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[57] Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise* XVI, 2.
[58] James, *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics: The Theological-Political Treatise*, 309.
[59] Spinoza, *Ethics* III, P11.
[60] Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise* V, 11.
[61] Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise* XVII, 4.

a tyrant cannot maintain his power anymore.[62] It is also very important that Spinoza does not consider formal institutions, or the sovereign itself, as a centre of power. For him, sovereign power rests on the acquiescence of the multitude and limits the fear of provoking its indignation. Spinoza argues in *TTP*, chapter XVII, that there is no state "that was not in greater danger from its own citizens than from foreign foes, and which was not more fearful of the former than of the latter."[63] Thus, "the king's will has the force of law just as long as he holds the sword of the commonwealth, for the right to rule, is determined by power alone."[64]

Moreover, by the equation of right to power, Spinoza rejects one of the basic fundaments of the liberal tradition: the equality of human rights. As Étienne Balibar comments, the formula "men are born and remain free and equal in their rights" does not correspond to reality or the Spinozist perspective.[65] In practice, individuals are always unequal since the balance of power is not pre-determined but must affirm itself in each separate moment differently. As Karl Marx writes in the "Critique of the Gotha Programme":

> Right, by its very nature, can consist only in the application of an equal standard; but unequal individuals (and they would not be different individuals if they were not unequal) are measurable only by an equal standard insofar as they are brought under an equal point of view (…). Right can never be higher than the economic structure of society and its cultural development conditioned thereby.[66]

Marx's emphasis on the economic structure and condition of society is similar to Spinoza's dichotomy between right and power. In other words, if we don't know what constraints and conditions a body is subject to, talking about equality and rights is meaningless: "Equality of rights itself constitutes a right or a power, which may or may not exist, according to the circumstances; it supposes certain conditions (…) for instance, in the anarchic situation, close to the "state of nature", the equality of individuals exists "in imagination rather than in fact."[67]

The aforementioned conception of Spinoza is directly related to the rejection of the liberal tradition, according to which, despite bodily relations in actuality, individuals are treated as absolutely equal. The error of the liberal tradition, from a Spinozist point of view, is that it seeks beyond the material world the absolute, transcendent beginning, a state of nature, which then determines the political interaction of individuals. Indeed, for the liberal tradition, society derives from the free will of the individual, from a free

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[62] Montag, *Bodies, Masses, Power: Spinoza and His Contemporaries*, 66.
[63] Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise* XVII, 4.
[64] Spinoza*, Political Treatis*e VII, 25.
[65] Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, 60.
[66] Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, 21-22.
[67] Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, 62.

mental decision, that allows them through a contract to transcend the material world. The constitutional illusion, or legalism adopted by the liberal tradition, rests on a dualism between body and mind and fact and right. Contrary to this, in the third part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza clearly shows that there is no way out from the material world, from the bodily realm: "Mental decisions are nothing more than the appetites themselves, varying therefore according to the varying disposition of the body."[68] Thus, politics is a field of interaction between bodies, and modes bounded by material reality, and not a normative field in which a juridical understanding of rights plays a determining role. Without power, right is meaningless. This is the reason why we can equate right with power: "We might sum up Spinoza's Philosophy in the slogans that he directly or indirectly provides: God or nature, and right or power."[69]

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[68] Spinoza, *Ethics* III, P2S.
[69] Montag, *Bodies, Masses, Power: Spinoza and His Contemporaries, 5*.

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