

## Warren Montag

### Who's Afraid of the Multitude? Between the Individual and the State

Spinoza speaks of the unity that is the state as only *una veluti mente* and we see a real danger in taking these texts in too literal a sense. It is a danger that, in our opinion, leads to an almost Marxist or Hegelian (or at least collectivist) conception of Spinoza's politics which, we insist, fully affirm liberalism and individualism.

—Steven Barbone and Lee Rice, “La naissance d’une nouvelle politique”

Montag resists a “Straussian” reading of Spinoza's relation to the multitude. Spinoza, according to him, delineates no final division between an intellectual elite and the multitude, nor does he finally support an ideal in which a cultural elite feeds the multitude indulgent stories in order to release itself to think higher thoughts and, if lucky, participate in ruling the state. . . . Montag himself participates in an elite of the left, one that claims it will dissolve into the multitude if and as the latter becomes democratized. It is not easy to decide which elite to worry about most: a self-styled permanent elite or a self-styled temporary elite. In the contemporary context, Montag's gang seems less worrisome, though the balance might shift if—to use his language—the existing equilibrium of social forces were to change significantly.

—William E. Connolly, “Spinoza and Us”

It is very rare today to see the word *dangerous* applied to an interpretation of seventeenth-century philosophy. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine the circumstances in which a critic would be led to describe a reading of Descartes or Pierre Gassendi, or even Hobbes (whose theory of the state of nature, it should be recalled, was once cited in support of the strategy of mutually assured destruction), as dangerous.<sup>1</sup> Spinoza, significantly, is the exception; the word *dangerous* has appeared with increasing frequency to describe interpretations of his work, and the danger posed by the interpretations in question is not simply the danger of misinterpretation, the danger that the interpreters have intentionally or unintentionally attributed to Spinoza ideas not to be found in his work. For some critics, the danger is exactly the opposite: the danger of taking Spinoza at his word, that is, of reading him too literally. Of course, the anxiety of interpretation arises only in relation to certain passages, phrases, and words that for the anxious scholars simply cannot or should not mean what they appear to mean.

Louis Althusser was undoubtedly right to describe Spinoza's philosophy as so "terrifying to its own time" that it could only provoke philosophical repression. But is the fear this philosophy provokes today the same fear that it provoked then? Are the passages whose literal existence could be experienced as dangerous the same? The answer is probably no: if, taking the eighteenth-century as an example, we can agree that part 1 of the *Ethics* (summarized retrospectively by Spinoza in the preface to part 4 in the formula *Deus, sive Natura*) appeared to the vast majority of commentators to contain the germ of Spinoza's heresy, it hardly does so for our time. Indeed, it suggests to many readers that Spinoza is another Enlightenment thinker who, for good or ill, for or against Judaism, sought to replace religion with science. It remains, therefore, for us to specify what it is in Spinoza—in the extraordinarily difficult works of a solitary seventeenth-century excommunicant—that is capable of activating the defenses of philosophy at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

At the risk of oversimplification, I believe that it is possible to identify a node through which pass all the strands in Spinoza's thought, whether political, ontological, or metaphysical, that prove disturbing today. I refer not simply to the well-delineated arguments but also to what are often merely ideas, and even images, in various states of completeness or fragmentation: they all seem to converge around the notion (and not simply the word) of the multitude.<sup>2</sup>

The most obvious sense in which the concept of the multitude touches

what Althusser liked to call “un point sensible” in contemporary theory is captured in the polyvalence of Étienne Balibar’s phrase “the fear of the masses.”<sup>3</sup> Even Antonio Negri’s work (which must itself be read not simply in relation to Spinoza but also in relation to its own historical and political context) was to a great extent devoted not so much to the idealization of the multitude, as is so often charged, as to a recovery of its productive or constituent power at the very historical moment that “the fear of the masses” had reached its theoretical peak.<sup>4</sup> The fact that the mere recognition of this power was so immediately and universally dismissed as “idealization” must itself be analyzed, of course, even if such an analysis cannot be undertaken here. Nevertheless, perhaps in his desire to avoid the appearance of a dialectical reading, Negri tended to neglect the theoretical element that appeared simultaneously with Spinoza’s exposition of the power of the multitude and accompanies it like a shadow to the very last word of the *Political Treatise* (hereafter cited as *TP*): Spinoza’s own fear of the multitude. As Balibar has demonstrated, the phrase *the fear of the masses* communicates Spinoza’s own ambivalence toward the masses: they inspire fear in the tyrants and despots who are foolhardy enough to provoke their indignation, even as they themselves experience fear; in fact, they are perhaps most fearsome (and not simply to tyrants) when afraid. Alexandre Matheron is even blunter in rendering the conflicts internal to Spinoza’s conception of the mass base of all politics: not only is there nothing idyllic in it, but in fact “the elementary form of democracy, according to Spinoza, is the action of a lynch mob.”<sup>5</sup>

But behind the charge of an idealization of the multitude that is extended by critics to nearly all those who discuss the function of the concept in Spinoza’s work lies a more fundamental fear, one that is consistently and symptomatically absent from the recent critical reception of Spinoza. It is a fear of following Spinoza’s path—a path without a fixed destination, and one that Spinoza must open before him as he sets out from the equation of natural right and power in chapter 16 of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (hereafter cited as *TTP*). Refusing to grant to humanity the status of an *imperium in imperio*, Spinoza begins his discussion not with the human individual in the state of nature but with nature itself: “Nature has the absolute right to do all that it can do, that is, nature’s right extends as far as its power.” Further, “since the power of nature is nothing but the simultaneous [*simul*] power of all individuals, it follows that each individual has the sovereign right to do all that it can do.”<sup>6</sup>

There are a number of important features to note in this passage, and

the most important is also the most commonly overlooked: here Spinoza speaks of nature as a whole, and the “individuals” to which he refers are individual things, a class of which human individuals would be only one member. Indeed, the only individual thing we’ve encountered so far in Spinoza’s argument is the big fish that eats the little fish “with absolute natural right.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, while Spinoza uses the verb “to have” (*habeo*) to describe nature’s relation to right, he has nevertheless transformed right from a possession into the ability to act and has thereby effaced any possible distinction between the right of any thing in nature and that of the human individual. If the human world possesses any specificity, it must consist in the singular forms in which the power of nature (which cannot be transcended or alienated) is there organized. 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. The social state retains its usefulness as long as the former outweigh the latter and individuals are able through collective existence to do and think more than they could alone. When the state ceases to be useful to the individuals that comprise it, it will (and not simply “ought to”) provoke rebellion. And like everything else in nature, the right of the state extends only as far as its power. The sovereign who faces rebellion has no grounds for appeal. We have reached the threshold of the concept of the multitude at this point in the *TTP*: every ruler has more to fear from his own citizens (*cives*) than from any foreign enemy, and it is this “fear of the masses” (which at this point, the beginning of chapter 17 of the *TTP*, are still *cives*, a juridical category that might well exclude those who make up the multitude)<sup>8</sup> that places an actual limit on the evil a sovereign may do to his subjects. Spinoza, however, abruptly abandons the argument a few paragraphs into chapter 17 to begin his examination of the Hebrew state.

What is most provocative, even today, in this section of the *TTP* is thus left undeveloped, deferred to the later works, both the *Ethics* and the *TP*. First, as a number of commentators have noted, occasionally with alarm, Spinoza has made the indignation of the multitude—or, even worse, the fear of such indignation—rather than law, or even custom, the principal brake on the power of the sovereign or state. This is undoubtedly the element that Gilles Deleuze, in his preface to the French edition of the *Savage Anomaly*, referred to as Spinoza’s “anti-juridicism,”<sup>9</sup> the systematic subordination of law to force and a refusal to entertain any notion of the rule of

law separate from the causal power that makes any society what it is. Law, however, neither disappears as an object of analysis in political philosophy nor becomes irrelevant to the composition of a society. Rather, the function of law must be reconceptualized as something other than an ideal foundation, a constitution, or a set of norms. Such notions are not simply false, not simply a given society's inadequate idea about itself; they are positively harmful to the peace and stability of the *Civitas*. Thus, it may be true that in a monarchical state, the sovereign must like Ulysses before the Sirens command others to bind him with laws and keep him so bound even if later, carried away by passion, he commands that these laws be broken; but to rely on the "weak assistance of laws" (*TP* 7.2) can only result in ruin. It is "not enough to have shown what ought to be done"; one must show how people "whether led by reason or passion" (*TP* 7.2) will act in accordance with the prescriptions of the law. Although laws serve to codify and make permanently knowable both the set of actions that increase the power and stability of a society and the set of actions that necessarily weaken it and, under specific circumstances, lead to its disintegration, Spinoza places at the center of his analysis the question of the causal processes and power relations that will compel all those living in a domain to act in accordance with the law regardless of their intentions.

But another dimension of Spinoza's antijuridicism has proven even more provocative. What disturbs commentators even today is the fact that, as Hobbes noted in *De Cive*, from a legal point of view (which itself presupposes a certain theoretical anthropology) "a multitude cannot act" (*De Cive* 6.1);<sup>10</sup> therefore from the point of view of law, there is no collective action in the strict sense, merely the simultaneous actions of separate individuals only apparently united into some collective entity. Spinoza's insistence that right equals power displaces the individual from the center of political analysis. The argument begins in chapters 16 and 17 of the *TTP*, pauses, and then resumes only at *TP* 3.2, the point at which Spinoza introduces the concept of the multitude. There we learn that the right of the sovereign is "limited not by the power of each individual but by the power of the multitude." It is at this point, and I am still in the middle of Spinoza's sentence, that he is compelled by his argument to specify, against Hobbes, how it is that a multitude can act. The right of the state (*imperium*) or supreme authorities (*summarum potestatum*) is limited by the power of the multitude precisely insofar as the multitude is not the mere appearance of collective action, which upon reflection is revealed to be nothing more than dissoci-

ated individuals acting simultaneously. Instead, Spinoza goes on to argue, the multitude “is guided, as it were, by one mind” (*TP* 3.2). And the sentence does not stop there. As if in anticipation of the reader’s skepticism at the idea of the mind of the multitude, Spinoza offers the following analogy: “As each individual in the state of nature, so the body and mind of a state (*imperium*) have as much right as they have power” (*TP* 3.2).

In a recent essay, Balibar has examined at some length the chain of interpretations and counterinterpretations produced by the analogy Spinoza constructs in this passage: just as the individual has a body and a mind, so does the state (*imperium*), so the state itself must therefore be an individual (following Spinoza’s lengthy discussion of the individual in *Ethics* 2, part 13), differing only in scale not only from human individuals but also from any other individual thing.<sup>11</sup> It may be wondered why Spinoza’s sentence and his suggestion that the state be viewed as an individual possessed of a mind and a body would, even if one disagrees with it, generate an interpretive conflict. The answer lies in Spinoza’s use here—and in other passages both in the *TP*, the *Letters*, and the *Ethics* in which he ascribes the status of an individual to a collective entity—of the qualifier *veluti* (translated here as “as it were”: “the multitude is guided, as it were, by one mind”). The insertion of the qualifier “as it were” or “as if” (“the multitude is guided as if with one mind”) suggests, at the very least, some hesitation concerning the notion of the mind of the multitude and perhaps also the notion of the body and mind of the *imperium*. What is the nature of this hesitation? What prevents Spinoza from saying here (and it’s here, *TP* 3.2, that he first ascribes a mind and body either to the multitude or to the *imperium*) what he will admittedly say without qualification at a later point: that these collective entities are individual or singular things and as such are irreducible to their component parts? Does the insertion of *veluti* indicate his attitude toward his readership in another form of his general rhetorical strategy of translating or giving new meanings to familiar terms without replacing them, in which case we would read him as attempting gradually to overcome the prejudices of his audience to allow them to break with the form of methodological individualism necessarily imposed on us by the very nature of the imagination (as discussed in the appendix to *Ethics* 1)? Or, in contrast, does the use of the qualifier *veluti* (and in the *Ethics* he will use the term *quasi* to perform a similar function) indicate that Spinoza does not in fact assign, except in a metaphorical sense, the status of an individual to the multitude or to the *imperium*, which would then be “like” individuals or even quasi-

individuals, while remaining distinct from any real form of individuality, or at least human individuality (since the *imperium* is said to possess a mind as well as a body)? In his analysis of the controversy sparked by this passage, Balibar groups the responses into two categories, the dogmatic and the critical. The former term is not meant to be pejorative; rather, it signals a desire on the part of the commentators in question to reduce the conflict exhibited in Spinoza's text to what they regard as the text's sole meaning. Thus, Matheron and, in a different way, Negri tend to disregard the discordance introduced into Spinoza's postulation of the *imperium* as individual by the use of the term *veluti*, while Lee Rice and Douglas Den Uyl, in contrast, take the term as a marker of Spinoza's commitment to an early form of methodological individualism for which any collectivity is reducible to the individuals that comprise it, criticizing Matheron's position as organicism.<sup>12</sup> Matheron speaks of the *conatus* of the *imperium*—the sense in which a state, like any other individual, endeavors to persist in its own being.<sup>13</sup> Rice, in opposition, argues that a state cannot possess a *conatus* because it is not an individual thing but a temporary correspondence between the actions of a number of individuals who exist prior to it and to which it must be reduced. Pierre-François Moreau's response, according to Balibar, can be called critical insofar as Moreau insists on restricting himself to Spinoza's actual utterances, very much in the spirit of chapter 7 of the *TTP*.<sup>14</sup> He finds that Spinoza does not always use a qualifier when treating the *imperium* or *civitas* as an individual and therefore cannot be regarded as employing the term *individual* in this context in a metaphorical way.

A number of observations can be made about this debate, and I will begin by expanding on Balibar's general observation that these interpretations, despite their divergences, share an anthropomorphic conception of the individual.<sup>15</sup> In fact, to take it a bit further than Balibar does, I would argue that all the participants in the debate remain committed to what Althusser called, speaking of Feuerbach (who in a sense haunts this entire discussion), a reversible specular relation that itself rests on a centered foundation, that is, an anthropology.<sup>16</sup> Thus, on the one side, the individual and, on the other, the state, society, community, collective, and so on are mirror images of each other. To declare one rather than the other natural or artificial, primary or secondary, in no way allows one to escape the anthropology that remains presupposed without question. The implications of the observation for our understanding of the history of philosophy and Spinoza's place in it are significant: it reveals the ways in which there exists a certain com-

plicity between philosophical traditions often regarded as antagonistic—for example, the methodological individualism of a Hobbes, or even more of an Adam Smith, and the collectivism of Hegel (who, in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, reproaches Spinoza for failing to think substance as a subject). From the point of view of this anthropomorphism, it matters little whether the social whole exists by nature or is woven by an invisible hand—by individuals producing a supra-individual possessed of a suprarationality (say, the market) that can and indeed must be understood as endeavoring to persist in its own being and therefore possessed of a *conatus*. In fact, the opposition between the individual and the community, society, system of wealth, and so on is simply another variant of the vicious theological-anthropological circle, a circle that Michel Foucault, from another perspective, captured in his description of the “man” of humanism as an empirico-transcendental doublet, a figure that Spinoza had already analyzed in the appendix to *Ethics* 1.<sup>17</sup> Further, in addition to the theological dimension of this anthropology, it is also, to use a phrase from Moreau’s study of Utopian discourse, a juridical anthropology, vacillating between two legal entities, the juridical person or individual and its collective counterpart, the people, the state, the society, and so on.<sup>18</sup>

In order to break the hold of this seemingly inescapable opposition, we can do no better than to return to the passage from the *TP* discussed earlier to note a discrepancy which, to my knowledge, only Balibar has observed: “The right of the supreme authorities is nothing else than natural right itself, limited indeed by the power not of every individual, but the power of the multitude, which is guided, as it were, by one mind—that is, as each individual in the state of nature, so the body and mind of the *imperium* have as much right as they have power” (*TP* III, 2). Spinoza moves from *multitude* to *imperium* almost as if the two terms are synonymous, although this is clearly impossible if the right of the supreme authorities is limited by the multitude. Significantly, all the other commentators have followed him, focusing their arguments on the relation between individual and community or society. Balibar, recognizing the difficulty of taking *imperium* simply as a synonym for *multitude*, attempts to resolve this difficulty by arguing that the relation between the two terms is one not of equivalence but rather of form and content: it is “the *imperium* that gives form and thus body to the multitude.”<sup>19</sup> Yet it appears that Spinoza, in other formulations in the *TP*, suggests exactly the opposite: that the multitude gives body to the otherwise empty forms of the *imperium* and, under specific circumstances, may

be moved by certain affects (Spinoza mentions indignation) to destroy an *imperium*. Even if we accept Balibar's solution to the problem of the displacement from the multitude to *imperium* or *civitas* in this particular passage, however, we must nevertheless acknowledge that there exists a distinction, if not an irreconcilable antagonism, between *multitude* and *imperium* that has been systematically suppressed in what is otherwise the most important debate to take place around Spinoza (and of course the stakes are far greater than simply the correct interpretation of Spinoza) in perhaps the last century.

I want to argue that this suppression through displacement signals the liminal nature of the multitude as a concept: it is neither an individual, in the meaning that the dominant juridical anthropology assigns to the term, nor *the* collective, *the* community, *the* people having legally constituted themselves as a juridical entity ("a people makes a people"). Rather, emerging precisely out of Spinoza's critique of the constitutive function of law (and here, as elsewhere, Hegel's specification of the contradictions proper to the moment of reason as lawgiver in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* follows Spinoza very closely) and his insistence that right equals power, the multitude calls into question the conceptual antinomies of a certain liberal tradition that began with Francisco Suarez, Hugo Grotius, and Hobbes and continues to thrive in our own time. Neither a mere juxtaposition of separate individuals nor a collective entity that draws its legitimacy and function from its source in the voluntary consent of such individuals, the multitude precisely has no juridical legitimation or political form. It is that excess or remainder that is irreducible to the antinomies of legal and political thought, overdetermining both political theory and practice, the permanent excess of force over law, and a force that no state can monopolize precisely because it is the force no one can alienate or transfer insofar as it is necessary to life itself. And I will agree with Balibar to call this remainder or excess the element of transindividuality.

Of course, however dominant the liberal tradition I spoke of earlier remains, and however compelling or even compulsory its antinomies and dilemmas prove to be, even or especially today, there exist preliberal or anti-liberal, perhaps even simply nonliberal, philosophical traditions that offer a number of categories by which to think intermediary forms of human existence between the solitary individual and the state. I cannot begin to enumerate the philosophers, from Aristotle to Hegel to Heidegger, or concepts (family, clan, race, *das Volk*—quite distinct from the People—or even class,

which, though irreducible to these categories in certain key respects, has not in its actual historical existence been entirely innocent of them either). Does not the multitude take its place among these other categories of collective existence? If so, it would no longer represent an excess or remainder but would belong in a distribution of social forms according to scale and thereby functionally integrated into the highest unit of social life, the *summum potestas*, however we choose to designate it.

If we turn to Spinoza's texts for an answer to this question, we find only further difficulties and questions, statements that, if built upon, might furnish something like an answer but that remain without issue or development or are even manifestly contradicted by other passages. Let me take as an example Spinoza's well-known response to one of his frequent hypothetical interlocutors, the one who seeks to explain the disobedience and subsequent misfortune of the Hebrew people after the destruction of the Hebrew state (*imperium*) "by the stubbornness of the race [*gentis*]." <sup>20</sup> Because this is a difficult passage and it is far from clear what exactly is at stake in it, I want to follow the precise wording of Spinoza's response: "But this is childish. Why would this nation be more stubborn than others? By nature? But nature does not create nations [*nationes*], but individuals [*individua*] who are not divided into nations except by the diversity of language, laws and custom."<sup>21</sup>

The effect of the sentence is to sweep away in a single gesture all the so-called natural unities to which theories of society have appealed: family, clan, race (and *nationes* can be read as "races"). And while the family posed a number of difficulties for the theorists of the contractual origin of the social bond, they were forced by virtue of the philosophies which preceded them and against which they had to demarcate themselves (from Aristotle to Robert Filmer), in however unsatisfactory a way, to confront the family and the problems it posed: natural love, hierarchy, and so on. It is worth remarking in this context that Spinoza, who, as Francois Zourabichvili has recently noted, exhibits a highly ambivalent fascination with the figure of the child, says virtually nothing about the family.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps, as the passage concerning the Hebrew nation seems to indicate, Spinoza seeks above all to deprive the "essential," "natural" forms of community (those identified as such against the imputation of their artificiality by philosophical doctrines of the naturalness of society) of any theoretical privilege, as if such notions prevent us from imagining other ways, not derived from what is commonly thought of as nature, in which human beings unite. But the passage cited above also poses extraordinary difficulties: it appears to exemplify precisely

the kind of methodological individualism that I have previously argued is incompatible with everything else Spinoza has to say, whether in the *TTP* or the *TP*, about political life; indeed, if it only made mention of the contractual origin of the “nation” it could have been taken from chapter 13 of *Leviathan*. But there is no such contract in Spinoza’s account and no need for any transition between a state of nature and the social state because these are not moments in a chronology that leads dissociated individuals to unite through the mediation of a contract into a nation; rather, they are two forms of causality that operate simultaneously. Further, unless we reject Spinoza’s critique in the preface to *Ethics* 3 of the idea of a human realm that is an *imperium in imperio*, given that God or Nature is all that exists, we must also recognize as equally real—that is, equally natural—what Spinoza here calls nature and the institutions and practices that comprise social life. In fact, it appears here that it is not so much the *contumacia* or stubbornness of the Hebrews that he contests, and therefore the fact that this nation (and by extension others) may or even necessarily does possess a certain *ingenium* or character, but rather (in addition to discounting the causal power of the *ingenium*) the fact of this *ingenium* being caused by nature instead of what we would today call institutions or apparatuses. But if, according to Spinoza, the human world is a part of nature and even language and law cannot in any way be understood separate from it, how are we to understand the term *nature* in this passage? It appears that the *ingenium* of the Hebrew people can be understood only in relation to that part of nature that has humanity as its adequate cause; therefore this *ingenium* is not determined by the power of causes external to human beings, a power that would then escape their knowledge and control, but rather can be known through its causes. And if the power is known, then under precise circumstances it can be changed.

But such an interpretation, however Spinozist it may be, does not account for or explain what Spinoza actually says, the specific terms he uses, in the passage on the Hebrew people. Above all, it cannot explain away the fact that by opposing individuals created by nature and peoples or nations distinguished (here he uses not the word *created* but the verb *distinguo*) “ex divertate linguae, legum et morum [by different languages, laws and customs],” Spinoza has, in however complicated a way (and I believe I have only touched on the complexities of this passage), reproduced a version of the antinomy of individual and community, individual and state, individual and society.<sup>23</sup> Even if we entertain the argument that Spinoza has adjusted the terminology of his exposition to accommodate his readers, we

are still faced with striking inconsistencies in his own treatment of the individual/collective relation in his later texts, signaling the fact that this relation posed insurmountable problems for Spinoza until, literally, the very end of his last, unfinished work, the *TP*. I have had occasion elsewhere to remark on the stark contradiction between Spinoza's dismissal of any notion of a fixed essential "stubbornness" of the Hebrew *gentis* and what, according to his own analysis, must be regarded as a puerile or childish insistence on the natural inferiority of women to men, an inferiority that, he is at pains to say, will persist no matter what the institutional context or the attempts to educate women. Nature, to use the terminology of the earlier passage, clearly has created, not simply individual women, but Woman, whose essence is thus placed beyond the reach of institutions, and of human practice altogether; in no conceivable legal and customary regime can the power of women's mind and body be equal or superior to that of men. It is thus not simply the "organicism" of Spinoza's very brief account of women, or Woman, as a fixed, unchanging, and unchangeable collective entity that should be noted but, just as important, his inability to imagine, at the conclusion of the *TP*, particular women not simply as individuals (which would allow them to be expressions of some underlying essence or nature) but as *res singulares*, singular things expressing singular essences.

Thus, Spinoza's final work leaves off at the point at which he—in order to make absolute the absolute *imperium*, democracy—negatively determines those who have the right (*jus*) to participate in political decision making, by enumerating those who do not have such a right: foreigners (*peregrinos*, which in Roman law was also applied to "resident aliens"), women and servants (*servos*, a category that contains servants in a very broad sense, that is, all those under the authority of another man), children, and criminals (*TP* II.4). Given that women and servants (those in the employ and thus under the power of another), at least in places like England, France, and the Netherlands (each of which also had significant populations of resident aliens), comprise the overwhelming majority of the population whose power no ruler, according to Spinoza, can afford to ignore, we are forced to acknowledge that Spinoza's last text ends with a spectacular dissociation of right and power, with an attempt to legislate out of existence the very multitude that he has argued throughout the *TP* is the primary force of political life, and with a collapse into a notion of a transcendent identity of the collective category of Woman, that historical becoming cannot change, a notion that implies as its correlate a theory of feminine individuals as individual expressions of their transcendent essence.

Thus, from the inaugural moment of its textual inscription in *TP* 3.2, the multitude as a concept pursues itself, in search of its own true meaning, incessantly fluctuating between *imperium* and *cives*, between the terminal and starting points of political philosophy, as if Spinoza can neither think the concept in its specificity nor reduce it to something other than itself. To leave it at this, however, would be to fail to grasp the full measure of what Negri called Spinoza's savage anomaly and the degree to which Spinoza's philosophy retains a singular capacity to disturb the categories that continue, often without our knowledge or consent, to organize our thought.<sup>24</sup> In this spirit I want to return to Balibar's essay "*Potentia multitudinis*," specifically to its concluding lines, in which Balibar attempts to recast the debate between those who consider the state an artificial entity reducible to individuals and those who, adhering literally to Spinoza's text, regard the state itself as an individual endowed with a body and a mind (according to the theory of individuality developed in *Ethics* 2, part 13): for Spinoza, Balibar argues, philosophy's most urgent task was "to think man outside of any anthropomorphism," as he sought to liberate himself from all the models that man (that is, the multitude of men) has not ceased to propose for himself.<sup>25</sup>

How do we begin to think social and political singularity in terms other than those modeled not simply on the familiar juridical anthropology, the notion of the individual as endowed with a body and a mind which is the idea of the body, or even on the empirico-transcendental doublet of individual and community, citizen and state, and so on? In fact, as we have seen, the very possibility of theorizing the specific existence of the multitude depends on the possibility of our freeing ourselves from all such models, from the point of view of which the multitude remains unthinkable. The first step perhaps consists of recognizing with Matheron that the concept of the multitude only begins to become intelligible on the basis of the analysis of the affects, and, more particularly, the phenomenon of the imitation of the affects developed in *Ethics* 3 and 4.<sup>26</sup>

But Spinoza's theory of the imitation of the affects appears to reproduce rather than resolve the dilemmas we have encountered so far. Thus, for Matheron himself the imitation of the affects constitutes a primary "inter-human life" that in turn provides the foundation for a state or society that can be moved by the affects or passions proper to it.<sup>27</sup> Despite the fears of critics such as Lee Rice, his theory in no way excludes the notion of originally dissociated individuals who remain dissociated even in their imitation of the affects of others.<sup>28</sup> In fact, Spinoza's text contains the basis of a read-

ing according to which affective imitation would become nothing more than an act of projection, which requires only that I imagine that the other feels pleasure or pain in order to imitate what I imagine that other to feel. This is precisely Adam Smith's definition of sympathy in chapter 1, part 1, of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. For Smith, there is no crossing the boundary between me and the other; I can never know what or even if another person feels. The operation of sympathy remains internal to what Smith calls "spectators," who imagine what they themselves would feel or have felt in a circumstance similar to the other.<sup>29</sup> Sympathy, for Smith, does not (strictly speaking) require even the existence of the other. It is possible for me to sympathize with the dead, given that there is no communication or transfer of feeling or affect across the infinite distance that separates me from all others, all of whom can be no more than projections of myself.<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, *Ethics* 3, 21 seems to authorize just such a reading: "He who imagines that what he loves is affected with pleasure or pain will likewise be affected with pleasure or pain." Or at least seems to authorize it until Spinoza adds, "the intensity of which will vary with the intensity of the emotion of the object loved." What might at first be taken as an act, specifically, the act of imagining, undertaken by and within a single person becomes, with the addition of the qualifying clause, not simply an act that requires the presence of the affect in the other, but a being affected with pleasure or pain that is precisely determined by the force of the other's affect. In its complexity and perhaps even its contradictions, the sentence captures something of the movement of the *Ethics* itself from part 2 to part 3,<sup>31</sup> as the imagination (which to a certain extent mediates between inner and outer, between self and other, acting as a conduit between my body considered as a singular thing and other equally singular bodies) gives way to an unmediated imitation that is less a reduplication of one person's affect in another than, as we see in part 21, a perpetuation or persistence of affect without the mediation of the person. The affect thus is not contained in me or the other but lies between us; the production of affects both individualizes and transindividualizes. But Spinoza will go even further: it is not simply that affects, pleasure and pain and their various secondary forms, are communicated like a contagion. There can even be the imitation or communication of desire, which Spinoza calls emulation (*emulatio*): desire is "engendered" (*ingenuratur*) when we "imagine" that others have this desire (*Ethics* 3, def. 33). But given that Spinoza has, earlier in *Ethics* 3 (part 9, Sch.), defined desire as the consciousness of the *conatus* whereby a thing endeavors to per-

sist in its own being, the fact of the transindividual engendering of desire compels us to pose the question of the “thing” whose *conatus* is expressed in consciousness. If desire is the consciousness of the *conatus* and I share a desire with another person, do I share the *conatus* of which the desire is the expression? In other words, what would allow us to be thought of as separate individuals, rather than as parts of a singular thing whose *conatus* (and therefore “interest”) is expressed in us both? Nothing at all: “When two individuals of the same nature are combined, they compose an individual twice as powerful as each one singly” (*Ethics* 4.18, Sch.).

This passage from the *Ethics* sheds light on the content of one of Spinoza’s most controversial and troubling letters, letter 17 to Pieter Balling, dated June 20, 1664, following the death of the latter’s young son. This letter, full of beauty and sorrow, of pleasure as well as pain, the pleasure of understanding one’s own sorrow and, in the act of understanding it, increasing one’s force, can or must itself be read as a transcription of imitated affects, of identities, not just those of Balling and his son, or Spinoza and Balling, or even the three together, so intermingled that we can no longer clearly demarcate the pain of the one from the others. Balling, otherwise a follower of Spinoza, “recalls” in his grief that he once while sleeping was awakened by groans like those his son would later utter on his deathbed, at a time when the boy was still healthy and fit. Can we not call these groans, he asked Spinoza, “omens,” portents of the fate awaiting his beloved son?<sup>32</sup> Spinoza’s response, even taking into account the fact that the letter comes early in his philosophical career, is surprising: he maintains that while “the effects of the imagination which are due to corporeal causes” can never be omens, “the effects of the imagination, or images, which have their origin in the constitution of the mind can be omens of some future event because any mind can have a confused presentiment of what the future is [*quia Mens aliquid, quod futurum est, confuse potest praesentire*]. So it can imagine it as firmly and vividly as if such a thing were present to it.”<sup>33</sup>

Here, of course, Spinoza dissociates mind and body to a greater degree than he does in the *Ethics*, but his willingness to preserve the term “omen,” by defining it in a way that does not correspond exactly to the meaning attributed to it by the superstitious, is another early example of the philosophical strategy that would mark his entire career. Thus, images that arise in the mind may express what is feared—for example, the death of one’s young son—and what is feared may indeed come to pass. One’s fear may be rational, rather than irrational—a calculation of probabilities, accompa-

nied by an image of what might come to pass but which has not yet done so. What is surprising is what follows Spinoza's description of the firmness and vividness of the image of what was not yet present to the mind: "Let us take (to adduce an example similar to yours), a father who so loves his son that he and his beloved son are, as it were, (*quasi*) one. . . . the father through his union with his son is a part of his son, it being necessary that the soul of the father participate in the ideal essence of the son, and in its affections and in what follows from them."<sup>34</sup> Is it possible to see in this passage the beginnings of a theory of the imitation of the affects and of desire, and therefore the beginnings of a theory of transindividuality? If we take "ideal essence" to be the "actual essence" which in part 3 of the *Ethics* is the *conatus*, the father/son couple possesses an affective unity: each participates in the affect or desire that marks their composition as a single individual whose actual essence is lived by them as desire, and this affect or desire cannot be apportioned to one or the other. Images fluctuate between them without proprietorship or fixed origin.

Can we not now begin to see what constitutes the danger of the multitude in Spinoza's philosophy?—the unthinkable residue of a philosophical tendency that begins with Hobbes and includes, but does not end with, Adam Smith? It is not simply the right or power of mass movements beyond law and property but the transindividualization of desire and affect, and therefore of the *conatus* itself, in a movement that overflows and exceeds the confines imposed by the rituals and apparatuses that govern us. The calculable self-interest of the juridical individual, the foundation upon which rest the hopes and promises of an epoch, is fractured by the eruption of desires and pleasures that cannot be contained by either the individual as constituted in law or the state, the incalculable and incessantly changing forms, from dyads to multitudes, in which individuality and transindividuality are one and the same thing.

Let us recall that letter 17, the letter devoted to the question of omens, includes an example from Spinoza's own life, an image that Spinoza insists was, unlike the groans that Balling recalls having heard before the death of his son, not an omen. It is of course that dream image, an image that persisted, beyond the dream, into the clarity of the morning light: "the image of a black, scabby Brazilian whom I had never seen before."<sup>35</sup> We can say today with perfect assurance that even if Spinoza did not recognize it as such, it was indeed an omen of the hatred and fear that his philosophy would inspire in others and that he could not entirely escape himself, if we take seriously

the theory of the imitation of the affects. Further, we may see in the image of that “Ethiopian” (to use the other term Spinoza applies to the image of the black man) another omen: the omen of new compositions, of trans-Atlantic transindividualities making worlds even as they are made by them, of a destiny he cannot escape but is not yet willing to embrace, of multitudes to come whose power is the limit of Empire.

## Notes

- 1 See Gregory S. Kavka, *Hobbesian Moral and Political Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).
- 2 I realize that in choosing to focus on the multitude, I will be accused of giving in to fashion, especially now that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire* has introduced this once obscure term into such general currency that even *Time* magazine has deemed it appropriate for its readership. Those familiar with Spinoza will hasten to point out that the multitude as a concept appears only in Spinoza’s last and unfinished work, the *TP*, and does not appear perhaps even under another name in the *Ethics* or the *TTP* and therefore cannot serve the task I seek to assign to it: the task of designating what is most disturbing about Spinoza’s work as a whole in the current theoretical conjuncture. I will respond to these perfectly reasonable objections by insisting that while Hardt and Negri’s use of the term “multitude” in *Empire* and in some subsequent essays is undoubtedly derived from Spinoza and therefore exists in a certain as yet unspecified relation to the concept as it appears in the text of the *TP* (after all, Negri himself was the first to explore this aspect of the *TP* in detail: see Negri, *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza’s Metaphysics and Politics* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991]), it remains in essential ways distinct from it, conditioned as much by the history of Marxism and communism, both theoretically and practically, as by the work of Spinoza. To the second objection, that is, to the charge that I have made central to Spinoza a concept that only appears in his last unfinished text, I would respond by citing Matheron’s argument that the theoretical conditions of possibility of the multitude are established not in the *TP*, where these conditions are presupposed, but only in the *Ethics* (particularly parts 3 and 4); see Alexandre Matheron, *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza* (Paris: Editions Minuit, 1969) and “L’Inignation et le *conatus* de l’état spinoziste,” in *Spinoza: Puissance et ontologie*, ed. M. R. D’Allonnes and H. Rizk (Paris: Éditions Kimé, 1994), 163. In fact, I would go further than Matheron (and to some extent oppose him) and argue that the path on which Spinoza embarks in chapter 16 of the *TTP*, the equation of right and power, requires as a condition of its validity the absent concept of the multitude, a concept that I will thus regard not so much as absent as deferred from the *TTP*. Let me provisionally argue, then, that the constellation of problems surrounding the concept of the multitude, whether logically preceding it as its condition of possibility or necessarily following from it, cannot be grasped by following the apparent chronological order of Spinoza’s texts and that the order of arguments is not identical to the order of the texts.
- 3 Étienne Balibar, “Spinoza the Anti-Orwell,” in *Masses, Classes and Ideas* (London: Routledge, 1994).

- 4 Antonio Negri, *L'anomalie sauvage: Puissance et pouvoir chez Spinoza* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1981).
- 5 Matheron, "L'ignation et le *conatus* de l'état spinoziste," 163.
- 6 Benedict Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, trans. Samuel Shirley (New York: E. J. Brill, 1991), 237. Other Spinoza editions cited below include *Ethics*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Cambridge, MA: Hackett, 1992); *The Letters*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Cambridge, MA: Hackett, 1995); and *A Political Treatise*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Cambridge, MA: Hackett, 2002).
- 7 Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, 237.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 250.
- 9 Negri, *L'anomalie sauvage*, 9.
- 10 Thomas Hobbes, *Man and Citizen*, ed. Bernard Gert (New York: Doubleday, 1972).
- 11 Étienne Balibar, "Potentia multitudinis quae una veluti mente duciter," in *Ethik, Recht und Politik bei Spinoza*, ed. M. Senn and M. Walther (Zurich: Schultheiss, 2001).
- 12 Matheron, *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza*; Antonio Negri, "Reliqua Desiderantur: Towards a Definition of the Concept of Democracy in the Final Spinoza," in *The New Spinoza*, ed. Warren Montag and Ted Stolze (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Lee C. Rice, "Individual and Community in Spinoza's Social Psychology," in *Spinoza: Issues and Directions*, ed. Edwin Curley and Pierre-François Moreau (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990); D. J. Den Uyl, *Power, State and Freedom: An Interpretation of Spinoza's Political Philosophy* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1983).
- 13 Matheron, *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza* and "L'ignation et le *conatus* de l'état spinoziste."
- 14 Pierre-François Moreau, *Spinoza: L'expérience et l'éternité* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1994).
- 15 Balibar, "Potentia multitudinis quae una veluti mente duciter," 135.
- 16 Louis Althusser, "On Feuerbach," in *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2003).
- 17 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage, 1970).
- 18 Pierre-François Moreau, *Le récit utopique: Droit naturel et roman de l'état* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1982), 9.
- 19 Balibar, "Potentia multitudinis quae una veluti mente duciter," 5.
- 20 Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, 267.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 François Zourabichvili, *Spinoza: Une physique de la pensée* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002).
- 23 Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, 267.
- 24 Negri, *The Savage Anomaly*.
- 25 Balibar, "Potentia multitudinis quae una veluti mente duciter," 135.
- 26 Matheron, "L'ignation et le *conatus* de l'état spinoziste."
- 27 Matheron, *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza*, 79–222.
- 28 Rice, "Individual and Community in Spinoza's Social Psychology."
- 29 Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 16.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 12–130.
- 31 This raises the possibility of speaking, as Negri did in *The Savage Anomaly*, of a kind of

caesura separating parts 1 and 2 of the *Ethics* from the last three parts, even if my sense of what separates these “two foundations” is quite different from Negri’s. I want to suggest in particular that the relation between the imagination as described in *Ethics* 2 and the affects discussed in *Ethics* 3 and 4 is marked by discontinuity and rupture. This is an area for future investigation.

32 Spinoza, *Letters*, 125.

33 *Ibid.*, 126.

34 *Ibid.*, 127.

35 *Ibid.*, 125.