Immanence, transindividuality and the free multitude

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Abstract
Since the late 1960s there has been a resurgence of interest in Spinozism in France: Gilles Deleuze was among the first who gave life to a ‘new Spinoza’ with his seminal book Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza (1968). While Deleuze was primarily interested in Spinoza’s ontology and ethics, the contemporary French philosopher Étienne Balibar focuses on the political writings. Despite their common fascination for Spinoza’s relational definition of the individual, both thinkers have drawn very different consequences from the Spinozist inspiration regarding the relevance of his philosophy for a contemporary ethical and political thought. Deleuze draws from Spinoza an ethics of the encounter, an ‘ethology’ that is concerned with the composition of bodies on a plane of immanence. Balibar, on the contrary, deals with the modes of communication that we institute between one another and that are always effectuations on two levels at once: the real and the imaginary. Whereas Deleuze emphasizes the conception of a univocal plane of immanence, Balibar insists on a double expression of the real and the imaginary in any transindividual practice. The aim of this paper is to compare and finally assess their respective contributions to a conception of collective political action: the question of constitution of the ‘free multitude’.

Keywords
Spinoza, democracy, multitude, immanence, transindividuality, Deleuze, Balibar

Introduction
While for a long time Spinoza appeared in academic discourse only as a philosopher integral to the rationalist tradition, a disputed figure in the pantheism controversy and a formative influence for German idealism, it was in the late 1960s that a ‘new Spinoza’...
and a French school of Spinoza studies emerged (Vinciguerra 2009). Gilles Deleuze was arguably among the first to raise a renewed interest in Spinozism through his publication *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* (1968). Emerging from the moment of structuralist Marxism, Étienne Balibar also argued in several essays and books for Spinoza’s relevance to a political anthropology and philosophy today. Both in their different ways assume the importance of Spinoza’s ethical and political philosophy as a conceptual tool for thinking in the present.

Deleuze was primarily interested in Spinoza’s ontology and ethics, celebrating in particular his conception of immanence. Balibar, focusing on Spinoza’s political writings, embraces a conception of transindividuality that he finds sketched out there and considers a crucial concept for politics. Despite their differences, they meet at one point: their fascination for Spinoza’s relational definition of individual essence, the *conatus* (or desire) to preserve oneself in one’s being. For Deleuze, each individual *conatus* is determined through the encounter of bodies on the plane of immanence. Desire is constituted only within an assemblage: a composition or coupling of bodies, affects and signs. Balibar, referring to Spinoza’s definition of desire as ‘Appetite together with consciousness of the appetite’ (E3P9S), 1 understands desire as the effort to preserve oneself plus the dimension of consciousness, which he translates as the imaginary component of our relationship with objects. Thus, for Balibar, the modes of communication that we institute between one another are always effectuations on two levels at once: the real (or material production) and the imaginary. He rejects ‘an imaginary (theological) conception of politics’ as much as ‘the “physicalist” illusion of a politics without an imaginary component’ (Balibar 1997a, 192). Whereas Deleuze upholds the conception of a univocal plane of immanence, on which modal relations are distinguished only according to a kinetic and an intensive dimension, Balibar insists on a double expression of the real and the imaginary in any transindividual practice.

Why should it be worthwhile to bring these two divergent thinkers and their distinct readings of Spinoza together? Deleuze and Balibar have raised a fundamental question of politics – the question of the constitution of the ‘free multitude’ – albeit in very different terms. In *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, Deleuze asks: how can individuals enter into composition with one another so as to form a new amplified relation (more ‘extensive’ and more ‘intensive’, that is, with a greater capacity or power) (Deleuze 1988, 126)? For Balibar, the multitude is more ambiguous, ‘an unstable aggregate of individual passions’ (Balibar 1998, 87). Accordingly, his question is rather: how can the internal passional conflicts be balanced so as to make room for more constructive forces (love, admiration, devotion, rational thought) such that the power of the masses, which was passive, becomes active (Balibar 1994, 5; 1998, 120)?

This paper aims to put Deleuze’s and Balibar’s reading of Spinoza alongside one another with regard to the question of collective political action. Deleuze in his two books on Spinoza does not deal with this question directly. In one of his Spinoza lectures, he only makes the rather vague remark that ‘there is a fundamental relation between ontology and a certain style of politics’ (Deleuze 1980). While he did not discuss this ‘fundamental relation’ any further, it could be argued that he spells out certain political consequences of his Spinozistic inspired thought in his collaborative work with Félix Guattari (especially in *Anti-Oedipus*, which is more Spinozist in spirit than the few
references might suggest, and then in *A Thousand Plateaus*). If this hypothesis is correct, what is it about Spinoza’s ontology that makes it interesting for contemporary political thought? At first sight, Spinoza’s conceptions of the eternity of substance and of the necessity with which everything flows from this unique substance in infinitely many ways make his metaphysical views seem unsuitable for a thinking that would be adequate to the reality of political and historical experiences and transformations. What Deleuze draws from Spinoza is a philosophy of expressive immanence and univocity; he praises Spinoza as the singular philosopher who was able to conceive the purest plane of immanence, an immanentist thought that has done away with transcendence and any hierarchical conception of the world. By constructing this common plane of immanence, on which all modes are equally distributed, Spinoza laid the foundations for an ethics and an ethology concerned with the composition of bodies.

Balibar sees a rather problematic tension between Spinoza’s metaphysics and his conception of the interaction of modes: while the individual existence of modes is the effect of their compositions, agreements and disagreements, their respective essences envelop the one, infinite, immutable and indivisible substance (Balibar 1990, 64–65). To my knowledge, it is Deleuze who has offered the best solution to this problem by implementing a logic of expression. In the first part of this paper, I will therefore lay out the major concepts that allow Deleuze to tackle the notorious difficulties and contradictions in Spinoza’s ontology. I will then discuss the question in what way these ontological considerations can have a relevance for contemporary political thought. However, it is to Balibar that we must turn for a proper consideration of Spinoza’s political writings. Deleuze’s views on ethical composition rather remain on a ‘micropolitical’ level and fail to take into account the collective construction of ‘a totality of compatible relations’ (Toscano 2012), of institutions, rights and duties. Balibar’s concepts are more adequate to account for this philosophical task: the theory of society must include the concept of transindividual practices such as the regulation of production, exchange and consumption as well as the corresponding institutions of law, culture and religious functions.

The second part of this paper will reflect, through the lens of Balibar, Spinoza’s fundamental thoughts regarding the question of how best to construct a stable political order that permits the maximum degree of freedom for as many as possible. As Balibar will argue, every political order participates in the idea of democracy, or in other words, democracy is the truth of every political order ‘as it tends towards its own “perfection”’ (Balibar 1998, 74). Yet, although the state is a ‘natural thing’ for Spinoza and does not stand outside the order of nature — it is not a dominion within a dominion (*imperium in imperio*) (E3PR and Spinoza 2002b, 684) — the democratic state does not emerge spontaneously in a kind of natural unfolding but needs to be instituted. The question for Balibar is thus how the masses can organize their power within the institutions and, if necessary, constitute themselves into what he provocatively calls ‘*imperia in imperio*’ (Balibar 1997a, 185) to struggle for their collective liberation.

**Deleuze: Expressive immanence and an ethics of the encounter**

If Spinoza is the only philosopher he never forgot — as Deleuze humbly and humorously admits in the eight-hour video interview *Abécédaire* with Claire Parnet — this is perhaps
because Spinoza provided him with an image of thought which Deleuze implemented in his own philosophical thinking. Spinoza ‘showed, drew up, and thought the “best” plane of immanence – that is, the purest, the one that does not hand itself over to the transcendent or restore any transcendent’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 60). On a couple of pages in What is Philosophy? Deleuze recounts philosophy’s history as the history of a single illusion: how immanence was made immanent to something other than itself (a transcendent entity, a transcendental unity) or made to encompass the transcendent everywhere (phenomenology of the Other) (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 44-9).

There is, however, philosophy’s counter-history, an alternative lineage in the history of philosophy, which evolves through the thoughts of ‘nomad thinkers’ – Nietzsche and Spinoza among others (Deleuze and Parnet 2002, 32). They both affirmed immanence and life, challenging religious authorities for taking an absolute standpoint beyond immanence and for exercising their power over the hearts and minds of the people, impervious to any critique. A philosophy of immanence, it can be argued, makes a practical difference in ethics as well as politics. Immanence provides an orientation for thought, which is removed from normative regimes of transcendence and tends to be critical of religious and political authorities. Philosophy’s un timely task is to be critical of ‘vertical Being, an imperial State in the sky or on earth’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 43).

A philosophy of immanence is thus a key dimension of Deleuze’s (and Guattari’s) thought, and Spinoza stands out as ‘the “prince” of philosophers’ (Deleuze 1992, 11) in having conceived absolute immanence. However, the idea of seeing substance as a plane of immanence on which all modes are situated encounters a lot of contradictions and difficulties in Spinoza that call for a solution. How can the tension between the one and the multiple, the indivisible and the divisible, the immutable and the changing, the infinite and the finite be settled? In order to solve this complex problem, Deleuze introduces a set of concepts that all belong to a new logic – a logic of expression – which he marks out in the middle of Spinoza’s philosophy. In what follows, we will unravel Deleuze’s expressionism by elucidating the conceptual network of ‘expression’, ‘complication’, ‘univocity’, ‘formal distinction’ and ‘intensity’.

In his book Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza, Deleuze develops an ontology of expressive immanence at the heart of Spinoza’s philosophy. Although Spinoza does not seem to put great emphasis on the term ‘expression’ (he mostly uses it in the verbal forms of expressere) (cf. Macherey 1996, 144), Deleuze wishes to place him within a Neoplatonist tradition of expressionism, for this allows him to tackle the problem of the One and the Many by means of the concept of ‘complication’.

Certain Neoplatonists used a profound word to designate the original state that proceeds any development, any deployment, any ‘explication’: complication, which envelops the many in the One and affirms the unity of the multiple. Eternity did not seem to them the absence of change, nor even the extension of a limitless existence, but the complicated state of time itself. The Word, omnia complicans, and containing all essences, was defined as the supreme complication of contraries, the unstable opposition. From this they derived the notion of an essentially expressive universe, organized according to degrees of immanent complications and following an order of descending explications (Deleuze 2000, 45).
‘Complication’, as well as ‘explication’ and ‘implication’ are the three major components of the logic of expression. God complicates or contains all beings and at the same time explicates itself in every finite thing, which remains implicated in God. ‘We must ask,’ Deleuze demands, ‘how Spinoza fits into an expressionist tradition, to what extent his position derives from it, and how he transforms it’ (Deleuze 1992, 17). The logic of expression offers a solution to the tension between God or the absolute and infinite substance and the infinity of attributes and modes. As Deleuze puts it:

Expressionism is on the one hand an explication, an unfolding of what expresses itself, the One manifesting itself in the Many (substance manifesting itself in the attributes, and these attributes manifesting themselves in their modes). Its multiple expression, on the other hand, involves Unity. The One remains involved in what expresses it, imprinted in what unfolds it, immanent in whatever manifests it (Deleuze 1992, 16).

Yet, in order to make the best possible use of the Neoplatonist expressionist paradigm, it needs to be purged from all remaining traces of emanation that would reinstall a hierarchical order of being and an equivocity of relation.

Thus Deleuze implants another key concept in Spinoza’s ontology: the concept of univocity, which he draws from the medieval theologian Duns Scotus. According to this principle, God ‘is’ in the same sense as each created and finite thing. In other words, Being is said of all beings in a single and same sense. As Deleuze elaborates in one of his lectures: ‘All beings are the same [se valent]. The stone, the insane, the reasonable, the animal, from a certain point of view, from the point of view of Being [être], they are the same’ (Deleuze 1980). This is to say that there is an equality of beings: all beings participate in one and the same substance which, as immanent cause, is not separated from its effects but equally present in all beings. There are no ‘divine names’ or properties assigned to God that would make his being eminent and degrade the being of modes. The descriptions of God as perfect, almighty, omniscient, etc., are just nominal definitions that elevate human properties into eminence – they do not grasp the real nature of God, which is nothing but substance or infinite power.

Particular beings are equal, since they all participate in God’s power. It is important to note that participation has to be understood here as ‘a material and quantitative participation’ (Deleuze 1992, 183), while theories of emanation or creation interpret it rather in terms of ‘imitative likenesses’. Deleuze concludes that

the themes of creation or emanation cannot do without a minimal transcendence, which bars ‘expressionism’ from proceeding all the way to the immanence it implies. Immanence is the very vertigo of philosophy, and is inseparable from the concept of expression (Deleuze 1992, 180).

For Deleuze, expressive immanence ‘is anti-hierarchical thought. It is almost a kind of anarchy’ (Deleuze 1980). That all beings are equal means that they ‘are not defined by their rank in a hierarchy, are not more or less remote from the One’ (Deleuze 1992, 173). The ‘world of ontological immanence is an essentially anti-hierarchical world’ (Deleuze 1980).
However, we should not pass too quickly from the one substance to the multiplicity of modes: what we have left out is the crucial intermediary role of God’s infinite attributes, of which we know only two: thought and extension. It is in the attribute that the interaction of modes, their composition and transformation can be thought. Yet, the difficulty is now to explain how attributes are distinguished from one another, while at the same time belonging to a unique, infinite and indivisible substance. According to Deleuze, what is needed is the Scotist concept of formal distinction. Although Spinoza never refers to Scotus, let alone the concept of formal distinction, Deleuze assumes that ‘Scotist theories were certainly known to Spinoza, and played a part, along with other themes, in forming his pantheism’ (Deleuze 1991, 67). In medieval scholastic theories, the problem of the Trinity of God as well as the plurality of divine attributes or perfections demanded a solution: Duns Scotus forwarded the conception of a formal distinction, which is not a numerical distinction, that is, it does not divide up the One into separate denumerable parts. Instead, it formally distinguishes perfections such as wisdom, justice, goodness, etc. Deleuze does not find it hard to discern Scotus’ formal distinction in Spinoza’s ‘conception of a non-numerical real distinction’: attributes are ‘really distinct (i.e. one may be conceived without the aid of the other)’ (E1P10S), each of them ‘expresses an essence infinite in its own kind’ (E1P16D), but nevertheless they all constitute one single substance. ‘Spinoza restores formal distinction, and even gives it a range it didn’t have in Scotus’ (Deleuze 1992, 66). Contrary to Scotus, who considers attributes as properties or ‘propria’ that are merely assigned to divine substance by the understanding and are thus only conceptual ‘points of view’ on substance, Spinoza takes them as real constitutive forms. Hence the concept of formal distinction has to be transferred to a new context and put to work as a purely qualitative, quidditive distinction that excludes any division. Deleuze argues that ‘it is formal distinction that provides an absolutely coherent concept of the unity of substance and the plurality of attributes, and gives real distinction a new logic’ (Deleuze 1992, 66).

According to this reading, attributes are not denumerable substances but must be considered as intensive qualities, infinite and indivisible. Along with the concept of formal distinction, Deleuze thus imports another concept into Spinozist philosophy: that of intensity. As intensive qualities, attributes also permit a differentiation into intensive quantities, that is, modal essences. In Expressionism in Philosophy, Deleuze picks up Duns Scotus’ example of a white wall (Deleuze 1992, 196): the quality of whiteness does not contain any extensive parts that are extrinsically distinct from one another. Rather, it complicates various degrees of intensity, a continuous and infinite series of different degrees of whiteness. Those are intrinsic modes that are all implicated in the quality of whiteness, which remains univocally the same. In this sense, Deleuze argues, the relation between attributes and modes are to be understood in Spinoza. Modal essences are intensive quantities that are distinguished from one another through intrinsic differences; together they form part of a ‘system of “complication” of essences’ (Deleuze 1992, 198), which is implicated in the infinite attribute which remains indivisible. This way of putting it makes it possible for Deleuze to answer the questions: how can modal essences be distinguished? What kind of distinction applies between existing modes? And finally to respond to Hegel’s challenge, which claims that Spinoza’s substance is an ‘abyss of annihilation’ in which all differences are swallowed up (Hegel 1974, 288).
According to Deleuze, every attribute-quality has an infinite intensive quantity which can be differentiated into infinitely many intrinsic modal essences. As Simon Duffy explains, ‘intensive quantity is therefore divisible intensively rather than extensively, as maintained by Hegel in the example in the Encyclopaedia Logic’ (Duffy 2006, 114). For Deleuze, modal essences have to be understood as degrees of power, intensive parts of the attribute itself, and what distinguishes one modal essence from the other are intrinsic differences of degree. A whole logic of differentiation can be discerned in Deleuze’s interpretation of Spinoza (Duffy 2006, 4). ‘The production of modes does, it is true, take place through differentiation. But differentiation is in this case purely quantitative’ (Deleuze 1992, 182-3). Besides the movement of differentiation, there is also differentiation, precisely when modal essences pass into spatiotemporal existence by some external cause. Existing modes are specified through external determinations. They are ‘outside the attribute’ (Deleuze 1992, 213) and external to one another. Importantly, Deleuze emphasizes that ‘an attribute is thus divided modally, not really’ (Deleuze 1992, 191): extrinsic numerical differences are modal, rather than real distinctions.

With these conceptual tools and theory of distinction at hand, Deleuze is able to advance a Spinozist philosophy of immanence, which incorporates monism and pluralism at the same time. As Deleuze and Guattari famously say in ‘Rhizome’, the introductory chapter of A Thousand Plateaus, we have to ‘arrive at the magic formula we all seek – PLURALISM = MONISM’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, 20). This is achieved by thinking ‘multiplicity’ (which is not to be confused with the Many or the Multiple): ‘In Spinoza and Leibniz the relation of expression applies, essentially, to Unity and Multiplicity. But one would look in vain through the Ethics for some sign of the Multiple’ (Deleuze 1992, 331). There are two kinds of multiplicity which can be found in the Ethics: (1) a qualitative multiplicity of attributes (Deleuze 1992, 37), whereby each expresses an infinite essence. This means that attributes are qualitatively or formally distinct, but from the viewpoint of quantity they refer to the same single substance; (2) a quantitative multiplicity of modes, which Deleuze refers to as ‘the multitude of modes in each attribute’ (Deleuze 1992, 332). Those modes are distinguished by intrinsic or extrinsic numerical differences from one another, depending on whether one takes them as modal essences or as existing modes in duration. But in any case they involve the attribute, which remains infinite, unique and indivisible, and which constitutes the essence of substance. Therefore, to conclude, Spinoza’s monism of substance is not ‘the undifferenciated abyss, the black nothingness, the indeterminate animal in which everything is dissolved’ (Deleuze 1994, 28), but turns out to be based on implicated multiplicities, qualitative and quantitative multiplicities alike.

However, there remains a certain tension in Deleuze’s reading of Spinoza which he openly refers to in Difference and Repetition: ‘Spinoza’s substance appears independent of the modes, while the modes are dependent on substance, but as though on something other than themselves. Substance must itself be said of the modes and only of the modes’ (Deleuze 1994, 40). It cannot be denied that Spinoza poses substance as the sufficient reason from which infinitely many things follow in infinite ways. He considers the identity of substance to come first: the infinite absolute substance is conceptually and causally independent. How can it be achieved that identity as a principle comes second,
that it revolves around the Different? How to make ‘substance turn around the modes’ (Deleuze 1994, 304)?

In his own philosophy, as it is laid out in *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze replaces the couple of substance-modes with the couple of virtual–actual and introduces as an intermediary term processes of individuation that operate through spatiotemporal dynamisms. While this is not the place to develop Deleuze’s transcendental empiricism, it is nevertheless indicative of the way he seeks to modify Spinozist thought. He is finally not interested in Spinoza’s conception of substance and quickly converts it into a plane of immanence, on which all individual modes operate and reciprocally determine one another. In fact, after the beginning of part II of the *Ethics* Spinoza no longer speaks of substance but focuses instead on the question of passional encounters between individuals, which has a determining function with regard to their *conatus*.

According to Spinoza, the preservation of one’s existence has to be understood as an eminently active task, insofar as the individual is a dynamic, metastable structure, constantly in exchange with its environs. The encounter with bodies that increases an individual’s power (for instance, the intake of food, or the presence of supportive relationships) will be experienced as good, while the encounter with bodies that threaten to destroy the individual’s internal composition of parts will be experienced as bad and dangerous (for instance, the confrontation with environmental pollution, or with stupidity and prejudice). Spinoza’s immanentist ontology thus entails a whole ethics, which defines ‘good’ or ‘bad’ encounters for an individual *immanently* in terms of what increases or decreases its power of action. Instead of a morality that poses ‘good’ and ‘evil’ as transcendent values, Spinoza proposes ‘an understanding of ethics as an immanent evaluation of ways of life’ (Toscano 2012).

Spinoza’s ethics of the encounter is key to understanding Deleuze’s own conception of the ethical task: the basic idea is the organisation of encounters that increase the power and freedom of as many as possible. Elaborating on Spinoza’s analyses of affective mechanisms, Deleuze especially points to the vital role of joyful passions, inasmuch as they increase our power of action and render us more capable of forming common notions. Certainly, Spinoza asserts that joyful passions can only induce inadequate ideas within us: they cannot give us adequate knowledge of the things we encounter because when we are affected with joy (or sadness), the affection is more indicative of our own bodily state than of the thing that affects us. However, joyful and sad passions immediately determine our desire (or *conatus*); in fact Spinoza says that ‘joy and sadness are the desire, or appetite, itself insofar as it is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, by external causes’ (E3P57D). As Deleuze explains, through the increase of our power of action, joyful passions prepare and facilitate rational activity:

We must then, *by the aid of joyful passions*, form the idea of what is common to some external body and our own. For this idea alone, this common notion, is adequate. This is the second stage of reason; then, and then only, do we understand and act, and we are reasonable: this not through the accumulation of joyful passions as passions, but by a genuine ‘leap’, which puts us in possession of an adequate idea, by the aid of such accumulation (Deleuze 1992, 283).
This ethics of joy that Deleuze draws from Spinoza is the inspiration for Deleuze’s and Guattari’s conception of desiring-machines or assemblages. They insist that desire is not given in advance but is created through an external encounter or coupling: something snaps into place and creates a flow, a new functionality or desiring-machine, which did not pre-exist the encounter. Deleuze states in *Dialogues*: ‘We must describe the assemblage in which such a desire becomes possible, gets moving and declares itself’ (Deleuze 2002, 97). Desiring-production for Deleuze and Guattari is a *mode of production of existence* that not only brings about subjectivity but also social reality. ‘We maintain that the social field is immediately invested by desire, that it is the historically determined product of desire’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 29). Desiring-production is always part of the social infrastructure (either becoming fixated there or liberated as abstract flow).

Due to constraints of space, it is impossible to investigate this relation between Spinozist ethics and Deleuze’s (and Guattari’s10) ethical views any further. However, other scholars have commented on this specific conception of ethics and its substitution for politics: in the Preface to *Anti-Oedipus*, Foucault remarks that ‘*Anti-Oedipus* (may its authors forgive me) is a book of ethics’ (1983, xiii). In his article ‘Existe-t-il quelque chose comme une politique deleuzienne?’ Badiou argues that ‘there is a Deleuzian ethics under the name of “politics”’ (Badiou 2009, 18).

Returning to our initial question raised in the Introduction, it now appears that from Deleuze’s viewpoint, the problem of the constitution of communities is a question primarily of the ethical composition of bodies. Installing oneself on the plane of immanence means to create an art of the encounter, a way of life, a mode of existence. As Deleuze suggests in ‘Spinoza and Us’: ‘it is a long affair of experimentation, requiring a lasting prudence, a Spinozan wisdom that implies the construction of a plane of immanence or consistency’ (Deleuze 1988, 125).

**Balibar: Processes of transindividuality**

Balibar sees in Spinoza the conceptual resources for an ontology of relations, which would overcome the traditional dualism of individualism and organicism (or holism) (Balibar 1996, 35–36). In a way similar to Deleuze, Balibar starts from Spinoza’s ontology with a particular regard to the notion of the individual. Yet whereas Deleuze makes use of Spinoza in order to suggest an ‘ethology’, that is, a kind of perspectival science that defines sentient beings (animals as well as humans) by the affects they are capable of, Balibar quickly narrows the focus to the relations between human beings, that is, their rational and imaginary modes of communications that compose the political and religious forms of life. The term that he uses in order to describe these complex reciprocal interactions between human beings is ‘transindividuality’ – a term that he also finds in Gilbert Simondon’s *L’Individuation psychique et collective* (1989), along with a theory of individuation and individualisation. The concept of transindividuality allows Balibar to spell out a specific relationality between human beings, which is irreducible to a simple mechanistic relation of causality and, what is more, includes the passage to collective existence. In what follows, I will explain Balibar’s notion of transindividuality and examine how it plays out with regard to Spinoza’s political writings.
Balibar draws attention to Spinoza’s conception of the individual which – as is true for the 17th century in general – differs considerably from the understanding emerging in the 19th century. An individual does not necessarily designate a single person; instead it is used for all sorts of entities from finite things to nature as whole. For Spinoza, an individual is always composed of parts that are related to one another according to a certain ratio of motion and rest. There are different orders of individuals, depending on their complexity. As Spinoza explains, ‘if a number of individuals so concur in one action that together they are all the cause of one effect, I consider them all, to that extent, as one singular thing’ (E2D7). This conception of the individual is elaborated in what is commonly referred to as Spinoza’s ‘Physics’ between propositions 13 and 14 in Part II of the Ethics. There Spinoza shows that individuals can vary and exchange parts, while still preserving their nature. What is more, individuals depend on this exchange with other individuals for their own preservation.

Balibar emphasizes that individuals are not ‘perfect’ in a final sense; they are active, or productive. But their construction as well as their activity always involves a previous, originally [sic] connexion with other individuals: not only an adaptive reciprocity of the individual and its environment, or the ‘interior’ and the ‘exterior’, but rather a reciprocity of interconnected or interdependent processes of individuation and individualization (Balibar 1997b, 9). He sees a parallel to Simondon, who claims that the individuation of an entity is always structurally incomplete and open to processes of transformation or evolution. For Simondon, the individual depends on and emerges from a pre-individual field, a meta-stable equilibrium, whose tension is progressively resolved through successive structurings or, in his own words, processes of ‘transduction’. By building collectivities the individual can reach a higher degree of individualization. Balibar emphasizes that ‘a living collectivity is never a simple aggregate or, on the contrary, a fusion of pre-existing individuals: it must be a culture (what Simondon also calls “spiritualité”), or a dynamic way of solving the individual’s problem’ (Balibar 1997b, 22–23, fn. 25). The pre-individual potential poses a problem that needs to be solved through processes of reciprocal determination and differenciation, through the composition of more complex bodies, a collective existence that increases the power and freedom of individuals.

The term that Simondon employs (and that Balibar has equally invented for explaining the reciprocal connection between individuals) is ‘transindividuality’. Transindividuality is not a pattern of connections between separate individual entities, but rather describes processes of psychic and collective individuation, which involve material, semiotic and pragmatic dimensions; in other words, an exchange of materialities, knowledge, words and signs, a mode of communication by means of ideas and affects, values and norms. Transindividuality not only involves a mutual dependence between individuals but the development of a common ‘agreement’ (convenientia), which leads to a more complex individual with a higher degree of power. As Balibar succinctly puts it the transindividual pattern which we are dealing with is not only understood as horizontal interaction or reciprocity at the same level, but also as a process of interaction which, for
any type of individual [...] regresses to the inferior level and simultaneously progresses to the superior level (Balibar 1997b, 22).

Thus reciprocal determination requires both: it is by diving back into the level of the pre-individual which, according to Simondon, is the not-yet individuated pre-individual reality, that the individual discovers a potential that can only truly be realized within the collective.

Collective individuation involves a ‘second order of complexity’ (Balibar 1997b, 22), which can be realized, for instance, when human beings engage in collective action and thereby give rise to a ‘second individuation’, in Simondon’s terms. From a Spinozist perspective, Balibar argues that ‘a unity of mutually convenient individuals is an intrinsic condition for each of them to maintain its (or his) autonomy and singularity’ (Balibar 1997b, 22). Instead of imposing a limit to freedom and action, the constitution of collective individuals is in fact an enabling condition of individuals’ power to act. An actual individual is thus a being that tends towards the collective, and its reality is essentially transitory and open to new processes of individuation. In alliance, individuals can combine their forces and better resist threats of destruction. Spinoza believes that the coalition in a civil society, which acts on the basis of a *convenientia* or synergy under common laws, leads to a growing autonomy and empowerment of its citizens. ‘A man who is guided by reason is more free in a state, where he lives according to a common decision, than in solitude, where he obeys only himself’ (E4P73).

**Imaginary democracy**

On the basis of his metaphysical and anthropological views, Spinoza sets out to develop his political philosophy, which holds democracy to be the most ‘natural’ form of state, since of all forms it seems to assure the greatest possible degree of freedom and equality to everyone. Despite this continuity in thought, Spinoza’s two treatises on political philosophy are quite different in style and purpose. The *Theological-Political Treatise* (TTP), published in 1670, can be seen as a militant intervention in the particular contemporary conjuncture: the precarious state of the Dutch Republic threatened by sectarian religious conflicts between the Remonstrants and Counter-Remonstrants. Spinoza therefore made every effort to convince his readers of the advantages of democracy and the two political principles that seemed most important: the authority of the state in religious matters and freedom of expression. He provided theoretical reasons in favour of the democratic state and went through a lengthy explanation of an historical-biblical example – the foundation and demise of the theocratic Hebrew state – in order to derive political principles from this ‘sacred’ history.

The *Political Treatise* was written under quite different circumstances: the warnings that he had issued in the TTP had no effect on the historical unfolding of events: the French invasion, the mass revolt against the republican regime, the murder of the liberal regent Johan de Witt in 1672, and the restoration of power to William III. Now Spinoza’s main concern was how to secure peace and stability of the state and how to keep the multitude ‘within fixed bounds’ (Spinoza 2002b, 681). The answer had to be sought in the construction of institutions that propagate civil rationality and regulate human
passions towards the common good. As Balibar puts it, the *Political Treatise*, published after Spinoza’s death in 1677, is a theoretical work that discusses different state forms (monarchy and aristocracy) in view of their tendency towards ‘perfection’, that is, ‘a process of “democratisation”’ (Balibar 1998, 74). This logic does not describe a natural unfolding based on a supposedly political nature of man, nor is it a historical study of singular regimes and transformations. ‘History is now subordinate to theory, for which it provides both a field of investigation and a source of illustrations’ (Balibar 1998, 51). The *Political Treatise* is a theoretical investigation of the problem of absolute sovereignty, which Spinoza – in opposition to his predecessors and contemporaries alike – sees accomplished in democracy, that is, the ‘completely absolute state’ (*omnino absolutum imperium*), where the constitutive power is lodged in all the people (Spinoza 2002b, 752). It is here that the category of the multitude becomes important and where Balibar’s notion of transindividual relations comes into play. However, in order to better understand Spinoza’s shift in the conception of democracy, it is worthwhile looking at the TTP and what Balibar has called the ‘imaginary democracy’ of the theocratic state. It will then become clear, to what extent democratic praxis is actually forestalled by the imaginary dimension of politics.\(^{14}\)

In chapter 16 of the TTP, Spinoza deals with the question of natural and civil rights as well as the foundation of the state, while engaging with and contesting, in a more or less hidden manner, Thomas Hobbes’ thoughts on these issues. It is in this chapter that Spinoza articulates the famous thesis of the equivalence of rights and powers. From the point of nature, he argues, it is the natural right of any individual to exercise its power, since it is part of the divine power, that is, the power of nature, and in exercising its power it necessarily conforms with the natural laws. A ‘law’ in this context simply designates the necessary expression of the divine substance or God; it is beyond the schema of command and obedience, since there can be no trespassing of natural laws. Hence an individual’s right is co-extensive with its power and coincides with the natural laws. If the natural right of an individual mode can be said to be limited, ‘its limits have nothing to do with either a prohibition or an obligation. They are simply the limits of a real power’ (Balibar 1998, 103).

The right and power of the state is necessarily constituted, and limited, by the power of the people. As Aurelia Armstrong puts it:

> because Spinoza conceives of the state as a power to govern (*potestas*) that operates within the immanent horizon of (power) relations which it regulates, it must itself be regarded as dependant for both its existence and its continued efficacy on the preservation of the (combined) power (*potentia*) of individuals (Armstrong 2009, 293).

Social relations, therefore, have a constitutive and controlling function. In chapter 16 of the TTP, however, Spinoza rather refers to the idea of the social contract in order to explain the basis of the state. Contrary to Hobbes, he believes that natural rights cannot be completely transferred to another person, that is, whatever the form of government, the citizens retain their natural rights and there are natural limits to what a sovereign can compel citizens to do.
In his essay ‘Jus-Pactum-Lex: On the Constitution of the Subject in the Theologico-Political Treatise’, Balibar argues that Spinoza’s concept of pact differs completely ‘from all classical definitions of the social contract’ (Balibar 1997, 194). It does not have as a function the thinking of an absolute origin of human societies, nor an ideal foundation of the juridical order as such, but the explanation of the complex of causes that permits a given state to preserve its own form, and at the same time to make intelligible the apparent anarchy of its political history, the cycle of its internal conflicts, the movements of the reinforcement and weakening of its collective power (Balibar 1997, 175).

Spinoza does indeed look at historical examples and the complexity of real politics, instead of merely proposing a convenient fiction. In chapters 17 to 18, he discusses the history of Hebrew theocracy: he converts the concept of pact to ‘the concept of a history’ (Balibar 1997, 177), thereby opening the way to the idea that ‘there are as many real states as there are forms of pact’ (ibid.). The singularity of the Hebrew state is manifest in the fact that it did not separate civil law and religion, which is why it can be rightly called a theocracy (Spinoza 2002a, 540). As Balibar puts it, the civil pact was ‘over-determined’ by another pact: a pact to obey God in all things (Balibar 1997, 179). By ‘transferring’ their power to God, all citizens remained equal and responsible only before God; yet fear induced the Jewish people to choose Moses to consult God in their place and to interpret his words for them.

Balibar concludes that ‘theocracy is the imaginary institution of society as democracy, that is, as the collective transfer of power of individuals to an imperium that is itself only their collective projection’ (Balibar 1997, 184). The incredible stability of the Hebrew state was a combined effect of imagination (the pact with God) and rational choice (the civil pact with Moses). It lasted so long because religious imagination and nationalist passion, grounded in the narrative of God’s election of the Jewish people and his offering of the promised land, played a constitutive role. However, this imaginary democracy already contained ‘the germ of a split’ (Balibar 1997, 185). Before his death, Moses appointed his brother Aaron as high priest and the Levites, his own tribe, as the priestly caste; he also made Joshua the commander-in-chief in secular affairs. After Joshua’s death this power was divided and distributed among the twelve captains of the tribes. As the story goes, the division of religious and secular office as well as the division of state power weakened the Hebrew state: different factions emerged and passions of envy, greed and thirst for glory arose, which led to civil war.

From the example of the Hebrew state, Spinoza derives the political principle that the sovereign power should be given the right to decide in religious matters and, more generally, that religion should consist ‘only in works, that is, simply in the exercise of charity and just dealing’ (Spinoza 2002a, 555). Spinoza sought ‘to tie together, in a transformed “pact,”’ a civil law that is still national and a religious law that is irreversibly universal, which is not adapted to the imaginary of any people in particular’ (Balibar 1997, 203). But this was precisely the difficulty: how can one construct a particular national identity, detached from all narratives of origin and religious election, and combine it with the fiction of ‘a universally “human”’ (Balibar 1997, 203)? Spinoza summons all kinds of arguments, metaphysical and pragmatic, to convince his readers of
this transformed ‘pact’ that would establish a real democracy, which grants equality and freedom to its citizens. From a pragmatic point of view, Spinoza argues that ‘human nature will not submit to unlimited repression’, and with reference to Seneca: ‘rule that depends on violence has never long continued; moderate rule endures’ (Spinoza 2002a, 438). This is to say that a sovereign who rules by force, contrary to the dictates of reason, effectively weakens and destroys the power of his own political body because he incites the indignation of the people, that is, conflicts and seditions.

On the contrary, a wise government enables the citizens ‘to develop their mental and physical faculties in safety, to use their reason without restraint’ (Spinoza 2002a, 567). Spinoza emphasizes in particular the right to freedom of expression, or more precisely, the freedom to philosophize. Already in the subtitle of the TTP and then again in the Preface, Spinoza asserts that ‘this freedom can be granted without detriment to public peace or to the right of civil authorities, and should be so granted, and cannot be withheld without great danger to peace and grave harm to the entire commonwealth’ (Spinoza 2002a, 393). Indeed, Spinoza not only claims that freedom of expression is compatible with the authority of the state, but ‘that the concession to individuals of a maximal liberty of thought and opinion is a necessary condition for both the continued authority of the state and for the stability of the commonwealth as a whole’ (Armstrong 2009, 295). After all, a state is not ‘a dominion within a dominion’ (E3PR) but part of nature: it is thus necessary to observe as far as possible the natural equality (or the unrestricted right that each individual possesses naturally) as well as the natural freedom (or the individual’s desire which can never be reduced to total submission) of all individuals. By mobilizing these metaphysical arguments, Spinoza concludes that a democratic regime, which guarantees pluralism and freedom of opinion, and governs its citizens ‘in such a way that the different and conflicting views they openly proclaim do not debar them from living together in peace’ (Spinoza 2002a, 570), is naturally the best and most stable of all regimes. ‘It is in closest accord with human nature’ and ‘comes closest to the natural state’ (Spinoza 2002a, 570).

**Free multitude and the truth of democracy**

After the social upheavals, encouraged by religious authorities and the House of Orange, and the subsequent overthrow of the Republican regime, Spinoza’s thought took a different direction. As Balibar suggests, realizing the internal difficulties of the TTP, Spinoza completely dropped the concept of pact and the ineffective appeal to the concept of freedom. ‘If the rights-powers of individuals do not combine harmoniously, then civil society will be destroyed. We see this happening when the repression of opinions leads to ideological struggle and thus to the infernal cycle of revolution and counter-revolution’ (Balibar 1998, 117). Spinoza has to rethink the modes of communication and reciprocal action that characterize the relation between individual powers and the state: individuals powers can no longer be conceived as separate, independent agents entering into a pact. The correlate of individual right or power cannot be ‘independence’, but must be ‘dependence’. As Balibar puts it: ‘To be in the power of others, to depend upon their power, can also constitute a positive condition through which one can, up to a point, preserve and
affirm one’s own individuality’ (Balibar, 1998, 61). It is this relationality and reciprocal
dependence that Balibar refers to with the notion of transindividuality.

Notably, the transindividual relation cannot be reduced to merely bilateral relations
among individuals, based on exchange. Rather it amounts to the reciprocal implication of
individual powers and composite powers (the civil society or state), which can be
characterized as relations of participation, mutual empowerment, collective action and
communication. There is no equivalent term in Spinoza: the closest is the concept of the
multitude, which remains ambivalent (for Spinoza as well as Balibar). Traditionally,
there has been by and large a great contempt for the masses, shared by all Roman
historians and political philosophers, from Sallust to Machiavelli, and Spinoza himself
in the TTP uses the pejorative term vulgus to refer to the masses. Yet, in the Political
Treatise, it is conspicuous that the term multitude is substituted for the term vulgus
(Montag 1999, 80). It appears that Spinoza in this way acknowledges the constitutive
power of the multitude for social reality.

While Spinoza remains aware of the inherent danger that lies in the power of the
masses (for instance, seditions in the name of prophets and ravaging wars of religion), he
now focuses on the multitude’s political potential to self-governance. In the Political
Treatise, notes Balibar

the multitude as such, not only in its quantitative sense (the ‘majority’ of citizens) but also in
its qualitative sense (the collective behaviour of individuals who are brought together en
masse), has become the decisive concept in this analysis of the State. Thus the political
problem no longer has two terms but three. ‘Individual’ and ‘State’ are in fact abstractions,
which only have meaning in relation to one another (Balibar 1998, 69).

The central question now becomes to what extent the multitude is capable of
governing its own passions (Balibar 1998, 58). How can destructive passions be held
in check in favour of more constructive forces such as common collective affections,
love and rational thought?

Spinoza acknowledges that

a constitution cannot stay intact, unless it is upheld both by reason and the common senti-
ment of the people; otherwise, if for instance laws are dependent solely on the support of
reason, they are likely to be weak and easily overthrown (Spinoza 2002b, 750–751).

In the Ethics he declares that the motivating force behind the formation of a state may
be the fear of a greater evil and the hope for a greater good, but once established a
political community cannot be chained together through a regime of fear: ‘Harmony is
often the result of fear: but such harmony is insecure. Further, fear arises from infirmity
of spirit, and moreover belongs not to the exercise of reason’ (E4AP16). According to
Spinoza, fear as well as hope belong to the group of passions that he calls ‘sad’, and are
expressions of passivity. As Balibar explains, a passive mass, driven by sad passions,
fluctuates under the influence of fortune between over-estimation and under-estimation of
its own power. This leads it to alternate between submission and revolt, between devotion to
its ‘prophets’ and the ‘great men’ sent by Providence, and hatred of those who govern it (Balibar 1998, 120).

Therefore, the crucial question will be how to effectuate an ‘internal transformation of the power of the mass (\textit{potentia multitudinis}), through which that power which was passive tends to become active’ (Balibar 1998, 120). How can the multitude be turned into a ‘free multitude’, that is, ‘a collectivity of citizens, who are enabled by their institutions to reach decisions, to supervise their application and to correct their effects’ (Balibar 1998, 120)?

According to Balibar, transparency in political affairs and circulation of information is a necessary prerequisite, in order to allow citizens to exercise their judgement. Indeed Spinoza says that ‘to seek to conduct all business without the knowledge of the citizens and then to expect them not to misjudge things and to put a bad interpretation on everything, this is the height of folly’ (Spinoza 2002b, 720). The policies of the state should be transparent and no secrecy in dealing with affairs of the state should prevail. Furthermore, Spinoza argues that the number of those participating in government affairs should be as large as possible and increase in proportion to the growth of those who are governed. Such a rule is supposed to assure that the power to pass and to repeal laws always rests on a large number of decision makers, be it in a monarchic, oligarchic or democratic state. ‘[I]t is only in their fewness that danger lies’ (Spinoza 2002b, 728). He implements this rule of the greatest possible number as an organisational and constitutional principle everywhere in his theory of institutions. The philosophical argument behind the principle of the greatest possible number is that out of quantity arise reasonable decisions for the common good. When only a few are deciding on the common good, they decide everything in conformity with their own passions. A large number, on the contrary, will be able to discover what they all approve – ‘by discussing, listening to others, and debating’ (Spinoza 2002b, 746).

Although Spinoza does not discuss the institutions and procedures of a democratic state (the \textit{Political Treatise} is left incomplete due to his premature death and the relevant chapters on democracy are missing), his discussion of the monarchic and oligarchic regimes are already guided by the political idea of democracy. Democracy functions as the limit concept of an ‘absolute sovereignty (\textit{omnino absolutum imperium})’, in which the rule of governance ‘is held by the people as a whole (\textit{integra multitudo})’ (Spinoza 2002b, 724). The absolute character of sovereignty means that all power lies in the people, that is, the masses. As Balibar argues, even in a monarchical system the masses play a fundamental role. In reality, it is not the king who decides, because as a single and weak individual he is incapable of holding the supreme power and guaranteeing the security of the state. He needs ‘generals or counsellors or friends’ whom he can trust (Spinoza 2002b, 701–702). This is why Spinoza says that absolute monarchies are in actual practice rather concealed aristocracies (Spinoza 2002b, 701–702). However, for the power of the king it can be quite detrimental to prefer a particular caste rather than another and to bestow it with certain privileges, because such a preferential treatment will necessarily cause rivalry and ambition among the courtiers and nobles. Thus to preserve his power, Balibar argues, the king is best advised to accept the following rational strategy:
All traces of corporatism must be eliminated, and the decision-making process must be grounded in the masses. […] We should notice that the mechanisms Spinoza describes are not only representative but also as egalitarian as possible. The king must play no role in the process of deliberation and elaboration of policy (Balibar 1998, 72).

His task is rather to sanction the opinion of the majority.

As for aristocracies, the matter is more complicated, because ‘an aristocracy cannot be transformed into an egalitarian regime without collapsing, for it is precisely the domination of a given class that is to be preserved as such’ (Balibar 1998, 73).

Nonetheless Balibar argues that ‘such a system […] still needs to be grounded in the masses. Whence this fundamental rule: in order for an aristocracy to be viable, it must enlarge the number of its members as far as possible’ (Balibar 1998, 73). A large number of decision-makers will best reflect the whole range of opinions to be found in the masses and will reach decisions that are informed by reasons. As a further constitutional measure in order to ensure the participation of the people in the government, Spinoza demands that bureaucrats should be appointed from the common people who are entrusted with the handling of state affairs. Spinoza’s final judgment on aristocracy appears to be rather negative; one of the main reasons is that in an aristocratic state the ruling members are determined by cooption and not by law. As Spinoza admits,

if we reflect on what happens in practice, or on human nature in general […] patricians will always think those are the best men who are wealthy, or near akin to themselves, or close friends. It is true that, if patricians were of such a nature that in choosing their colleagues they could free themselves from all bias and be guided only by zeal for the public good, there would be no state to compare with aristocracy. But experience has abundantly taught us that the very opposite is the case, especially with oligarchies where the will of the patricians, in the absence of rivals, is quite unrestrained by law (Spinoza 2002b, 752–753).

Monarchic as well as aristocratic regimes, inasmuch as they tend toward their own ‘perfection’, open the way for democracy (Balibar 1998, 74). An effective democratic state ruled by laws, which the multitude has given to itself, seems to be the best possible regime according to Spinoza. The diversity of opinions within the multitude is no hindrance for democracy but rather one of its conditions. In fact

the institutions must bring about the conditions for the greatest possible diversification of opinions, so that the decisions they produce can effectively be based on the combination of all existing points of view. This explains Spinoza’s hostility to political-religious parties, not because they are at odds with public opinion but because they are mechanisms for reducing its complexity, by channeling it into pre-established categories (Balibar 1998, 121–122).

What needs to be established then is the institutional framework for an inclusive public discourse, the access to and transparency of information, as well as participatory structures for decision-making processes. While these are tasks that have to be accomplished within politics, in concrete circumstances, and cannot be predetermined in advance by philosophy, there is nonetheless an important lesson to be drawn from
Spinoza’s anthropological and political reflections: the transindividual dimension is central for the constitution of the individual’s power of action as well as for the constitution of the power of the multitude (which includes rulers and the ruled, sovereign and citizens). As Balibar argues, ‘It is the relationship of each individual to other individualities and their reciprocal actions and passions which determine the form of the individual’s desire and actuate its power. Singularity is a trans-individual function’ (Balibar 1998, 108). This is to say that the individual’s power of action and autonomy is maintained, even when it is part of a larger collective; indeed its power of action can be enhanced through relations with others. At the same time, the combination of individual powers, their interaction and common rationality increase the power of the free multitude – not in the sense of an arithmetical sum but through transindividual relations, which include rational and passional components. In short, one does not have to choose between individualism and organicism (or holism). Balibar’s argument is that this dualism is false and we have to move beyond it by experimenting with new concepts, such as the concept of the transindividual.

**Conclusion**

Both Deleuze and Balibar propose a reading of Spinoza that opens up resources for contemporary political and ethical thought. They draw from Spinoza’s metaphysics a relational schema between individual modes, through which the singularity of each mode is reciprocally determined.

According to Deleuze, this reciprocal determination takes place on ‘a common plane of immanence on which all bodies, all minds, and all individuals are situated’ (Deleuze 1988, 122). The lesson to be learnt from Spinoza is an ethics of the encounter, an ethology that evaluates the ‘composition of fast and slow speeds, of capacities for affecting and being affected on this plane of immanence’ (Deleuze 1998, 125). Hence, what have to be organized are encounters that increase the individual’s power of action; what has to be constructed is an assemblage that permits the production of desire. Yet in spite of the fact that the assemblage is always collective and desire is part of the social infrastructure, we might wonder whether this ethics is capable of going beyond the micropolitical sphere, and even whether such a theory of the constitution of the social bond recognises the reality of political procedures at all.

Balibar, on the contrary, in his discussion of Spinoza’s political writings deals with properly ‘macropolitical’ tools: he raises the question of institutions, the idea of which is to make the totality of individual powers compatible and to permit the collective construction of the common good. Balibar asks us to move beyond the classical dichotomy of individual right and autonomy on the one hand, and social obligation and coercion on the other. By means of the concept of transindividuality, he points to the reciprocal implication of the individual and the collective, which is irreducible to a physical causality of bilateral exchanges among individuals. Transindividual relations include practices as diverse as those of production, consumption, law, education, science and ideology; it therefore operates on two levels: the real and the imaginary. While Balibar adheres to the double expression of the real and the imaginary, for Deleuze these two
registers no longer exist: there is only a single plane of immanence on which all bodies, affects and signs circulate.

A second difference between Balibar and Deleuze seems to be important, which concerns their respective conception of the masses or the multitude. For Balibar, the multitude is an ambivalent power that fluctuates between activity and passivity, agreement and disagreement, knowledge and imagination. It needs to be transformed into an active, constitutive power, since in itself ‘it is a contradictory power, internally divided against itself: as such, it is unable to decide anything. It lacks the minimum of coherence that would allow it to correct its errors, to adjust ends to means’ (Balibar 1998, 71). The political task is then to enable the multitude to understand its metabolism with nature, of which it forms a part, and to liberate itself from blind obedience to an imaginary system of rules: ‘the power of the masses can destroy the imperium only if it finds in the institutions themselves the means of organizing itself into tendencies, into parties, in a word, to constitute itself into imperia in imperio (Balibar 1989, 185). We may wonder whether this reluctance to trust in the power of the masses, detached from any institutional regulation, is really justified. Can the collective liberation of dominated and exploited masses only proceed through Spinozan wisdom (the regulation of affects and accumulation of adequate ideas, constitutional measures and institutional procedures)?

Lastly, we may ask whether in a Spinozist universe of determined causes we will actually be able to think something like a revolutionary break. This doubt is perhaps only compounded by the way that in Anti-Oedipus, Deleuze and Guattari claim that what has to be achieved is a ‘rupture with causality’:

Do these masses or these links [the ‘weakest links’ of a given system, D.V.] act in their own place, within the order of causes and aims that promote a new socius, or are they on the contrary the place and the agent of a sudden and unexpected irruption, all irruption of desire that breaks with causes and aims and overturns the socius, revealing its other side? (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 177)

By thinking the possibility of a rupture with causality and an irruption of becoming Deleuze and Guattari certainly go beyond Spinoza and possibly beyond Balibar. If this controversy is not resolved, this only shows to what extent Spinozist thought is still a challenge for us today.

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Notes

2. Zourabichvili highlights Spinoza’s overall pessimism articulated in the Political Treatise: ‘Spinoza exposes a general schema of decadence of the State, from a primitive democracy
towards a final monarchic barbarism.’ (Zourabichvili 2002, 249). The only real historical chances to ultimately disrupt the ‘physicalist’ regime of political transformations lie in the possibility of insurrection or struggle of independence, which requires a ‘people of children’ (des peuples en enfants), freed from the reign of memory and ingrained habits (ibid.). This is for Zourabichvili the task of the free multitude.

3. The strange kinship between Spinoza’s and Nietzsche’s thought can be substantiated by Nietzsche’s well known enthusiastic remark in a letter to Overbeck in summer 1881: ‘I am utterly amazed, utterly enchanted! I have a precursor, and what a precursor! I hardly knew Spinoza: that I should have turned to him just now, was inspired by “instinct”’ (KSB 6:111, letter 135 (July 30, 1881)). However, as several scholars argued, it is likely that Nietzsche never read Spinoza directly but that his knowledge was mediated through his reading of secondary literature, in particular Kuno Fischer’s Geschichte der neueren Philosophie. See Wollenberg 2013.

4. Spinoza’s efforts to elaborate the best possible institutional infrastructure for different political systems, such as monarchy and aristocratic oligarchy, do not constitute an objection to this, since the best and most stable monarchical and oligarchical systems, for Spinoza, incorporate democratic elements and tend towards a greater number of those who govern. Nor does Nietzsche’s praise for the aristocratic masters contradict this hypothesis, since they confirm their ‘free spirits’ in a horizontal, agonal struggle of forces.

5. As Deleuze says in Difference and Repetition, there are ‘three principal moments in the history of the philosophical elaboration of the univocity of being’: while the first is marked by the work of Duns Scotus, the second and third are to be found in the work of Spinoza and Nietzsche (Deleuze 1994, 39).

6. Deleuze comments on introducing the concept of intensity in the appended notes of the English translator in Expressionism in Philosophy: ‘It is quite true that one doesn’t, strictly speaking, find intensity in Spinoza. But potentia and vis cannot be understood in terms of extension. And potentia, being essentially variable, showing increase and diminution, having degrees in relation to finite modes, is an intensity. If Spinoza doesn’t use this word, current up to the time of Descartes, I imagine this is because he doesn’t want to appear to be returning to a Precartesian physics. Leibniz is less concerned by such worries. And does one not find in Spinoza the expression “pars potentiae divinae”? ’ (Deleuze 1992, 417–418).

7. Simon Duffy provides a detailed analysis of this logic of differentiation from the differential point of view of the infinitesimal calculus. See Duffy 2006.

8. Deleuze adds that the existence of modes outside their attribute does not contradict the theory of immanence, for ‘Spinoza doesn’t say that existing modes are no longer contained in substance, but rather that they “are no longer only” contained in substance or attribute. The difficulty is easily resolved if we consider that extrinsic distinction remains always and only a modal distinction. Modes do not cease to be modes once they are posited outside their attribute, for this extrinsic position is purely modal rather than substantial’ (Deleuze 1992, 214). Deleuze explains the theory of distinction, which is so crucial for his reading of Spinoza, in chapter 1 of Expressionism in Philosophy; see also chapter 3, 63–67.

9. Deleuze will never abandon the theory of multiplicities, although Badiou, one of his greatest critics, indicts him for precisely the conception of qualitative (continuous and intensive) multiplicities. One of the problems with this concept is how to prevent it from collapsing into the One. As Badiou argues, Deleuze’s closeness to Bergson is responsible for reducing
Riemann’s mathematical thought to the notion of qualitative multiplicities, thereby forestalling an adequate thinking of the multiple-without-one. See Badiou 2004. For a critical debate of Badiou’s arguments, see Toscano 2006, esp. 187–198.

10. Guattari deserves to be treated separately by taking into account his published oeuvre, his analyses of the ‘Integrated World Capitalism’, his political practice as an activist, and his work at the psychiatric clinic La Borde.

11. The term ‘individualism’ itself can be traced back to the 19th century. In the French context, it was primarily used in a pejorative sense to describe the prioritizing of individual interests over the common good. Alexis de Tocqueville, for instance, a French aristocrat and political philosopher, made use of the term in his book *Democracy in America* (1835) to criticize a tendency toward egotism and the general withdrawal from public space into the private and domestic sphere. See especially Vol. 2, Book 2: ‘Influence of Democracy on the Feelings of Americans’.

12. *Individuation* describes the process through which an individual is formed by increasingly distancing itself from the environment and gaining a degree of autonomy. *Individualization* is a more intricate process that applies primarily to psychosocial individuals: it describes the formation of subjects within a social context. The basic idea is that a subject’s singularity is shaped only within the dynamic of collective praxis. Cf. Balibar 1996, 43; Simondon 2013, 257–258.

13. Simondon defines ‘transduction’ as follows: ‘We understand by transduction a physical, biological, mental, social operation through which an activity propagates gradually within a domain, by founding this propagation on a structuration of the domain that is realised from one place to the next’. See Simondon 2013, 32; my translation, D.V.

14. Contrary to Balibar, Deleuze does not take into account the imaginary dimension of politics as such, since for him the imaginary is not a separate domain but a relay of signs, order words and collective enunciations that enter into the assemblage of bodies on the same plane of immanence.

15. On the different terms that Spinoza uses to refer to forms of collective life (such as *populus, plebs, vulgus, turba, multitudo*) and their respective meanings, see Warren Montag’s chapter ‘The body of the multitude’ (Montag 1999, esp. 76–82).

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