



## Commonism

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To mention Spinoza in some leftist circles is to risk an understandable incredulity. The familiar criticisms include whether Spinoza's explorations of emotion, theology, and metaphysics can be interpreted in any way to address the deep contradictions and predicaments of the contemporary period. Asserting that Spinoza is the first post-Marxist might be true, dialectically, but not to a dialectics where Marx and Spinoza can actually meet. Within Spinoza's schema, this idea itself would be deemed "inadequate" and yet, in a moment when capitalist crisis screams for the insight of Marxist critique, communism sometimes seems a quintessentially Spinozist project. No Marxist (including the Marx who, tired of petty "phrase-mongering," remarked to Lafargue that "if that is Marxism, I am not a Marxist") can possibly believe Spinozism amounts to a communist idea if, by that idea, a riddle of history has been solved, as Marx puts it in 1844, and it knows itself to be this solution.<sup>1</sup> A strategy of refusal, for instance, not only describes a specific moment of Italian workerism before the predations of the capitalist factory, but also Marxism's verdict on Spinozism as a dividing line between the possibilities of revolutionary practice and those wanton idealists the other side of the Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach. As Balibar aptly puts it, Spinoza's thought "represents a complex of contradictions without a genuine solution."<sup>2</sup> Yet the question of synthesis, at once impossible and incredible, hangs over Marxist theory where, let us say, our desire from Cultural Studies to resist divisions in intellectual labor compels us to examine irresolution as itself a materialist symptom, of what, these brief notes intend to examine.

If Spinozism is necessarily a lost cause for Marxism, then it is, in the spirit of Žižek's wild interventions, a heresy that must be embraced for all the terror of its contradictions (just as, Althusser reminds us, Spinozism was terrifying to its own time).<sup>3</sup> It is simply not enough, theoretically or politically, to adumbrate the alchemist of affect for not being more "red," or Gramsci, or Fanon, as if the challenge of metaphysics in materialism has been met and the proper genealogy of revolutionary thought has been secured in the name of those whose praxis and practicality are

unimpeachable on their own terms. But it is also remarkably blinkered to assume the “Marx beyond Marx” is categorically Spinoza, however appreciable such a theoretical conceit might be. We know that Spinozism has affected and continues to animate specific articulations of radicalism; the only significant question is whether the substance of that engagement is true to the event of change in which it is precipitate. This, of course, is not a matter of relevance, or even of being true to Spinoza (whatever that means), but of discovering in the conjunction that is Spinoza/Marx a tenor of transformation appropriate to the material conditions of the crisis (of capitalism and of alternatives to the same). If the latter is resolved in a flourish of theoretical superfluity then such a dialogic will not have been for aught, for what is rendered excess is an historical decision (a decision of history) and not the adjudication of individual intellect. And even then, the lost cause, as Žižek underlines, may be scandalously and necessarily “found” again.

For the purposes of this argument, let us suppose that Spinozism is the lost cause and “commonism” is its proposed effect. Within this parallax of theory, communism is a lost cause and Marxism is its metaleptic effect. The dialectic of the parallax is not in parallel, and historically so, which is why the elements demand articulation, keeping in mind that “lost” is a challenge, not a statement of fact. What Hardt and Negri call Spinoza’s parallelism (he does not use this word, or at least not in the proposition “the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things,” which is cited to demonstrate the term) is an example of analogism, or more precisely, *formaliter*, an inherent equivalence between an idea and object in extension.<sup>4</sup> This is a materialist concept of Nature, but one where the idea is an effect of its very proposition (proof, as it were, of causal parallelism, is a matter of the conceptual apparatus, not formal contradiction). Just as, for Spinoza, an idea is a concept of the mind, and mind, in its turn, is an expression of the body, so here “commonism” and communism are attributes of material substantiation; their idea, as such, does not live by individual nomination or “pre-established solution.” As I hope to emphasize, the difference between “commonism” and communism is not simply that between the common and the commune, but emerges around fundamental questions about the institutional modes of transformation and the agency putatively meant to achieve it. The form of this irresolution is precisely what pulls Spinoza, reluctantly and controversially, into the present.

Blanchot once noted “one does not belong to communism, and communism does not let itself be designated by what it names.”<sup>5</sup> There are lots of ways in which communism is being contested, especially when no state was able to attain it. The desire has been separated from its teleology just as in China it has been cleaved from ideological substance. This is the time for involution and non-linear genealogy; the time, as it were, for “Hegel or Spinoza” in Macherey’s telling book title.<sup>6</sup> For Giovanni Arrighi, Chinese communism has folded in on itself and Mao Zedong has become Adam Smith.<sup>7</sup> Flush with all of the verve of the future anterior, Marx’s communism will have been

Spinoza's joy all along, and who would not desire that given what communism became in the twentieth century? Caught in the Cold War's two versions of dementia, radical critique often seems to back into the future with all of the optimism of Gloucester on his way to Dover. But this does justice neither to the theorization nor to the implication of Blanchot's quip. The "is" of communism was supposed to meet the "is" of capitalism at the level of revolutionary peripeteia, the point of praxis where one mode could no longer out-revolutionize itself. Communism cannot name anything under capitalism. To borrow from Rancière, it is the part of no part to come.

Backing into this future, as a devil of regress, it is useful to ponder what has become of the common in Hardt and Negri:

A democracy of the multitude is imaginable and possible only because we all share and participate in the common. By "the common" we mean, first of all, the common wealth of the material world—the air, the water, the fruits of the soil, and all nature's bounty—which in classic European political texts is often claimed to be the inheritance of humanity as a whole, to be shared together. We consider the common also and more significantly those results of social production that are necessary for social interaction and further production, such as knowledges, languages, codes, information, affects, and so forth. This notion of the common does not position humanity separate from nature, as either its exploiter or its custodian, but focuses rather on the practices of interaction, care, and cohabitation in a common world, promoting the beneficial and limiting the detrimental forms of the common. In the era of globalization, issues of the maintenance, production, and distribution of the common in both these senses and in both ecological and socioeconomic frameworks become increasingly central.<sup>8</sup>

Much of this, one could argue, is a précis of Spinoza's *Tractatus Politicus* (hereafter, *TP*) and I want to implicate this elaboration of the common as a basis for the imagination and possibility of a democracy of the multitude, for which I am using the term "commonism."<sup>9</sup> This is a different approach than that used by Hardt and Negri themselves, who use the "common" specifically to foreground the question of the abolition of private property central to the *Communist Manifesto* while separating it from the organizational forms that historically it has inspired. In his essay, "The Common in Communism," Hardt notes that the alternative of capitalism or socialism favors the former because of the assumptions sedimented in the production of the latter.<sup>10</sup> The common in communism can only be realized by reconceptualizing the break from capitalism as precisely not one effulgent in the production of state socialism. To the extent "socialism" is ideologically deployed to mark liberal excesses within capitalism ("Obama is a socialist," etc.), continual clarification is required.

For his part, Hardt emphasizes the contradictions that profit and rent in capitalism necessitate, placing the common at the center of a communist project. The state as such, and industrial capitalism, are not the nexus of transformational possibilities but, as the trilogy *Empire*, *Multitude*, and *Commonwealth* affirms, the ground has shifted to immaterial labor and biopolitical production where accumulation strategies and exploitation are of a different order. I would argue it is precisely because Hardt and Negri read the contemporary struggle as one over “immaterial property” rather than material property (Marx’s initial formulations) that we need to distinguish the valence of the political intervention implied. In short, the Spinozist form of the common is not the Marxist form of the commune; this, indeed, is the dialectical tension of “commonism” and communism in addressing the contemporary crises of capitalism.

Before elaborating the necessity for such distinction in the “new Spinoza” or “Spinoza now,” I should point out that in principle none of the characteristics of immaterial property are necessarily outside the struggle for communist futures. Patents on genetic information and the whole discourse of intellectual property rights, for instance, constitute vital arenas of contestation in the world system and, however amorphous the political forms of change sometimes sound in Hardt’s and Negri’s work, their emphases are salutary and inspirational. Missteps abound, however, in how the various accumulation strategies of capitalism are integrated as the basis for critical opposition. For instance, Hardt usefully underlines that finance capital expropriates from the common while appearing to transact in an autonomous domain of credit (it is important to distinguish, as Marx does, between fictitious and fiction in financialization, just as Hilferding does in his elaboration of capitalist mobilization), but why this should be deemed immaterial falls short of explaining the processes in play. A significant factor in the “financial meltdown” of 2007 / 2008 was banks’ overexposure to positions in derivative markets. These are complex financial instruments that not only permit the dilution of risk in investments but also the bundling of good and bad assets into contracts emphasizing the former over the latter. The bad assets, say, mortgage-backed securities, are not immaterial even though they fed and feed speculative frenzy. In short, “immaterial” in this example fails to constellate the “value” of contracts with the conditions of foreclosure or deserted tracts of suburban sprawl. Similarly, substituting affect for effect vaunts immateriality over substantive cause but here the question remains whether immateriality is adequate to operative logics of capital accumulation which may be immaterial but are nevertheless objective, as Marx puts it.

In order to gauge what is living and dead in the imaginative possibility of commonism, in part, one could follow Negri’s protocol of going back to Spinoza, but I read this more polemically as backing into Spinoza. The difference is clear in the sharp juxtaposition of Spinoza’s *TP* and the somewhat abrupt conclusions Negri draws from it in the penultimate chapter of his collection, *Subversive Spinoza* (example,

“Spinoza is ontology”).<sup>11</sup> The resulting play in chiaroscuro can also be discerned in the permutations of commonwealth in the book of the same name, about which I will comment further in due course. Again, basically, “commonism” is not communism, but it is more forcefully an imagination of communism requisite to its instantiation.

Like Marx’s *Capital*, Spinoza’s *TP* is an unfinished critique, as if extended revolutionary analysis of either the economic or the political is doomed to fall beneath man’s most pedestrian universalism, death. But Marx worked harder and longer on these issues and so he not only had a plan for *Capital*’s entirety but voluminous notes to complete the project, albeit in the hands of Engels and Kautsky (for what is revolution but the tension between amanuensis and artifice?). Spinoza, hobbled by inhaling glass dust, gives us barely three pages on the subject of democracy and nothing at all of the proposed section on law. Spinozists interested in political theory have therefore often turned to the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (hereafter *TTP*) or, more controversially, the *Ethics* to build a politics of the state from its potential (Deleuze, I would argue, is much less troubled by the shortfall, which becomes, in his “Cours Vincennes,” a means to police the philosophical). Ultimately, one would want to elaborate in detail the logic of political economy through the structure of these elisions and emendations less in the service of Spinozist Marxism but more as a way to concretize the desire called revolution in the twenty-first century. This is also, by the way, why I tend to respond to Macherey’s celebrated intervention with “Spinoza or Marx” (Marx in the position of Spinoza, Spinoza in the position of Hegel — more about Macherey below). Let us say here that what Marx and Spinoza hold in common in these texts is not “commonism,” still less communism (a word, like “capitalism,” that appears in neither work), but a means to their social contestation that is their fruition. Since I do not take such commonality lightly, I emphasize that the “or” in “Spinoza or Marx” is about the role of dialectics. Just as you cannot take any Marxist seriously who disregards dialectical method, so you can only smile at a Spinozist who thinks logic is the itemization of affect. For some, the devil in the details amounts to eclecticism — Marx and Spinoza — as if Hegelian essence in one awaits accretion through the difference that precedes identity in the other. But the “or” is also overly strident, a mark of divided paths symptomatic of the conditions of French and Italian communism of the Sixties and Seventies, the proof of which suggests, as Jameson has done, that Althusserianism may have aspired but failed to become a method as such (this may also explain the turn to Foucault in many of the same thinkers). The “or,” however, is not a basis of rejection but a challenge about relation, a confrontation over the capacities of thought, systematic or chaotic, to overcome its constitutive insufficiencies in the current conjuncture. In the preface to the second edition of *Hegel ou Spinoza*, Macherey points out the idiosyncrasy of the French “or”: it indistinctively translates the “or” and “either/or” connotations of its Latin root, a language that also provides us with the word “vel” in addition to “aut” (“vel,” of course, is a key word for Lacan, and describes the space of non-meaning between

the Subject and the Other, Being and Meaning, which is the fundamental division in the dialectic of the subject). Unfortunately for Macherey, Latin scholars are much divided on the differences of “vel” and “aut,” which is only to say that they may be read metonymically, a practice that cannot bear the philosophical distinction Macherey wishes to advance. Nevertheless, while this proves Macherey is not emulating Derrida (who is quoted approvingly, but not followed), we can maintain his injunction on Hegel or Spinoza as “la crise ouverte par leur confrontation.” The “or,” then, is only decisive to the extent it provokes precisely this confrontation, the agon of thought that is revolutionary, which is much more than a semantic distinction. In the “and,” we studiously read revolution as cumulative; in the “or” it is paradoxically conjoined as subtraction—revolution as all that is left to thought, or perhaps, in common, “determinatio est negatio.”<sup>12</sup>

The *TP* that we have is Spinoza’s attempt to think the practice of commonwealth as it is occasioned by different forms of political structure: monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. He is not interested in metacritique, say, satire, or in speculative reason, say, utopia, which is why literary theory in a Spinozist grain concerns itself primarily with the *Ethics* and its aesthetic feel for man’s substance as nature. Rights over nature, as a power of the multitude, are held to be dominion, and whatever the form of political structure, dominion is delegated to it. What is entirely subject to dominion is commonwealth, but its mode is characterized as a state and its practice a state of affairs. As such, there is nothing too surprising about this division for philosophy but I am particularly interested in the meaning of commonwealth that it distills, for this is the basis of dominion to come wherein what is subtracted from state makes practice coextensive with commonwealth (Spinoza does not say this, of course, for he writes a tractatus, not a manifesto). Still, the commonwealth is the will of the multitude and human right is coextensive with that will, and those who reason otherwise are its enemies, who “may be coerced by force.”<sup>13</sup> A commonwealth, suggests Spinoza, provides for freedom from oppression in ways that a man in nature cannot provide (a man must sleep, he says, and oppression need not, so commonwealth fights it collectively when man cannot individually). It is important to remember, first, these are descriptive components of commonwealth which must then be rearticulated in terms of distinctive forms; and, second, commonwealth is not conceived in isolation but in multiplicity and in a state of contracting powers. What decides commonwealth is not its uniqueness but the edge of its dominion, beyond which one may find either man in nature or other commonwealths. This is the decisive weakness of state structure; short of universality, its power of dominion exists only in an unstable equilibrium with other states, each of whom has a right to war, as Spinoza puts it. The natural law of the state is its persistence in existence and independence even if this be at cost to other states. Nevertheless, this need not be detrimental to the citizenry; indeed, Spinoza notes that men naturally aspire to the civil state as a form of group security, and war may be seen as consistent with

such preservation. Ultimately, however, peace is a virtue — for obedience — and this is more conducive to state persistence. The only problem with these principles from the opening chapters of the *TP* is that they appear to dissolve in the actual practices of monarchies and aristocracies that follow.

Let us consider two very brief examples. The limit of right is power and in the monarch this power is limited to the king as purveyor of right. Spinoza bemoans the fact that too many citizens are governed by passions that relinquish commonwealth to the arbitrary and capricious machinations of the monarch. But the more absolute this passionate displacement, the more likely the monarch will live in fear of the citizens whose return for passion is thereby experienced as loss and unhappiness. On this point, we might say Spinoza knows his Machiavelli but Machiavelli does not fully comprehend the potential of the multitude. In the interplay of councils, clans, and judges, the monarch exploits their self-interest in the maintenance of his own. Yet, in explaining these foundations, Spinoza faces several problems including, most prominently, the difficulty of historical adjudication. The references to Ulysses may appear casual but they nevertheless draw attention to the vagaries attending specificity in monarchical forms where possible subterfuge is driven by what seems natural to commonwealth under dominion and not to the actual antinomies in its historical distillation. For some, this would be an advantage, that Spinoza is precisely engaged in an understanding of the logic of rule in this constellation, and not the messy particulars that might contravene its natural disposition. But, to support his warning that the monarch must not marry a foreigner, he resorts first to an example from the Hebrew Bible and then to that of Louis XIV, whose marriage to Marie-Thérèse, the daughter of King Philip IV of Spain, is said to precipitate war (this war is known as the War of Devolution). Leaving aside the historical veracity of the Bible, we can say regional strategy was more important to the Sun King than the non-payment of his wife's dowry by the Spanish. This history, of course, is very much close to home since the French subsequently and easily invaded the Spanish Netherlands, requiring the Dutch to switch sides and enlist the somewhat interested predilections of the British. To this we would have to add discussion on the Peace of Westphalia and, at the very least, the influence of the Holy Roman Empire, but the point is that the fact of foreign marriage does not do justice to the complex conditions of monarchical rule at the time. Perhaps because these events are directly connected to the horrific murder, mutilation, and, by some accounts, cannibalizing of the de Witt brothers in 1672, Spinoza prefers not to give substance to his propositions — this would require reading the *TP* in terms of its own “vel,” the non-meaning that structures the dialectic of its subject (the “*ultimi barbarorum*” as Spinoza puts it). The best monarchy is instituted by a free multitude (Shirley translates “multitude” as “people”), suggests Spinoza, for which only these foundations will serve.<sup>14</sup> Since there is no example of such a monarchy in the *TP* (“no state, as far as I know, has included in its constitution all of the features I have here described”), might we conclude it is but the monarch's

utopian desire?<sup>15</sup> The positive impulse in the negation of this possibility is that which Balibar cannily roots in what he calls the ambivalence of Spinoza's "mass standpoint." It is ambivalent for two reasons: first, in whether we can actually interpret the mass ("multitude," "people") as a positive force alongside or in opposition to the notions of state Spinoza outlines; second, in whether "fear of the mass" bears within it more than that which the mass produces. This makes all the difference in how we might creatively engage a politics beyond the "vel," or choice, to which it otherwise leads. If Balibar's reading of Spinoza on the mass is everywhere hesitant and problematic in its assertions, it is because Spinoza himself vacillates profoundly on whether a state form could secure the dominion of the mass (we should ask ourselves appropriately whether Lenin or Mao, for instance, offers a more robust response to this problem, but Balibar's point is that "affective ambivalence" is constitutive in Spinoza of political possibility).<sup>16</sup>

The same conceit operates in the interstices of Spinoza's account of the aristocracy which ostensibly is framed around the question of proportionality, i.e., the number of patricians required for the governance of a particular dominion. There is much work to be done on the scale of dominion in these passages, particularly since it is not obvious that an apparatus exists to scale dominion to the point where the multitude meets commonwealth (a substantial absent cause in Hardt and Negri). In *Commonwealth*, it is not enough to celebrate the disorganized nature of the multitude and its capacity for spontaneous political action, as if necessity pivots on some social equivalent of the pyrophoric. Mobs and crowds, for instance, have always played a role in modern social change but they do not represent its determinate instance. Capital, unlike Spinoza, does not fear the mass but specific constellations of organized opposition which threaten its reproduction as a relation beyond individual events. In isolation, the crowd is an imaginary foe; the real substance of its danger rests in the logic that enables it to coalesce. This is not to discount any power in random association, just to underline that it is not the primary form of hegemony's sublation. Setting aside this problem, however, Spinoza continues to waver on critical elements of his approach. On one hand, we have again the forbidding intrusion of historical fact into the formal exegesis — a reference to the artisans and guilds of Lower Germany reminds us of the principal antagonism of Spinoza's Netherlands, the class friction of the merchants, the States Faction whose champion was the aforementioned and forlorn Johan de Witt, and the artisans or middle classes, who preferred a strong House of Orange to counter the predations of the merchants (and to some extent the British, since Cromwell had signed an Act of Exclusion with de Witt to keep the House of Orange from power — William III was the grandson of the decapitated Charles I). On the other hand, the more Spinoza details the best practices of aristocracy, the more one doubts his sincerity in the matter. Think of the council of syndics, for instance, who for preserving the constitution should receive a tax levy from every household and still more from the patricians, whether they participate in council meetings or not

(note, Spinoza's aristocratic political form has characteristics American democracy does not — a progressive tax system and voting by ballot without filibusters). High taxes, Spinoza wagers, are the price of peace, yet when he notes “What nation ever had to pay such heavy taxes as the Dutch?” Spinoza knows this peace dividend has not emerged.<sup>17</sup> And, since he was beaten up attempting to collect debts for his father's firm, he must have understood that voluntary payment of any kind is neither assured nor begets peace. In these cases, then, monarchy and aristocracy, we read a treatise on the best practices of both that neither correspond to Spinoza's historical experience, nor to what is axiomatic in his *Ethics* and elsewhere; namely, that what is common in commonwealth is negated by servitude. Macherey suggests Hegel must denegate Spinoza because his work signals an anti-dialectics as well as a path to a non-teleological dialectics (this is why Macherey places Hegel before Spinoza). The difficulty of the *TP* for a viable commonwealth is not just its standard linearity (monarchy, aristocracy, democracy) but that it pleads so hard against satire it more or less becomes it.

Still, Spinoza is clear such dominions can dissolve even if the dissolution he details is in stark contrast to the states or state in which he lives. And so I move quickly to democracy, the fulfillment of commonwealth or its imaginary resolution in “communism.” In the *TTP* democracy is most often read as politics' most natural form and in *TP* it is described as “the perfectly absolute dominion.” The problem is this characteristic is not the negation of either monarchy or aristocracy; indeed, Spinozists have pointed out that in general Spinoza favors aristocratic dominion in more than one city as the most agreeable political form and, even without this preference, all three structures of dominion constitute viable alternatives, particularly if they are true to their genealogical traditions and maintain stability in that regard. As long as there is respect for tangible freedom among its subjects, the question of institutional structure is in fact secondary. Thus, when Spinoza argues in the *TTP*, “the true aim of government is liberty,” it is noticeable this is not the preserve of democracy alone.<sup>18</sup> Here, then, is “communism” as imaginary; that is, as a prototypical political form for which alternative institutional structures may be proposed. Spinoza does not assume political participation as decisive. (In aristocracy, for instance, it is the independence of the supreme council that is more important than the claims of the multitude — this is basically what Spinoza means by “absolute” in his political critique.) While it is not my position to be heretic to the heretic, I would suggest that what Macherey says of the “or” between Hegel and Spinoza is not consistent with the “or” between monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. Does dominion, therefore, meet commonwealth in the “vel” separating political forms, and is it this méconnaissance, like that between Hegel and Spinoza, that articulates the breach we call “communism”?

In *Subversive Spinoza*, Negri takes the position that Spinoza's claims for democracy in the *TP* are obscured only by the circumstances of its publication (death) and that nevertheless the *TP* is a work of time to come, “a fundamental text for the construction

of modern democracy.”<sup>19</sup> Now, it is true the earlier chapters on natural right and reason can be positively invoked in the articulation of democracy, but there are times in Negri’s defense of the *TP* when it appears he has not read the bulk of the text of the *TP* dedicated to the best dominion in terms of monarchy and aristocracy. Make no mistake, there are bad monarchies and aristocracies, as Spinoza himself was too painfully aware, but one must struggle at every turn to make the *TP* the scene of a subsumption of the monarchy and aristocracy as political forms by democracy. From this perspective, Negri’s understanding of political structure is simply “subverted Spinoza.” But this is also his genius with regard to “commonism” (interestingly, the *TP* has been discussed as a polemic for communitarianism, which is in accord with its contrast to liberalism). It is not that Negri closes his eyes to the text of *TP*, but that he (and to some extent Hardt; although the latter is a close reader of Spinoza, he is an even closer reader of Negri himself) finds the constitutive non-meaning of democracy in the Venn diagram of the *TP* appropriately fecund for completing its geometry. Just as Rancière gives us the philosophical feint that is “hatred of democracy” (a political unconscious more obvious in neoliberalism and the increasingly false choice of voting), so Negri considers what political structure could be if the conclusion of *TTP* was actually the elaboration of democracy cut short in the *TP* by Spinoza’s expiration. “Commonism,” commonwealth, and the commons do not appear in Negri’s reading of Spinoza’s *TP*, but what I am suggesting is that this composite elision is a faithful correlative of what Spinoza does not say about democracy. One does not necessarily have to be a dialectician to hold this productive contradiction in tension. Indeed, it is no coincidence that Macherey, the vigilant critic of “aut” between Hegel and Spinoza, is Althusser’s best exponent of the symptomatic reading, the realm of the non-said, the place where the text is constrained not to speak the conditions that are its very possibility. This does not reduce “commonism” to a promissory note, but it would suggest, at the very least, a critical framework that might usefully be deployed not just to Spinoza’s *TP*, but to Macherey’s and Negri’s reading of the same. In this short speculative gloss, could we say that “commonism” is the non-said of communism, a kind of communist conatus of the common, a striving itself ostensibly cut short by the collapse of its actual existence in 1989 to 1991?

There are lots of problems, philosophical and political, with such a project, a few of which appear in Hardt’s and Negri’s *Commonwealth*. Here I will mention just a couple of them as they relate directly to Spinozism (which Negri refers to as a state of mind). First, possibility cannot recommend itself over actuality, a lesson we can draw from my Blanchot quote but one with which he could only have strenuously disagreed (it is Hegelian). At this level, the schism between “commonism” and communism is rather quaint because the actuality of actual existence historically seems now to have performed its own imaginary resolution. More to the point, however, I have pressed a role for “commonism” as imaginative, but as we know, Spinoza, like Descartes, saw imagination as a bugbear for reason even if it still played a significant role in

knowledge. Recall that Spinoza specifically separates intellect, the non-imagistic realm of adequate ideas, from imagination, the imagistic enclave of inadequate ideas. And yet Negri passionately, let us say, forwards the notion of an ontological imagination as posing the problem of “the dialectical fate of the West and its desperate crisis.”<sup>20</sup> In a resounding flourish, Negri claims Spinozism “does not sweep away the imagination of communism but makes it come true.”<sup>21</sup> Following Spinoza, we would have to say that this has happened, in that what came true was an inadequate idea. But without this inadequacy, communist reason cannot articulate itself as such and thus it is not beyond caution (*caute* is Spinoza’s favorite Latin word) to proffer the notion “commonism” is communism’s imaginative lifeline, the limits of which reveal the contours of political structure to come, precisely what Hardt and Negri mean when they opine “A democracy of the multitude is imaginable and possible.”<sup>22</sup> But let us exercise a little more caution about “commonism” where Spinoza’s truncated discourse on democracy is concerned.

Negri admits a hesitation before the perfectly absolute nature of democracy given the histories of perfection, absolutism, and nature but, at least for Spinoza, people who are “destined to manage affairs of state, are not chosen as the best by the supreme council, but are destined to it by a law.”<sup>23</sup> So far, so democratic. But then, given the current relations of nations, things get a little problematic for this structure of state as dominion. First, of course, Spinoza denies any participatory rights to foreigners, an exclusionary zeal for which we can provide numerous examples in the current conjuncture. Second, however, Spinoza extends such democratic exclusion to women and servants (a patriarchal pairing), children and wards, and finally, criminals. There is “reason enough” for these regressive exclusions but Spinoza, coughing and spluttering on the point of death, feels a special need to justify the exclusion of women from the perfectly absolute nature of democracy. Applying all the force of metaphysics and immanence, Spinoza declares that because there are no states where men and women rule alike, this proves that “women have not by nature equal right with men” and thus must be ruled by them. (Since the Latin is explicit, I quote it here in full: “Quod cum nullibi factum sit, affirmare omnino licet, feminas ex natura non aequale cum viris habere ius; sed eas viris necessario cedere, atque adeo fieri non posse, ut uterque sexus pariter regat, et multo minus, ut viri a feminis regantur.”)<sup>24</sup> Obviously, we are meant to excuse this absurd reasoning as a sign of the times, tubercular delirium, or as a personal quirk, like Spinoza’s highly ambivalent representations of the figure of the child. Irrespective of the conservative assumptions of his time, the identification of God with nature, pantheistic monism, and his monkish existence, Spinoza’s philosophical system cannot possibly support a political structure in which the bulk of its population is excluded from rule on the basis of gender? Yet the rueful logic of these meager pages underlines the danger in reading the *TP* too closely at all (Balibar, Negri, and Montag all wriggle uncomfortably as they explain Spinoza’s overly passionate democratic deficit). It is not a question of filling in the gaps, and, by

so doing, making the limitations of seventeenth-century political science a template for the twenty-first. The issue is at what point a Spinozist position must necessarily question the principles that organize its analytical model. In this sense, Negri is absolutely right to subvert Spinoza because the latter, in his consideration of the best practices of three structures of political dominion, cannot imagine a commonwealth that is their subsumption. Thus, “commonism,” to my mind, is not only the imaginary perquisites of a post-Marxism after 1989, but it is also the initial condition of a post-Spinozism as a necessary injunction towards a communism appropriate to its name. This is the only way “Spinoza or Marx” is more than a political distraction.

To return to Hardt’s and Negri’s *Commonwealth*, one would have to say the structure of parallelism, or analogy, is detrimental to the claims for political intervention advanced. They use Spinozist concepts to argue, correctly I believe, for a communist overcoming of identity; essentially, there is no identity in common, the common itself is the social realization of forms no longer dependent on identitarian formulae. But, the common in this process is not articulated as an organizational mode of transformation; it exists in a relatively vague horizontal affective assemblage. Whereas we would want the common to press the abolition of property as constitutive of social being, in “commonism” the desire remains, but not the political structures for its attainment. In seeking to avoid the stigma of socialist hierarchization, Hardt and Negri follow Spinoza in not being able to specify or choose any political structure that could marginally sustain a human population being in common. It is true that much of contemporary being is unrepresentable and unconscious and that we should cast suspicion on figural or allegorical models that take their stead. Yet a Spinozist Marxism might also usefully resist a tendency to allow the philosophical to do the work of the political, or let us say an ethics to perform everywhere the agential. “Commonism” to that degree is both creatively discrepant (it challenges all notions of Marxism as dogma) and affectionately insufficient to a communist idea which, however material or immaterial, must thoroughly take on the most pedestrian and immediate human needs of existence and what might prevent or “denature” fulfillment of their best aspirations (the challenge of class, for instance, in capitalist socialization).

I have suggested, however, that “commonism” itself must be engaged precisely because Spinoza, while not particularly worldly by most standards, encourages a global paradigm of utopian thinking about alternatives to capitalism. Just as dialectics might not break bricks, so Spinozist ideas of the common cleave to their own specialty which is as much about what might be held in common, as what constitutes a commonwealth. By way of closing, I want to consider whether “commonism,” at this level, promises any pivotal interrogative protocol for understanding the crisis we live as well as the resolutions we desire (another effect of the lost cause). The collective production of the common is a serious business in part because each element (collective, production, common) necessitates analysis of its possibility as praxis. Rather than hope the Spinozist

multitude (Hardt/Negri) is the mass Spinoza fears (Balibar) that will perform class war (Marx), Spinoza's foundations of collectivity might have a more modest heuristic responsibility. Hardt, in particular, has re-read important passages from Marx (beyond the *Grundrisse*) to show a level of correspondence and proximity between Spinoza and Marx on property and the production of "man." A consideration of the proximate asks vital questions about how specific contradictions of contemporary capitalism, its shortfalls in the reproduction and sustenance of the planet and its species, might clarify what the promise of communism currently represents. It is hopelessly idealist, however, or let us say rigorously undialectical, to point out that "One of the reasons the communist hypotheses of previous eras are no longer valid is that the composition of capital — as well as the conditions and products of capitalist production — have altered" and not apply this to Spinoza's hypotheses rather than just the critical procedures of Marx or Marxism.<sup>25</sup> On one hand, *explicare* (another key Spinoza word) does enable an apparatus in which affect, property, and state may be constellated; on the other, the logical operations of capital as a social relation are entirely absent from such explication, so one might be forgiven for thinking that a redefinition of "commonism" as communism risks eliding the procedural specificities of the latter. The frisson between Marxism and Spinozism has already been creative, but we cannot cherry-pick in what is proximate between the two unless this risk itself is argued as speculative necessity rather than as thoughtful metonyms. The commodification of affect and the circulation of affective labor in general can certainly be understood more fruitfully from a close reading of Spinoza, but to combine this with his analysis of the state is to fill one hole by digging another. Hardt and Negri have shown how a Spinozist articulation of the common reveals a form of capitalist impasse (capitalism cannot control the common but strenuously attempts to produce subjectivities within the multitude that would perform this role, as biopolitical labor, for it). Yet the struggle over the common does not necessarily produce a political form of the common, still less one we could identify with communism as a genealogy of historical distinction. It certainly produces templates, or terrains upon which the struggle about political form might be waged (their analysis of the city as a locus for the production of the common is particularly noteworthy in this regard). Similarly, in Spinoza's *TP* common also takes the form of "common consent" (i.e. to dominion) which is precisely an agonistic space that has too often become an alibi of democracy. It is not that "commonism" thus becomes a kind of theoretical superstructure from which communism takes revolutionary practice (or one is its idea, the other is its body), but that communism cannot be a material force without a politics of the common. This protocol does not solve the antinomy of Spinoza or Marx but also, because of the non-equivalence of the common's multitude with tangible structures of state transformation, it finds little solace in Spinoza and Marx. Two lost causes do not "found" another, but their critical distinctions are in the process, nevertheless, of dissolving their inappropriateness to each other and, more importantly, to the crisis that wants more than either can express, alone.

## Notes

1. Engels quotes this in two letters, to Bernstein (1882), and to Schmidt (1890). That Marx is referring to French socialism has a long tail in the history of Marxism.
2. Étienne Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas*. (London: Verso, 1994) 3.
3. Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2009). See also, Louis Althusser, *Essays in Self-Criticism.*, trans. Grahame Lock (New York: Humanities P, 1976) 135.
4. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009) 341. The quote from Spinoza's *Ethics* is from Part Two, Proposition VII, which reads: "Ordo et connexio idearum idem est, ac ordo et connexio rerum." "Same" is not parallel so much as coterminous. Parallelism works in all kinds of interesting ways in *Commonwealth*, including an explicit link to the Multitude. Theoretically it owes more to Hardt and Negri's creativity than Spinoza's.
5. Maurice Blanchot, *Friendship*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 1997) 295.
6. Pierre Macherey, *Hegel ou Spinoza* (Paris: La Decouverte, 2007 [1979]). This title, and its variations, constitute an axis around which my argument turns.
7. Giovanni Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing* (New York: Verso, 2007).
8. Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth* viii.
9. Baruch Spinoza, "Tractatus Philosophicus" in *Complete Works*, ed. Michael L. Morgan, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002) 676-754. Subsequent references to the *Complete Works* will be noted by page number.
10. Michael Hardt, "The Common in Communism." In *The Idea of Communism*, ed. Slavoj Žižek and Costas Douzinas (New York: Verso, 2010) 131-44.
11. Antonio Negri, *Subversive Spinoza*, trans. Timothy S. Murphy (New York: Palgrave, 2004) 94. This is a conceit, not a concept.
12. This statement, from Spinoza's letters (No.50 to Jarig Jelles) has taken on a life of its own, with a little help from Hegel's interpretation (when Marx quotes it, it is usually via Hegel). The argument for a dialectical Spinoza must spring from this notion, even if it might preclude the negation of negation. See Baruch Spinoza, *The Letters*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995) 260. See Spinoza, *Complete Works* 892.
13. Spinoza, *Complete Works* 693.
14. Spinoza, *Complete Works* 699,
15. Spinoza, *Complete Works* 720.
16. Balibar, *Masses* 6.
17. Spinoza, *Complete Works* 734.
18. Spinoza, *Complete Works* 567.
19. Negri, *Subversive Spinoza* 10.
20. Negri, *Subversive Spinoza* 99.
21. Negri, *Subversive Spinoza* 100.
22. Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth* viii.
23. Spinoza, *Complete Works* 752.
24. Spinoza, *Complete Works* 753.
25. Hardt, *The Idea of Communism* 132.