

Sean Grattan. "Spinoza As Imperative" *Mediations* 25.1 (Fall 2010) 117-122.
www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/spinoza-as-imperative

Spinoza Now

Dimitris Vardoulakis, ed.

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011, 384 pp.

US\$27.50

ISBN 978-0816672806

Spinoza as Imperative

Sean Grattan

The title of Dimitris Vardoulakis's edited volume *Spinoza Now* should be read in at least three ways: first, as an examination of the fecundity of the philosophy of Spinoza as a set of interpretive strategies across disciplinary boundaries; secondly, as a marker for investigating how and why Spinoza is useful at this particular historical moment; and finally, *Spinoza Now* might be taken as the imperative to turn to Spinoza as a slogan, as the crucial taking up of Spinoza *now*. Taken together, the three sides of the title enact the theoretical practice imagined by the collection. From the historical to the seemingly apolitical, each essay in *Spinoza Now* demonstrates how, as Vardoulakis affirms, Spinoza's philosophy is inextricably linked to his politics. If we are in the middle of what Patricia Clough has called "the affective turn," then a serious investigation of current trends in Spinoza scholarship is long overdue. *The New Spinoza*, the last major Spinoza collection, was published over ten years ago and many of the collected texts had been published previously. Since then, interest in Spinoza has increased dramatically, and the challenge of *Spinoza Now* is to craft a volume that reflects the variations within current Spinoza scholarship.

Spinoza Now is a well-conceived and important entry into the study of Spinoza, especially as it draws together many thinkers whose work has been indelibly marked by encounters with Spinoza. At the beginning of his book on Deleuze, Alain Badiou remarks that he has never recognized the Spinoza whom Deleuze writes about.¹ One of the many merits of this collection is the opportunity for so many different Spinozas to push against each other. Most of the contributors remark on the contradictory readings of Spinoza, while the organization of the collection goes on to demonstrate the remarkable breadth of these contradictions. The various Spinozas rest uncomfortably

against one another, and the joy of *Spinoza Now* is the possibility of getting to recognize the many shades of Spinoza — whether it is the Spinoza of Deleuze who pushes you like a gust of wind from behind or Badiou's Spinoza concerned with mathematical proof, or, perhaps, a third Spinoza cloistered in his room grinding lenses while his lungs fill with glass particles. In other words, the multiple readings offered by *Spinoza Now* highlight the variety of positions available in considerations of Spinoza.

Vardoulakis organizes the entries into four sections: the sections move from considerations of Spinoza's reception, Spinozist hermeneutics, Spinoza's relationship to the arts, and finally to the seemingly odd combination of Spinoza and death.² The conceit of the entire collection is that the theoretical bundle of concepts within the term "Spinoza" is practical in interpreting a range of current political, philosophical, and artistic issues, and, thus, the importance of Spinoza now. Vardoulakis begins the entire collection with a fluent, nuanced, and nearly exhaustive overview of the broad variations in the reception and study of Spinoza's philosophy from his contemporaries to our present moment — a moment when Spinoza reappears within cultural and political investigations. In fact, Vardoulakis makes it apparent that Spinoza's thought reverberates throughout many of the central intellectual movements from the seventeenth century to the present. For instance, his influence is not only philosophical, but extends to literary figures like George Eliot, Alexander Pope, and Goethe, who all note Spinoza's influence on their work. Vardoulakis points to the emergence of a current form of Spinoza scholarship arising from the concentration of Spinoza as a philosopher of immanence and power and also, fundamentally, a philosopher of modernity.

Because of the famous difficulty of reading Spinoza (especially the *Ethics*), the first section of *Spinoza Now*, "Strategies for Reading Spinoza," is tantalizing. Christopher Norris develops some of the same issues in the "Introduction" by evoking the sociohistorical moment in which Spinoza wrote and, furthermore, tracing genealogical lines of descent in the reception of Spinoza's philosophy. Moreover, the Norris essay illustrates the underlying tensions between historically opposed interpretations of Spinoza, which are then played out throughout the rest of *Spinoza Now*. Norris importantly draws attention to Althusser and Balibar's contention that Spinoza was the first person to ever "posit the problem of reading, and in consequence, writing" (14). By linking Spinoza's *Theological-Political Tractatus* to Althusser's critique of ideology, Norris illustrates how Spinozist elements have often arrived under the radar within Marxist discourse. Though Althusser never wrote extensively on Spinoza, the Dutch philosopher's influence cannot be underestimated for French structuralist Marxism. Moreover, according to Norris, the reception of Spinoza marks overwhelming philosophical conflicts around the mind/body dualisms that restrain the potential for philosophical investigation, leaving Norris to conclude that "Spinoza's radically monist understanding of mind and body or mind and world offers by far the most effective counterinstance to this whole way of thinking and its

hold on philosophers from Descartes down” (31). The analogous relationship between mind/body and mind/world has important consequences for discussing the collapse of boundaries between critical projects, institutional departments, and analytic and continental philosophy, and offers, instead, a vision of the world where everything holds the possibility for connection.

Though Norris is quick to point to the boundaries of interpretive possibility, invoking Derrida’s contention that all famous philosophers evoke contradictory, yet satisfactory readings, the next essay, Badiou’s “What Is a Proof in Spinoza’s Ethics?” resoundingly attempts to draw lines between how to, and how not to, read Spinoza correctly. Badiou, as scold, argues for the necessity of remembering that Spinoza wrote the *Ethics* in a *more geometrico*—as an exercise in the geometrical method—and that ignoring the importance of the method for Spinoza radically undermines any chance for engaging with Spinoza on Spinoza’s terms. Though it is not my intention to discuss each contribution in *Spinoza Now*, I do want to point to the way many of the articles enact the forms of tension developed in Norris’s presentation of Spinoza’s reception. I draw attention to these first two articles, therefore, as illustrative of the theoretical concerns inherent in dealing with a figure as much of a philosophical lightning rod as Spinoza. Badiou, here, is clearly at odds with any of Deleuze’s claims that there are two different books existing simultaneously in the *Ethics*: one book of proofs, definitions, propositions, and the other, hidden and minor variation existing in the scholia.³

The middle of *Spinoza Now* appears to pivot on close reading with Warren Montag’s “Interjecting Empty Spaces: Imagination and Interpretation in Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*” and Cesare Casarino’s “Marx before Spinoza: Notes toward an Investigation.” What many of the essays in this collection have in common is the importance of reading as practice in Spinoza’s philosophy. Montag’s essay focuses on Spinoza reintroducing gaps and dislocations in biblical translations, thus denormalizing the text, rendering it unfamiliar, and thus exposing underlying ideological assumptions at work within the text. Both essays are examples of Spinozist reading practices insofar as they attempt to unveil hidden moments of interrelation within Spinoza’s philosophical project, not by making order out of chaos, but by examining the importance of connections within the text. Casarino’s contribution, an investigation of how Marx has had “an irreversible impact on how we read Spinoza” (180), forms the theoretical core of *Spinoza Now*. In turn, I would argue that Casarino’s essay has an irreversible impact on how to read Spinoza and Marx together. Casarino makes the seemingly paradoxical claim that Marx was the first theorist of globalization, while Spinoza was the second” (180), but through his close reading of a passage of the *Ethics* where Spinoza discusses the “concatenation of all things” as “he has explicated it,” Casarino draws out the implications for the interconnection of all things through the lens of Marx and the widening gyre of commodity circulation. With the inclusion of Marx, the concatenation of all things

takes a political turn and the globalized commodity begins to resonate between both Marx and Spinoza. Casarino closely examines what appears to be a passing moment in the *Ethics* and draws out an original and highly engaging reading where “Spinoza posits the articulation of being as chain of things in a passage that not only signifies this meaning but also performs it by virtue of its parenthetical yet connective textual location” (190). Similarly, Casarino’s essay exists within *Spinoza Now* at a connective textual location, inflecting the readings coming before and after.

In the introduction, Vardoulakis makes the point that Spinoza’s method is inextricably linked to his politics, and through the imbrication of Marx and Spinoza, Casarino clearly delineates one possible route for Spinozist politics, but that route is not merely the combination of Marx and Spinoza; it is, instead, a theory of reading predicated on engaging with connective tissue. For instance, within the essays in “Spinoza and the Arts,” Vardoulakis and Mieke Bal’s Spinozist versioning in Rembrandt’s “Joseph and Potiphar’s Wife” takes on different valences of meaning through the reading of the interconnection of all things. The connections combined in every text open the potential for readings that operate in contradistinction to social, philosophical, or historical boundaries and attempt, however tentatively, to grasp the world as interconnected. Suddenly, Rembrandt and Spinoza have more in common than unsubstantiated biographical claims; they comment on their own cultural moment, but also might be read as cementing their relationship with one another and our cultural present.

Of course, there are limits to reading the connective tissues. The difference between Casarino’s claim that the *Ethics* is truly a mapless work” and Badiou’s distinctly mapped geometrical *Ethics* could not be greater. Thus, after Casarino’s essay, the inner tension within *Spinoza Now* takes another form; the potentially odd juxtapositions occurring in each essay increase: Spinoza and Marx, Spinoza and Heidegger, Spinoza and Rembrandt, and finally the entire Spinoza and death section. Taking these differences into account I would like to focus, for a passing moment, on Antonio Negri’s contribution, “Power and Ontology between Heidegger and Spinoza.” The unwieldy nature of this combination is almost a foregone conclusion, one that Negri finally fesses up to by the end of the essay, claiming an exaggeration of the proximity of the two thinkers. With the denunciation of Heidegger at the end — a revelation a long time expected and a long time coming — in favor of Spinoza, the purpose of the essay becomes clear. There was never any doubt that Negri would denounce Heidegger, but with this move he has also triangulated an attack on Giorgio Agamben and the theory of bare life. Negri’s intervention is reminiscent of his comment to Casarino: “[Agamben] is quite limited when it comes to understanding politics — and in his work this limitation takes the form of a radical Heideggerianism.”⁴ Negri’s essay, then, works as a reminder of the limit of connectivity between texts, and a warning against the confluence of the different forms of theorizing the biopolitical.

The depth of Spinoza’s thought is on display in the varied contributions to *Spinoza*

Now, but the one gap in the text is that, with the two exceptions of Cesare Casarino and A. Kiarina Kordela, few of the authors explore the galvanizing effect Spinoza seems to induce in putatively Marxist critics. True, Norris plots a historical overview that examines the Spinozist undercurrent in Althusserian Marxism, but a definite silence hangs around the issue of Spinoza and Marx now. Casarino's essay attempts to, if not reconcile Marx and Spinoza, then to draw the very real and very important conceptual links between the two thinkers. Kordela, on the other hand, primarily engages with the reception of Spinoza by certain Marxists in a polemical footnote about Žižek and Kant.⁵

Given the accumulation of importance around the term "multitude" in current debates about Spinoza's place in political thought, it is surprising that the multitude barely makes an appearance in *Spinoza Now*. Vardoulakis points to the importance of the multitude in his introduction, yet the multitude is non-existent for most of the text. Only mentioned a handful of times, and (in the contemporary context) only by Negri, the absence of the multitude might signal the emergence of a different focal point for contemporary political interpretations of Spinoza. Though there are many versions of Spinoza in *Spinoza Now*, the Spinoza of the multitude seems eclipsed by the development of other strands of Spinozist criticism. The waning of the multitude simultaneously opens the possibilities for different forms of articulating the importance of engaging with Spinoza's now.

Perhaps changing the first section, "Strategies for Reading Spinoza," to "Strategies for Spinozist Reading" might underscore the vital necessity for a reconsideration of Spinoza's place in current philosophical, political, and theoretical debates. Spinoza was a philosopher who never fit easily within categorical boundaries, and *Spinoza Now* clearly tries to capture that spirit by offering a series of varied interventions. What holds all of these texts together is the certitude that an engagement with Spinoza offers a way of reading the world that is committed to exploring productively the tensions, connections, and gaps between words and things. And if Spinoza has anything to teach us now, it is the persistent need to live ethically in the present.

Notes

1. Alain Badiou, *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*, trans. Louise Burchell (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1999).
2. I find this last section exceptionally interesting because it flies in the face of so much of Spinoza criticism. If, as according to Spinoza, a free man thinks little of death, then it has become almost passé to remark that Spinoza is uninterested in death. If nothing else, even the idea of organizing the collection in such a way as to end with death is inspired for its originality.
3. Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: A Practical Philosophy* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2001).
4. Cesare Casarino and Antonio Negri, *In Praise of the Common* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 2008) 152.
5. Kordela has explored some of these issues in her *Surplus: Spinoza, Lacan* (Albany: SUNY P, 2007). The entire text is an argument for reading Lacan and Spinoza together contra Žižek, but she also discusses Hardt and Negri's Spinozist Marxism. See especially pages 124-31 where she criticizes the teleology of democracy in *Empire*.