SPINOZA for OUR TIME

Politics and Postmodernity

ANTONIO NEGRI

Translated by William McCuaig with a foreword by Rocco Gangle

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FOREWORD

Time is restless.
—ANTONIO NEGRI, *Time for Revolution*, "kairòs"

Our relation to the seventeenth-century Dutch Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza via the twenty-first century Italian thinker Antonio Negri is to an unthought or barely thought radical democracy, a concrete potentiality and smoldering power of our time. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza provides us with an ontology and an anthropology of creative relations, a constructive account of immanent being on the one hand and, on the other, an affective, desiring conception of human liberation achieved through embodied joy and intellectual power. In his other great work, the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza leads us—against the mainstream modern political tradition and, today, against neoliberalism—to a concept of democracy understood as "a society which wields all its power as a whole"

(ch. XVI, Elwes translation). Negri's decades-long work on Spinoza aims to demonstrate both how these two sides of Spinoza's vision cohere and how they mutually reinforce one another. For Negri, the genius of Spinoza was to have grasped at the epochal inception of modernity, among the forces of its incipient capitalist globalization, the ultimate identity of an immanent, material, affective, and constructive conception of being and a unique idea of democratic political constitution.

For Negri, the word "democracy," far from merely signifying one political system among others, one, say, in which individuals would be allowed the freedom to choose their governmental representatives and to engage freely in exchange-relations with others, designates instead an ontologically creative power, *the* universal human power—political, but equally social, cultural, linguistic, physical—to make and remake being itself. A cooperation-without-synthesis of subjective and material forces acting in common, such democracy manifests the irreversible power to make the world itself a common space of creative endeavor, thereby forging new relations that amplify unlimitedly that very power itself. This form of action inhabits a unique temporality, the time of *kairòs*—the creative moment that ruptures the continuous flow of ordinary history and opens up not only new possibilities and new names but new realities. There is nothing abstract about this common power, *our* common power. It is the concrete, global interconnectedness of human labor and life, born in principle with the advent of modernity and yet immediately curtailed and distorted by the brutal history of modern capitalism. Among other things, democracy is a name—sullied, to be sure, but infinitely self-renewing—for action oriented not toward but within the affects of joy and love (*real* joy and *real* love, not the cheap substitutes proffered and withdrawn everywhere in the service of

other ends). Democracy asserts the immanence of this world's desiring multitude.

In developing such a concept of radical democracy across the dozens of books he has written over the past decades, Negri conjoins politics and ontology in a program of the noncapitalist production of a global common. And in this conjunction Spinoza remains for Negri the key thinker. Where Spinoza wrote *Deus, sive Natura—God, or Nature*—to mark the unqualified identification of two terms designating concepts usually held not only to be distinct but to be positively opposed to one another, Negri offers us a similarly momentous fusion of concepts, at once philosophical and political: *democracy, or communism*. For Negri, such a fusion does not represent some exterior synthesis or merely ideal approximation, but is rather the immanent naming of the constitutive and joyful power that Spinoza was the first to identify philosophically as the very substance of our world. This is indeed *our* ontology, the ontology of the multitude, a theory and praxis fusing objective and subjective genitives in a new political grammar.

The present work, *Spinoza for Our Time*, has roots in some of Negri's earliest projects. Already in books such as *Political Descartes* and, later, *Marx Beyond Marx*, Negri employs philosophy's embeddedness in large-scale social and historical processes as a way to advance a style of textual analysis and rigorous argumentation that takes the dynamics of such processes into account in the reading of the history of philosophy without reductionism or vicious circularity. In Negri's work an immanently political writing is thereby made manifest, a powerful inscription of historical materials and theory into channels of immediate political resonance. Like Machiavelli before him, Negri writes equally in the immediate political present and in the attenuated presence of his historical interlocutors. And like Machiavelli, Negri knows the

fierce immediacy of political struggle and the ineliminable need for the sharpest intellectual cunning, not to mention the negativity and brutality of reactionary power, of the forces of punishment and imprisonment that aim to crush bodies and minds that will not submit. In Negri's writing, thought bodies forth the materiality of a rhythmic, driving assault. The clarity of his arguments and the detail of his textual examinations as well as the force and frequent brilliance of his rhetorical leaps at once exhibit and produce a distinctive intellectual camaraderie. One reads *with* him, and one is invited by the force of the argument and its narrativization to add one's own powers of thought to its uncompromising movement. In Negri's writing, thought itself learns the impulse of its essentially political drive.

Negri's militancy is everywhere steeped in a deep erudition that draws upon multiple sources, including the Italian humanist tradition, the metaphysics and political thought of modern philosophy, and the most sophisticated theoretical developments of late modernity and postmodernity. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the roots of his rhetorical and argumentative power are to be found above all in the concrete political struggles Negri has waged and continues to wage on solitary and collective fronts. His work with the Autonomia movement in Italy in the 1970s and his direct engagement with workers' revolts and factory occupations during that time imbue his thinking with a firsthand understanding of the dynamics of collective resistance, a veritable physics and chemistry of revolutionary action. The tactics and strategy of Autonomia were in many ways opposed to those of the dominant leftist organization in Italy at the time, the Italian Communist Party (PCI), and this antagonistic difference internal to the left becomes for Negri one microcosm or synecdoche of a more general struggle of creative freedom against command,

of immanence against transcendence, and of true communism against the Party and the State. In this way, Negri was able to bring the theoretical advances of the French philosophers of the 1960s and 1970s (in particular, Foucault, Deleuze, and Guattari) to bear on the concrete political concerns of his day, asserting a method of molecular resonance as against that of synthetic molarity. A new image of revolutionary praxis thus emerged, a seemingly paradoxical conjunction, as Negri put it at the time, of Rosa Luxemburg and Vladimir Lenin, an anarchist-collectivist broad-based vanguard. This distinctive viewpoint continues to inform Negri's more recent solo writings and collaborations, and both of these have been subject to a good deal of criticism from left and right. It may be noted here in passing that seldom have the critics of the concepts of Empire and Multitude that grew out of this early work been themselves able to speak from such a first-person standpoint conjoining the most rigorous academic research with the experience of direct struggle, high-level academic production with effective factory takeover.

In the wake of the kidnapping and assassination of the Italian Christian-Democratic politician Aldo Moro by the radical leftist Red Brigades in 1978, Negri was accused under highly dubious pretenses of instigating terrorism and being involved with the murder. Although he was absolved of those charges, he was eventually convicted on separate, also quite dubious counts. He would later flee to France and receive political asylum there. While in Italian prison, however, awaiting his trial, Negri wrote *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics*, one of the finest works on Spinoza written in the twentieth century and a pivotal text in the renaissance of Spinoza scholarship that flourished in the 1960s with works by such thinkers as Matheron, Moreau, Althusser, Balibar, Macherey, and Deleuze and that

continues today through the work of Zourabichvili, Vinciguerra, Montag, Tosel, Kordela, Israel, and many others. The core argument of *The Savage Anomaly* depends upon a sustained analysis of the difference between two concepts of power in the *Ethics*: on the one hand, *potestas*, a capacity to act and create effects, a broadly "dialectical" power—linked definitively to transcendence—corresponding somewhat to Aristotelian *dynamis*, that is, a power that subsists as *possibility* and gathers itself essentially in its inhibition and in its self-restraint; on the other hand, *potentia*, the exercise of force *in situ* and *in actu*, the constitutive activity that coordinates subjective desire and objective construction in a genuinely immanent creation. This distinction of *potestas* and *potentia* serves as the basis for a coordination of the themes and arguments of Spinoza's *Ethics* and his *Theological-Political Treatise* in terms of a "phenomenology of revolutionary praxis constitutive of the future." Negri takes the break in the composition of the *Ethics* in which Spinoza writes and publishes the *Theological-Political Treatise* as more than an accidental biographical detail, as instead the necessary passage in the construction of the ontology of the *Ethics* through the immediate political crisis that marks the composition of the *Treatise*. Spinoza and Negri's phenomenology of praxis thus becomes one of an immediate situating of thought within the crisis of capitalism. Only the clear-sighted confrontation with the contemporary political and economic crisis enables Spinoza's ontology to mark the thoroughgoing immanentization of thought, which Negri interprets, controversially, as an inversion of the relationship between the unity of substance and the plurality of its modes. For Negri, a privileging of the constitutive relationality of the modes over and against the unity of substance becomes the measure of a final shift in Spinoza's thought away from the residual transcendence still evident in the earlier work

of the *Short Treatise* and the *Emendation of the Intellect*. With this constitutive modal turn, this *political* turn, in the composition history of Spinoza's *Ethics*, Negri thus identifies the very moment at which an irreversible ontological event inaugurates within philosophy the immanent singularity of a global common.

In 1997 Negri returned to Italy voluntarily from his political asylum in France to serve out the remainder of his sentence. He remained mostly under house arrest until 2003, when he became, after decades of imprisonment, exile, and then highly restricted mobility, at last relatively free to travel, meet with others, and speak publicly and in person at academic and political venues. This period from 1997 to the present has seen the publication of the three installments of Negri's collaboration with Michael Hardt—*Empire*, *Multitude*, and *Commonwealth*—which have made Negri's work more widely known and discussed, and a number of other texts by him have appeared. Not surprisingly, among the many talks he has given during this period, he has returned frequently to Spinoza as to a comrade who has supported him in the past and continues to reside with him in the present.

Spinoza for Our Time collects four talks given by Negri on Spinoza at various colloquia and conferences between 2005 and 2009. This collection both continues and supplements the essays gathered in Negri's *The Subversive Spinoza*, published in 1992, which addressed, among other themes, the status of Spinoza's unfinished *Political Treatise*, the subterranean connections between Spinozan thought and the poetics of Leopardi, and the key contrast of philosophical approaches indexed by the names Spinoza and Heidegger. The texts of the four presentations in *Spinoza for Our Time* are preceded by Negri's extended introduction, which accomplishes several tasks concurrently: revisiting the main theses of *The Savage Anomaly*; reviewing the

major figures in Continental Spinoza studies over the past several decades; and situating his ongoing philosophical project within the broader contemporary scene of Continental political philosophy. Regarding this last point, Alain Badiou, Emanuele Severino, and the Schmitt-influenced political theologies of Derrida and Agamben are directly confronted in striking contrast with Negri's own project and in particular his well-known collaborations with Hardt. The basic orientation of *The Savage Anomaly* is strongly reasserted as against these current philosophical trends, and in this way *Spinoza for Our Time* is intended both to clarify and to focus the perhaps better-known analyses of *Empire*, *Multitude*, and *Commonwealth*. The introduction is thus in part intended to demonstrate the continuity of the philosophical-political project that has carried Negri from his earliest writings and political activities through to the contemporary conjuncture.

The four essays that then follow, taken together, present the outline of a coherent intervention and reassertion of Spinoza's relevance to the contemporary debates outlined in the introduction. The first essay, "Spinoza: A Heresy of Immanence and of Democracy," revisits the primary philosophical-historical thesis of *The Savage Anomaly* and works to show the relevance of the anomalous event of Spinoza's thought in early modern philosophy to contemporary global politics. Negri does not shy away here from asserting a sharp dichotomy, which is not to say that his analysis is at all unnuanced or brutal. In the juxtaposition of Bodin and Hobbes on the one hand with Spinoza on the other, we see the clear break that separates a political vision grounded in transcendence from one operating within immanence. Negri shows how this difference at its heart concerns the key Marxist distinction between the social relations of production and the forces of production themselves, the former transfigured by ideology, the

latter inalienable in principle. Negri demonstrates the belonging of the mainstream social contract tradition to an ideological and reactionary inhibition of production by way of its necessary detour through transcendence. In opposition to this—but it is a thoroughly asymmetrical and nondialectical opposition—Spinoza's ethical ontology (being *is* praxis) makes the cooperation and collision of forces the very substance of social order and thus traces *in its own actuality and effectivity* the political object it engages. The common replaces the public through its essentially creative and productive excess with respect to every constituted order.

Somewhat more polemical with respect to contemporary philosophical trends is the second text, "Potency and Ontology: Heidegger or Spinoza." Negri's title plays on that of Pierre Macherey's seminal study *Hegel or Spinoza*, demonstrating in a somewhat different way the singularity of Spinoza's project of immanence, which forcefully opposes itself to every reaffirmation of transcendence, especially in the sophisticated forms marked by philosophers such as Hegel and Heidegger. Here, Negri attacks the Heideggerian interpretations of existential and post-*Kehre* temporality and argues that the supposed Heideggerian break with modern metaphysical conceptions of temporality is in fact far less radical than that of the apparently "eternalist" Spinoza, for whom *time* on Negri's provocative reading emerges as a constituent "time of power" productive of new being (as opposed to Heidegger's nihilistic "powerlessness of time"). Despite Heidegger's break with the Idealist tradition and its culmination in Hegel as well his own partial self-overcoming in the "Turning," Heidegger according to Negri remains essentially bound to the dissociation of actuality and affirmation that characterizes modernity. The contrast here is never crude, but it is definitive and clear. Both Heidegger and Spinoza mark a "return to earth," a human belonging to Being,

but in the case of Heidegger this belonging can only be decided and affirmed as a giving-up or giving-over to the unthought event. With Spinoza, however, the cooperative experience of human world-creation appears as "a dimension both unremarkable and strong," in other words as the *common* that is at once the ground and the creative object of democratic action.

The crucial figure of Nietzsche links the contrast of Spinoza and Heidegger to the themes of the third essay, "Multitude and Singularity in the Development of Spinoza's Political Thought." This essay—developed from a talk given at the Jerusalem Spinoza Institute—insists upon the ontological basis of Spinoza's radical democracy in an immanent monism, as distinct from any theologically oriented reinsertion of transcendence as an external guarantee of democratic political forms. Taking as his point of departure the instances in Nietzsche's texts where Spinoza is represented in negative terms as an idealist and denier of vital affirmation, Negri aims to reconstitute the genealogy of productive social desire in the *Ethics*. Negri here emphasizes the moment of "mutation" that characterizes the desire connecting singularities, the emergence of productive relationality *between and across* singularities as they act in common, this praxis itself performing in a strictly immanent fashion the connective role later thinkers such as Hegel will relegate to the field of "mediation." This moment of mutation is essential for Negri, and helps to explain how Spinoza's ontology may retain the rigor of its "rationalism" while supporting a materially creative and truly vital productivity. Thus the *political essence* of human striving becomes manifest, an immanent (super)naturalism: "not the reconstruction of the organic but the construction of the common."

Finally, "Spinoza: A Sociology of the Affects" draws upon the key Spinozan concepts of *conatus*, *cupiditas*, and *amor* in conjunction

with a turn to Foucauldian genealogy to oppose a constitutive Spinozan conception of the social to every abstract and individualist model—such as that, in particular, of the dominant modern natural-right tradition—in which concrete social relations supervene upon first-order independent actors and institutions. Once again, the refrain is sounded of an opposition of transcendence and immanence, in this case a contrast between static, atemporal models of sociality and intrinsically antagonistic, temporalized discourses of social transformation. Here, this distinction operates such that "we can descry in Spinoza . . . a perspective on actuality and an initiation into the desire to gain cognizance of the structures of society and power that are evolving right now." Importantly, Negri points to a variety of theorists in this context—Simmel, Becker, Bourdieu, Simondon, Althusser, Macherey, Foucault—who have already in one way or another made such an immanent terrain of social analysis their own. Each of these references indicates a path to follow, a channel for further research and creative, practical deployment.

The critical and affirmative force of Negri's thought is evident on every page. His canonical strategy is simple—and infectious: identify some form of thought inhibiting constructive and revolutionary political theory and praxis, and dismantle its theoretical presuppositions by way of Spinoza's positive and constitutive ontology. This strategy is at once historical, ontological, and political. Throughout these essays it is the coordination of three axes of interpretation that underlies Negri's view of Spinoza: an attention to the social and political context of early modern Europe, within which Spinoza worked; a profound immersion in the complexities, singularities, and overall topography of Spinoza's texts; and an unflagging sense of urgency via sustained reference to present and future political postmodernity.

The "we" invoked by the title *Spinoza for Our Time* is neither a generalized collective nor a narrow scholarly circle but instead a singular cross-section of a new kind of cooperative social and political subject defined primarily by its immanent forces of creative resistance rather than its composition through distinctive identities. It is perhaps Negri more than any other living intellectual who has best charted both the constitutive dynamics and the affirmative prognosis of such a subject. On the one hand, the relative informality of these texts (in comparison, for instance, with *The Savage Anomaly*) makes this collection a fine introduction to Negri's quite unique reading and application of Spinoza's metaphysics. Yet on the other hand the arguments laid out here also speak incisively to the growing community of advanced Spinoza scholarship that treats Spinoza's thought *in and of the present*, a scholarly community for whom the stakes of Spinoza's philosophy are also the stakes of the contemporary global political conjuncture.

This is thinking of and for our time. In the wake of the global economic crisis in 2008, radical political thought is undoubtedly in the midst of a resurgence in Europe, the United States, and throughout the world. Today, when "austerity" has become a faith-cry of increasing desperation beyond any principle of reason in the face of neoliberal default, it is time for renewed attention to the original bourgeois capitalist fracture that was opened in the age of Spinoza as well as to the heretical path charted by Spinoza's thought in response to this fractured opening, a response pregnant with futures largely obscured and postponed by the dominant traditions of metaphysics and ontology on the one hand and political philosophy on the other. Today Spinoza's—and Negri's—political and ontological conception gives impetus to our present all-too-necessary dismantling of the current order and—in the

face of an undeniable reactive consolidation of economic and political *potestas*—the conjugation, at local and planetary levels, of noncapitalist modes of survival with strategies for the revolutionary construction of postcapitalist society.

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The translation is based on the text published in French, *Spinoza et nous*. Although Judith Revel is credited as the translator of this book from the original Italian, and discusses the nuances of her Italian-to-French translation in several footnotes (which I omit here), her French text is considered definitive by the author. All that appears within square brackets is a gloss by me; all that appears within round brackets is a parenthetical remark by the author.

Antonio Negri quotes Spinoza's *Ethics* (in Latin, *Ethica*) frequently, the *Tractatus politicus* a handful of times, and the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* just once, all from published French translations. The English translation in the public domain of Spinoza's major works is by R. H. M. Elwes, and dates from the late nineteenth