

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Frédéric Lordon, *Willing Slaves of Capital: Spinoza and Marx on Desire*, London: Verso, 2014. ISBN: 9781781681619 (cloth); ISBN: 9781781681602 (paper); ISBN: 9781781682135 (ebook)

In an 1881 postcard to his friend and interlocutor Franz Overbeck, Friedrich Nietzsche writes in perhaps the humblest tone he can muster: “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’” (quoted in Kaufmann 1974: 140). As anyone who has waded through the *Ethics* can attest, this sense of enchantment comes through great effort, but is nevertheless accompanied by a sense of intellectual satisfaction: it just *feels* like someone finally managed to explain what it feels like to be human. But then, if one is compelled to look for a little biographical information, it becomes embarrassingly clear: this thinker who lived in the mid-17th century—whom Nietzsche called “the purest sage”, and whom Gilles Deleuze called both “the ‘prince’ of philosophers” and “the Christ of philosophers”—has essentially been with us all along.

Marx, for his part, was no stranger to Spinoza: he copied entire passages of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* into his notebooks, and a handful of political philosophers—Louis Althusser, Antonio Negri, Pierre Macherey, and Deleuze—have used their own readings of Spinoza in attempts to eliminate Hegelianism from Marxism altogether (see Holland 1998). Frédéric Lordon, however, is an economist with a different project. Taking welcome liberties with a linear conception of time, he returns to Spinoza to help us understand what is occurring “down-deep” at the level of desire in capitalist society. Instead of focusing on the two fundamental Marxian categories—capital and labor—Lordon seeks to explain a subjectivity that blurs this distinction and is more prevalent in contemporary capitalism than it was in Marx’s own time: the manager, who “is the very model for the kind of happy workforce that capitalism would like to create” (p.xii).

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In order to make some sense of this paradoxical figure's situation, which is marked by their material connection to labor and symbolic alliance with capital, Lordon brings together "the Spinozist anthropology of passions and the Marxist theory of wage-labor...to rethink the concepts of exploitation and alienation from the ground up" (p.xiii).

At the basis of Spinoza's understanding of all "finite modes" is the *conatus* doctrine, which states that "each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being" (Spinoza 1994: E3P6). Spinoza's philosophy is here especially empowering for those working with contemporary topics like nonhuman life, for all things indeed have a *conatus*—an indefinite and objectless appetite to continue existing—but humans are different because we are also conscious of this striving. It is this combination of appetite and one's consciousness thereof that Spinoza defines as the first of the three primary affects: desire. The "anthropology of passions" that Lordon references is, then, the consistent modulation of this essential "life force" *in response* to encounters with ideas and bodies external to ourselves: joy, the second primary affect, is an increase in this power to act, while sadness, the third primary affect, is its decrease. Deleuze (1978) perhaps says it best by asserting that we must imagine Spinoza "strolling about" in the streets, perpetually being affected by what he encounters. The *conatus* thus responds to joyous interactions—those that increase the power to act—by investing desire in their causes, thereby making them objects of desire. This philosophical point is the key to understanding how, for Lordon, capitalist social relations can channelize desire in such a way that the employee can ultimately desire their own repression. Given this schema, we cannot simply say that money or the boss's praise are *a priori* objects of desire; instead, such encounters are joyous because they increase our power to act.

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Showing and transforming his Regulationist School roots, Lordon schematically divides the historical development of capitalist social organization into three phases roughly defined by particular accumulation regimes and attendant “regimes of desire”: first, in Marx’s era, the dominant desire is material-biological reproduction; second, in the Fordist era, this basic desire is expanded to also include access to all the little joys caused by the bells and whistles of an expanding consumer society; and third, contemporary subjectivities—best understood as the managers or entrepreneurs of the self—emerge in a situation where desire is increasingly oriented such that work in general is the cause of joy. This most recent transformation is a symptom of the twin demands of competitive deregulation and the emphasis on emotional and creative labor that fuel theories of the neoliberalization of everything. For Lordon, this amounts to the capitalist *conatus* attempting to draw all others into line with itself as a “master-desire” that tends toward a cynical, amoral, and purely quantitative asymptote of absolute liquidity and infinite flexibility. But this raises two conceptual questions: first, how does Spinozist thought transform this structural diagnosis, which is seemingly just repackaged here in Spinozist language; and second, how can Spinoza potentially help us out of this bind?

The first question can be addressed by looking to the points between these three phases. In Marx’s own time, the “spur of hunger” as motivation to produce corresponds to a regime defined by sad affects: that is, one either sells their labor power or one’s power to act terminally decreases. However, the Fordist regime of desire supplements these sad affects with a veritable catalog of material commodities for joyful consumption. The shift from the Fordist to the post-Fordist regime of accumulation must therefore entail a corresponding restructuring of the regime of desire, which Lordon argues involves shifting from *extrinsic affects* produced by hunger and commodity consumption to *intrinsic affects* of immediate joy that must be generated by work itself. This argument hinges on Spinoza’s assertion that “the mind, as far as it can, strives to

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imagine those things that increase or aid the body's power of acting" (Spinoza 1994: E3P12): given the two alternatives of facing the depression resulting from a "life wasted" making ends meet or incrementally restructuring ones own desires to fall into line with the logic of the accumulation regime, and therefore attaining a proportional amount of joy, desire tends toward the latter. Crucially, this process is augmented by a range of institutional shifts, ranging from increasingly individualized management of human resources to flexible work arrangements; from life coaches to the rhetoric of self-realization through work.

Lordon addresses our second question by noting that this devotion is more akin to passionate political capture than cold economic exploitation, but that, somewhat paradoxically, this arrangement ultimately "recogniz[es] the productive superiority of uncoerced labor, [and therefore] the enterprise comes close to repudiating itself as a hierarchical structure" (p.124-125). This is, of course, a reformulated communism, but one theorized in a way that emphasizes the task of identifying and *guiding common desires* away from the neoliberal master-desire. This means breaking with the idea of the immediate seizure of the means of production and instead undertaking a patient and continuous effort wherein we learn how to use reason to democratically govern ourselves in accordance with these excavated common desires. Like many authors working in this vein, Lordon does not offer a plan of attack or a program. Instead, he leaves readers in a place where it is ultimately up to them to decide on the next step. In this case, that first step involves doing something that we do anyway, though typically without assigning it any political force: asking ourselves and one another about those things that bring us joy.

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