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*To my Mother and her critique-al support that have directed  
me to new ways of knowing and unretracting activism,  
and to my Father for his enduring love and support.*

## PREFACE

New Materialism has declared itself a theoretical insurgency against the linguistic turn, its epistemology and theotextuality that have barred the analysis of such world-making issues as ecology. “Everywhere we look...we are witnessing scattered but insistent demands for more materialist modes of analysis and for new ways of thinking about matter and processes of materialization,” Diana Coole and Samantha Frost write, “particularly in light of [the textual and cultural turns] most urgent challenges regarding environment, demographic geopolitical, and economic change” (“Introducing the New Materialisms” 2–3). In a different but related new materialist tendency, Bruno Latour and Nikolaj Schultz, in calling for a new “ecological class” to confront environmental crises and the need for “materialist” analysis, insist, “But here’s the thing: *it’s no longer the same materiality!*”, which requires new concepts to address the new realities (*On the Emergence of an Ecological Class: A Memo*, emphasis in original 11).

New materialism puts itself forward as a conceptual breakthrough that by innovative concepts has transformed the contemporary ways of understanding the world and brought bold perspective to social and cultural sciences.

In this book, I ask when and how philosophical innovations become urgent matters and within that analytics raise a second question—how innovative are the innovations of new materialism and what are they innovation in. My goal is not the traditional debunking of their claims

to newness—in the capitalist culture industry every new philosophical commodity is advertised as “new.” Therefore, although I discuss, often at great length, the fundamental concepts of new materialism and its specific analytical moves and their genealogies in the thought of such thinkers as Spinoza, Gille Deleuze, Latour, Antonio Negri, Jane Bennett, Rosi Braidotti, Jacques Derrida,..., my main argument in this book is that new materialism is not a conceptual innovation, an intellectual breakthrough or an interpretive leap forward but a “new” response to the emerging contradictions of capitalism. They are indeed bold innovations in the ways they contain these contradictions and normalize the emerging forms of exploitation in cognitive capitalism. New materialism is, to say it differently, a philosophical normalization of the economic needs of capital.

In my analysis of new materialism and its conceptual structure, however, I have a broader purpose which is to argue, through critique of new materialist concepts such as vitality of matter, intra-action, federated agency, flat ontology and affiliated notions of actor-network theory, speculative realism, that philosophical innovations, although they have a discursive form and a conceptual scaffolding, are never conceptual or innovative. Rather they are tropic legitimization of emerging economic needs of the contemporary form of capitalism. This is a bold reduction but bold reductions (actually reductions of any kind) are the very conditions of change of the way world is understood and acted on. The outcome of reductions is, like the outcome of class struggles (a reduction of the social to two great classes (Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*)), not predetermined: “each time” they end “either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes” (482). Writing a book such as this, in other words, is taking a risk... I am taking the risk.

La Crosse, WI, USA

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## NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS AND ABBREVIATIONS

Citations of Spinoza's writings are from Edwin Curley's translations in *The Collected Works of Spinoza* (Princeton University Press). I also use Curley's system of abbreviations, according to which:

E = *Ethics*

TP = *Political Treatise* (*Tractatus politicus*)

TTP = *Theological-Political Treatise* (*Tractatus theologico-politicus*,

and references to the *Ethics* make use of the following abbreviations:

Roman numeral = part

A = axiom

D (following Roman numeral) = definition

D (following an Arabic numeral) = demonstration

P = proposition

C = corollary

S = scholium.

In referencing the *Political Treatise* and the *Theological-Political Treatise*, chapter and paragraph numbers are instead included. (See pages xix ff in Volume I and Volume II of Curley's *Collected Works*.)

However, breaking from the notational convention, I also include the page number after a coma following the abbreviation. Thus:

E IP14D, 420 = *Ethics*, Part I, Proposition 14, Demonstration, page 420

TP ii, 17, 514 = *Political Treatise*, Chapter 2, paragraph 17, page 514.



# Left Spinozism and the Metaphysics of Democracy

## 1.1 ONE

Spinoza's metaphysics of substance is at the heart of the contemporary new materialism that has become the dominant interpretive analytics in the humanities after the fading of poststructuralism. In fact, "Spinoza, and most of all the Spinoza of the *Ethics*," Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin write, "might very well be considered the first (and foremost) new materialist" (*Cartographies* 151). For new materialists, Spinoza offers a post-anthropocentric way of grasping "the lively immanence of matter" (Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms* 9) and what Jane Bennett calls a "faith" in that everything is part of one substance (*Vibrant Matter* x), on the one hand, and, on the other, a much needed attention to bodies and their affective agency as a means, it is claimed, of responding to contemporary crises of climate change, deepening inequality alongside technological advances, and eroding democratic institutions. Spinoza, as Dimitris Vardoulakis, puts it, "has emerged as a figure who allows us to think of our contemporary situation" (*Spinoza Now* xi).

I argue in this book, however, that Spinoza has become a "decoy" philosopher for the left. The left critics and theorists have deployed his ideas (formed by his own times and his own commercial ties) to represent his regressive materialism as innovative, pioneering thoughts. Warren Montag, for instance, argues that Spinoza's famous expression "*Deus, sive Natura*" (God, or Nature) is the basis of a "revolutionary" mode of

materialism which “leav[es] us with a purely material world of bodies and their forces, a world in which bodies are moved by other bodies, a purely material world of force against force” (*Bodies, Masses, Power: Spinoza and His Contemporaries* xx).

In the dominant readings of Spinoza, left theory has substituted a materialism of objects and bodies (legacies of the matterism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) for the materialism of relations. Through this displacement, what comes to matter are (non)human bodies and objects and their interactions, while the historical relations that shape them and their “forces” are themselves subsumed into object relations. Which is another way of saying that the materialism of objects disappears the social relations of production that have relentlessly transformed all social life into the relations of exchange and subordinated people’s needs to the accumulation of profit. It, in effect, erases the social agency by which these relations are transformed. This regressive materialism has been represented as a ground-breaking advancement in materialism.

My reading of Spinoza is part of a counter tradition, historical materialism, which has been dismantled and displaced in the contemporary moment in large part by the post-1968 speculative trends in Euro-American Left thought that I discuss in the book. In significant ways, Spinoza—and more precisely, left interpretations of Spinoza—have been at the heart of these trends. I call these readings of Spinoza Left Spinozism to place them in the same ideological genealogies of Marx’s critique of the “left Hegelians,” who, in the name of bringing Hegel down to earth, merely updated spiritualism (*The German Ideology*).

My book, in other words, is essentially about a class war in philosophy. Who is Spinoza? There is, I argue, not one Spinoza but two: Spinoza as Marx reads him, and Spinoza as the para-Marxists interpret him.

*Spinoza, New Materialism and the Contemporary* is an anatomy of some of the Left Spinozist main tendencies as they are developed in such writers as Gilles Deleuze, Louis Althusser, Antonio Negri, and Warren Montag, and especially as they are re-articulated in the recent new materialist or ontological turn, in writers like Jane Bennett, Graham Harman, Rosi Braidotti, Bruno Latour and their numerous followers whose essays and papers now fill the pages of scholarly journals and conferences. In these discourses—which now inform some of the most influential tendencies in the (post)humanities—things, objects, matter, bodies and affects take center stage, while the (social and historical) relations within which they develop and interact, are backgrounded—often in terms of a

posthumanist re-orientation that displaces the human and that affirms with Spinoza that humans are not “a dominion within a dominion” (as Spinoza puts in in the Preface to Part III of the *Ethics* (491)) but subject with the rest of nonhuman life to, above all else, natural (physical, biological, chemical...) laws. The suspension of the “human” of course has nothing to do with humans. It is a ruse for the erasure of agency (as in people “make their own history” (Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire* 103)).

If, in other words, it is the case that “Spinoza studies has been a test case for canon change in the Anglosphere. Once nearly invisible, then a marginal figure and eventually a specialist interest among scholars of early modern European philosophy, Spinoza is now nearly everywhere in North American journals, conferences, and departments,” as Julie R. Klein observes (“Toward the Future of Spinoza Studies”), this is owing not to Spinoza’s explaining of the contemporary but to the manner in which he spectralizes and therefore un-explains it—a spectralizing through which the left in the Anglosphere has normalized liberal capitalism in the global north.

The world is remade through Spinoza as a flat ontology of things’ self-agency, by which is meant the “power” to “react” and “interact”—not agency as people “engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed” (Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire* 103). On the flat plane of Spinozian being, whose “immanence” is said to nullify “teleology,” things interact in assemblages that operate outside of any “external” cause that could be said to historically determine phenomena or be subject to social agents of historical change. Far from making materialism “more” materialist, Left Spinozism is a ghost-al or, to be more sympathetic to their view, spiritual materialism, the spirit made earth(ly) matter in “substance.” This ghostly matter is made to appear (like Spinoza’s “substance”) as “self-causing” only by abstracting it from the totality of social relations of production. The undoing of “totality”—which articulates the underlying social logic—is of course one of the tasks of the new materialism which, like poststructuralism, emphasizes the capillary, the local and the regional “small” narratives cut off from the “grand narratives” of class relations, above all the grand narrative of “emancipation” from relations of exploitation (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* xxiii–xxiv).

In contrast to the dominant left interpretations of Spinoza and theorists of materialism today, I argue that materialism is materialism of relations. Materialism is not a materialism of matter. As Frederick Jameson

argues, such a view of materialism as matter is essentially a bourgeois idea. Materialism is a relation and the relation is always and ultimately a relation of production in a mode of production. In other words, materialism is not static but dialectical. The “grounding of materialism in one or another conception of matter,” Jameson writes, is “the hallmark of bourgeois ideology from the eighteenth-century materialisms all the way to nineteenth-century positivism and determinism (itself a bourgeois rather than a Marxian term and concept)” (*Political Unconscious* 45–46). Materialism in its most complex mode is, however, “not a mechanical but a historical materialism: it does not assert the primacy of matter so much as it insists on an ultimate determination by the mode of production” (Jameson 45–46). Materialism becomes part of a new philosophy in social struggles. In his *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law* Marx writes, “Philosophy cannot be made a reality without the abolition of the proletariat, the proletariat cannot be abolished without philosophy being made reality” (187).

The materialism of relations is itself a product of changing material relations. It became possible to supersede the early materialism of objects and mechanical materialism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in other words, only “when it became possible to criticise the conditions of production and intercourse in the hitherto existing world, i.e., when the contradiction between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat had given rise to communist and socialist views” (*German Ideology* 419).

The earlier matterism, in which “things” interact with each other and which is developed by Spinozian metaphysics, is a relay of early bourgeois relations in which the conflict between capital and labor is emerging, and “agency” remains identified with the agency of capital hypostatized in ideal forms (“substance” and “matter”) devoid of history. One of the main features of this speculative treatment of matter is that “the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object of *contemplation*, but not as *human sensuous activity, practice*” (“Theses on Feuerbach” 143). It is in this regard a metaphysics of capital.

The contemporary discourses of the new materialist turn have aggressively opposed materialism of relations and substituted for it a materialism of matter (a matterism) that is a modern version of metaphysics. Metaphysics has, of course, been revived in new materialist discourses which take their lead from Deleuze’s “I am a pure metaphysician” (*Collapse* III 42). The substitution of objects for relations is evident not only in those theories that focus exclusively on objects and treat “relations” as

“external” and that insist, as Graham Harman does, that “Everything is Not Connected” (*Bells and Whistles: More Speculative Realism* 110–127). Non-relational materialism is also at the core of the most relational-seeming materialisms: those focusing on assemblages (Latour), desiring-machines (Deleuze), entanglements (Karen Barad), meshes (Timothy Morton), etc. I say “relational-seeming” because what these theorists mean by relations are really local reactions and interactions of entities (more or less fluid and fleeting) with each other—a logic of objects (what Spinoza calls “singular things”) divorced from social relations. In compensation for their severance from the social world, all things, through Spinoza, are given an other-worldly significance and interconnection in the substance that is divine Nature itself: “in Nature there is only one substance” and “it is absolutely infinite” (EP14D, 420) from which follows the claim that “nothing can be or be conceived without God” (EP15D, 420).

The object-al notion of relations is the logic of the commodity, which translates the social relations of production that produce commodities into relations between things. As with the commodity, it has great “allure,” what Harman, whose object-oriented ontology reduces the world to objects perhaps more aggressively than all the new materialists, argues involves an “enchanted experience” that “makes no attempt” to analyze “hidden” material relations of things (Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics* 143). The allure of the materialism of objects is a response to neoliberalism, which has made it possible to “criticize” earlier forms of materialism and their contradictions from a “more materialist” standpoint—but the “more” is a speculative, spectral materialism that normalizes the economic relations of finance and translates working class passivity (itself a product of capital’s class power—ownership—and the left’s accommodation) into militant affective agency that ultimately calls for minor forms of redistribution. It is a substitute for collectivity (based on position in the division of labor), just as “assemblages” are a substitute for making sense of events as part of the social totality of capitalism and the dialectic of its transformation.

## 1.2 Two

Many Left Spinozists—following the enormous canon of Spinoza studies—have highlighted the now widely known aspects of Spinoza’s biography and his contribution to Western thought, addressing for

instance the circumstances of the *herem* (excommunication) imposed on him in 1656, the rigor of Spinoza's philosophical system and the differences with his contemporaries it manifests, his concern for community and democracy, his critique of theological and teleological ideology and the courage with which he advocated freedom of intellectual and religious inquiry and debate in an era in which he risked for doing so exile if not imprisonment, murder or execution.

But, as with the more canonic and mainstream scholarly texts, in the left scholarship detailing such issues, Spinoza's "heroism" has overshadowed serious critical materialist inquiry and analysis, with few exceptions. George Caffentzis likens the treatment of Spinoza among left and Marxian readers to the "great ideas" theory of history from which the left normally vigorously distances itself ("How Savage Was Spinoza?"). One result is that dominant left interpretations of Spinoza ignore the ways in which what Spinoza defended as democracy (the governing of "public Affairs" in a "*Democracy*," Spinoza writes in the *Political Treatise* is the "responsibility" "of a Council made up of the common multitude" (ii, 17, 514)), is a democracy of the bourgeoisie. A democracy of political freedom, not economic freedom. Which is to say a political freedom that encodes the equal rights of all to own private property by which they exploit the labor of others. It is advocated by a progressive and often radical bourgeois class (especially relative to the feudal aristocrats), who in their fight against feudal and absolutist relations in the early stages of capitalism appealed to the working class to support political institutions advantageous to the bourgeoisie. This is essentially the class behind what Jonathan Israel calls "the Radical Enlightenment" thinkers (*Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity: 1650–1750*). But it is a class that nonetheless depended on the exploitation of free labor and enslaved labor of early modern capitalism. To put it another way, it is a class whose relative radicality lies in the way its members were advancing *new* forms of exploitation, in other words, a new mode of production—one based on the exchange of free labor for wages. Exploitation of free labor, or capital, "comes dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt" (Marx, *Capital* I 926). These contradictory relations in reality produce what Étienne Balibar calls the "aporia" of Spinoza's notion of community (*Spinoza and Politics* 113–124), "aporia" being one of the left's favored concepts within which to absorb class contradictions in the philosophical language of "unresolvable" opposition.

The Left Spinozists exalt Spinoza as a “radical” and even “revolutionary” defender of “democracy” as if his democracy was not the democracy of the bourgeoisie, and in doing so make reform of capitalism the limit of revolutionary change. They, in effect, ignore or actively obscure the way exploitation increasingly takes place over the modern era in the sphere of economic relations rather than imposed with brute force and political dictatorship—though brute force and political authoritarianism never disappears, even as the relations of free (wage) labor extend throughout the world. The immanence of the market is of course what Friedrich Hayek refers to as the most “efficient” and “noncoercive” method “by which our activities can be adjusted to each other with coercive or arbitrary intervention of authority” (*Road to Serfdom* 41). Its “freedom”—the illusion of immanence and political liberty—however is the economic unfreedom of the other. The other—the outside to capitalist relations—is the basis of a transformative materialism—not a matterism of objects but a materialism of relations. Political liberty is the name under which economic inequality is presented by the left and the right alike, in different idioms, as an absolute, as if “things could have been created [...] in no other way or order” (E IP33S2, 437). The uncritical (often joyous) readings of Spinoza have had devastating consequences for the left and for the working class movement to transform private property relations, which is in part the focus of and reason for writing *Spinoza, New Materialism and Contemporary*.

### 1.3 THREE

I have here focused on Spinoza because he has been deeply influential in formations of new materialism, including such tendencies as vibrant matter, object-oriented ontology, affect theory, speculative realism and assemblage theory, for instance. This book, however, is not a book about Spinoza. Nor is it a book primarily about “reading” Spinoza or “readings of” Spinoza, although it necessarily involves both. It is a book about new materialism and the way it has remapped the humanities. It engages Spinoza because, as I have already said, Spinoza’s thought has been used by the left to substitute a regressive materialism of objects for materialism of relations, a substitution which has normalized existing social relations.

My concern here is not Spinoza or new materialism—although I engage both. I engage both because they have, in the name of materialism, turned materialism into a mode of latter-day spiritualism.