

Research Statement and Project

Title: Spinoza and the Problem of Labor: State, Multitude, and Radical Democracy

Topics to be studied

The project I propose to become a postdoctoral fellow in the Research Project on “Power, conflict and freedom: Spinoza and the paths of modern and contemporary political philosophy on democracy,” in the Department of Philosophy, at the University of São Paulo, will examine the relationship between *labor*, *democracy*, and the *State* in Spinoza’s work and the further ramifications of this relationship in contemporary political thought.

The aim of this project is to contribute to the still understudied concept of labor in Spinoza and to examine how it relates to his idea of democracy and the multitude. The hypothesis guiding this research states that Spinoza’s work gives us theoretical and analytic resources to establish a more comprehensive idea of democracy than the one he himself aimed at describing in the *Political Treatise*. This more comprehensive regime would eventually require the abolition of what we now call “waged” or “salaried” labor.

The project consists of 3 research axes. Its first axis, on the relationship between Spinoza’s conceptions of labor, democracy, and the multitude, establishes the general problems to be investigated and the hypotheses to be explored. The second and third axes will extend the reflections on Spinoza’s political philosophy into other historical periods and geographical contexts: contemporary Spinoza scholarship and radical democratic thought in Latin America

The project aligns with research topics that I have explicitly developed in my PhD thesis (Lema 2021; forthcoming), as well as with other aspects of political thought and Latin American studies (Lema 2019) that I have studied and published in journal articles or presented at conference meetings.

Axis 1: Democracy and the problem of labor in Spinoza’s philosophy

In spite of the rich and vast Marxist-inspired bibliography on Spinoza, it is surprising that there is still a lack of a thorough analysis of the problem of labor in his work. As is known, Marx did not envisage a revolution in capitalism without a revolution—or straightforward abolition—of

waged labor. Therefore, the lack of a detailed analysis in Spinoza's concept of labor becomes all the more surprising when we realize that an important amount of Marxist-inspired readings and uses of Spinoza's philosophy have highlighted its revolutionary potential for a democratic politics in the 20th century.

If understanding the dynamics and mechanisms of labor is a requirement for conceiving of a materialist transformation of society (what Marx investigated in *Capital*), why is there still a lack in this the study of the conception of labor in Spinoza's philosophy? If, in the Marxist framework, revolution in capitalism is inseparable from the full-fledged transformation of labor regimes, why have we not delved into a more complete analysis of the problem of labor in Spinoza's philosophy? In light of Spinoza's description of different regimes of government in the *Political Treatise (TP)*, could we say that this work is something like the *Capital* of the 17th century? Furthermore, in light of Spinoza's concepts of democracy and the multitude as the *imperium* of society, could we say that the *Political Treatise* contributes to a radical renewal of the relationship between labor and the State?

Exploring these issues and arguing for the presence of a more comprehensive conception of democracy in Spinoza's work is not an attempt to "rescue" Spinoza from his infamous exclusion of women and workers from democracy. In fact, it is not certain that Spinoza's work gives the resources to counter his own notorious statement that women are, "by nature," not suited to govern, as he writes in the last page of the *Political Treatise*; or that laborers are to be excluded from democracy (*TP XI*, 3-4; G. III, pp. 359-360). The source to establish other possible paths of democratic government in Spinoza's philosophy is rather based on the fact that he implicitly recognized a theory of alienation related to the existence of waged labor.

The concept of alienation is not explicitly employed by Spinoza. It has often been used—mostly, but not exclusively, by Marxist-inspired commentators—to describe the state of individuals who live according to the so-called "first kind of knowledge," that is, according to imaginary ideas and not to rational ones (Althusser 1993, 1976; Matheron, 1969, 1976; Macherey 1994-1998). In this sense, the idea of alienation has been traditionally understood, in Spinoza's philosophy, as relating to ideological beliefs integrated into the psychophysiological constitution of individuals. Leaving alienation behind would entail attaining truth and rational knowledge, which in turn would suppose a rational ethical organization of life. But this use of the notion of ideology as applied to Spinoza's philosophy forgets that, in Marx, alienation and ideology are inextricably related to specific labor regimes. As Marx explained in his 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, alienation does not only refer

to having falsified ideas about the world, but, most importantly, to the fact that the product of labor manufactured by laborers is literally “taken away” from them by the capitalist and then dissolved into the market as a commodity. In other words, alienation relates not only to ideas, but also to materially and concrete modes of production.

What commentators have not thoroughly studied in Spinoza’s work is the notion of alienation related to labor. As Alexander Matheron has shown in a classic article on “Femmes at serviteurs dans la démocratie spinoziste,” (2011, pp. 287-304) Spinoza’s exclusion of “servants” (*servi*) from the democratic regime he describes in the unfinished chapter XI of the *TP* refers to a specific portion of the population corresponding to those who lived under the economic tutelage of a “master” (*dominus*). These people would receive, in exchange of their work, something we could call today a “salary,” either in the form of money or other goods. In other words, Spinoza was probably referring mostly to that category of people we now call “waged-laborers” or “proletarians,” a growing group of people during the early years of capitalism in 17th century Netherlands. Making reference to Spinoza’s theory of passions (and especially to the “imitation of affects”), Matheron establishes that Spinoza excluded these laborers from democracy because they could be easily instrumentalized by their masters. This situation would create, within the State, powerful “cartels” led by these masters.

If Spinoza believed that wage-laborers would be easily instrumentalized by their proto-bourgeois masters, this means that Spinoza saw in the emerging proletariat a subjected group of people, whose alienation was not based on the presence of non-rational ideas, but—in line with Marx’s materialism—on capitalist (or at least proto-capitalist) division of labor. In turn, being a “master” in this context did not consist in having attained rational knowledge, but only in being economically independent, that is, in owning the means of production and making others work to extract surplus-value, to put it in Marx’s terms. Therefore, the specific democratic regime that Spinoza was to describe in the last chapters of the *Political Treatise* supposed a restriction in people’s political and civic participation due to the acknowledgment of an emergent division of labor, entailing the presence of wage-laborers (servants) and capitalist, owners of the means of production (masters).

However, in light of Spinoza’s acknowledgement of this division of labor and the consequent subjugation (alienation) of a portion of people (workers) that this labor system entails, I claim that it is not possible to say that this is the *only* form of democracy for which Spinoza’s own system allowed. The textual basis to support this idea is found in a reference on which commentators barely comment. It is located at the beginning of the chapter XI of the *TP*, where Spinoza says that he will describe only *one* kind of democracy: “I don’t plan to

discuss each [democratic regime], but only one in which absolutely everyone who is bound only by the laws of his native land, and who is, furthermore, his own master and lives honorably, has the right to vote in the supreme Council and to stand for political offices” (*TP* XI, 3; G. III, p. 239. Curley’s translation). Although Spinoza does not mention what other democratic governments may look like, it is clear that he believes that other forms of organizing a democracy *are possible*.

I propose—in a non-exhaustive manner—that two alternatives are opened up for a different form of democracy, which would be, most importantly, an *improved* democratic regime according to Spinoza’s own standards. First, as Alexandre Matheron famously proposed in his *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza* (1969), it would be possible to argue that Spinoza accepts the possibility of a hypothetical “society of sages,” where every individual would have attained rational knowledge. In this society, the collective organization of passions (what we may call “politics” properly understood) would not be necessary. In fact, the State itself would not be necessary, as every individual would be able to rationally and autonomously perform a society without conflict. However, in my doctoral dissertation on *Spinoza’s Notion of Life and its Reception in Contemporary French Thought*, I argue that Matheron’s idea of a hypothetical democratic regime based on the attainment of rationality by every individual does not take into account that Spinoza holds a *collective* conception of rationality in the *Political Treatise*. The idea of a society of sages continues with a logic of rationality anchored in particular individuals attaining the third kind of knowledge and, at least in the context of the *TP*, is not a valid hypothesis for an improved democracy.

A second way of thinking about democracy therefore emerges from Spinoza’s conception of a collective notion of rationality, anchored in the idea of a free multitude (*libera multitudo*) as the *imperium* of a democratic system. This alternative form of democracy goes beyond the particular kind of regime Spinoza was to describe in the last chapters of the *Political Treatise*, and also beyond the ultimately impossible foundation of a “society of sages.” This alternative democracy would rather be a regime wherein the whole multitude would be totally free from its subjection to a master. As we have seen, “having a master,” in the context of chapter XI of the *TP*, relates to being economically subjected to someone else, namely, being subjected via the nascent organization of what would be known as the “labor-market” consisting in the selling of labor-power. Then, the question to be asked is: can a multitude really be free, if an important portion of its individuals are “salaried” and thus subjected to a master? Can a multitude really be free if we take into account this implicit notion of alienation related to waged labor? If waged or salaried labor is a source of subjugation or alienation to a master,

then it is possible to establish that the organization of society based on this division of labor is also a source of political instability, which is what Spinoza sought to overcome in the *TP*.

The implicit assumption in this statement is that Spinoza himself would prefer the multiplication of free individuals integrating what he calls a free multitude (*libera multitudo*). There is room, therefore, to think about the constitution of a multitude whose freedom would come, not only from the development of rationality, but from the weakening of the division of labor that immediately supposes the subjugation of an important portion of (waged) individuals subjugated to a master. The free multitude of an even more autonomously determined democratic regime would thus hypothetically be a multitude freed from waged labor.

To show the feasibility of this working hypothesis with reference to other key aspects of Spinoza's *oeuvre* will be the main research task and goal of this first axis.

The development of this hypothesis implies a point of connection between Marx and Spinoza. This project thus also requires to integrate a comparative analysis of their ideas on labor, labor-power, constituent commune power, democracy, and communism. Such a comparative perspective will allow to illuminate Spinoza via Marx and vice versa. Although scholars have attempted this comparison (see, for example, Casarino 2011), the novelty of this project lies in two related issues. First, the explicit inclusion and analysis of the conception of "labor" in Spinoza's philosophy and the recognition of a division of labor in the societies and political regimes Spinoza describes, especially in the *Political Treatise*. Second, in light of Marx's notion of a conception of "non-alienated" work in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, it will be necessary to interrogate Spinoza's philosophy to establish as to whether he considered the possibility of "productive" labor that did not entail the subjection to a master.

After an initial phase of reconstruction of Spinoza's argument on labor and the constitution of another form of a democratic regime, a second phase starts from this analysis to explore how contemporary Marxist-inspired readings of Spinoza and theories of radical democracy may benefit from it.

Axis 2: Labor and democracy in contemporary Spinoza scholarship

Axis number 2 focuses on contemporary Marxist-inspired work on Spinoza. Why have authors such as Jean-Toussaint Desanti, Alexandre Matheron, Antonio Negri, Étienne Balibar or Frederic Lordon not undertaken an in-depth study of the issue of labor in Spinoza's work and of its consequences for rethinking the division of labor in contemporary society?

The focus on topics such as the affective dimension of politics (Lordon 2013), the constituent power of the multitude (Negri 1981, 1994; Negri and Hardt 2000, 2004, 2009), the problem of democratization of political regimes (Balibar 1985, 2018), or the production of ideological superstructures like philosophical knowledge (Desanti 1956), have occupied most of the attention of this literature; but these authors have only partially considered the possibility of finding, *in Spinoza*, further clues for rethinking the role of labor-power in politics. My hypothesis is that these sources contain nonetheless the conceptual tools to think, *with Spinoza* (and Marx), new forms of political constitution whereby the organization of the multitude's power is accompanied by a critique of the very regime of labor that dominates capitalism, namely, waged-labor.

More specifically, I claim that Étienne Balibar's concept of "transindividuality" (taken from Gilbert Simondon and applied to Spinoza's philosophy) has all the potential to reflect, not only upon the constitution of subjectivity (as it has been recently and fruitfully done [see Read 2015; Morfino; 2018; Vardoulakis 2018]), but also on new ways of organizing a creative-cum-productive collective beyond the logic of labor-power. Therefore, by entering into the debate on contemporary discussions of Spinoza, the aim of the project is not merely to critique a gap in this literature, but most importantly to use their own conceptual tools to expand on some their achievements and to adding a new dimension on the reflection of labor-power.

I have already advanced an important results of this portion of research on several papers about the relationship between some key figures in 20th century Spinozism, such as Matheron, Negri, and Desanti (Lema 2019). This work has also been recently presented at conference meetings in London in 2018 (*Historical Materialism*) and Cambridge in 2021 (*Ships in the Proletarian Night: Contemporary Marxist Thought in France and Britain*). These manuscripts will be the basis upon which I will develop this part of the research.

Axis 3: Spinoza and radical democratic thought in Latin American

Axis 3 will also go beyond the reconstruction of Spinoza's work and will focus on contemporary discussions in the domain known as "radical democracy." Recent scholarship on Spinoza's political philosophy has attacked the radical democratic interpretation of Spinoza, especially as incarnated in the work of Negri (see Field 2020; Laerke 2021). This is, in a sense, not surprising, because the project of a radical democracy has been interpreted as an essentialist attempt to read the "multitude" and the "people" as revolutionary morally "good" agents *par*

excellence. Although this critique often takes the radical democratic perspective as a caricature of what it really is, some of its points are useful to reassess the merits of a radically democratic reading of Spinoza's political philosophy.

This axis thus aims at rehabilitating a radical democratic interpretation of Spinoza and, also, to assess its relevance for current political discussions. This rehabilitation implies a double gesture concerning both Spinoza and contemporary political thinking.

The first gesture is to establish that the complexity of Spinoza's position concerning democracy and the multitude does *not* lie in his belief of the people as a morally good actor essentially driven by a revolutionary impulse. Rather, this radicalism lies in a political reflection that considers as inseparable the *multitude* as an agent and *labor* as an organizational societal dynamics relevant for political *institutional* design. More concretely, what is "radical" about Spinoza's democracy (according to this project's hypothesis) does not lie in a moral consideration about the multitude, but on the implicit assumption that a democratic representative system based on waged-labor cannot lead to the constitution of a fully free multitude in Spinoza's own terms.

The second gesture is to put this Spinozist line of thought in a critical dialogue with contemporary Latin American currents in political thought, considering the relevance of the renewed discussions on democracy and the State during the last two decades in the continent. The implementation of projects of radical reform and redistribution that attained the State via representative democratic methods in countries such as Venezuela, Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, or Uruguay have triggered multiple discussions precisely on the role of democracy. The main goal of this portion of the research project is to establish how Spinoza's philosophy may contribute (or perhaps be in opposition) to the development of Latin American thought around the relationship between democratization, the State, the multitude, and labor-power. Possible authors to examine are Marilena Chaui, from Brazil; Ernesto Laclau and Rita Laura Segato, from Argentina; Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, Alvaro García Linera, and Luis Tapia, from Bolivia; Santiago Castro-Gómez, from Colombia; and Aníbal Quijano, from Peru. An in-depth systematic dialogue between Latin American thought and the work of Spinoza has not yet been carried out. This is thus another novelty that the project proposes.

Research Schedule and Expected Publications

A clear schedule of the different tasks to be undertaken during the two years of the postdoctoral grant will allow this project to be developed in full. The result of the proposed research project will include a series of publications in peer-reviewed journals and books, the details of which I specify in the following schedule.

Year 1

During the first year I propose to undertake three tasks:

(1) To study and thoroughly reconstruct Spinoza's notion of labor present in his work. I will attempt to demonstrate the hypothesis guiding this project, which states that other forms of democratic organization are possible within Spinoza's *oeuvre* and that division of labor does not allow for the full development of what Spinoza calls "free multitude." Although I place this research task at the very beginning of the project, the study of Spinoza's conception of labor and its relationship with contemporary philosophical and political discussions around democracy will traverse all the other research tasks presented.

This portion of research aligns with the last chapter of my PhD dissertation on the *Political Treatise*, titled "*Multitudinis libera sibi vivere studet*. La notion de vie collective dans le *Traité politique*." The result of this research may include **two articles** (in Spanish and English) on Spinoza's concept of labor and his idea of a radically democratic multitude.

Possible publication venues for these articles: *Cadernos espinosanos* and *Political Theory* journal.

(2) To establish how this research on Spinoza's concept of labor relates to current literature on Spinoza's political philosophy and, more specifically, how it fills what I consider to be a "gap" in Marxist-inspired studies on Spinoza.

The result of this research considers the **writing of a paper or book chapter** giving a general perspective on this problem in the literature, but which will ultimately concentrate on Balibar. This paper will be included as the last chapter of a **book-length manuscript** (taken from my PhD thesis) provisionally titled *Simondonian Spinozism*, which traces criticisms and positive receptions of Spinoza contemporary thought. Its last chapter will be focused on the

Marxist- and Simondon-inspired reading proposed by Balibar and will include a reflection on the issue of labor as related to the concept of transindividuality.

Possible publication venue for this book: Book series “Spinoza Studies,” Edinburgh University Press or book series “Historical Materialism,” Brill publishers (Leiden).

Year 2

During the second year I propose to deploy axis number 3 of the project, namely:

To develop a dialogue between all of the developments and conclusions established until this point of the research project (mostly around Spinoza and Spinozism) and contemporary Latin American theories that have sought to radicalize perspectives on democracy.

This portion of the research will be carried out in a twofold manner.

First, it considers the **organization of a conference** with the provisional title of **“Spinoza and Latin American Thought,”** to be held online if the pandemic crisis does not allow for an *in situ* realization. The conference will attempt to host, as keynote speakers, some of the Latin American intellectuals and activists that I will study as part of the project. These speakers will be invited to reflect on how Spinoza has affected their own thought or on possible relationships between their work and Spinoza’s political philosophy. In addition, a multilingual call for papers will be circulated to attract the attention of established scholars and students. A **collective volume with the articles of the conference will also be published**, in Portuguese and Spanish. Both the conference organization and the subsequent publication may be envisaged as collectively organized projects.

Possible publication venues for this collective volume: “Siglo del Hombre” publishing house (Bogota) and/or *Cadernos espinosanos* (special issue).

Second, **two articles** on the possible dialogues between Spinoza’s notions of democracy and labor and Latin American thought will be written and published. These articles may constitute the basis for a future book on “Spinoza and Latin America’s Political Philosophy.”

Possible publication venues for these articles: *Revista de ciencia política* (Santiago), *European Journal of Philosophy*, *Historical Materialism* journal.

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