



Balibar and Transindividuality

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This issue of *Australasian Philosophical Review* is organised around an original article by the eminent contemporary French philosopher, Étienne Balibar. The article—‘Philosophies du transindividuel: Spinoza, Marx, Freud’—has been abridged by the author (by approximately one third of its original length) and translated into English in consultation with the author for publication here. In accordance with the format of this journal, Balibar’s lead article is followed by a collection of commentaries by an international and interdisciplinary line-up of scholars. The issue concludes with Balibar’s afterthoughts in response to these commentaries.

Balibar’s lead article represents an intervention into an increasingly lively debate around the eponymous concept of the ‘transindividual’, itself originating in the work of Gilbert Simondon, but having been popularised by Balibar himself on his own account. Following Simondon, Balibar positions this concept as opening a momentous *via negativa* leading away from the mistakes of all previous philosophy. He does not, however, regard Simondon as the crucial figure of this moment, but rather traces a longer prehistory of the concept. For Balibar, the key figure in this history, the earliest he names, is indeed the earliest figure he posits as seminal to his own position, Spinoza. It is in relation to Spinoza that Balibar, a quarter of a century ago, first adopted the concept of the transindividual from Simondon.

To put it very simply, the idea of transindividuality is that much of what we are is constituted through relations between individuals, implying indeed that even our individuality itself is transindividual. Balibar also insists that this implies that social institutions above the level of the individual are constituted relationally through transindividuality, rather than genuinely supervening on individuals. The simplicity of this idea—indeed, what some might regard as its apparent obviousness—belies the degree to which it disturbs the cherished foundations of our ideology.

Despite how influential his writings on the subject have been, and although the concept of the ‘transindividual’ has come to be a key term in his lexicon, this is the first systematic approach to the topic of transindividuality as such (as opposed to using the concept in analysing a particular thinker) presented by Balibar.

The most evident novelty of the present text is its arrangement, under the sign of the transindividual, of an idiosyncratic triad of thinkers, including unsurprisingly Spinoza, but with more eccentricity beginning with Marx, and most surprisingly ending with Freud. In earlier works, Balibar has applied the concept of

transindividuality to Spinoza at length, and also to Marx, albeit explicitly only briefly. Freud, however, Balibar has rarely written about before at all. While tracing a materialist line from Spinoza to Marx is not new (even if it remains somewhat controversial), involving Freud with these other two produces a peculiar genealogy. This inclusion can be read as a kind of provocation in relation to Jason Read's recent book on transindividuality, in which Read sets up a different triad, combining Spinoza and Marx with the interceding figure of Hegel.

Read's *soi-disant* Marxist intervention can be said, by bringing Marx together with Hegel and Spinoza, to stand against a narrowly materialist reading of Marx, in favour of a conceptual frame that straddles the distinction between materialism and idealism. In relation to Marx, the imputation of transindividualism has the character of bringing to prominence a feature of his thought that ought to be obvious, given his stress on the social character of human being, but in practice is typically occluded in favour of the spontaneous ideology of individualism.

Balibar's insertion of Freud, and correlative displacement of Hegel, is not only provocative in relation to Read's construction (even if it is not meant to imply an outright contradiction of Read), but also complicates our understanding of both Balibar and Freud himself. The recourse to Freud should perhaps not be surprising given Balibar's lineage within French philosophy, being influenced by numerous thinkers—most prominently Louis Althusser, but also Gaston Bachelard, and one might even say Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida—who were themselves strongly influenced by psychoanalysis. Moreover, there are strong traces of Freud in Balibar's work: for example, the central concept of the 'other scene' that organizes his argument in *Politics and the Other Scene* is borrowed from Freud. Moreover, we have reason to hope that this text marks a turn towards a more concerted engagement with psychoanalysis by Balibar.

Still, Balibar has rarely mentioned Freud before, and moreover the Freud he chooses is the most eccentric Freud imaginable: Balibar focuses on a single text by Freud, namely the latter's treatment of mass psychology, neglected by most of his readers, certainly including the French tradition from which Balibar springs. Where Balibar's reading of Spinoza and Marx is grounded on a thoroughgoing knowledge of their thoughts, with Freud the reading is tendentially partial—but perhaps necessarily so, given that in comparison with Spinoza and Marx, Freud rarely touched on the social as a theme. Still, the approach remains incongruous, since there are other works of Freud that might be deemed relevant here. The text plays an extraordinary role then in relation to Freud, simply by drawing attention to this text.

The assembly of the series Marx–Spinoza–Freud, beginning achronologically with Marx, is reminiscent of nothing so much as the influence of Louis Althusser, recalling Balibar's intellectual origins within what we can loosely define as the 'Althusser school' (meaning the cohort of young scholars influenced by Louis Althusser in the 1960s). The three nodes that organized Althusser's thought are, precisely, Marx, Spinoza and psychoanalysis, with Marx kept dutifully as the primary reference.

Balibar first came to prominence as the co-editor of the hugely influential collected volume *Reading Capital*, comprising texts by Althusser and his students including Balibar (and in some editions consisting solely of Althusser and Balibar's contributions). Althusser's signature move in reading Marx is positing a so-called 'epistemological break' between the Hegelian early Marx and the later,

proto-structuralist Marx who adumbrates a revolutionary political economy. Althusser's virulent attack on humanism can be understood in part precisely as a rejection of the philosophical privileging of the individual. He was accused conversely of propounding a form of sociological functionalism that ignored the individual and saw it as a mere effect of social forces.

This misunderstanding of Althusser can be seen as having a motivating effect on Balibar's project of conceptualizing transindividuality, in articulating a position that clearly rejects not only the hypostasization of the individual but also the reification of society as such. Balibar's decision to begin with Marx here can be seen as a confirmation of this motivation. Indeed, while Balibar's major previous work on transindividuality was *Spinoza: From Individuality to Transindividuality* it is significant that he first adopted the concept not there but in *The Philosophy of Marx* published the same year that the lecture on Spinoza and transindividuality was delivered. And the triad Marx–Spinoza–Freud itself can be seen as a matter of going back to Althusser's core influences in order to articulate a corrective philosophical account within the same basic framework.

The relation of each of the French thinkers to their three earlier references is surely quite different, although this difference may be somewhat superficial: with Balibar, we have seen, it is Spinoza that has been the greatest of textual references, with Marx not far behind, and psychoanalysis rarely mentioned; Althusser by contrast made Marx his unequivocal guiding star, while the influence of psychoanalysis, particularly of his contemporary, the pre-eminent French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, was palpable, yet Spinoza was someone whose philosophy he never addressed systematically. Nonetheless, Spinoza was for Althusser ever present, as those who attended his seminars testify. An effect of this 'underground current' of Spinozism in the Althusser school is that a number of important philosophical works on Spinoza have been produced by Althusser's students, including most prominently Pierre Macherey and Balibar himself.

Balibar's approach, both in *Spinoza and Politics* and in a series of influential essays published shortly after—including eight years later the lecture that was published as a book on the transindividual—is to make Spinoza's thought resonate with concerns and questions in contemporary political thought. Let us provide one example that is revealing in the context of the concept of the transindividual. *Spinoza and Politics* surveys the entire work of Spinoza, with one chapter dedicated to each of the major works. Perhaps the most original and decisive intervention is Balibar's reading of Part IV of the *Ethics*, centring his analysis around Proposition 37. Balibar frames the entire discussion of Part IV of the *Ethics* in terms of two competing understandings of the political: one insisting that sociality is 'against' nature whereby it needs to be instituted; and the other proposing that sociality is natural. The former understands as natural only the individual, while the latter privileges society over the individual. Balibar holds that Spinoza overcomes this binary impasse, framing the question of sociality in entirely different terms. It is the overcoming of the binary alternative that Balibar thematizes as transindividuality in Spinoza by precisely expending the interpretation of Part IV of the *Ethics*—and specifically the propositions around the central Proposition 37. We see, then, that Balibar's interpretation of Spinoza is not merely an exegetical exercise but an attempt to grapple with ideas that are current in political philosophy—and the concept of the transindividual is not different.

The thematization of transindividuality can be seen as a response to the accusation of functionalism levelled at the Althusserians. Instead of the trap of a conception of ideology, imputed to Althusser, as totally dominating the individual, Balibar stresses the mutual and reciprocal presence of construction and destruction that characterizes the *movement* of transindividuality. Thus, transindividuality denotes an evolving and mutable relation between individual and society. It is, differently put, a relational ontology that is incompatible with any notion of social stagnation.

Such a new basis is not, of course, justified *ipso facto*. The various responses to Balibar's paper from scholars who are engaged in one way or another with the Althusserian school and its legacy prompt Balibar to further expand and refine his challenge.

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