

The Politics of Indignation: A Spinozist Perspective

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Abstract: Contemporary social struggles increasingly recognise and use indignation as a positive political affect. But what is indignation, and to what extent can it serve as a foundation for political movements and claims for justice? I turn to Spinoza to explore the complexity of this issue, and ways in which it is played out in our current political context. In section I, I emphasise the ambiguity, if not the paradox of indignation: on the one hand, Spinoza tells us, indignation is a Sadness accompanied by hatred towards others. As such, indignation threatens the harmony of the social order, and can even destroy the civil state. But indignation is also itself a genetic force, *constitutive* of the civil state. This means that both the social consensus and its dissolution are *in fact* a consequence not of sound reason, but of the power of an essentially imitative affectivity, and of indignation in particular (section II). In section III, I illustrate the complexity of Spinoza's account by turning to recent historical examples. Specifically, and following the work of Didier Fassin, I focus on post-Holocaust Europe and post-Apartheid South Africa. Eventually, I arrive at a nuanced, plausible defence of indignation as a political affect, yet one that cannot serve as a model or a guide when we try and think the nature of the *demos*, by which I mean the constitution of the multitude as the greatest possible unit of power, or right.

Keywords: suffering, hate, indignation (ethics and politics of), resistance (and natural right), consensus, recognition (and reconciliation), justice, revenge (and destruction).

Since the publication of Stéphane Hessel's thirty-two pages-long essay *Indignez-vous !*, which sold over four million copies worldwide in just one year, and was translated in thirty-four languages, indignation has become an increasingly recognised as a positive political affect, around which protest movements of various kinds can rally (Hessel 2010). In his opusculé, Hessel, a hero of the French resistance deported to Buchenwald, celebrates indignation as the ferment of political resistance and, implicitly, presents resistance as the essence of politics. His brief call to indignation, in reaction to the treatment of the *sans papiers* and migrant workers in France, the fate of Palestinians in the occupied territories, the victims of inequality, France's politics of immigration, as well as the place of financial capitalism in today's world, clearly resonated with a large section of the population. Soon after the publication of Hessel's bestseller, Spain saw the formation and rise of the anti-austerity movement *Movimiento 15-M*, also known as '*Movimiento de los indignados*', which eventually led to the formation of political parties such as *Partido X* and *Podemos*. More recently, the so-called cancel culture, also rooted in indignation, has spread on university campuses, public forums, social media, and society in general.

Increasingly, indignation is seen as a right, if not a virtue and a political goal, one that is amplified and exacerbated by the “echo chambers” of social media, entrenching divisions within society, comforting each side in their certainty that their indignation is more valid, legitimate and founded than the indignation of others. Have we, then, entered the era of the politics and culture of indignation, directed at abuses of power, but also often bent on erecting new popular tribunals aimed at naming and shaming, and before which the accused are forced to kneel, confess, and repent (Hübl 2019)? With a bit of historical contextualisation, Axel Honneth claims, we observe that social struggles of the modern age find their point of departure not in pre-given economic interests, but in “moral feelings of *indignation*.”¹ They stem “from collective feelings of having been unjustly treated” and denied legal or social recognition.²

But what is indignation, and to what extent can it serve as a foundation for political movements and claims for justice? Can we even talk about a *right* to indignation? And can we rightfully think of indignation as a virtue, rather than a passion – and a sad one at that, fuelled by the hatred that we feel in the face of a wrong committed towards ourselves or others – which can, in the best of circumstances, lead to a democratic process of recognition and transformation on the part of the body politic, yet can also lead to assaults on freedom and the dissolution of the democratic consensus? Is indignation an end in itself, a genuine political stance, or a mere trigger, the murmur or tremor of a movement through which society either rescues itself from a state of inequality and alienation, or plunges further into bondage and oppression?

Those questions, and the ambiguous nature of indignation they imply, find a remarkable echo in Philip Roth’s *Indignation* (Roth 2008). Published two years before Hessel’s opuscle, Roth’s novel offers a nuanced and, as we’ll see, rather Spinozist account of this particular emotion. On the one hand, he describes the futile and ultimately destructive logic of indignation. At the same time, the narrator describes indignation as “the most beautiful word of the English language” (95), arguably because it helps us understand our emotional response to specific situations of injustice. In the novel, indignation appears as the necessary response to the implicit but tangible anti-Semitism of the Dean of men, and the bigotry of the deeply Christian ethos of Winesburg College, with which the young college student and main protagonist, Marcus Messner, is confronted. Roth thus brings to light the ambiguity if not paradox of indignation, which Spinoza analyses in his *Ethics* and political writings. Sometimes, indignation is the only possible response,

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1 Honneth 1995, 161 (emphasis added).

2 Honneth 1995, 165.

and the only way to live with dignity, however briefly. In Roth's novel, Marcus Messner's outrage leads him to drop out of his Ohio college. As a consequence, he is drafted into the US army to fight in the Korean war and killed in combat after only a few months.

In a recent interview and a different context, the French economist turned Spinozist François Lordon seems to come to a similar conclusion: whilst a sad passion, which combines anger and hatred, indignation is sometimes the only possible reaction, and, all things considered, the least bad option (Lordon and Foessel 2016). It signals the point at which a situation becomes intolerable for a particular group or society, a critical threshold that can lead to forms of resistance such as rebellions, uprisings, strikes, practices of civil disobedience, etc. a society remains normatively deficient so long as its members are systematically denied the recognition they seek and deserve.

Yet can we distinguish between types of indignation? What are to make of the indignation motivated by ethnic and religious supremacy, by conspiracy theories that lash out at technocrats and civil servants, the urban elite, the media, the judiciary, religions other than their own, foreigners and migrants, etc.? What are we to make of those who capitalise on the indignation of certain groups and claim to feel their pain, frustration, and anger; who tell them who is responsible for it, who deserves to pay, and against whom they should turn their vindictiveness? We want to believe in the possibility of distinguishing between different forms of indignation, of seeing some as legitimate and others as illegitimate, of attributing the former to *ressentiment* and revengefulness, and therefore to an imagined or hallucinatory alienation, and the latter to a genuine call for justice, rooted in real, historical alienation.³ Yet how secure and well-founded are those distinctions? Can the *demos*, and democratic politics, be the result of indignation, or are the politics of indignation by definition the politics of the lynching mob? Is indignation a remedy which the body politic produces and applies to itself, and therefore a form of self-immunisation which restores a certain equilibrium, a key element of the state as a self-regulating system? Or is it a poison that threatens its very existence?

I turn to Spinoza to explore the complexity of this issue, and ways in which it is played out in our current political context.⁴ In section I, I emphasise the ambiguity, if not the paradox of indignation: on the one hand, Spinoza tells us, indignation is a Sadness accompanied by hatred towards others. One of the political consequences of indignation, which Spinoza draws not in his *Ethics*, but in his political writings, is that

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³This is the view Didier Fassin develops in a recent article, to which I'll return (Fassin 2013).

⁴The literature on the topic of indignation in Spinoza is now significant. See A. Matheron, 'Indignation and the *Conatus* of the Spinozist State', in Matheron 2020; L. Bove 1996, 295-301; F. Del Lucchese 2009a, Chapter 3; T. Stolze 2009, 152-158.

indignation threatens the harmony of the social order, and can even destroy the civil state. It would be wrong, therefore, to consider it a good. But indignation is also itself a genetic force, *constitutive* of the civil state (*status civilis*), and one which remains alive within the state, thus providing it with its *regulative* dimension (section II). This means that both the social consensus and its dissolution are *in fact* a consequence not of sound reason, but of the power of aggregation, or federation, of an essentially imitative affectivity, and of indignation in particular. Politics, from the inception to the transformation of the civil state, is rooted in the economy and government of passionate affects. In section III, I illustrate the complexity of Spinoza's account by turning to recent historical examples. Specifically, and following the work of Didier Fassin, I focus on post-Holocaust Europe and post-Apartheid South Africa. Eventually, I hope to arrive at a nuanced, plausible defence of indignation as a political affect, yet one that cannot serve as a model or a guide when we try and think the nature of the *demos*, by which I mean the constitution of the multitude as the greatest possible unit of power, or right.⁵ In other words, if indignation, and therefore sadness, is at the root of all politics, the truly democratic question consists in knowing how it can move beyond it, and give way to a different kind of affectivity, more prone to the flourishing or perfection of a community of minds and bodies. But does this simply mean to a joyful affectivity, such as the love of oneself – Spinoza calls it “*gloria*” (EIIIp30s), *philautia*, or *acquiescentia in se ipso* (EIIIp50s), and defines it as “Joy arising from considering ourselves” (EIIIp55s) – a love that can apply to one's nation (patriotism), but also to self-respect, self-confidence, and self-esteem? Or does it mean to an affectivity that is otherwise than imitative?

I. From Suffering (or Sadness) to Hate and Indignation

Indignation (*indignatio*) seems to play a limited role in the *Ethics*, but a more important, if not crucial one in Spinoza's last work, *The Political Treatise*. It is entirely absent from *The Theological-Political Treatise*. Yet the consequences of what Spinoza has to say about it, and the various ways in which this can be interpreted, are highly significant. Three things are worth mentioning from the start.

First, aside from its definition – “Indignation is a Hate toward someone who has done evil to another”⁶ – indignation appears three times, each time in connection with the question of the state (*imperium*)

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5Throughout, I will use the word multitude as a translation, or the most minimal possible translation, of Spinoza's *multitudo*. It would take me too long to justify the use of this translation, now adopted by most Spinoza scholars since the publication of Antonio Negri's *The Salvage Anomaly* (Negri 1981), and say why, in the end, I believe it to be preferable to the notions of “people,” “masses,” or class. For a synthetic and illuminating account of the meaning of Spinoza's concept, see V. Morfino 2009, 79-86.

6 Spinoza, EIII, Def. Aff. 20; also EIIIp22s.

and its consequences for society as a whole. This is not a coincidence: indignation is fundamentally a political affect. Spinoza contrasts indignation with the rule of law (EIVApp24) and distinguishes it clearly from the right of the state to punish its citizens in the case of a wrong committed (EIVp51s): the state, and the system of right that defines it, does not punish out of indignation, which is a secessionist, or at least divisive affect, but out of *duty*. The second point to emphasise from the start is indignation's fundamental, indeed irreducible connection with hate, and therefore with what Spinoza sees as a form of sadness (*tristitia*) (EIII, Def. Aff., 7). Indignation is a sad passion, which involves hate toward someone or a group as a result of a wrong committed towards them, and with whom I identify. The latter, related point, to which I'll return, is crucial: indignation is hate on someone else's behalf, who is like me, or in whom I recognise myself. It is a mimetic affect, of the kind that defines the sense of belonging that we can expect from the imagination (EIIIp27). But this feature is not unique to indignation: as propositions 16 to 27 of Part III of the *Ethics* seek to demonstrate, we tend to bond through shared affects, whether joyful or sad, and therefore through imaginary representations. Our sociality is first and foremost passionate and a matter of imagination. Anticipating a line of thought that runs from Hume to Adam Smith,⁷ and Gabriel Tarde's sociology of mimetic desire,⁸ based on the idea that social relations are, for the most part, relations of imitation, Spinoza comes to the realisation that, insofar as human beings are affective beings, the more they seek to preserve their own being, or follow their *individual* desire, the more they realise that they are inextricably bound to one another, according to a strict logic of imitation: their sociality happens and expands through a spontaneous propagation of affects.⁹ Spinoza calls Pity or commiseration (*commiseratio*) the imitation of the affects that are related to Sadness in general. In EIIIp27s, he contrasts it with emulation (*aemulatio*), of which we could assume that it is an imitation related to Joy in general. But things are more complicated than it seems. To be sure, Spinoza defines emulation as a kind of imitation, or "a Desire for a thing which is generated in us because we imagine that others have the same Desire" (EIII, Def. Aff. 33). The difference between imitation (*including* Pity) and emulation, he adds, is that "we call emulous only him who imitates what we judge to be honourable, useful, or pleasant" (EIII, Def. Aff. 33, Exp.). However, Spinoza insists that emulation is almost inevitably accompanied by envy: "human nature is so constituted that men pity the unfortunate, and envy the fortunate" (EIIIp32s). This is because, whenever I desire something

7 A. Smith 1976, I.iii.2, III.ii.1-9; D. Hume 2000, 2.2.9-10.

8 Tarde 2000 [1890], 1989 [1901], 1902.

9 For a detailed exploration of this point, see Bostrenghi 2012; Bove 1996, Chapter 3.

that is desired and possessed by an other, I see the other as a rival whom I need to destroy, or whose object of enjoyment I need to dispossess her from (EIIIp32d). Thus, siblings feel that they are competing for the love of their parents. Their shared object of desire, namely, *laetitia*, requires that they hate and destroy each other. But they are precisely children, that is, minds and bodies governed by passions and external causes. The primal scene of puerile, imaginary or hallucinatory sociality (and not just the state of nature) is one of Jealousy, Envy, Rivalry, and Murder. It is that of Cain and Abel. In other words, and as Tarde, Lacan and Girard each tried to demonstrate in their respective domains, *imaginary* Desire is essentially mediated, mimetic, and envious: *my* desire is mostly the desire of an Other, whose existence and Joy are an obstacle to the realisation of my desire, and whose place I therefore need to take.¹⁰ But, as Lacan used to ask: if I am to put myself in the other's shoes (*à la place de l'autre*), where will the other go? Is there room for the two of us, or is imaginary, passionate, narcissistic desire essentially a place of rivalry and conflict which pits me against the other, even (and especially) where and when I identify with the other?¹¹ The difference between imaginary, puerile identification and narcissistic paranoia is very thin indeed.

The Spinozist (and also Nietzschean) lesson is that nothing, it seems, spreads more easily and quickly than sad passions, especially of the envious and revengeful kind. A crucial point, to which I'll also return in my conclusion, is one of knowing whether the imaginary, reactive and narcissistic affectivity of imitation can give way to a real (or rational), active and democratic affectivity, rooted in friendship and solidarity; and whether the latter can lay the foundations for the constitution of the multitude as a true *people*, rather than as an obedient herd or a lynching mob. In other words, the question with which I'll be concerned *in fine* is that of knowing not how the state can become wholly rational – Spinoza himself believes it can't – and therefore neutralise our affective sociality, but whether human affectivity is exclusively auto-affective, or mimetic, whether it grows and spreads solely through imaginary representations of likeness, or whether it can crystallise through a genuine understanding of what we have in common, and makes us more powerful. This question, I will argue, allows us to overcome the alternative between the logic of the police, or governmentality, which channels and orders the contrary – and for that reason dangerous – desires of the multitude, thus turning

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10 See Lacan 1966, 113, 121; Lacan 1975, 169, 199-200; Girard 1961, 1972.

11 Naturally, for Lacan, this imaginary and essentially narcissistic regime of desire, with which his own itinerary as a clinician began, is normally tamed and overcome through the symbolic order. But this order is that of the Law and, as such, one that Spinoza would recognise as introducing a degree of ordered and obedient sociality, but one that would still belong to the order of representation and superstition, and therefore of imagination. The Real, according to Spinoza, can only be the rational, or the endlessly re-enacted movement that liberates us from the hold of imagination, and towards the adequate knowledge of causes.

it into an obedient herd; and the logic of conflictual politics, which takes place from within the former, but only to suspend or destroy its regimes of desire, its divisions and hierarchies. The alternative in question requires a different conception of politics, rooted not in resistance, and especially sad passions such as indignation, but creative and joyful assemblages of desire, conducive to the creation of greater units of power. The democratic body politic is one that reaches a degree of perfection, or power, and therefore a collective joy, through the systematic cultivation of Generosity.

1. Hate between suffering and indignation

Indignation is a social affect rooted in hatred. But hate is itself a consequence of one's suffering. Suffering – Spinoza calls it “sadness” – is the immediate reaction to, and sign of, a decrease of my power to act and think. Its signals a shift from a greater to a weaker perfection, a diminishing of my own being, a drop in my own vitality, a frustration or impediment in my desire to grow, in short, an expression of impotence. Nietzsche calls it “a feeling of obstruction” (Nietzsche 1994, 102). This shift or change is a direct result of the negative, even destructive effect of another and greater power on my own power to act and think. Insofar as this affection of the body is accompanied by an Idea that corresponds to it, it is an affect (EIIIdef.1), the range of which is broad: “sad” passions include fear, anger, hatred, cruelty, disdain, despair, envy, jealousy, spite, rancour, vengeance, etc.¹² As such, and whatever the nature of the suffering (a flesh wound, a disease, the loss of someone we love, a hurtful comment), suffering is *always* bad. Insofar as it affects the human (or animal) body negatively, it is *necessarily* bad. What we call “bad” (and should distinguish from evil in a moral sense) is nothing besides this ontophysiological drop in power, and the feeling that most often accompanies it. I call “bad” (*malum*), Spinoza writes, “every kind of sadness [*tristitia*],” and especially every force or affection of the body which “frustrates” our desire [*desiderium*] (EIIIp39s). The most extreme, indeed liminal version of sadness is melancholy; for then the body's power of acting and the mind's power of thinking are “absolutely diminished or restrained” (EIVp42). Human desire and, more generally, the effort of every “mode” or living being to persevere in its own being, or augment its power to the maximum of its capacity, is equivalent to what Nietzsche, in a perhaps more ambiguous way, calls the will to power. *Bad*, Nietzsche says, is everything that inhibits the will to power; everything that locks me into a passive, reactive position, frustrates my power to act, subjects me to the power of others; everything that inhibits my own vitality, my “instinct for growth, for continuance, for accumulation of forces... for *power*” (Nietzsche 1990, 129).

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12 For a long time, and to this day, *triste*, the word for “sad” in various romance languages (Italian, French, Spanish), carried the sense of base, contemptible, despicable, and malicious. See for example Montaigne 1965, Book I, Chapter II.

Yet every type or mode, every idea or affect, is an expression of the will to power or the conatus specific to the mode in question. The power of the generous person differs from that of the greedy, which itself differs from that of the ambitious man, or the Envious. “Good” and “bad” mean different things to them, and each acts and thinks according to his or her right or nature, that is, according to what it is naturally determined to do. Each one, “from his own affect, judges a thing good or bad, useful or useless” (EIIIp39s). The power of the envious person is highly selective, and restricted: from the other person, and as the cause of his own happiness, the Envious selects or retains only her unhappiness. What is useful to the Envious is precisely what is useless to the other person. His power is a lesser degree of perfection, which requires the sadness of others as the condition of his own satisfaction. In the state of nature, defined by the right of every individual to do those things that follow from the necessity of his own nature, “there is nothing which, by the agreement of all, is good or evil; for everyone who is in the state of nature considers only his advantage, and decides what is good and evil from his own temperament” (EIVp37s2). The natural right of each person is determined not by reason, but by desire and power: “Whatever anyone who is considered to be only under the rule of nature judges to be useful for himself – whether under the guidance of sound reason or by the prompting of the affects – he is permitted, by supreme natural right, to want and to take – by force, by deception, by entreaties, or by whatever way is, in the end, easiest” (TTP 16.8). This means that in the state of nature the ideas of evil and sin are meaningless: “This is just what Paul teaches, when he recognises no sin before the law...” (TTP 16.6). Things are different, however, in the civil state, which is significantly more advantageous, if only because it allows us to live securely, according to certain dictates of our reason, and without the constant fear of being subjected to the power and appetites of others: “all men fear being alone, because no one alone has the strength to defend himself, and no one alone can provide the things necessary for life. So by nature men desire a civil order” (TP 6.1). In the civil state, what is good and what is evil “is decided by common agreement. And everyone is bound to submit to the State. Sin, therefore, is nothing but disobedience, which for that reason can be punished only by the law of the State” (EIVp37s). The question, however, is one of knowing how the “common agreement” in question is generated in the first place. And the troubling answer Spinoza provides in Part III of the *Ethics* and various sections of *The Political Treatise*, as we’ll see, is that it is generated not through reason (as Spinoza suggests in *The Theological-Political Treatise*), but through indignation, and therefore through a sad passion. Equally troubling, as we’ll also see, is that civil disobedience, which from the point of view of the civil state, can only be seen as sin, but which corresponds to the inalienable right of the multitude, is itself born of a sense of indignation. But does this close the

political matter of indignation once and for all? Or does indignation in fact play a certain role not only in the constitution or emergence of the civil state, and the consensus that defines it, but also in its evolution or transformation? Can we imagine situations in which indignation is legitimate and politically productive, that is, conducive to restoring or improving the equilibrium of the state, through mechanisms of reconciliation, recognition and assimilation? I return to those questions in the third and final part of my essay.

In addition, and as a necessary corollary, insofar as those negative, revengeful passions diminish my power whilst always also expressing it, that is, whilst also expressing a degree of the will to power and the will to live, they limit my freedom. In their throe, I am subjected to the power of external forces over which, I feel, I have no control, and which affect me negatively, thus generating in me thoughts of hatred and revenge. I am locked in a state of servitude, forced to think and act like a slave, that is, to *react*. That is all I *can* do, what I have become. Unable to act, that is, to combine my powers with those of others around me so as to increase it, and thus experience joy, I can only *suffer* life. “What is *bad*?” Nietzsche asks. “Everything that proceeds from weakness, from envy, from revengefulness” (Nietzsche 1990, 191). Every form of suffering, from the most trivial to the most excruciating, is thus an indication of a passive or reactive life.

By contrast, anything that increases my power to act and think is necessarily good, or virtuous. So much so, Spinoza insists, that the person who is genuinely free, or led by reason alone, and has only adequate ideas, has no concept of either evil or good (EIVp68): for those concepts are relative and arise only in the context of drops and increases of one's perfection, which the person guided by reason alone does not know. And in the same way that a decrease of power or loss of vitality brings about sadness and pain, an increase of one's power, a growth in vitality brings about joy: “By ‘good’ [*bonum*] I understand every kind of joy [*laetitia*] and furthermore whatever is conducive thereto, and especially whatever satisfies a desire [*desiderium*] of any sort” (EIIIp39S). Laughter, joking (but not mockery) and other forms of well-balanced pleasure are intrinsically good. Only “savage and sad superstitions” discredit and prohibit pleasures. “For why is it more proper to relieve our hunger and thirst than rid ourselves of melancholy?” (EIVp45s). Philosophy itself, insofar as it is concerned with understanding the conditions under which power is increased, and the ways of bringing it about, is the highest expression of action and the “gay” or “joyful” science, which also acknowledges and includes the great woes and sufferings of life. It is the science that is concerned with the creation and transmission of joyful affects, and combats the introduction, reproduction and proliferation of sadness with all its heart. It is the struggle against the oppression of sadness and the glorification of suffering in all its forms; against

those who promote it, organise it, and derive their own power from the enslavement of others; against the ethics, politics and religion that draws on such passions, and sometimes injects the social and political body with its poison. It is an antidote and a resistance fought in the name of *hilaritas* or “cheerfulness,” an affect that “cannot be excessive” and “is always good” (EIVp42).

In that respect, the greatest historical *tour de force* – or should we call it *faiblesse*? – and the most unforgiveable lie has been to pretend that weakness is virtuous, that God loves weakness. What kind of God would love weakness, that is, praise us for our imperfection, for what makes us sad and feel small? A perverse God, no doubt:

Nothing forbids our pleasure except a savage and sad superstition... no deity, nor anyone else, unless he is envious, takes pleasure in my lack of power and my misfortune; nor does he ascribe to virtue our tears, sighs, fear, and other things of that kind, which are signs of a weak mind. (EIVp45s)

No, God's law, or the law of Nature, if there is such a thing, consists only in seeking the highest perfection possible, that is, and as far as we human beings are concerned, the greatest expansion of our powers or faculties (Nietzsche calls them our “instincts”) – our powers of understanding and knowledge, imagination and recollection, sensation and intuition, socialisation and love, physical strength and flexibility – through philosophy, science, art and literature, religion (yes, religion), politics, ethics, dance and gymnastics, celebrations and festivals, as well as the use of bodily pleasures. The only law or commandment is that we understand, test and stretch our nature so as to reach the greatest possible contentment (*gaudium*); and this means to avoid everything that causes us harm, sadness and suffering, for *tristitia* always diminishes or frustrates the power of the mind and the body, their capacity to understand (*intelligere*) the nature of each thing, to act, and bring our faculties to another, hitherto unknown power: “the greater the Joy with which we are affected, the greater the perfection to which we pass, i.e, the more we must participate in the divine nature. To use things, therefore, and take pleasure in them as far as possible... is the part of a wise man” (EIVp45s).

2. From suffering to indignation

Suffering (or sadness) is thus the physiological or mental condition that lies at the root of the range of emotions we call rancour, resentment, spite, indignation, vindictiveness, etc. However, whilst a *necessary* condition for the emergence of such passions, it is not a *sufficient* reason. The connection to be established is that between suffering and the spirit of revenge that lies beneath the range of passionate affects just

mentioned, and beneath indignation in particular. The movement from suffering to indignation is neither immediate nor inevitable: it requires an *interpretation* of this basic physiological feeling, the source of which, then, can only be attributed to something other than the suffering itself. The strange thing about pain, Nietzsche remarks in *The Gay Science*, is that it “always raises the question about its origin,” whereas “pleasure is inclined to stop with itself without looking back” (Nietzsche 1974, 86). In the face of suffering, we tend to ask ourselves: whom can I blame and *punish*? What is the meaning or purpose of my suffering? We attribute responsibility and project meaning onto it. We assume that things could have been different, and we can repair the past. This search for blame and punishment can be directed at others, or oneself. It is in any case destructive. In the face of a suffering we generally judge to be senseless and undeserved, we can’t help feel “indignant” (KSA 10, 7 [9]) and want “to make someone pay for it [*ohne irgendwen es entgelten zu lassen*]; every grievance contains the seeds of revenge [*schon jede Klage enthält Rache*]” (Nietzsche 1967-77/1998, 10, 5 [1] 20). Adam Smith puts it even more plainly: “We are angry, for a moment, even at the stone that hurts us” (Smith 1976, II.iii.1.1).

Hatred can thus be described as the emotion that naturally accompanies suffering, or the spontaneous rejection of suffering insofar as it is accompanied by the idea of its cause: as my power or perfection diminishes, I develop anger and hatred towards the idea – or, as we’ll see, towards the imaginary projection – of its cause. And in the case of indignation, the hatred in question involves a third party, with whom we identify for one reason or another. There is therefore nothing *morally* wrong about anger and hatred. As Spinoza puts it, insofar as anger leads us to “ward off from us that which has caused us some harm,” and “avoid the thing we hate,” it isn’t bad.¹³ The greater the sadness or pain, the greater our desire to remove it (EIIIp37Dem). It is also natural, when we hate someone, and are understandably *angry*, to endeavour to cause them harm, unless we fear that we will suffer greater injury in return (EIIIp39). It is likewise natural, whenever we imagine the destruction [*destrui imaginatur*] of someone or something we hate, to feel joyful [*laetabitur*] (EIIIp20). The feelings of anger (*ira*: “the effort to harm those we hate”), revenge (*vindicta*: “to return the harm we suffered”) and indignation are natural consequences of hatred (EIIIp40s), which is itself generated by the representation of the cause of our sadness.

But to say that hatred, anger and revenge are not *morally* bad does not mean that they are not *ontologically* or *ethically* bad. There is, to be sure, something intrinsically *bad* about them: they are a negative feeling, a sad passion, indicative of a loss of power and the transition from a greater to a weaker perfection; I can’t feel hatred,

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13 Spinoza 1985, *Short Treatise on God, Man and his Well-Being*, II.6.1 and II.6.5.

anger and vindictiveness without imagining my own powerlessness, the frustration of my own essence (or perfection), the inhibition of my desire: “He who wishes to avenge wrongs by hating in return surely lives miserably” (EIVp46s). I can’t be subjected to those feelings without the representation of my own passivity and servitude, without the realisation that my desire (or will to power), that is, the force (*vis*) with which I persevere in existence (*in existendo*) is limited, exposed to the power of external causes, which can cause it harm. Such is the reason why “hatred can never be good” (EIVp45), and why “envy, derision, contempt, anger, revenge, and the other emotions related to hatred are bad” (IVp45c1).

As such, those reactive or passive affects never match the feeling of love, and all the feelings associated with love, the joy of which stems not from the destruction or sadness of others, but from the knowledge of their wellbeing and their joy, and thus the increase of their own power: “Desire arising from joy is, other things being equal, stronger than desire arising from sadness” (EIVp18). Similarly, “He who lives according to the guidance of reason will strive, as far as he can, to bring it about that he is not troubled with affects of Hate (by P19), and consequently (by P37), will strive that the other also should not undergo those affects”. Now hate is increased by being returned, in what amounts to a vicious circle. A prime, political example of this vicious dynamic is civil war, which is in fact a return to the state of nature: through a systematic campaign of hate, communities, families, and society as a whole, once united, are divided and pitted against one another. A line of hate cuts across the political body, and quickly becomes a chasm. The other side is no longer considered a political adversary (and even less, of course, an ally), but an enemy to be defeated, if not destroyed. Each is equally indignant and feels entirely justified in its hate towards the other side. Locked into a vicious cycle of sad, hateful passions, human beings are bent on defeating each other. But Hate can be defeated only by Love and Nobility, and not by a greater Hate (EIIIp43 and p44, EIVp46Dem), or even a sense of duty or obedience, such as the command to turn the other cheek, forgive one’s enemy, or love one’s neighbour (especially when that neighbour causes us injury) (EIVp7 and p14). Spinoza understands very well why, in order to pacify the fickle and unstable, for essentially passionate, Jewish multitude, and minimise the place of sad passions in its midst, the Prophets had recourse to the imagery of parables, and to the language of divine laws and commandments.¹⁴ But we must not confuse this ideological, imaginary order of representation, or this superstition, with the natural order, accessible to thought. Those who live by the guidance of reason – and this, for Spinoza, means by the guidance of a complete *understanding* of the order of nature and

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14 See for example Spinoza’s reply to Willem van Blijenbergh from 5 January 1665 (Letter 19), in Spinoza 2016, 357-361. See also TTP 4.

man's own essence (EIVp53Dem), rather than by a moral imperative – endeavour as far they can to repay with love or generosity another's hatred, anger, contempt, etc. towards them (EIVp46), not because they are ordered to do so, but simply because it is in their interest to do so, because their power and self-love increase rather than decrease as a result, because their virtue, or perfection, demands it: "Acting absolutely from virtue is nothing else in us but acting, living, and preserving our being (these three signify the same thing) by the guidance of reason, from the foundation of seeking one's advantage" (EIVp24; see also EIVp45s, 46s, 59Dem). For reason alone can reveal and express the true power of our nature, or virtue. "Therefore he who is ignorant of himself is ignorant of the foundation of all the virtues, and consequently, of all the virtues" (EIVp56Dem). Generosity is the necessary outcome of he or she who, through the sole force of an intuition consistent with the highest kind of knowledge, understands that relations of love, solidarity and friendship between human beings increase their power, and therefore their joy:

Therefore, there are many things outside ourselves which are advantageous to us and ought therefore be sought. Of these none more excellent can be discovered than those which are in complete harmony with our own nature. For example, if two individuals of completely the same nature are combined, they compose an individual twice as powerful as each one singly. Therefore, nothing is more advantageous to man than man. (EIVp18s)

The goal of life, Nietzsche claims after Spinoza, is to create "bigger units of power" (Nietzsche 1994, 54), and therefore avoid the negative instincts that get in the way of such a goal: "It is especially useful to men to form associations, to bind themselves" through friendship (EIV, App. 12). It is in their advantage to form "a common society" and to come together "in harmony and friendship" (EIV, App. 14). The problem, however, is that human beings rarely live under the guidance of reason, and are mostly "envious, and inclined to vengeance than to Compassion [*miser cordia*]" (EIV, App. 13). The logic of alliance, which Spinoza advocates from the standpoint of reason, is constantly threatened by the logic of indignation and conflict. However, whilst the Yes to life will always be better than the No, and love than hatred, anger, and revenge, it is virtually impossible to imagine a *human* life that would be devoid of sadness and suffering, and therefore of a form of aggressiveness towards its cause.

Such is the reason why, ultimately, indignation (and the politics of resistance with which it is bound up) does not necessarily exclude the politics of alliance and the creation of bigger units of power, and may even be a regrettable but nonetheless inevitable stage towards their realisation. To be sure, compassion and pity, or commiseration

(*commiseratio*), which Spinoza defines as “a Sadness, accompanied by the idea of an evil that has happened to another whom we imagine to be like us” (EIII.def.aff.18; also EIIIp22s), are always more advantageous than forms of hatred, such as indignation, vindictiveness and resentment. This is because the compassionate spontaneously and naturally seek to relieve others (and themselves) of the suffering with whom they identify (EIVp50s). They are therefore animated by a kind of love. This definition of compassion, or pity (EIIIdef.aff.18 claims that they are virtually the same thing), is very close to that of indignation, and occurs in the same Scholium of Proposition 22, the difference between the two being that indignation involves *hatred* toward him who has done evil to another. Pity, Spinoza insists, is evil and useless, at least for the man who lives according to the guidance of reason (EIVp50). For pity is a sadness, and therefore evil. Moreover, our effort to free the person who suffers from their suffering stems from reason alone, that is, from what we *know* to be good (EIVp50s). Pity as such is therefore neither a way forward nor a useful state. Having said that, pity, like repentance and shame, and in a civil state governed not by reason alone, but by passions, can serve a positive political purpose, one of unity, accord and obedience. Those affects, which Nietzsche would associate with the ascetic ideal, and Spinoza with the ruler who, through a fine balance of hope and fear, is able to reign over the hearts of his subjects, can tame the multitude and transform it into a pacified and obedient herd. The fickle and contrary nature of the masses, which is due to the fact that they are governed “solely by their emotions,” is a “cause for despair” for those who try to govern them, and the reason why loyalty and obedience are most often arrived at through various regimes of discipline, through the introduction of rituals and habits, through work, etc. (TTP 17.9-17). Through such techniques, the norms prescribed by the State, those of *obsequium* and justice in particular, are internalised and perpetuated by the subjects themselves. But the herd is not the same as the *demos*: a true people governs itself not through blind and passive obedience, or through hateful passions, but through the combination of individual powers and maximisation of the power of the multitude. And that increase of power is also my increase, and my *interest*; that greater composition of power, that virtuous assemblage will always be better – stronger, healthier – than any relation based on sadness. It is also divine, in that it signals the transition from a lesser to a greater degree of perfection, and requires the full deployment (and therefore power) of thought.

II. The Politics of Indignation

The “pessimism of indignation,” to borrow Nietzsche’s expression (KSA 13, 15 [30]), can’t be dissociated from the desire for revenge following a harm or injury. For

[i]ndignation originates not in the confrontation with the enemy, but in the injury caused by his victory [*Die Empörung entsteht über die Schädigung also über den Erfolg des Feindes, nicht über die Feindseligkeit*]. It is the feeling of the vanquished, the longing for revenge – not the feeling that an injustice has been committed [*Es ist das Gefühl des Besiegten - das Verlangen nach Vergeltung: nicht das Gefühl, daß Unrecht geschehen sei*]. (KSA 4, 16 [29])

Spinoza's own view is similar: indignation, the author of the *Ethics* remarks, "seems to present an appearance of fairness" (EIVapp.24). But it is in fact the feeling of the vanquished, provoked or increased – and this is perhaps the most significant element – by the arrogant attitude of the victors (who, were they to be wise, would act in the interest of the multitude, and do their best to generate affects of hope and love, rather than fear and hatred). We recall from EIVp37s2 that "fair" or "just" is defined by the law of the civil state, and has no place in the state of nature. "Fair" and "just," like "good" and "evil" are values that emerge from within the civil state, and as a result of a consensus. When addressed within and against an existing social order, indignation is lawlessness and a desire for revenge that leads to discord.

1. Indignation from natural right

Indignation is an intrinsically rebellious attitude, or a political affect that threatens – and has every *right* to threaten – the civil state when the multitude is confronted with abuses of power, loses the fear and reverence it ordinarily has for the sovereign, and displays hatred towards those it holds responsible. Whenever the social contract or transfer of rights to the Sovereign is broken; or, which amounts to the same thing, whenever the multitude feels that it is in its interest to violate the contract, the multitude exercises its natural right (or power). But the right in question is no longer a civil right, since the rebellion calls into question the social contract itself. Insofar as it is a matter of Law, it is not the civil Law, but the Law of war, and a pre-political situation, which prevails:

There's no doubt that the contract, or the laws by which a multitude transfers its right to a Council or a man, ought to be violated when it's in the interest of the general welfare to violate them. But (by §3) no private person is entitled to make the judgment about whether it's in the interest of the general welfare to violate them or not. Only the sovereign can rightly do this. Therefore, by the civil Law only the sovereign is left to be the interpreter of those laws. ...

But if that's the nature of these laws – that they can't be violated unless the strength of the Commonwealth is at the same time weakened, i.e., unless the general fear of most citizens is at the same time turned into indignation – by that very fact [of political

weakness arising from general indignation] the Commonwealth is dissolved, and the contract is inoperative [*Civitas dissolvitur, et contractus cessat*]. So the contract is defended not by civil Law, but by the Law of war. (TP 4.6)

It is therefore in the interest of the sovereign to observe the conditions of the contract, if only because he or she might otherwise fall prey to the hatred and violence of the multitude. To be sure, Spinoza writes in *The Theological-Political Treatise*, the supreme powers can, *by right*, “rule the multitude with the utmost violence and condemn citizens to death for the slightest of reasons” (TTP 20.7). But this reign of terror is ultimately detrimental to the whole state, for the simple reason that the supreme powers will “never be able to stop men from making their own judgment about everything according to their own mentality, and from having, to that extent, this or that affect” (TTP 20.7), and that of indignation in particular. As a result, Spinoza concludes, we can deny that governments can prescribe men how to think and judge “with absolute right” (TTP 20.7): no one can transfer absolutely to another person his natural right or faculty of reasoning freely, and of judging any matter. As Del Lucchese puts it, the actions of the sovereign are ultimately subject to the power and consensus of the multitude: “the stability of the state is proportional, at every instant, to the degree of consensus it is able to obtain from its subjects” (Del Lucchese 2009a, 38). If the sovereign doesn’t observe those conditions, violates or disdains the laws he himself has made, the fear and respect of the multitude turns into indignation, and the civil Law gives way to the Law of war (TP 4.5). Fear is therefore a double-edged sword: it is the dominant affect of the multitude subjected to abusive power; but it can also turn into indignation, at which point the sovereign himself ought to fear the wrath of the multitude: *terret vulgus, nisi metuat*.¹⁵ The multitude reaches a boiling or tipping point, thus triggering a phase transformation, or regime change. The key point, here, is that the multitude always retains the right to exercise its power and freedom; it never surrenders this right entirely in the face of the destructive force of even the most arbitrary form of government. This, again, is not because of a transcendent, moral right, but because of the immanent law of nature according to which “there is in nature no singular thing” – a physical body, a political body, an affect, or an idea – “than which there is not another more powerful and stronger. Whatever one is given, there is another more powerful by which the first can be destroyed” (EIV, Axiom 1). As a consequence, resistance, as indicative of the *potentia* of the multitude, is built into the very structure of regimes of power, and the civil state in general. To quote Del Lucchese again, “resistance is nurtured continuously by man’s insuppressible

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15 “The mob is terrifying, if unafraid” (Tacitus 1888 I, 29). Spinoza cites Tacitus’ famous sentence in EIVp54s and TP 7.27.

power, thereby making conflict the ontologically constitutive dimension of politics” (Del Lucchese 2009a, 53). There is no “governmentality” or ways of “conducting conducts,” to use Foucault’s terminology, that does not contain the possibility of “counterconducts,” or the desire and power to be governed less, not in this particular way, and not in our name. Where there is power, there is resistance. As a result, indignation is a natural and inevitable outcome of power relations, and a key mechanism through which a new distribution of such relations, or a new, temporary equilibrium and consensus, can arise. It certainly does not tell or even indicate the form that the resistance in question will take – demonstrations, strikes, civil disobedience, rebellion, revolution, etc. – but it is the affective trigger without which counterconducts could not take place. And it is the direct political translation of the right or power of every mode, and of the body politic itself, to resist the power and domination of external forces which act against its own *conatus*. As Bove puts it, resistance lies at the root of every existence (Bove 1996, 14).

2. The genetic power of indignation

Yet the difficult, even troubling reality, which *The Political Treatise* invites us to confront, is that all politics, including democratic politics, is rooted in a shared affectivity, and especially in forms of hatred, such as resentment and the desire for revenge; that the very constitution of the civil state rests not on a social contract or original pact rooted in reason, but on the federation of individuals through indignation and exclusion:

Men... are guided more by affect than by reason. So a multitude naturally agrees, and wishes to be led, as if by one mind, not because reason is guiding them, but because of some common affect... [T]hey have a common hope, or fear, or a common desire to avenge some harm (TP 6.1).¹⁶

The *Ethics* already showed how the life of reason, which means of the adequate understanding of one’s interest, or power, is difficult to achieve at the individual, ethical level. And there is no doubt, in Spinoza’s mind, that the person who is guided by reason and desires to live freely, which means according to the principle of common life, and to the advantage and decision of the state, lives without hate, envy, or indignation (EIVp73s). As such, indignation has no place in the constitution of a free or rational state. But did such a state ever exist, and could it ever exist? Or is the state the necessary outcome of human passions, and therefore the necessary form of the struggle between reason and passions? In truth, the life of reason is most difficult, if not impossible to achieve at the social and political level:

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¹⁶ Spinoza makes a similar point in TP 1.5, 2.14, 2.18, 3.9.

[T]hough we've shown that reason can do much to restrain and moderate the affects [EV P1-P10S], we've also seen that the path reason teaches us to follow is very difficult [EV P42S]. So people who persuade themselves that a multitude, which may be divided over public affairs, can be induced to live only according to the prescription of reason, those people are dreaming of the golden age of Poets. They're captive to a myth (TP 1.5).

In the same section of *The Political Treatise*, Spinoza makes clear not only that human beings "are necessarily subject to affects," but that they are more inclined to envy than celebrate those who are prospering, more likely to crush than to elevate each other, to seek revenge than mercy. Human beings tend to bond over sad passions, and over that of indignation in particular. To philosophers interested in the origin and foundations of the civil state, Spinoza seems to say: rather than look at reason and its dictates, look at human passions; and look not at *philia*, fraternity, solidarity, or generosity, but ambition for glory and domination, envy, indignation, and vengeance. If human beings are political animals, it is not by virtue of their rationality. This, in turn, suggests that it is not the multitude, but the individual, which is an abstraction, and that individuals are always already constituted as a web of relations (*connexio*), or a multitude, and through it.

This view is clearly at odds with that presented in Chapter 16 of the TTP, in which, as already indicated, Spinoza insists on the role of "sound reason" and its "dictates" in the emergence of the political state (*ex solo rationis dictamine*).¹⁷ It would therefore seem that Spinoza provides a double genesis of the civil state, one, initially, through the interest of the multitude as guided by reason, and another, subsequent one, through the imitative, imaginary communication and crystallisation of passions, and of indignation in particular: "we must seek the causes and natural foundations of the state, not from the teachings of reason, but from the common nature, or condition, of men... (TP 1.7). The former resonates clearly with seventeenth-century social contract theory. The latter, rooted in Book III of the *Ethics*, reaches back to Plato's *Republic* and anticipates Nietzschean genealogy. I will not go into the reasons behind this radical evolution.¹⁸ Instead, I will focus on the imaginary, passionate dimension of political life, and explore some of its current manifestations.

The existence of the state, Matheron insists, follows necessarily from the fact that human beings are subject to passions, and from

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17 Bostrenghi notes that when Spinoza was writing Chapter 16 of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, in which he puts forward his contractualist view, he had not yet written Part III of the *Ethics*, where he formulates his theory of mimetic affectivity. This theory underpins much of his genetic account of the civil state in *The Political Treatise* (Bostrenghi 2012, note 39).

18 It is discussed by Negri 1981, 229, and Matheron 2020, 163-178.

the very play of their passions.¹⁹ Ultimately, and most likely originally, everything happens as if politics were a matter of imagination, and of the fleeting, often contradictory, and therefore antagonist affects it generates. The true myth, to use Spinoza's own term, consists in believing that we can do away with myths in politics, or with political fiction.²⁰ The true myth is that of the (sole) power of reason to transform or reform that of imagination. The government of the multitude – and this genitive ought to be understood in the subjective as well as objective sense – is the government not of, or through reason, but of, and through, the affects (*non ratione, sed solis affectibus gubernatur*) (TTP 17.13). So much so that one could define politics as the art of governing human affects. If humans lived solely under the guidance of reason, they would spontaneously agree with one another and not need the state (EIVp37s2; TTP 5.20-22; TP 1.1). Otherwise said, and in the words of Matheron, “the State, even the best one, will only ever be the result of a relation of forces between individuals subject to passions, whose authentic liberation would entail its *disappearance* if it took place in everybody” (Matheron 2020, 113).

Indignation, as the desire to avenge a collective harm, is a key affect in the transition from the state of nature to the civil state, as well as in the political dynamics internal to the state. It is given a genetic force that seems to contradict its destructive dimension, which, as we saw, Spinoza emphasises in the *Ethics*. But this is precisely the apparent paradox which Spinoza invites us to consider: indignation accounts for the shift from the natural to the civil state, as well as from the civil to the natural state, or a “state of hostility [*status hostilitatis*]” (TP 4.4). Whilst we might naturally grant Spinoza the idea that indignation fuels the revolutions or social uprisings of the multitude, which can go as far as dissolving the Commonwealth, we might be less inclined to agree with him that it also accounts for the emergence and existence of any state (*imperium*), and of the democratic state in particular, which he defines as the exercise of the power of the multitude, of its right or Sovereignty, by a Council made up of a *common* element (TP 2.17). In his eyes, though, the connection is a matter of certainty: “*Indignation generates the State in exactly the same way that it causes revolutions,*” and therefore destroys the state (Matheron 2020, 128). It is, therefore, the condition of existence and dissolution of the state, or the very engine of politics. How exactly?

The first thing to recall is that “insofar as men are tormented by anger, envy, or some affect of hatred, they're pulled in different directions

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19 This thesis, which Matheron initially developed in Chapters 5, 7, 9 and 11 of *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza* (Matheron 1988), is refined in Matheron 2020, 109-110 and 119-120.

20 On this question, see the important work of Chiara Bottici (Bottici 2007).

and contrary to one another” (TP 2.14).²¹ And “because men are by nature subject to these affects most of the time, they are by nature enemies” (TP 2.14). Rivalry and enmity are therefore the default mode of intersubjectivity in the state of nature. The latter corresponds to a state of alienation, in that it is governed by passions, and especially passions rooted in fear, hatred, and revengefulness. As such, human beings have less power, and therefore less right, than when they come together and join forces. But this can happen in two different and contrasting ways. On the one hand, insofar as human beings are prone to mimetic affects, and feel closer to those whom they think are like them than to those who aren't, they tend to love and associate with those who are like them; and they tend to hate and rise against those who are not. In a dispute or struggle involving two parties, a third party identifies with the feeling of the adversary who is most like him or her. Similarly, she will feel indignation towards the adversary who is less like her, and will fight against her. And the person who most resembles her is of course the person with whom she shares desires and values, and possesses the same sort of things. As a result, the outcome and victory will tend to favour the adversary who most conforms to the model in place, and the adversary who is most remote from it will be defeated. A *consensus* eventually emerges, with norms designating what people can desire and possess without feeling endangered or threatened, what is “fair” and “just,” and what is forbidden. A collective power or commonwealth begins to take shape, guaranteeing the safety and security of the conformists, and repressing the deviant elements of the multitude. This, in effect, accounts for the emergence, however informal and embryonic, of a commonwealth.

But, as Proposition 35 in Part IV of the *Ethics* makes clear, whenever human beings cease to live under the influence of contrary passions, and live instead “according to the guidance of reason,” “they always agree in nature.” This proposition, strategically placed immediately after Proposition 34, as if each depicted one extremity of the political spectrum, indicates the conditions under which sad passions, and indignation in particular, would have no place in politics. As Del Lucchese puts it, “concord and discord would seem to correspond, respectively, to life under the guidance of reason and life under the ‘bondage’ of the passions” (Del Lucchese 2019a, 74). And most, if not all actual polities unfold between those extremities. In the (real rather than ideal) situations which Spinoza considers in his political writings, indignation, as a highly contagious affect rooted in hatred, would appear as both inevitable and limited, especially regarding the possibility of a truly democratic state.

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21 This claim echoes Proposition 34 in Part IV of the *Ethics*, in which Spinoza states that insofar as men “are torn by affects which are passions,” such as envy or anger, “they are contrary to one another.”

We can draw several conclusions from Spinoza's account of indignation. The first, general conclusion, is that the political order, or *imperium*, is spontaneously generated through human passions, rather than reason: political consensus are first and foremost affective, and a passionate affair. To be sure, Spinoza raises the question of what the *imperium* would look like, should the multitude be guided by reason alone. But such an *imperium* is not a realistic prospect, and may not even be necessary under the sole guidance of reason. Furthermore, the passions in question are not joyful, but sad, and rooted in forms of hatred: my indignation is not rooted in a feeling of love towards those who suffer in the hands of political power, or in compassion, and even less in the generosity that results from reason, but in the fact that we identify with their suffering and develop hatred towards its cause. Finally, the passive affects in question are imitative, and a matter of identity. This first conclusion raises a crucial question, to which I'll return in my conclusion: can we imagine a democratic politics, or a figure of the demos, which would be rooted not in indignation, or a form of mimetic affectivity rooted in sadness and leading to a consensus of impotence, but in a different affectivity, leading to a different conception of the consensus? Is political affectivity necessarily and irreducibly mimetic?

The second conclusion is that, since indignation is intrinsically and necessarily bad – unlike, say, humility, shame, or repentance, which are bad in themselves yet can be good indirectly (EIVp54s) – it would seem impossible to distinguish between forms of indignation, some of which, for example revolutionary indignation against tyranny, or indignation before the ill treatment of minorities, would be legitimate, whilst others, such as the indignation felt by some in the face of a perceived threat to their identity or way of life, would be necessarily bad. For even if we admit that indignation can be *right* for the multitude, in that it signals the crossing of an affective threshold, the sense that a situation has become unbearable, thus causing the multitude to move against the power in place, it can never be good for the person who feels it. In addition, it inevitably introduces elements of discord within the *imperium*, which is another way of saying that it is bad for the state. Finally, indignation necessarily reveals an imbalance between units of power, each of which is *by nature* entitled to exercise all of its power or right. Spinoza's uncomfortable if not shocking conclusion, then, is that something irremediably bad lies at the root of the commonwealth: not actions, but passions; not a disposition rooted in love and generosity, but a reactive, sad tendency rooted in hatred. As Matheron puts it, “the elementary form of democracy, according to Spinoza, is lynching [*le lynchage*],” or the hate-driven, bloodthirsty mob (Matheron 2019a, 133). Is the alternative, then between the violent mob and the pacified herd? Between indignation and obedience? In the absence of a political order governed entirely by the knowledge of adequate ideas, and given the fact

that the multitude is naturally governed by sad passions such as fear, hatred, envy and indignation, a big question mark remains the possibility of ever overcoming such a pessimist, if not nihilistic horizon. Are we left, then, with having to distinguish between types of passions, and even sad passions, such as indignation, envy, vindictiveness, etc.? In that respect, and as P. Roth's novel indicates, indignation is perhaps better than blind submission, or regret. Sad passions themselves – hate, anger and revenge – might even be necessary to arrive at the glorious Yes to life, the life that is itself struggle and hardship. To be sure, there is a Yes, a sheepish and spineless form of acceptance, that is detrimental to life, including political life, insofar as it turns the multitude into a herd, and diminishes its power: "When the peace of a Commonwealth depends on its subjects' lack of spirit [*a subditorum inertia pendet*] – so that they're led like sheep, and know only how to be slaves – it would be more properly called a wasteland [*solitudo*] than a Commonwealth" (TP 5.4). Similarly, there is a No, a form of struggle and combat, an anger and a rage that affirms *human* life, that speaks from a desire to grow and increase one's power, and not merely preserve *biological* life (TP 5.5). For peace or concord isn't merely "the privation of war, but a virtue which arises from strength of mind [*quae ex animi fortitudine oritur*]," requires genuine consent and, as such, does not shy away from conflict (TP 5.4). Peace, yes, but not at any cost. Consider, as a recent example, the constructive, transformative anger Audrey Lorde feels and claims in the face of racist and sexist attitudes, and the deep, destructive hatred that animates them:

We ["women, people of Color, lesbians and gay men, poor people"] cannot allow our fear of anger to deflect us nor seduce us into settling for anything less than the hard work of excavating honesty; we must be quite serious about the choice of this topic and the angers entwined within it because, rest assured, our opponents are quite serious about their hatred of us ... *This hatred and our anger are very different*. Hatred is the fury of those who do not share our goals, and its object is death and destruction. Anger is grief of distortions between peers, and its object is change.²²

This kind of indignation in the face of "those who do not share our goals," this kind of rage and even fury – fury is a recurring theme in Lorde – needs to be distinguished, quite fundamentally, from the purely nihilistic hatred and longing for revenge – the indignation, yes – which characterises the desire for "death and destruction" animating their opponents. In a way, Lorde invites us to distinguish between a highly

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22 Lorde 1984, 128-129 (emphasis added). See also Lorde 1981. Further positive accounts of anger as emotional responses to male oppression from feminist philosophers include Frye 1983 and Spelman 1989.

conflictual and antagonistic, yet *political* form of indignation, or even between indignation as a key mechanism of political life, which can lead to greater justice, and a form of indignation, or raw hatred, which is pre- or para-political, which negates politics, since its outcome is death and destruction, since the other side, for it, is not an adversary, but an enemy to be destroyed.²³ And it seems that, almost despite himself, Spinoza recognises struggle and conflict as the irreducible dimension of politics, as the negativity that propels the constant evolution and equilibrium of the state. Whilst indignation within the civil state can lead to the dissolution of the commonwealth, this outcome is extremely rare. Most often, indignation takes the form of disputes and struggles – of resistance – that are settled within the existing structure of the commonwealth, or force it to change its form:

Therefore, when disagreements and rebellions are stirred up in a Commonwealth – as they often are – the result is never that the citizens dissolve the Commonwealth – though this happens in other kinds of society. Instead, if they can't settle their disagreements while preserving the form of the Commonwealth, they change its form to another. (TP 6.2)

Does this mean, then, that we need to learn to live with indignation, and accept it as a necessary evil, or as the affective pole indicative of a problem, which political rationality needs to confront, and solve? Does this mean that we, as a polity, need to distinguish and prioritise between types of indignation and claims to justice? And can we imagine a democratic order that would not be *rooted* in indignation? In other words, can we imagine a politics beyond the negotiation of our contrary and conflictual passions? Before I address the latter in my conclusion, I want to turn to the first set of questions and argue for the need to distinguish between forms of indignation, and therefore begin to supplement and complicate the picture we inherit from Spinoza.

III. Historical Examples

Rather than illustrate Spinoza's views by turning to his own politics, or his analyses of the politics of his time, I will follow up on my brief reference to A. Lorde, focused on the difference between anger and hatred, and analyse a few situations borrowed from our recent history.²⁴

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23 In that respect, I disagree with M. Nussbaum's claim in *Anger and Forgiveness* (Nussbaum 2016) that anger is necessarily bound up with retribution, and retribution with resentment. Resentment is rooted not in anger *per se*, but in the specific form of anger that is purely reactive, imaginary, and vindictive. Lorde points to the positive side of anger: "The angers of women can transform difference into power. For anger between peers births change, not destruction, and the discomfort and sense of loss it often causes is not fatal, but a sign of growth" (Lorde 1984, 131).

24 For a discussion of Spinoza's own political struggles, see Del Lucchese 2009a, Chapter 4.

The situations I analyse – in Germany and Austria after the Shoah, in South Africa after Apartheid – can be described as extreme, or liminal, and as the greatest challenge posed to the possibility of processing or mediating indignation.

In a recent article, which I will use as a guiding thread, Didier Fassin explores affects such as “rancor, bitterness, acrimony, anger, ire, and indignation” (Fassin 2013, 249).²⁵ to assess a range of political situations. Those affects, he claims, belong to a grey territory that escapes the alternative between good and evil. Now we saw how, from a Spinozist perspective, those affects are necessarily bad, insofar as they are all expressions of sadness, and therefore of a decrease of power. In addition, we saw how, for Spinoza, good and evil are necessarily relative. At the same time, we saw that the affects under consideration are inevitable, and a key engine for political change: whilst irreducible to politics as such, by which I mean politics guided by reason and the *complete* understanding of human nature, they are indispensable to the politics of resistance. Fassin’s claim, which repeats that of Spinoza, is that the reactive affects in question are all “a response to what is experienced or imagined as an injury or injustice.”²⁶ Fassin focuses specifically on resentment, and suggests, somewhat arbitrarily in my view, that we distinguish the French *ressentiment* from the English “resentment.” Yet much of what he says applies to indignation as I’ve tried to describe thus far. The man (or woman) of *ressentiment*, such as the holocaust survivor or the victim of racial segregation in South Africa or the United States, he claims, “may have been directly exposed to oppression and domination, or indirectly, through the narratives of his parents or grand-parents, for instance.” *Ressentiment* thus results from what he calls “real” or “historical alienation:” something happened, “which had tragic consequences in the past and often causes continuing hardship in the present” (260). There is a real causality at work here, which can be subjected to an adequate form of understanding. Resentment, by contrast, results from imaginary, sociological alienation, and can’t possibly leads to forms of recognition: to the racist or the homophobe, who feels his country is taken over, and his identity threatened, by an Other, one can’t say: “I hear you. Your racism, your homophobia, your misogyny needs to find its place within the multitude.” The distinction between real and imaginary indignation is helpful, if not key. Yet it needs to be qualified. For we saw how, for Spinoza, indignation – or other political affects rooted in hatred and revengefulness – is necessarily imaginary, that is, passive, and therefore contrary to reason. However, the further distinction which Fassin invites us to make is that between

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25 In a similar vein, but a different context, that of bearing witness to sexist injustice, see McFall 1991.

26 D. Fassin, “On Resentment and *Ressentiment*,” op. cit., 249.

the affect itself, which is indeed necessarily passive, at least initially, and the idea of its cause, which can itself be real or imaginary, attached to a causality that is either verifiable or purely fictitious. Furthermore, the distinction allows us to distinguish between two different kind of politics, or political processes: one, as Audrey Lorde suggests, leads to change and to the growth in power – and therefore the freedom – of the multitude; and another to destruction and the decrease in power of the multitude, to further alienation. The first form of indignation calls for recognition, redress, compensation, etc. Recognition does not erase the injury, but transforms social and historical relations for the better – and this means with a view to increasing the power and freedom of the multitude. It transforms or creates norms, and is able to unite the multitude, and therefore move closer to the interest of reason itself. By contrast, the second form of indignation calls for revenge and destruction; it is too weak, too much subjected to its rage and hatred to do anything other than stigmatise, blame, divide, and annihilate. Its norms and values are those of the spirit of revenge itself, bent on the subjugation, domination or even annihilation of certain groups or classes: misogynistic, xenophobic, racist, etc.

1. Indignation from historical alienation.

Fassin introduces his discussion of *ressentiment* through the writings of Jean Améry. Originally published in 1966, *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne (Beyond Guilt and Atonement)* was translated in 1980 as *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities* (Améry 1980). Written in the first person, the series of essays consists of a description of Améry's experience, during and after the war, as a victim of the Nazi regime. The key essay, for our purposes, is entitled *Ressentiments* and is translated (regrettably, given its obvious and ultimately critical reference to Nietzsche) as "Resentments." The issue of *ressentiment* already appears in the very last page of the second essay, devoted to Améry's experience of torture in the hands of the Gestapo in the Belgian prison of Breendonk, and in those of a regime, the Third Reich, for which torture "was not an accidental quality, ... but its essence" (24). In just about everyone's mind, torture is the extreme form if not the very definition of pain, and thus legitimate grounds for the most radical form of hatred and desire for revenge. Améry's description of the pain he experienced is vivid and unforgettable. And the point is precisely that of the unforgettable nature of that pain and the insurmountable effects of that trauma: "Whoever was tortured, stays tortured" (34). Whilst the tortures he had to endure were not, on his account, of the worst kind, he can say with confidence, twenty-two years after they occurred, that "torture is the most horrible event a human being can retain within himself" (22). It is not just the severity of the pain, which is impossible to quantify and varies significantly from one subject to another. It is the

nature of it. When tortured, and from the very *first blow*, which announces all the others, potentially infinite in number, one feels *helpless* and *alone*. The torturers will do what they want, and no one will come to the prisoner's aid to assist him, or relieve him of his pain. The help from others that we normally expect can no longer be expected. With the first blow, the victim loses "trust in the world" (27), that is, the trust that his physical and metaphysical being will be respected. The body of the victim is invaded, taken over. It is like rape. After those initial blows by the Gestapo, Améry was handed over to the SS. His hands cuffed behind his back, he was hooked to a chain that hung from the vaulted ceiling and lifted from the ground, until, exhausted from the muscular effort to hold himself at a half-oblique, barely able to breath, he felt a crackling and splintering in his shoulders, a sound and a feeling he can still hear twenty-two years later:

The balls sprang from their sockets. My own body weight caused luxation; I fell into a void and now hung by my dislocated arms, which had been torn high from behind and were now twisted over my head... At the same time, the blows from the horsewhip showered down on my body... (32)

In torture, the body is experienced as never before: as pure flesh and a total reality from which there is no escape. Riveted to her own body, reduced to her suffering, the victim experiences the loneliest agony: "Amazed, the tortured person experienced that in this world there can be the other as absolute sovereign, and sovereignty revealed itself as the power to inflict suffering and to destroy" (39). With the cracking and splintering of the shoulder joints, all the things that one may, according to inclination, call the soul, or the mind, or consciousness, or personal identity, are also destroyed. Torture makes feeling "at home in the world" (40) no longer possible. It leaves one broken, physically and mentally. It is the experience of total disempowerment, of absolute powerlessness. In that sense, it is the experience of death. In *Ideas II*, Husserl suggests that, instead of the Cartesian "I think," and by virtue of its embodied nature, consciousness be thought of us as an "I can."²⁷ My body, he argues, is the vehicle of my power and my freedom. In torture, this power is negated, reduced to nothingness. I can *no longer*. The experience is thus one of total alienation from the world, and from others in the world. One remains forever distrustful, afraid and, yes, resentful. Fear and *ressentiments*, Améry concludes, "remain, and have scarcely a chance to concentrate into a seething, purifying thirst for revenge" (40).

How, then, could they possibly be integrated into a historical and political process? What sort of claim or reparation can come out of

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27 Husserl 1989, Section Two, Chapter 3 ('The Constitution of Psychic Reality Through the Body').

that experience of brokenness? How do we respond to those who, like Améry, wonder “whether one can live humanly in the tension between fear and anger,” and whose “bitterness” comes from having been robbed of their “trust in the world” (100)? How can their suffering, and our own indignation in the face of it, come to anything concrete?

Those are the questions that Améry addresses in the essay entitled “*Ressentiments*.” There, he offers a kind of confession, but one that not does not and, he claims, should not lead to atonement: I, a survivor, he says in substance, harbour a rancour, a deep grudge and *ressentiment*, which I feel entitled to and want to live by, as well as *understand*. The *ressentiment* in question, it is crucial to note, is towards not only his torturers and those directly responsible for his suffering, but towards the German people and post-war Germany as a whole, this “thriving land” along with its “idyllic towns and villages,” “the quality of its goods” and “unfailing perfection of its handicrafts,” its “impressive combination of cosmopolitan modernity and wistful historical consciousness” (62). The guilt, he says, is a collective one, and needs to be acknowledged as such by the very people who seem to have moved on and done so well for themselves, who are *happy*. They should all feel his indignation and rancour, define who they are, and what they do as a multitude, in response to this indignation.

I leave aside the question of whether this process is one that Germany (or Austria, for that matter) actually engaged in since the publication of Améry's book. There is evidence that it has. But one can also point to contrary evidence. The case of the production and reception of Thomas Bernhard's *Heldenplatz* is a case in point.²⁸ In 1998, Thomas Bernhard, Austria's most important post-war writer and playwright, was commissioned by Claus Peymann, the politically controversial German director, to write a play to commemorate the Anschluss of 1938 as well as the hundredth anniversary of Vienna's famous Burgtheater. Bernhard is also known in his country as a *Nestbeschmutzer*, or someone who defiles the nest, Austria. In *Heldenplatz*, he directed his ferocious and unapologetically resentful pen at what he perceived to be the collective amnesia, denial and revisionism of his *Heimat*. As Malkin puts it, “unlike most post-Shoah plays written in German or Austria, anger, hatred and bile are unmitigated in Bernhard's play by any agenda of forgiveness or reconciliation, or by any metaphysical appeal to higher meanings” (Malkin 1998, 282).²⁹ His line is, in that respect, very similar to Améry's, whose life inspired the main character of the play, Josef Schuster. His indignation

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28 The following remarks and thoughts are indebted to Jeanette R. Malkin, ‘Thomas Bernhard, Jews, *Heldenplatz*’ (Malkin 1998).

29 Malkin has in mind very different plays such as Rolf Hochhuth's 1963 *The Deputy* (*Der Stellvertreter*), Erwin Sylvanus' 1957 *Dr. Korczak and the Children* (*Korczak und die Kinder*), or Peter Weiss' 1965 *The Investigation* (*Die Ermittlung*).

is not a call to national healing, but a political end in itself: what the time calls for, he seems to suggest, is pure and simple indignation, and the reconstitution of the body politic around this sad passion. Before it was even performed, and following leaks to the media, the play caused a scandal. Most felt that its focus – the memory of Austria's Jews and Austria's responsibility in their persecution and extermination – was not fitting for the occasion, which they wanted to be a celebration of Vienna's contribution to the arts over a century. As Malkin puts it:

Heldenplatz erupted in an Austria still bruised by the campaign surrounding the election of Nazi collaborator (and two-time UN secretary general) Kurt Waldheim to the Presidency. Waldheim, in his victory, proved Austria's determination not to see itself as anything other than 'Hitler's first victim,' an epithet long cherished in Bernhard's homeland. (Malkin 1998, 283)

Unsurprisingly, Waldheim called the play an insult to all Austrians. He was joined by ex-Chancellor Bruno Kreisky, among others, in calling for the play's removal from the National Theatre. Bernhard's politics of indignation were, in the eyes of the multitude, too much to bear and a direct threat to the political consensus.

Josef Schuster is the central character of the play. A mathematics professor and a Jew forced into exile in 1938, he returns to Austria with his wife long after the war, only to jump out of his third-floor window on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the Anschluss. Robert Schuster, his brother, provides the following, pessimistic explanation: "The Austrians after the war/had become much more hateful and even more Jew hating/than before the war/no one could have foreseen that."³⁰ Malkin's own reading of Josef Schuster is that resentment "cannot be cured. It can only be overcome (if at all) through death" (Malkin 1998, 285). She ends her article by pointing to Bernhard's own indignation, which he tried to extend beyond his death by demanding in his will that nothing he had ever written was to be published or performed "within the borders of the Austrian state, however that state describes itself... for all time to come."³¹ In addition, he forbade his own commemoration by Austria, or by any country supported by Austrian money. Thus, "his "rancor and resentment lived on after him in an act which continues to express his will to remember and, in a typical Bernhardian paradox, his refusal to *be* remembered in a country whose betrayals he could not forget" (Malkin 1998, 293).

Beyond the strictly historical question of whether nations that participated in the persecution and extermination of Jews under Nazism

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30 Bernhard 1988, 112. The translation is Malkin's.

31 Cited in Wille 1989, 19.

have sought genuine atonement since the publication of Améry's book, or Bernhard's play, what matters is the principled position, that is, the claim to a right to indignation and *ressentiment*, and its moral significance and superiority. In an explicit rebuttal of the politics of reconciliation, Améry ends his essay by voicing his scepticism regarding Germany's ability properly to atone and offer what he calls "a settlement in the field of historical practice" (77). By that, he means the nation's desire not to allow the reality of the camps to be neutralised by time; to weave it into the collective memory of the country in such a way that it becomes, to use Magnus Engensberger's words, Germany's past, present, and future – another, negative yet perhaps necessary experience of the eternal recurrence, one oriented towards not innocence, but guilt, or at least towards something like an open wound; to *own* this "realized negation of the world and its self, as its own negative possession" (78). Only then would "the overpowered and those who overpowered them" join "in the desire that time be turned back and with it, that history become moral" (78). Only then would "the German revolution be made good, Hitler disowned" (78). Yet the pacification of the victims' *ressentiment*, their ability to overcome their own subjective condition – one that, once again, Améry sees not as psychological, or clinical, but as moral – and become "objectively unnecessary" would require a final step, namely, "the spiritual reduction to pulp by the German people, not only of the books" printed between 1933 and 1945, as Thomas Mann had suggested in a letter to Walter von Molo, "but of everything that was carried out in those twelve years," in such a way that nothing could be rescued from that period, not even the Autobahn. This would amount to "a highly positive, a redeeming act" that would signal the end of the dialectical process, "the negation of the negation" (78-79). It would signal the emergence of a new consensus out of a sense of indignation. But this outcome is unlikely: "Our slave morality will not triumph," Améry writes ironically (81). The hatred, rancour and indignation of those who suffered the atrocities of Nazism will not find a place in the consensus of post-war Germany (or Austria). *Ressentiment*, as the inability to forget, to rise above, or to avenge an injury is unsurpassable in the case of an injury like the Shoah. To forget, as the only possibility open to the victims (in the absence of rising above and avenging), is precisely what Améry, Josef Schuster and Bernhard refuse to do. Instead, they prefer the self-harm of memory to what Améry calls "the anti-moral natural process of healing." But, taken to its logical conclusion, this decision leads to suicide, or an equivalent death wish, as Spinoza had understood a few centuries before:

We victims must finish with our retroactive rancor, in the sense that the KZ [concentration camp] argot once gave to the word "finish;" it meant as much as "to kill." Soon we must and will be finished. Until that time has come, we request of those whose peace is disturbed by our grudge that they be patient. (Améry 1980, 81)

Ultimately, Améry suggests in a way that remains ambiguous, the indignant community will need to be finished with its own indignation, and find a way of transforming it, as if according to a yet unknown alchemy, into a genuine historical and political process. There must be a horizon beyond that of indignation. But not now, not yet. For the time being – and time is of the essence – indignation, rage and resentment are the only possible response to the injury caused. Pure reaction, and this new form of alienation that comes from the dehumanisation of the camps, this complete entrapping within raw passion and passivity, is all there *can* be. Even if this means self-destruction, whether by suicide or through other means. To those who claim that one should not look to the past but to the future (“the genuine human dimension”) (68); to those who, even amongst Jews like Victor Golloncz and Martin Buber, “tremble with the pathos of forgiveness and reconciliation” (65), Améry opposes a right to harbour the hard feelings that are “condemned by moralists and psychologists alike,” the first regarding those emotions as “a taint,” the second as “a form of sickness” (64). Instead, and beyond the (essentially Christian) ethics and psychotherapy of “healing” and “closure,” of the need for reconciliation and forgiveness, it calls for the right, and even the need, *not* to obliterate the past and “move on,” “turn the page,” as if nothing had happened – the need to allow the past to continue to define the present, to keep the wound open, to remind ourselves, and especially the perpetrators, of what took place, at least as long as the victims of the holocaust, and perhaps their children, remain alive. For Améry’s *ressentiment* also applies to the younger generation of Germans, although to a lesser extent, given their lack of direct involvement. But he doesn’t feel they can claim their innocence, so long as they feel “German” in any way, so long as they claim to relate to their own past and history: “German youth cannot cite Goethe, Mörike, and Baron von Stein, and ignore Blunck, Wilhelm Schäfer, and Heinrich Himmler” (76). It would seem, then, that in addition to calling into question the Judeo-Christian ethics of forgiveness and reconciliation, or the ability to respond to hatred and extermination with love (if not of the perpetrators, of humanity in general, or one’s country, or the future, or God), Améry also calls into question the way of forgetting, and embraces slave morality. It is as if he were saying: ‘like many before us’ – and here one can only think of the enslavement of Africans by European powers – ‘we have been forced into slavery, and thus reduced to feel and think like slaves’. And in the same way that the slave mentality did not end with the end of apartheid in South Africa, or the end of colonialism in Africa, slavery does not end with the freeing of the camps. For slavery created indignation, rancour and *ressentiment*. It simply cannot be a matter of asking the (former) slaves to move on, forget or forgive, look towards the future. It cannot be a matter of adding that burden onto their shoulders, of asking them to lick their own wounds and heal their own scars. It is, instead, a matter

of asking at what cost, through what collective process, the creation of what norms and institutions, *ressentiment* can be overcome and indignation included in the democratic state. And that involves even the right to question the very Christian values of “truth” (as the truth that liberates) and “reconciliation,” as much as the desire for revenge. The “loudly proclaimed readiness for reconciliation by Nazi victims” strikes Améry as “either insanity and indifference to life or the masochistic conversion of a suppressed genuine demand for revenge” (71). Similarly, what we normally call forgiveness may be possible, but only at the cost of de-moralizing the deed, that is, of moving the subjective experience out of the moral sphere and into the social sphere. In other words, the traumatised or “distorted,” “warped” subject can forgive, but only as a de-individualized, interchangeable part of the social mechanism. And that is the reason why not just forgiving, but also forgetting, when induced by social pressure, is *immoral* for Améry. The healing process involves instead a process of recognition which culminates in the idea of settlement, ways of paying a debt, and of putting the overpowered back on the path of empowerment, of making them strong again. Ultimately, I believe it is a question of overcoming slave morality, not by ignoring and dismissing it, but by overturning it, by working with it and through it. Indignation, rancour and resentment are and always will remain sad passions. They are a poison which, Améry writes, “blocks the exit to the genuine human dimension, the future” (68), and locks one into a state of powerlessness. *Ressentiment*, in the Nietzschean, technical sense, is a historical and cultural construction that processes and transforms this sadness. But one can imagine other such processes, which don’t so much *capitalise* on indignation, transform its formula so as better to disseminate it in the social and political body, as create the conditions under which joyful affects, and that of generosity in particular, can thrive. This, I believe, is the truly democratic process sought by Spinoza.

It is possible to extend Améry’s or Bernhard’s militant and historically specific *ressentiment* to other situations, and to that of post-apartheid South Africa in particular. Fassin draws our attention to two different strategies which the black leaders of that country developed during that period. Whereas the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as envisioned by Mandela and Tutu, emphasised the joyful affects of forgiveness and generosity as a way of healing the wounds of the multitude, Thabo Mbeki’s 1998 “Two Nations” speech emphasized the deep and structural divisions between black and white, which required greater recognition and economic redistribution (Mbeki 1988). One nation, “white, relatively prosperous,” lives alongside the other, “black and poor.” The situation, he adds, is “underwritten by the perpetuation of the racial, gender and spatial disparities born of a very long period of colonial and apartheid white domination” (Fassin 2013, 255). In that same speech, and four years into the process of reconciliation Thabo Mbeki

presents the fundamental question, that is, the question that will allow for a true reconciliation and the overcoming of the blacks' indignation, in the following, straightforward terms: "are the relatively rich who, as a result of an apartheid definition, are white, prepared to underwrite the upliftment of the poor who, as a result of an apartheid definition, are black?" It is only at that cost, that is, at the cost of an economic sacrifice and a loss of economic power, similar to that accepted by Germany at the time of its reunification, rather than as a result of a process of symbolic recognition and reconciliation, and therefore as a new regime of superstition, that the suffering inflicted on black South Africans can be alleviated. In other words, and from a Spinozist perspective, Mbeki is claiming that the more arduous, and less compromising path, which seems to perpetuate the state and stage of indignation, is in fact the path that is closest to that of reason. For it is more real, by which I mean less symbolic or superstitious: it does not appeal to the (undoubtedly also effective) power of the heart, and to joyful affects such as forgiveness and reconciliation in particular, but to the redistribution of economic power as a more fundamental source of inequality, and a more arduous path towards social peace and unity. It is not a theological response, which unites through love and benevolence, but an economic one, which unites through redistribution and compensation, through the sharing of real, economic power. And it is rooted in the understanding that, to borrow Fassin's terminology, indignation "is more than an affect: it is an anthropological condition related to a historical situation of victim" (Fassin 2013, 256). In the case of post-Apartheid South Africa, *indignation* is already a process, a historical claim, a demand, as exemplified by Thabo Mbeki (and, before him and in a different context, Améry), and one that can be addressed.

2. Hallucinatory Indignation

By contrast, what Fassin calls resentment, and I have been referring to as the purely hallucinatory and imaginary form of indignation, "involves diffuse animosity and tends towards vindictiveness. It shifts its focus of discontent from specific actors towards society at large and vulnerable groups in particular, via *imaginary* projection" (Fassin 2013, 260). The injury or hatred felt is, for example, that of the white police officer in the presence of black people, whether in apartheid South Africa or the American South. In the case of France, the perceived injury is that of the police officers deployed in the *banlieues*, those poor suburbs largely populated by Arab and Sub-Saharan minorities, which themselves carry *la haine*.³² Often recruited from the deindustrialized and mostly destitute

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32 *La Haine* (1995), or *Hatred*, is the name of a film by Mathieu Kassovitz, as well as an expression from the *banlieues*. The film is inspired by the case of Makomé M'Bowolé, shot in the head at close range by a police officer inside a police precinct. *Avoir la haine* means to harbor and feel hatred, not towards anything in particular, but towards an entire system. It is a socially generated *condition*.

northern part of the country, the police refer to those urban areas as “the jungle” (Fassin 2013, 258). It is also the condition of far-right constituents, whose social malaise takes the form of xenophobia, racism, and the rejection of the “system.” In each case, we have “a reaction to a relational situation, which results from a sociological position,” and translates into an imaginary, almost random projection: the origin and cause of their injury and rancour, they feel, include “the poor, immigrants, minorities, magistrates, superiors, and society at large” (Fassin 2013, 260, 259). Here, the situation is one of *ideological alienation*: “the reality is blurred, leading to frequently misdirected rancor” (Fassin 2013, 260). Unlike the man of *ressentiment*, the man of resentment (or hallucinatory indignation) is not directly or indirectly exposed to oppression and domination, to historical or objective alienation. Yet he expresses discontent about a state of affairs, about his situation and condition, and feels wronged: the indignation is real, yet the idea of its cause is a pure construction. His alienation, Fassin concludes, is *sociological*. I would extend the affect of pure resentment, or fantasmatic indignation, to include the attitude of all those whose hatred, born of a sense of being ignored, or not recognised, can’t find a way out or forward, and are thus trapped in an endless deferral of revenge, which takes the form, in their daily lives, of a constant vindictiveness and indiscriminate rage. What distinguishes it from real, historical alienation, and the indignation it leads to is, I feel, its inability to evolve into a process, a claim or a demand, and therefore the inability to create any norms or values. It is a purely destructive, purely negative form of indignation, which lacks mediation, and does so necessarily. It lashes out at just about anything and anyone, without being able to formulate a demand and enter a process of recognition, however fragile or tenuous. Unlike *ressentiment*, it lacks the minimal self-awareness that would allow it to set a course, however oppositional and conflictual. It is pure reactivity, raw negative emotion. As such, the only thoughts it can give rise to are thoughts – fantasies – of revenge, and the only actions it is capable of are those that will inflict pain and suffering on others, and rejoice in seeing their power diminish and sadness increase. It is indignation at its worst, and leads to the formation of the multitude as mob. If the type in question occupies, as Fassin claims (rightly, I believe), a sociological position, I don’t believe there is a collective responsibility towards it: the racist, the racist and murderous police officer especially, should not be understood; the petty and envious neighbour who hates your success should not be understood; the mob that launches an assault on the US Capitol cannot be “heard.” That politicians of today or yesterday use and capitalise on that energy, claim that they are on the side of those who feel disempowered, and promise them to bring them back to the time of their (imaginary) grandeur and glory, is of no consequence. The politics of the mob, which is, of, by and for the spiteful, should not be confused with the politics of the people. The people, as

a political entity motivated by the quest for the common good, and the increase of power of the many, is neither the mob nor the flock. It seeks to be governed not by weakness (and hatred and vindictiveness are weaknesses) but by strength (and generosity), by which, following Spinoza, I mean the ability to move from a lesser to a greater state of perfection. As such, it is not mere obedience. Knowledge, thought, acumen and generosity, which all contribute to understanding the origin and causes of situations, and the effort to improve them, are necessary to reach such a state.

Conclusion

Were human beings not subjected to their passionate affects, which causes them to oppose and contradict one another, and force them into servitude; and were they, instead, to live in accord with the dictates of reason – they would naturally agree with each other, aid each other and join in friendship. They would only do those things that are good for human nature and therefore for every human being (EIVp35). The highest good, namely “to have adequate knowledge of the eternal and infinite essence of God” (EIIp47), is necessarily common to all, and enjoyable equally by all (EIVp36s). Furthermore, and in what *seems* like the true realisation of the mimetic, social affectivity we observed in passions such as indignation, my desire for and enjoyment of the supreme good increases as I see others enjoy it; and the more I enjoy the good the more I want (*conabitur*) others to enjoy it (EIVp37dem). Under the guidance of reason, relations of inequality, by which Spinoza means relations of power as struggle, domination, and exploitation, would be replaced by relations of composition of power (*potentia*), of assemblages of desire, through which my own power and the power of others would be inevitably increased, since such relations would be based on the fact that human beings agree with one another according to their essence or nature. To agree in nature, Spinoza insists, is to agree in power (*potentia*), not in impotence (*impotentia*) (EIVp32). Therefore, the true consensus cannot be based on expressions of impotence such as ignorance, negation, or opposition. Earlier on, I quoted the passage from the Ethics in which Spinoza claims that “if two individuals of completely the same nature are combined, they compose an individual twice as powerful as each one singly” (EIVp18s). Similarly, if many individuals of the same nature – and human beings are such individuals – combine their powers in the same way, their overall power, reason, or perfection, will increase further. As a consequence, individual human beings would never be more powerful than if composed with *all* other human beings, in what would amount to the realisation of freedom as cosmopolitanism: “Man, I say, can wish for nothing more helpful to the preservation of his being than that all should so agree in all things that the Minds and Bodies of all would compose, as it were, one Mind and one Body; that all should strive together, as far as

they can, to preserve their being; and that all, together, should seek the common advantage of all” (EIVp18s).

In such a civil state – for this is what this combination requires – human affections are entirely active, which means that they express the very essence of human beings to persist in existing. In the course of this essay, I mentioned in passing what those affections of reason are: kindness, generosity, honesty, fortitude, friendship, being honourable, etc. And I also just alluded to the fact that they seem to confirm, albeit from the positive side, the essentially mimetic nature of human sociality. But the scholium of proposition 37 in part four of the *Ethics* questions this assumption and points, I believe, in the direction of a political affectivity of reason that exceeds the mimetic and ultimately narcissistic dynamic of social relations governed by passions. For Spinoza defines the latter as rooted in an implicit, twofold form of ambition, which Matheron helped reveal.³³ The first is an ambition of esteem (EIIIp29s), glory (EIII30s), and recognition, which generates a certain, *imaginary* kind of enjoyment and self-love (*philautia, acquiescentia in se ipso* [EIII53c]). Our desire is driven not by reason, and the manner in which it can agree in nature with the desire of others, but by the desire to be recognised by the other, and therefore by the emulation of the desire of the other, however imaginary and passionate it may be. Emulation, as we saw, is a form of imitation, “a Desire for a thing which is generated in us because we imagine that others have the same Desire” (EIII, Def. Aff. 33). It is rooted in our envy for the fortunate (EIIIp32s). Social relations of imitation are by definition imaginary, determined by the common constitution of external things, rather than by the nature of human beings, considered in itself (EIVp37s1). Such is the reason why the first kind of desire contains within itself seeds of aggressiveness and conflict, especially if my desire is frustrated. Such, also, is the reason why it is so close to the other kind of ambition, which Matheron describes as one of “ideological domination,” in which I force the other to desire what I desire, to love what I love and hate what I hate. The latter form of ambition is the source of political and religious intolerance (EIIIp31s). In both cases, self-love is exclusive and inextricably bound up with hatred, envy, and vengeance, as we saw in relation to indignation.

The first scholium of proposition 37 in part four of the *Ethics* draws the consequences of the in-built narcissistic aggressiveness of the imaginary social drive, and contrasts it with the kind of love and enjoyment that characterises the rational, active life. In other words, relations of imitation are both common, or constitutive of the social order, and exclusive, destructive, and hateful: “He who strives, only because

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33 See A. Matheron, ‘Ethics and Politics in Spinoza (Remarks on the Role of *Ethics* IV, 37 Scholium 2)’, ‘Passions and Institutions in Spinoza’, and ‘The Problem of Spinoza’s Evolution’, in Matheron 2020.

of an affect [*solo affectu conatur*], that others should love what he loves, and live according to his temperament, acts only from impulse [*solo impetu agit*] and is hateful – especially to those to whom other things are pleasing, and who also, therefore, strive eagerly, from the same impulse, to have other men live according to their own temperament.” By contrast, he who strives *from reason* to guide or govern others acts not from impulse – from economic envy or social ambition, or from any other mediated and imaginary form of desire – “but kindly, generously, and with the greatest steadfastness of mind [*sed humaniter et benigne agit et sibi mente maxima constat*].” The humanity and benevolence that follow from reason, and define the manner in which I relate to others, is not a function of a mimetic, imaginary relation to others, and of the directly or indirectly hateful consensus it generates, but of the full understanding of the extent and limits of my power, and the power of nature as whole. The ability to rejoice in the happiness and success of others, that is a true virtue, and one that is most difficult to achieve. Spinoza does not have a name for it: “By what name we should call the Joy that arises from another’s good I do not know” (IIIp22s). Nietzsche forges a term, *Mitfreude*, which captures this affect nicely. Not *Mitleid* (pity), but *Mitfreude*, or the ability to rejoice from another’s Joy, is the most arduous path, and the truly ethical task.³⁴ Similarly, Spinoza systematically affirms the need to respond to Hate with Love, to overcome our fantasies of revenge, and therefore our tendency to remain trapped in a vicious circle of sad passions, through an adequate understanding of our power and its ability to combine itself with the power of other individuals and bodies (whether physical, social, or cultural).

But we know that this political life is an ideal, towards which we must strive. Democratic politics, and the emerge of a true *demos*, free of superstition, fear and hatred, and even indignation, is not so much the end of the process as the process itself, an endless process of liberation, which involves the cultivation of joyful affects I have mentioned, and the rigorous practice of thought. Through this effort, we are indeed progressively able to overcome our herd mentality and our lynching instinct, and move ever close to a politics of solidarity, hospitality, and inclusiveness rooted not in a morality of duty, but a rigorous and univocal ethics of power. Democracy is always to come.

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34 Nietzsche 2013, “Mixed Opinions and Maxims,” § 62. See also Nietzsche 1995, §§ 321 and 499; and Nietzsche 1974, § 338.

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