

**Imaginary
Projections. Spinoza
between Borges,
Péron, and Freud**

Mariana Gainza

Abstract: Academics and researchers, but also musicians, poets, writers, politicians, activists, and people of a large variety of inscriptions and origins have expressed a strange love for Spinoza. Borges and Perón, a couple of famous enemies, are part of this universal current, that connect heterogenous historical modes of imagination. If a certain kind of *unconscious* takes part of the actualization of Spinoza over times, we have to think also in Freud, who was not alien to this Spinozian affinity.

Keywords: Spinoza - Materialism of the imaginary - Borges - Perón - Freud

I.

Everybody loves Spinoza, says Slavoj Žižek. “One of the unwritten rules of today’s academia from France to the US is the injunction to love Spinoza. Everyone loves him, from the Althusserian strict ‘scientific materialists’ to Deleuzean schizo-anarchists, from rationalist critics of religion to the partisans of liberal freedoms and tolerances, not to mention feminists...”¹ Žižek’s irony takes note of something that does indeed happens; and it should be considered even more extensively, since this love for Spinoza is not restricted to the academic world, but appears mostly in spaces outside the sway of its fashions. Musicians, poets, writers, activists, militants and people of a large variety of inscriptions and origins have expressed over time this preference, which seems to recall an ancient love. In Argentina, we are not strangers to this universal love: Spinoza is part of the heterogeneous currents of national thought. To such an extent that even Borges and Perón spoke of Spinoza. Both, the great politician, leader of the Argentine working masses, and the great liberal writer, known not only for his remarkable literature but also for his anti-Peronism, pronounced significant words about Spinoza.

In a 1985 conference, Borges describes his relationship with Spinoza’s philosophy in a suggestive way. The navigator in a Conrad novel glimpses something from the bow of his boat: a shadow, a clearness at the ends of the horizon. That opaque line he sees is the coast of Africa, and so beyond it

there are fevers, empires, ruins, the Sahara, the great rivers explored by Stanley, Livingstone, and then palm trees, and what remains of Carthage, erased by Rome with fire and salt. And then the history of the Portuguese, the Dutch, the Zulus, the Bantus, and also the slave buyers, and ruins, and pyramids. In other words, a vast world. Of jungles, of leopards, of birds.²

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1 Žižek, 2007.

2 Borges, 1985 (all quotations from Borges come from this lecture).

Borges says that something similar happens to him with Spinoza. “I have spent my life exploring Spinoza and, nevertheless, what can I say about him?: I have glimpsed something, and I know that what is glimpsed is vast”. Faced with this vastness (that of a world made of infinite worlds) barely glimpsed from an irreducible foreignness, one can only confess a “dazzled ignorance”. Along with the impression that there is “something not only infinite but essential”, which “somehow belongs to me” and “I can feel, mysterious as music”, although “I could not explain it to others”. That which can be felt but cannot be explained, is what opens the game of words and images, pouring the full weight of strangeness into the literary construction. For a writer like Borges, who considers philosophy and theology to be “the most extravagant and most admirable forms of fantastic literature”, the relationship with Spinoza is deliciously elaborated between love and betrayal.

Between love (“so many centuries later, here we are, at the edge of a continent that [Spinoza] practically ignored, thinking about him, trying to talk about him, all of us missing him. And, curiously, loving him, which is the most important thing”) and betrayal, because Borges betrays – in philosophical terms – Spinoza, in every step he takes to describe his philosophy, broadly understood as the philosophy of someone who spent his life *imagining God* (a God who, in turn, “imagines even the tiniest detail of our lives”). But this was exactly Spinoza’s critique of tradition target. Philosophers *imagined* the infinite entity, when instead, it was a matter of conceiving it (since the absolutely infinite, God, cannot be imagined, only understood). Borges betrays Spinoza by transforming the attributes of infinite substance (extension and thought) into *space* and *time*; by dissolving, besides, space into time; by converting eternity into immortality. He betrays Spinoza not only because he neglects the critical and polemical sense that nests at the heart of his philosophy, but because he gives that heart a precise stab, by presenting Spinoza (with the greatest love) as the thinker of everything he fought against. And that is the marvelous thing about Borges’ reading. He turns *imagination* into the true substance of every existing thing: the world, God, men, Spinoza, Borges himself. So he is strictly faithful to the philosophy of Spinoza, who indeed thought about everything he fought against. Borges elaborates his fictions under the modalities of *time*, *measure* and *number*, the imaginary operation modes par excellence, according to Spinoza: imagination with its rational attire. Only from love is it possible to carry out a betrayal of this magnitude, internal to the betrayed object itself (as a case that he himself contemplates), and endowed with the strength to suck him into an external and strange space: towards the Borgesian world, where Spinoza becomes one among many others, captive in the middle of labyrinths, mirrors, and paradoxes about time and the infinite.

II.

At the antipodes of Borges, Perón. But Spinoza also appears in the lecture entitled “The Organised Community”, read by the former president at the closure of the First National Congress of Philosophy, in 1949. Beginning with a greeting to the visiting philosophers (“I wish, gentlemen, that by setting foot on this land you have felt a bit Argentinean. For the Argentine heart, in our land, no one is a foreigner”³), the text goes – with a classic totalizing pretension – through the themes of the individual, society, community, values, justice, peace, order, freedom, democracy, and also the more abstract ones, relating to God, spirit and matter, body and soul, salvation and happiness. Stressing these themes from the statesman’s concrete political interest⁴, the text aims to set the doctrinal foundations of a movement which, facing the post-war world, affirms a “third position”; and inward, it upholds the will to solve all conflicts and contradictions, in what the “democratic thought of the future” conceives as a new community. A community capable of transcending both the regime of economic interests founded on a negative idea of individual freedom, as well as the idolatry and mystification of the state, which condemns the individual to a “mute and fearful presence”. Perón’s lecture concludes by quoting the last words of the *Ethics*:

This community which pursues spiritual and material goals, which tends to improve itself, which aspires to be better and be fairer, to be kinder and be happier, in which the individual can fulfill himself and realise it simultaneously, will welcome the future man with the noble conviction of Spinoza: “We feel, we experience that we are eternal”.⁵

This quotation at the very end of the speech produces an effect of estrangement. The enigmatic force of the Spinozian sentence on the experience of eternity is projected over Perón’s speech, over the Peronist doctrine, over the idea of community, and its content of promise and frustration. Borges’ interest in the same philosopher and the same unresolved enigma evoked by the president he loathes also contributes to this estrangement.

David Viñas, a major figure in twentieth-century Argentine left-wing literary criticism, downplayed the well-known differences between Borges

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3 Perón, 2006, p. 5.

4 “I would never have the pretension of doing pure philosophy in front of the masters of the world in such a scientific discipline. But what I have to affirm, is to be found in the Republic fully realised. The difficulty for the responsible statesman consists in the fact that he is obliged to realise what he affirms”. Perón, 2006, p. 5.

5 Perón, 2006, p. 46.

and Perón, pointing out what they have in common: a shared conservatism⁶. The same exclusion of history, due to “the denial of class struggle in Perón” and “an analgesic literature in Borges”; the same “evacuation of the suffering and drama inherent to daily life”, due to Borges’ opposition to tragedy, and the “need to erase everything that implies questioning” in Perón. According to Viñas, both establish a vertical space that “excludes any horizontal dimension: incapable of making a community respect itself, even after having seen its own miseries”. A historical kinship in lexicon and cultural influences, but mainly a “kinship of symbols”, associated with an “elitist-liberal line” in Borges and the “national-populist” in Perón, and their middle-class roots, which converge in the great emblem of “an old Argentina of reassuring and stereotypical patriarchal virtues”. The values of verticalism, non-critical adherence, immobilising identification and projection, inheritance versus gamble. Perón and Borges are “the most famous bourgeoisie Argentina has ever produced”, two icons that feed back each other in a circular immobilism, which constitutes an *imaginary space* that –Viñas concludes– is exhausted and hatches in a “concrete historical space: today’s Argentina”⁷. That present-day Argentina is the year 1981. Viñas writes his article when the bloody dictatorship (1976-1983) has not yet fallen; the dictatorship that murdered his two children (María Adelaida, aged 22, and Lorenzo Ismael, aged 25), who are among the 30,000 kidnapped and disappeared by state terrorism. The profound bitterness and iconoclastic rage with which he confronts both mythical figures is well understood, in the light of what that Argentinean actuality made evident about the piled-up failures of a mortally wounded community.

However, several decades later and inspired by other historical experiences, we can illuminate with a different light that common ground between Perón and Borges, that goes beyond their irreconcilable differences. A distant, foreign reference (Spinoza) projects its enigma upon those who radically confront each other in the way they live and experience their rootedness to a geography and a history. And reminds us how porous, open and still available for new thoughts are the texts of our most illustrious conservatives. This ephemeral communion between irreducible positions, attracted by the idea that it is possible to express the essence of a singularity from the perspective of eternity, produces a tension in the idea of community, making it something different from itself: a multiplication of times and modes to imagine the perpetual misunderstanding constituting the world and history. The enigma then persists, and Borges confesses his ignorance, and Perón refers to an uncertain future something that was supposed to be realised; and the community can only appear as a desire.⁸

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6 Viñas, 1981 (2011).

7 Viñas, 2011, pp. 299-300.

8 A “desire of community” to which Diego Tatián often refers when he looks for secret ties (often “Spinozian” ties) linking very distant characters and experiences. According to him, “Spinoza invites us

III.

Are we ascribing to Spinoza those quasi-magical qualities Žižek refers to when he talks about the universal love paid to him? Probably yes! In fact, we can recall the words of one of the great contemporary Spinozists mentioned by Žižek in his article, Pierre Macherey.⁹ According to the French philosopher, Spinozian thought has a rare power to “resonate and mingle with most of what we do”, to the extent that it can be conceived as a sort of *intellectual structure* which, far from being timeless, would be defined by a peculiar force of adaptation or adherence to the most determined forms of the present. It is therefore a philosophy constantly updated, again and again, in different times and conjunctures, and in always different modes: it is not one philosophy but many, since everyone projects onto it their own “phantoms of actuality”. Macherey then suggests that Spinoza’s philosophy functions, for many and very different readers, as a theoretical unconscious.¹⁰ Therefore, it is inevitable to associate this suggestion with Freud’s declared affinity for Spinoza, when he admits his dependence on Spinoza’s doctrine: “There was no reason why I should expressly mention his name, since I conceived my hypothesis from an atmosphere created by him, rather than from the study of his work. Moreover, I did not seek a philosophical legitimation”.¹¹

Certainly, between imagination and its projections and the unconscious, there are not only magical tricks. Paths of art and politics are woven there, and we evoke them here through Spinoza, who elaborated – as Althusser grasped it – an unprecedented *materialism of the imaginary*: a theory of the historical modes of imagination that constitutes the singularity of a people.¹²

to think in community, not a community to which we belong, a prior, substantive one, but a community to be invented and which has as its horizon what is universal in men”. Philosophy plays a key role in this regard: “it opens a possible form of community (always an experiment and a construction, never a fact as society is and always absent)”, because “the common is not what is there but what is lacking”. Tatián, 2012.

9 “Is it, then, possible at all not to love Spinoza? Who can be against a lone Jew who, on the top of it, was excommunicated by the ‘official’ Jewish community itself? One of the most touching expressions of this love is how one often attributes to him almost divine capacities –like Pierre Macherey who (in his otherwise admirable *Hegel ou Spinoza*), against the Hegelian critique of Spinoza, claims that one cannot avoid the impression that Spinoza had already read Hegel and in advance answered his reproaches...”. Žižek, 2007.

10 “Spinoza obsesses and haunts us as if it were a theoretical unconscious, that conditions and guides a large part of our intellectual options and effective commitments; and that helps us to reformulate most of the problems that concern us”. Macherey, 1992, p. 7.

11 Freud, 1977, p. 168.

12 “Materialism of the imaginary”, which arises –says Althusser– from Spinozian biblical exegesis, and is explained by his theory of religious ideology, his theory of language, his theory of the body and his theory of modes of knowledge. We see in the TTP “the history of this singular people, living under a singular religion, the Thora, the observances, the sacrifices, and the rituals ([...] the *materiality of the very existence of ideology*), with a language determined socially and precisely with these incredible prophets, men who climb the mountain at the summons of the Lord but who only understand in

The Brazilian philosopher Marilena Chaui builds her reading of Spinoza¹³ based on that historical modes of imagination. Through a research that wholly moves within the history of philosophy, Chaui reconstructs Spinoza's thought out of the contradictory images that his contemporaries and several generations of readers have formed about it. Thus, *Spinozism* is approached as a multiform image, made up of heterogeneous and divergent scraps and traces, that says more about those who felt affected by this strange theoretical body that needed to be exorcised or integrated, than about Spinoza himself. The uniqueness of his work is thereby obliquely marked by all those contrasting images; it is negatively outlined through the failed attempts to integrate his ideas into the field of the already thought and known. Chaui succeeds in presenting the debates and struggles that shook the European seventeenth century through this privileged prism: an unassimilable thought for the pre-existing philosophical positions.

The fundamental epistemological and ontological reference to read Spinoza's *Ethics* proposed by Chaui is the theory of light. This interpretative approach –which is based on the concrete practice of Spinoza, a lens polisher– explains the movement of her book, which is also constructed as a sort of optical artefact that focuses Spinoza's thought more and more closely, traversing the sea of images in which – across the times – the human swims, shipwrecks and survives. Thanks to this focus, a new perspective, immanence, is discovered or conquered; and from this point, another movement, inverse to the previous one, begins to illuminate the Spinozian logic for the constitution of the real and the singularities that shape the world.

There is no enlightenment in this reconstruction of Spinozism. In other words, this approach does not entail a belief that the progressive advance of reason will bring light to the darkest corners of reality and world. Against the naïve idealism of such rationalism, the reference claimed by Chaui to understand Spinoza's philosophy is Kepler's optical revolution, the one that inaugurates modern optics by considering the eye as a device that operates with independence of any will to see. The retinal image is produced by the convergence between this device and light rays; and human vision, placed in the middle of the world, is a material mechanism participating in it, in accordance with its laws – and not the sovereign point of view, which transforms it into the object of its representation. Spinoza, polisher

the thunder crash and lightning flash some partially comprehensible words. Then they go back down to the plain in order to submit to their brothers, who themselves know the message of God. The prophets have not understood anything that God had say to them: it is explained to them carefully, and the generally they understand the message of God; except that imbecile Daniel who knew how interpret dreams but who not only understood nothing of the message received from God (...) but, what is worse, would never comprehend any of the explanations the people gave him of the messages he had received!"
Althusser, 2008, p. 9.

13 Chaui, 1999 (2020).

of lenses, is aware of these discoveries and the virtue of telescopes and microscopes, which incorporate into the perceptive universe the infinitely great and the infinitely small, those supra and infra-human dimensions that make obsolete the classical privilege of human body as measure of all things. Moreover, Spinoza is an assiduous interlocutor of Christiaan Huygens, Dutch mathematician, astronomer, and physicist, whose perspective connects with his own in a much more decisive way – emphasises Chau – than Descartes'. Huygens' geometrical mechanicism is what allows to reorient what could be transformed into a Keplerian neoplatonism (that is, a harmonic vision of the universe, where symmetry and proportionality would reign, more compatible with Leibniz than with Spinoza). Huygens' theory of the ondulatory propagation of light, then, lends the most appropriate metaphors to address the relationship between substance, attributes and modes, according to Spinoza's thought. And 17th-century Dutch painting, also connected with the perspective transformations brought by the optical revolution, becomes a descriptive counterpoint, enabling a positive approximation both to Spinoza's truth and the truth of the image: to the mode in which imagination, recognising and unfolding its own power, is also constituted as a fundamental medium for the knowledge about being. Dutch painting, by the hand of Keplerian eye, plunges into the depths of space in its infinite mobility, where the sovereign gaze of the painter no longer reigns, but the work of light itself, which is realised by the contrast of colours and the variation of their intensities. Immersed in a world that precedes it, the eye presupposes it and travels through different paths and directions, so that movement is more relevant than the point of view. We are dealing with a mobile and ubiquitous eye, capable of multiplying points of view and simultaneous perspectives, allowing the experience of depth and infinity. Such an eye, then, would explain something of Spinoza's gaze.

IV.

However, twenty-two years before Kepler's birth died another painter, who "inquire the properties and laws of light, of colours, of shadows, of perspective, in order to achieve mastery in the imitation of nature". In this case is Freud who evokes Leonardo Da Vinci with a Spinozist rhetoric:

A man who has begun to have an inkling of the grandeur of the universe with all its complexities and its laws readily forgets his own insignificant self. Lost in admiration and filled with true humility, he all too easily forgets that he himself is a part of those active forces and that in accordance with the scale of his personal strength the way is open for him to try to alter a small portion of the destined course of the world—a world in which the small is still no less wonderful and significant than the great.¹⁴

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14 Freud, 2002, pp. 22-23.

Spinoza gets attached to Da Vinci by Freudian projection. And again we get the impression that Žižek is right when he points out this phenomenon of dislocation of times produced by the love for Spinoza. Just as Macherey speaks of Spinoza's anticipatory refutation of Hegelian arguments, Freud shows Da Vinci as an Spinozian (and a Keplerian, as well) *avant la lettre*. Quite differently from the idea of immanence prioritised by the history of philosophy (the immanence of history to texts), immanence here is associated with a rejoicing in the power of human intellect to produce effects. This is something Nietzsche points out very well when he recognises himself as a Spinozist: 'I am really amazed, really delighted! I have a precursor, and what a precursor! I hardly knew Spinoza: what brought me to him now was the guidance of instinct. His whole tendency is like my own –to make knowledge the most powerful passion'¹⁵. That affection which goes with intellectual passion and accounts for some of the transhistorical love for Spinoza, to which we refer in this text. A strange love, for it is associated – as Freud suggests– with a rare impassivity:

The view may be hazarded that Leonardo's development approaches Spinoza's mode of thinking. A man who has won his way to a state of knowledge cannot properly be said to love and hate; he remains beyond love and hatred. He has investigated instead of loving. And that is perhaps why Leonardo's life was so much poorer in love than that of other great men, and of other artists. The stormy passions of a nature that inspires and consumes, passions in which other men have enjoyed their richest experience, appear not to have touched him.¹⁶

An intellectual love. A great perspective – let's say to conclude – to confront the successful management of affections carried out by the global neoliberal right-wing. The sentimentalist, anti-intellectual and anti-political moralisation of emotions (whose lines of incidence are elaborated in marketing laboratories, counting with the pervasive power of social networks) has two pillars. On the one hand, the promotion and canalisation of social hate; on the other, the cultivation of false emotionality and banal joy. The production of selective mass indignation, for example, constitutes the affective infrastructure required by anti-corruption discourses that seek to delegitimize politics with a redistributive will (disqualified as populist in Latin America) – and eventually enable the removal of progressivisms in the hands of Bolsonaro and his ilk. Inversely and complementarily, the spread of positive thinking invites people to deny pain (their own and others'), to restrict their sensitivity and block critical reflexivity, in order to foster adaptation to more and more hostile living conditions. Against neo-

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¹⁵ Nietzsche, 1996, p. 177.

¹⁶ Freud, 2002, p. 22.

liberal management and neo-fascist recondution of the passions, Spinozian intellectual love becomes an antidote (*Non ridere, non lugere, neque detestari, sed intelligere*) and a fundamental weapon for today's ideological critique.

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