

Covid, Crisis, and the Materialist Critique of Value

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Abstract: This essay argues that to comprehend the Covid pandemic not as a *cause* of the current crisis, but instead as a secondary *effect* and form of appearance of the valorisation logic inherent to the capitalist social form--as Anselm Jappe and his co-authors rightly assert in *De virus illustribus: Crise du Coronavirus et épuisement structurel du capitalisme* (2020)--requires, beyond the suggestive but ultimately programmatic affirmations of this newest instance of *Wertkritik*, a return to the Spinozist materialism of Pierre Macherey and Louis Althusser. The essay thus proceeds from an analysis of the nature of materialist critique as Althusser and Macherey develop the practice in their various readings of Spinoza and Marx, to a discussion of certain necessary effects of the capitalist social form and the crisis of the valorisation process as they determine the unfolding pandemic.

Keywords: Spinoza, Materialism, Althusser, Macherey, Marx, COVID, Jappe

'Metus est inconstans Tristitia, orta ex ideâ rei futuræ, vel præteritæ, de cuius eventu aliquatenus dubitamus' ['Fear is inconstant Sadness arising from the idea of a thing future or past, of whose outcome we are in some doubt']. Spinoza, *Ethics* III, def. 13.

'Lapis in alicujus caput ceciderit,' writes Spinoza in his critique of inadequate, imaginary thought, free will, and teleology in the famous Appendix to Book I of the *Ethics*. A stone has indeed fallen from the sky upon the head of humanity, in the form of a global pandemic that has in mere months spread with lightning speed across the globe to infect, as I write, 41.7 million people and kill at least 1.1 million, its fitful spread continuing largely unimpeded amid confusion over the adequacy and necessity of epidemiological regulations and consequent panicked, mycological surges of libertarian narcissism.²

In the ensuing shock and panic in the face of this novel and mysterious pathogen, our capacity adequately to grasp the nature and necessary causes and effects of this global crisis has manifestly regressed in the face of overwhelming terror before the unknown. In impulsive response, with the capillary necessity of poison spreading through a body, from every corner of the globe there spring forth from the mouths of the governing class the most dumbfounding, imagined

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1 The research and work on this study was supported by the Czech Science Foundation (GA R) within the project (GA 19-20319S) "From Bolzano to Badiou."

2 NYTimes, accessed October 21, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/world/coronavirus-maps.html>.

explanations and remedies for this misfortune. Even public figures long-known to be infantile 'morons' can still shock the global community with a sudden short-circuit of their already underdeveloped faculty of reason, to argue, for example, from the evident effect of bleach to kill pathogens in a toilet bowl to conclude that it could be ingested for similar antiviral effect in humans.³ No less stunning, however, is it to witness the soundest scientific minds, their adult lives dedicated to the emendation of predictive, epidemiological reason, regress under the unrelenting onslaught of destructive impressions and affects, and to accede to infantile moments of self-satisfaction.⁴ The global sacrifice of these ministerial lambs is unrelenting: Roman Prymula, Dara Calleary, Lukas Szumowski, Phil Hogan, Dominic Cummings...

Spinoza did not simply decry the fallible inadequacy of lived experience and sensuous memory, to debunk the imaginary representations and images we create for ourselves that are the subjective dimension of ideology. In response and above all, Spinoza urged us to develop the material powers of the intellect to know and grasp the eternal necessity of adequately comprehended causes in their univocal coherence under the order of nature. In the crisis and chaos that is our immediate global subjection to Covid, in the preparatory pandemic of fakenews and disinformation that has dissolved norms of scientific reason in the muck of lies, fantasies, and misinformation, when fact-checking the daily stream of deceptions, denigrations, and duplicities becomes an exercise in futility, in the mire of degenerative ruination, Santayana's sentiment, the pious counsel to consult the annals of history to gain a bearing on the present, grows evermore inadequate.

How many times have we seen in editorials, books, blogs, and all the rest of the symbolic cacophony that is contemporary life, comparisons between Trump and the rise of fascism, comparisons of the new and old populism, condemnation of the smallest signs of repetition of past descent into barbarity, signs that we read assiduously in the daily feed of our twitter accounts like the grounds of coffee or the entrails of beasts that might point toward the imminent demise of the postwar order?

When, in his Appendix to Book I the *Ethics*, Spinoza critiques the inadequacy of imagistic, imaginary modes of thought, he offers a general prescription for the emendation of the intellect, an itinerary for the path

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³Washington Post, October 4, 2017, 'Rex Tillerson sure made it sound like he called Trump a "moron."' <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/10/04/rex-tillerson-might-as-well-have-just-admitted-he-called-trump-a-moron/>, accessed October 21, 2020. 'Coronavirus: Outcry after Trump suggests injecting disinfectant as treatment.' BBC News, 24 April, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52407177>, accessed October 21, 2020.

⁴ Seznam Zprávy, 'Ve stínu "U Ria". Prymula s Faltýnkem se sešli v doupěti mocných' ['In the shadow of "U Ria." Prymula and Faltýnek met in the lair of the powerful']. Accessed October 21, 2020, <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/ve-stinu-u-ria-prymula-s-faltynkem-se-sesli-v-doupeti-mocnych-125768>.

of thought that leads from its utter debasement and subjection to the sensory images that flood our daily perception, from our mediated world of online phantasms, toward the adequate knowledge of eternal ideas. In a word, in this famous scholium, he condenses his radical prescription for an ethical orientation that culminates in the beatitude of a fully adequate intuitive knowledge of the absolute.

The single overarching prescription he offers us to orient our thought away from the hallucinatory meanderings of the imaginary, toward an apodictic knowledge of the necessity of a universal causal order is this: that we strive and learn to reason not from effects to their (imaginary) causes, but from the true necessity of causes to the effects they engender. 'Nature has no fixed goal,' Spinoza writes, 'and all final causes are but figments of human imagination. [Rather,] all things in Nature proceed from eternal necessity and with supreme perfection' (E I, App.). Most obviously, that we seek to reason not from the unpleasant subjective feeling a mask may give us only then to attribute its cause to the malicious intent of a sovereign Big Other, but from the essential nature of masks, scientifically understood, to their necessary epidemiological effects in a pandemic. The point is familiar, and tragically requires daily reiteration in op-eds across the globe. I wish to argue in what follows, however, for the nature and necessity of a materialist critique that attends not simply to the epidemiological nature of the virus, but to the contradictions of the capitalist social form, laid bare by the crisis, a materialist critique that finds its most powerful resources in the Spinozist ontology and ethics of Marx, Althusser, and Macherey, a Spinozist critique of the essential nature of the capitalist social form in the time of Covid.

The human intellect is capable of infinitely greater and more adequate reasoning than the tragic farces of imaginary thinking that surround us still today at every turn. Spinoza shows that we can come to know the causal order of nature, from the laws of motion universally governing physical bodies to the necessary structural causality of our human social order, when we reason from causes to their necessary effects, rather than the inverse. This, for example, is how Marx proceeded when he stepped back from the political engagement of the 1840s to construct his critique of political economy in the form of the massive, unfinished project that we know as *Capital*. Refusing to remain subject to the illusory forms of appearance of our world, to the world of commodities in which everything, absolutely everything has its price, in which profit is king and time is money, Marx instead immersed himself for the remaining decades of his life in the analysis and critique of capitalism as the determinant structure of global modernity.

In fact, the closest parallel to Marx's methodology in the opening chapters of *Capital*, is in fact Spinoza; specifically, Spinoza's famous deployment in the *Ethics* of the Euclidean synthetic, 'geometric' method

for the apodictic demonstration of propositions.⁵ Pierre Macherey has argued decisively that Spinoza's rejection of the Cartesian analytical method of philosophical argument in favour of the synthetic method he adopted from Euclid, virtually alone in the philosophical tradition, allows Spinoza to 'maximally clarify the presentation of his ideas and facilitate their assimilation'. Even more crucially, however, Spinoza argued against Descartes that the synthetic method with its axioms, definitions, propositions, demonstrations, and scholia is no mere heuristic method for the secondary, formal exposition and illustration of truths previously derived in an analytic passage from the known to the unknown. Rather, for Spinoza, the synthetic method finds its superiority in organizing the movement of thought from the adequate knowledge of causes to that of their effects.⁶

In this manner, the thought-object (Spinoza's *Ethics*) does not merely conform to or accurately represent the real order of things (there is no ontological dualism between thought and extension for Spinoza as there is for Descartes, a point I will return to below), it literally is the real order of things, the order of things apprehended under the attribute of thought, rather than in their attribute of sensuous, material extension. Macherey notes that this form of exposition gives Spinoza's text its critical, properly ethical force in a manner precisely analogous, I would add, to the critical intent of *Capital* (Macherey 1998: 21): in this view, if adequate understanding of Spinoza's *Ethics* should necessarily prove transformative to the reader's understanding, allowing her to grasp the radical inadequacy of illusory forms of thinking (thinking, that is to say, backward from perceived effects to imaginary causes, for example in the case of miraculous causes and cures for Covid), the same can be said of *Capital*, whose attentive reader is ineluctably led to pierce the ideological illusions of, for example, 'the fetishism of the commodity,' and even more radically, also to come to grasp the necessity of these illusory forms of appearance in the system of capital as a whole.⁷

It is only when we can adequately grasp the conceptual categories that determine our existence as subjects of capital, Marx demonstrated,

5 I develop this argument in greater detail in Nick Nesbitt, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Social Form: From Marx to Caribbean Critique*. Forthcoming, 2021.

6 Pierre Macherey, *Introduction à l'Éthique de Spinoza: La première partie, la nature des choses* (Paris: PUF 1998): 17.

7 On the latter point, see Jacques Bidet, *Exploring Marx's Capital* (Chicago: Haymarket 2006 [1985]), Chapter 8, 'The Theorization of the Ideological in *Capital*.' While Marx took notes on Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* in 1841, there is no evidence he read the *Ethics*, and his very few, ancillary mentions of Spinoza imply that his knowledge of that text was gleaned indirectly through Hegel's misrepresentation of Spinozist doctrine. See 'Marx's Reading of Spinoza: On the Alleged Influence of Spinoza on Marx.' *Historical Materialism* 26:4 (Dec. 2018): 35-58. On Hegel's misrepresentation of Spinozist doctrine, see Pierre Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press [1979]): 2011.

when we can adequately comprehend the structure of value and its division into use value and exchange value, the essential determination of commodity society under the wage labor relation as the source and substance of value itself, only when we have grasped these and many other categorial structures of capital in their relational necessity, can we then reason from causes to effects.

The point I wish to develop here is that a properly conceived, Spinozist materialism of the capitalist social form can offer a necessary and, ultimately, adequate theory for understanding the current global crisis, not simply as an unprecedented epidemiological disaster, but as a pandemic crisis of the capitalist social form itself. To do so, I will first examine the nature of Spinozist materialist critique as Marx, Althusser, and Macherey conceive it, to then discuss in light of this critique some of the necessary effects of the capitalist social form in the age of Covid.

Materialism in a Spinozist Way

The proper, though never fully articulated, Spinozist nature of materialist critique deployed in the writings of Louis Althusser and Pierre Macherey lies, I wish to argue, immediately at hand in the texts of high 'Althusserianism' of 1965-67.⁸ In essence, this is to claim that Althusser's famous general proposition in *Reading Capital* on the subterranean Spinozism of philosophy (Spinoza's 'radical revolution was the object of a massive historical repression. [...] The history of philosophy's repressed Spinozism thus unfolded as a subterranean history') holds true for Althusserian epistemology itself, in which Spinozist thought functions as an occasionally acknowledged, but never adequately explicated theoretical foundation (RC 250).⁹ In other words, the Spinozist epistemology that avowedly underlies the various analyses of *Reading Capital*, there is in fact no substantial distinction to be made between the 'object' of materialist analysis and that of analysis itself.¹⁰

8 Under this category I would include not only the published volumes *For Marx*, *Reading Capital*, *Theory of Literary Production*, and Macherey and Balibar's contributions to the Cérisy colloquium *Le centenaire du Capital*, but also the various exchanges of the 'groupe Spinoza' and related texts such as Althusser's 1966 'Sur Lévi-Strauss' (Louis Althusser, *Écrits philosophiques et politiques, Tome II*, François Matheron, ed. Stock/IMEC, 199). On the 'Groupe Spinoza,' Alain Badiou has reflected: 'The Groupe Spinoza was a group composed by Althusser, with some friends of Althusser, all reading *Capital* practically, engaged in the project to write a sort of synthesis of our epistemological convictions. The idea was to produce a fundamental book concerning theory: concerning what theory is, what constitutes an epistemological rupture and so on; to propose something like an educational book concerning all these sorts of themes. All that was destroyed by 1968 and, after that, by very strong political differences and struggles' (Alain Badiou, 'The Althusserian Definition of "Theory,"' in *The Concept in Crisis: Reading Capital Today*, Nick Nesbitt, ed. Durham: Duke University Press 2017: 25).

9 I develop this critique of Althusser's Spinozist materialism more fully in 'What is Materialist Analysis?', op. cit.

10 As Althusser famously wrote in the 1972 *Essays in Self-Criticism*, 'If we were never structuralists, we can now explain why: [...] we were guilty of an equally powerful and compromising passion:

The problem of an object that materialist analysis would *represent* is a false problem, once one accepts instead that substance is indivisible, that the infinite attributes constitute, immediately, the expression of substance and its infinite modes as the determinations of those attributes, and that, above all, the order of ideas is *one and the same thing* as the order of things [*ordo, et connexio idearum idem est, ac ordo, et connexio rerum*] (*E IIP7*). To conceive of materialist analysis in terms of a substantial distinction between analysis and its object is, from a Spinozist perspective, inadmissible; it is to reintroduce precisely the Cartesian dualism of substances (between extension and the intellect) that Spinoza systematically critiques.

Judging by his powerful (private) critiques of Althusser's presentation of the concept of structural causality in the first edition of *Reading Capital*, Macherey had developed a reading of Spinoza even more rigorous and systematic than Althusser's by 1965 at the latest (Montag 2013, ch. 5). It is only in his writings since *Hegel or Spinoza*, however, that Macherey has fully explicated the interpretation of Spinoza that can retrospectively be said to determine the epistemology of the Althusserian texts of 1965-67. In *Hegel or Spinoza*, and above all in the second volume of his explication of the *Ethics*, Macherey reads Spinoza's demonstration of the identity of the formal structure or order of the attributes to constitute the singular essence of a substantialist materialism. Proper understanding of the nature of the Spinozist attributes, and their relation to Substance, Macherey shows, is the key to any adequate construction of a truly materialist, positive dialectical mode of critique.¹¹

Rejecting point by point the Hegelian misreading of Spinoza in *Hegel or Spinoza*, Macherey affirms that, for Spinoza, the relation of the (infinite) attributes of substance:

1. Cannot consist in a linear and countable or ordinal sequence (i.e., the attribute of thought, plus the attribute of extensions, plus all the other infinite attributes). 'The unity of substance is

we were Spinozists.' (Cited at Morfino 2). Vittorio Morfino points to the decisive influence Spinoza brought to bear on Althusser's 1965 reading of *Capital*: 'The reference to Spinoza [...] is fundamental with respect to three decisive questions in the Althusserian re-reading of Marxism: the process of knowledge, structural causality, and ideology.' Vittorio Morfino *Plural Temporality: Transindividuality and the Aleatory Between Spinoza and Althusser*. Haymarket 2015: 2-3.

¹¹ 'La clé du nouveau raisonnement que Spinoza introduit dans la philosophie,' Macherey writes in *Hegel ou Spinoza*, c'est la thèse de l'identité des attributs dans la substance dans laquelle ils sont unifiés tout en restant réellement distincts. [...] il n'y a pas lieu de poser [as does Hegel] une identité entre deux, trois, quatre... une infinité de séries ou d'attributs, dont l'ordre et la connexion seraient reconnus comme concordants. Il faut comprendre, ce qui est impossible si on s'en tient au point de vue de l'imagination, que c'est *un seul et même ordre, une seule et même connexion*, qui s'effectue dans tous les attributs, et les constitue identiquement dans leur être : la substance n'est justement rien d'autre que cette nécessité unique qui s'exprime à la fois dans une infinité de formes.' (Macherey 1979: 152-153).

thus not an arithmetic unity [...], an empty form of the One. [...] It is this infinitely diverse reality that comprises all its attributes and that expresses itself in their infinity. [...] One can no more count substance than one can count its attributes, at least if one renounces the point of view of imagination., [...] To say that there is a single substance is to speak from the imagination that can only consider the absolute negatively, from nothingness, that is, from the part of the possible, which it envelops (Macherey 2011: 99, 104).

2. That the attributes do not coexist in ordinal relation implies in turn that they do not consist of elements defining one another in negative relation. 'If all the attributes together belong to substance, constituting its being (*E IP10S*), they do not coexist within it as parts that would adjust to each other to finally compose the total system. If this were so, the attributes would define themselves in relation to each other through their reciprocal lack (2011: 100).

3. This further implies that substance itself cannot be divided up into its various (infinite) attributes, but is instead indivisible. 'To think the infinite, whether it be in the attribute (in a kind) or in substance (absolutely), is to exclude any notion of divisibility; substance is entirely complete in each of its attributes (because it is identical to them), just as, moreover, all extension is in each drop of water or all thought is in each idea. [...] The infinite is not a number; this is why it evades all division. Indivisible substance is not the sum of all its attributes' (2011: 100).

4. From these propositions Macherey then concludes that the relation of the attributes is one of unitary (rather than comparative, negative) identity: 'As an attribute of substance, thought is *identical* to everything and therefore has nothing above it, but the sequence through which it is realized poses, at the same time, its absolute equality with all other forms in which substance is also expressed, and these are infinite in number' (2011: 74).

5. The so-called 'parallelism' of the attributes (a term that Spinoza never uses in any of his writings, and which Macherey attributes to Leibniz), then, is quite simply 'inadmissible.' This must be the case, if one reads the wording of proposition II7 attentively: in the statement *Ordo et connexio idearum idem est, ac ordo, et connexio rerum*, the order and connection of ideas is not said by Spinoza to be the same as the order of physical *bodies in extension* (the other attribute to which humans have access), but to that of *things [rerum]*, of all things without distinction, including, of course, ideas themselves; 'the word *things [res]* absolutely does not, in a

restrictive way, designate the modes of the attribute of extension, but the modes of all the attributes, whatever they are, *including thought itself*. [...] *This is one and the same order, one and the same connection*' (2011: 106, emphasis in original).

Macherey goes on, in his subsequent explication of book II of *Ethics* to further develop this critique of the notion of 'parallelism' in distinction to the more adequate understanding of the relation of the order of the attributes as an identity (1997: 71-81).¹² Macherey first repeats his assertion from *Hegel or Spinoza* summarized above to the effect that *E IIP7* must refer to the *identity* of the order of ideas and the order of things, further specifying this assertion, based first on grammatical, and then apodictic determinations.

Grammatically, in the phrase *Ordo et connexio idearum idem est, ac ordo, et connexio rerum*, the masculine/neutral adjective *idem* cannot be argued to apply to the feminine *connexio*. The phrase 'is the same as' [*idem est ac*] therefore cannot be said to apply to a ('parallel') relation between two 'independent sets [*ensembles*],' but instead qualifies a *single order as identical to itself*. From this, Macherey concludes that the proper translation of Spinoza's proposition should be 'The order and connection of ideas *is the same thing as* the order and connection of things' (1997: 71, all translations mine).

This assertion finds its immediate confirmation in the demonstration of proposition 7, which points to its axiomatic basis in the initial axiom 4 of *de Deo*, the meaning of which is eminently clear: ideas are subject to a single, identical order that holds for all things (1997: 72). In sum, Macherey concludes,

Proposition 7 of *de Mente* does not affirm the extrinsic identity between two systems of order and connection facing each other, one of which would be the order of ideas and the other that of things bestowing on these ideas their objects, these things being themselves identified unilaterally as bodies. Instead, Proposition 7 proposes that the order and connection inheres in its proper, intrinsic constitution to that to which all things in general are governed [*soumises*], and from which nothing distinguishes it. (1997: 73)

For Spinoza, in Macherey's reading, the order of causality of ideas is literally 'the same thing' as the order and causality of all things, including ideas; there is, in other words, only one order and causality of things,

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¹² I insist on this development in Macherey's 1997 volume in a volume unavailable as of this writing in English translation not only because it constitutes the most developed explication of Macherey's substantialist, Spinozist materialism, but also because the 400—plus pages of this crucial second volume of his explication are currently out of print even in the French original.

which can be apprehended through an infinite number of attributes (though humans only have access to two, thought and extension).¹³ To argue otherwise in the sense of a 'parallelism', Macherey insists, would be to reinstate a Cartesian dualism of the attributes of thought and extension: 'The "parallelist" reading of proposition 7 reinscribes the Spinozist doctrine in a dualist perspective, explaining all of nature through the relation of extended substance and thought substance.'¹⁴

On Storytelling and the Nature of Materialism

In contrast to Macherey's minute attention to the letter of Spinoza's text, Althusser's writings offer little concrete analysis of Spinoza's text, but instead propose a number of laconic, even enigmatic, one-liner definitions of materialism. It is thus possible to orchestrate in counterpoint Macherey's attention to the letter of Spinoza's text with the suggestive promise of Althusser's allusive materialism. It would take a volume in itself to address Althusser's various reiterations and returns to the related problems of Historical and Dialectical materialism, of the materialist turns in Marx's philosophy ('On the Young Marx'), of the relation of materials of production to the capitalist mode of production (*Reading Capital* 318-335), and the like. The 'aleatory materialism' of Althusser's final period poses similarly complex problems of interpretation beyond the scope of this essay, which we might sum up in saying that in turning to Lucretius and Democritus in his now-famous 1982 essay, Althusser distances himself on crucial points from the Spinozist materialism with which we are here concerned, and even more decisively from Macherey's arguably more rigorous, literal readings of the Spinozist text since 1979.¹⁵

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¹³ Jason Read, 'The Order and Connection of Ideas: Theoretical Practice in Macherey's Turn to Spinoza,' *Rethinking Marxism*, 19:4, 500-520 (2007) 511. The present analysis in general draws upon Read's limpid analysis of Althusser's and Macherey's related readings of Spinoza, to interrogate in its light the epistemological object and method of a Spinozist materialism.

¹⁴ 'For this [parallelist] reading to be possible, would require that, in the enunciation of the proposition, not only would the neutral singular *idem* [thing] have to be replaced by the masculine plural *idem sunt*, but also that the term *corporum* [bodies] be implicitly substituted for the term *rerum*' (1997: 72). Spinoza's explication of this proposition unequivocally corresponds to Macherey's reading: 'And so, whether we conceive Nature under the attribute of Extension or under the attribute of Thought or under any other attribute, we find one and the same order, or one and the same connection of causes—that is, the same things following one another' *E IIP7S* Cf. Macherey 2011: 106; Read 507-8.

¹⁵ One striking example of this incongruity is Althusser's assertion in 'The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter' (1982) that 'for Spinoza, the object of philosophy is the void.' This is not simply a 'paradoxical thesis,' as Althusser observes, it is quite simply antithetical to Spinoza's explicit and extensive critique of the concept of the void in Book I of the *Ethics*. The free-floating associations of Althusser's argument culminate weakly in the metaphorical (rather than ontological) conclusion that Spinoza asserted '*the void that is philosophy itself*' (Althusser, Louis. *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-1987*. New York: Verso, 2006: 178, italics in original). In fact, Macherey shows that Spinoza, reaffirming Descartes' critique, decisively rejects the atomism of the Ancients as fully inadequate, imaginary representation, to explicitly affirm instead that "'matter is everywhere the same" [*materia ubique eadem est*] in its substantial principle' (Macherey, Pierre, *Introduction à l'Éthique de Spinoza. La première partie: La nature des choses*. Paris: PUF, 1998: 124). 'Corporeal

Leaving aside the circularity of the definition of Althusser offers in Lecture III of *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists* (the ‘materialist character’ of science is characterized, as to its object, by ‘an external object with a material existence’) along with other definitions that merely equate materialism with an adequate scientific practice,¹⁶ in *The Future Lasts Forever*, Althusser offers richly enigmatic definition of materialism: “‘Not to indulge in storytelling’ still remains for me the one and only definition of materialism.”¹⁷ Though Althusser makes no mention of Spinoza in this passage, ‘to resort to mere storytelling’ neatly encapsulates the principal assertion of Spinoza’s Appendix to *Ethics I*: that reasoning inadequately from effects to causes is the basis of imaginary, ideological thinking. Materialism, in contrast, would thus implicitly seek always to argue from the adequate understanding of causes to the effects they produce.

In his 1985 text *L’Unique tradition matérialiste*, Althusser proposes another enigmatic yet even more auspicious definition of materialism: ‘Nominalism is not the royal road to materialism but *the only possible materialism*.’¹⁸ Here again, it lies far beyond the scope of this article to sort Althusser’s flat assertion that nominalism is ‘the only possible materialism’ from the innumerable accreted historical senses of nominalism, from the diverse critiques of universals and abstract objects as well as corresponding assertions of the reality of particular objects and of concrete objects. Instead, I shall merely summarize the Spinozist construct Althusser’s assertion is meant to encapsulate.

substance,’ Spinoza writes unambiguously, ‘can be conceived only as infinite, one, and indivisible’ (41). Macherey consequently reads these passages in Proposition 15 of Book I and its Scholium as ‘the affirmation of a plenitude [of substance] leaving no place for void, absence, or negativity. [...] Substance is thought reality in the intense intimacy of its self-relation [...] such that nothing else, not even nothingness [...] can disturb its infinite positivity. [...] To conceive of extension as constituted of distinct parts is to deny its infinity.’ In contrast to the Ancients’ imaginary depiction of atoms in a void, ‘only the intellect,’ Macherey concludes, ‘is apt [*en mesure*] to understand that the materiality of extended substance is given at once as an indivisible totality’ (Macherey 1998: 128, 129). Althusser’s related, imagistic redeployment of the thesis of the parallelism of the attributes in ‘Materialism of the Encounter’—which are claimed by Althusser ‘to fall in the empty space of their determination’ (177)—repeats the philosophical commonplace of so-called ‘parallelism’ that Macherey, as I have argued above, subjects to such extensive and compelling critique in both *Hegel or Spinoza* (1979, ch. 3) and his analysis of Proposition 7 of Book II of the *Ethics* (Macherey 1997).

16 Althusser, Louis, *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*. New York: Verso 1990 [1974], 135. In *Reading Capital*, following Lenin, Althusser affirms that ‘in the expression ‘historical materialism’, ‘materialism’ means no more than science, and the expression is strictly synonymous with that of ‘science of history’ (*Reading Capital* 360). Althusser will reiterate this definition, for example in “Lenin and Philosophy’: ‘Historical materialism thus means: science of history,’ and again, in modified form, in “Lenin Before Hegel,’ where he refers to ‘the materialist thesis of the material existence and of the objectivity of scientific knowledge,’ Althusser, Louis, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001: 23, 83.

17 *The Future Lasts Forever: A Memoir*. Richard Veasey trans. New York: The New Press 1993: 221.

18 Althusser, Louis, ‘The Only Materialist Tradition, Part I: Spinoza,’ in *The New Spinoza*, Warren Montag and Ted Stolze, eds. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997: 10.

In the third section of *L’Unique tradition matérialiste* in which this definition of materialism appears, Althusser—in the course of a broad reflection on the centrality of Spinoza to his thinking—turns to his interpretation of Spinoza’s third genre [*genus*] of knowledge, the ‘intuitive science’ [*scientiam intiutivam*]’ that Spinoza characterizes as ‘the adequate knowledge of the essence of things’ [*adaequatam cognitionem essentiae rerum*] (*E IIP40S2*). In Althusser’s usage in this passage, the term ‘nominalisms’ (in the plural) is adopted to refer precisely to such singular essences of things, things comprehended as ‘singularities.’ Such singularities are to be distinguished from Spinoza’s second genre of mere common or abstract universal notions [*notiones communes*] (such as motion and rest taken as universal characteristics of all bodies in extension); these are explicitly, for Althusser, ‘generic and not “general” constants.’

In Althusser’s reading, Spinoza’s invention of an adequate materialist (‘nominalist’) knowledge is thus held to encompass his discovery of ‘generic constants or invariants [...] which arise in the existence of singular “cases.”’ Crucially, such constants are to be distinguished from the universal generality of ‘laws,’ (which would fall under Spinoza’s second genre of knowledge); equally, it is their genericity as constants of any singular case that allows for what Althusser revealingly calls in clinical terms their ‘treatment,’ as distinct from any empirical or experimental verification (8).¹⁹ Here, the example of psychoanalysis is patent, in which the essential nature of the psychic apparatus as Freud and Lacan reproduced it in thought (to name only these two) form a second genre of common notions, categories common to all human psychic phenomena, to which the singularity of any given case must construct the singularity of a given treatment.

If a *law* would constitute an abstract or general universal, the *constant* arising in a given instance (a symptom in the analysand or patient for example) allows for the adequate analysis and treatment of that case in its ‘nominalist’ singularity: no universal treatment is proper for the singularity of every case, yet the analyst must construct an adequate knowledge of its causes and not be misled by mere surface impressions (whether the manifest content of the dream, the visibility of bodily symptoms, or, for Marx, the mere forms of appearance of capital) to be inadequately attributed to imaginary causes. Such attention to *constants*, moreover, holds in Althusser’s view for any singular being, for example a people (the Jews, in Spinoza’s analysis in *TTP*) or what Althusser calls a ‘social singularity’ (the critique of capital in Marx, or political revolution for Lenin) (8).

.....
19The constants diagnosed in any singularity ‘do not constitute the object of a will to *verification* in an abstract renewable experimental *dispositive*, as in physics or chemistry, but whose repetitive insistence permits us to mark the form of singularity in presence and, therefore, its treatment’ (8).

Following this elaboration, along with a brief excursus on the *TTP* and Spinoza's 'philosophical strategy' of 'taking over the chief stronghold of the adversary' (10), Althusser then concludes his presentation with the affirmation of Spinoza's materialist 'nominalism' cited above. This takes the form of a critique of transcendentals: 'Without ever sketching a transcendental genesis of meaning, truth, or the conditions of possibility of every truth, [... Spinoza] established himself within the factuality of a simple claim: "We have a true idea"' (10-11). The 'nominalist' materialist thus passes beyond the universal generality of common notions, of transcendental guarantees (such as Lévi-Strauss' kinship order or discourse in Gilles Deleuze's problematic definition of structuralism) to articulate instead the generic necessity of any singular essence.²⁰

This final step then brings Althusser to define, in eminently clear and distinct terms, the fundamental Spinozist proposition that should be seen retrospectively to constitute the essential order of any adequate materialist critique: 'This *factual nominalism* was rediscovered—and with what genius!—in the famous distinction [...] between the *ideatum* and the *idea*, between the thing and its concept, between the dog that barks and the concept of the dog, which does not bark, between the circle that is round, and the idea of the circle, which is not round, and so on' (11).

What Althusser names his 'nominalist' materialism in his late, 1985 text might indeed be more properly termed an *axiomatic, substantialist materialism*. For the proposition that the order of ideas and of things is one and the same thing is indeed an axiomatic proposition: its ground lies not in the apodictic, synthetic demonstration of proposition VII in *Ethics* Book II, but instead in the very axiomatic foundation of Spinoza's entire system. In fact, the famous proposition VII of Book II explicitly refers the reader back to *E I*, Axiom 4, and, together, Axioms 4, 5, and 6 of Book I constitute, Macherey demonstrates, the fundamental epistemological order of an inherent, necessary identity between the two orders or attributes of thought and extension.

While axioms 3-5 of Book I affirm the necessary structure of causality under both the attributes of extension and the intellect, it is Axiom 6 that draws these together to affirm that the true idea 'must be in conformity with its ideat' [*debet cum suo ideato convenire*] (*E I*Ax6). Macherey's interpretation of this key axiom bears citing in whole, as it is this statement that arguably informs the entire epistemological apparatus of Althusser's and Macherey's thought:

This axiom [6] takes up in a new perspective the general teaching [*enseignement*] from the initial definitions and axioms [of Book I]: as the thing is, so it is conceived, as well as the inverse: as the thing is conceived, in so far as this is a true knowledge, so it is, necessarily.

20 On Althusser and Macherey's critique of Deleuze's famous text, see Montag 2013: 96-100.

For every idea in the intellect, in so far as it is true, that is to say, [...] well-formed—since all ideas are true in the intellect that understands them, and at the same moment relates them to the ideate to which they are in a relation of conformity—there necessarily corresponds a content given in reality. (1998: 61, all translations mine)

This Spinozist monism thus founds for Macherey, and implicitly for Althusser as well, a substance-based materialism, in which the 'real'—an indeterminate, reflexively deployed category in Althusser's contribution to *Reading Capital* (41)—stands plainly revealed in Macherey's explication as neither mere sensuous materiality (empiricist materialism) nor transcendently finite totality (idealism); the real is to be understood as substance itself, the infinite dynamic of the *causa sui* as 'the process within which substance determines itself through the "essences" that constitute it' (2012: 91).²¹ This substance-based materialism affirms that

Thought reality and extended reality coincide in the absolute being of substance, where they are only distinguished by the intellect. [...] There is just as much materiality, no more nor less, in reality envisaged from the perspective [*angle*] of the mental as when envisaged from the perspective of the bodily. [...] Mental reality is a reality unto itself [*une réalité à part entière*], whose elements, ideas, are materially existing things, no less consistent, in their own order, than those that materially compose extended nature. (Macherey 1997: 5)

Covid, Crisis, and the Renewal of Materialist Critique

A materialist critique of the Covid pandemic would, following Althusser and Macherey's redeployments of Spinoza, necessarily seek to demonstrate the essential causes of the current crisis, refusing, in other words, to view the biological fact of the appearance of this novel virus as its cause, but rather to grasp the virus as *effect* (most obviously, as an effect of the development of transnational capitalist markets and modes of transport that were its vector of transmission, and the destruction of the ecosphere that seems to have profoundly determined the initial appearance of the virus). More particularly, however, Coronavirus must arguably be thought as a determinate, historical phenomenon comprehensible in light of the laws of the tendencies of the capitalist social form and above all, its essential compulsion to perpetuate the ongoing valorisation of value.

In this vein, one of the most suggestive recent books on the Covid crisis, *De virus illustribus: Crise du coronavirus et épuisement structurel*

21 Were this identity of the real with substance not sufficiently clear, Macherey even glosses in passing in *Hegel or Spinoza*—again without even bothering to draw attention to what should be perfectly obvious from a properly Spinozist perspective—the equivalence of the 'real' with substance itself: Spinoza 'eliminates from his conception of the real, from substance, any idea of a hierarchical subordination of elements' (2011: 74).

du capitalisme, argues precisely that the Coronavirus must not be understood as the *cause* of the crisis, but constitutes rather a powerful and destructive *effect* of the more general, ongoing crisis of the value form.²² The book develops the critique of the value form familiar from the writings of Robert Kurz and the Krisis *Wertkritik* group (of which Jappe is one of the central figures).²³ Its central thesis is that Covid has accelerated the crisis of the valorisation process that Kurz and the *Wertkritik* school have argued has gripped global capitalism since the 1970s. This is the case, they argue, in so far as the tendential elimination of living labor from the production process has forced the system, in order to stave off systemic collapse, to exponentially increase its dependence upon the generation of fictive capital, the nature of which is a monetary speculation on the potential (perpetually postponed) future production of surplus value. The authors of *De virus illustribus* restate this hypothesis as such, without rehearsing its demonstration via the *Wertkritik* reading of *Capital*. The general, ongoing crisis of value, they summarize in this vein, is a consequence of 'the reduction of abstract labour due to the general augmentation of productivity [since the 1970s....] As a result of these increased levels of productivity, the immediate production process as a source of the production of [surplus] value dries up. This constitutes the internal limit of capital' (23).

The central claim of the book, itself a fundamentally Spinozist point, is that the virus is not a cause, but an accelerator of this preexistent crisis:

The Sars-Covid-2 virus is the trigger, but not the cause of the aggravation of the ongoing structural and global crisis, one fundamentally determined by the internal contradiction [of the valorisation process]. As an expression of the internal contradictions accrued by the contemporary regime of accumulation, in its structural fixation upon the anticipation of the future production of surplus value via the generalization of debt, the sanitary crisis is the expression and vector of a crisis already in process, the course of which it only accelerates. (43)

This is to deny that the Covid pandemic constitutes a biological crisis

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22 Jappe, Anselm, Sandrine Aumercier, Clément Homs, Gabriel Zacarias, *De virus illustribus: Crise du coronavirus et épuisement structurel du capitalisme*. (Éditions Crise et Critique, 2020). All further translations mine.

23 See Larsen et al. eds., *Marxism and the Critique of Value* (MCM' 2014). See also Robert Kurz, Anselm Jappe (Preface), *La substance du Capital* (Paris: Collection Versus 2019); Kurz, *Vies et mort du capitalisme* (Paris: Lignes, 2011); Anselm Jappe, "Kurz: A Journey into Capitalism's Heart of Darkness," *Historical Materialism* 22, nos. 3–4 (2014): 395–407; Frank Engster, "Krisis, What's Crisis?" (review of Larsen et al., *Marxism and the Critique of Value*), *Radical Philosophy* 195 (January/February 2016): 48–51; Norbert Trenkle and Ernst Lohoff, *La grande dévalorisation: Pourquoi la spéculation et la dette de l'état ne sont pas les causes de la crise* (Ed. Post 2014); Anselm Jappe, *Crédit à mort* (Paris: Lignes, 2011).

exterior to the valorisation process and capitalism more generally, an exogenic 'external shock to a sound Economy', but rather reduces epidemiological phenomena to the status of effects internal to the valorisation process (35). Covid and the crisis make terrifyingly explicit the trajectories of capital and the exponential increase in flows of commodities, including, above all, the intensified flows of infected humans commoditized as subjects of air and other forms of rapid international travel networks that rapidly spread the pandemic to every corner of the globe (45).

A Spinozist, Althusserian critique of the ideology of Covid that would develop the suggestive critique of this recent book would require submitting to ruthless critique the stories we continue to tell ourselves about the nature of this pandemic, in which the media 'hammer home incessantly the panorama of a previously healthy global economy prior to Covid-19 as a mechanism of projection, the dominant apologetic ideology seeking above all to absolve the insane advance of the economy and to prevent, in this situation, any remobilisation of a critique of the system' (36).

Beyond this general critique of the ideology of Covid-19 as a natural and biological, rather than economically determined crisis, the central argument of *De virus illustribus* points to the debilitating contradictions and enfeeblement of the state, understood in its intimate dependency upon the valorisation process. In this view, the state is no mere independent outgrowth of civil society, but is by its very nature vitally dependent upon the ongoing production of surplus value (as the source of its lifeblood revenue via taxation): The state's

conditions of existence and its social capacities are utterly dependent upon the bleeding of value in the form of the taxes it draws from the economic sphere. Without this fiscal input, without an expenditure of the future production of value (in the form of state debt [as quantitative easing]), no collective action is possible. [...] The state form of collective action under capitalism is thus necessarily dependent upon the movement of valorisation. (71)

The obverse of the state's dependency upon the continuation of the valorisation process is the central role it plays in the reproduction of the valorisation process, acting in the long-term interests of capital to oversee and regulate the social reproduction process, the elements of which remain in dynamic antagonism with the logic of competition and the compulsion to realize increases in the production of relative surplus value. Here, the state operates in the interest not of the citizenry but of an 'ideal collective capitalist,' to assure the long-term interests of the system as well as the integration and subordination of the working and subaltern classes to the ongoing dynamics of primitive accumulation,

market dependency, and the primacy of the production of surplus value (71). The state thus serves to assure the ongoing function of valorisation, the accumulation of surplus value, via its deployment and oversight of the juridical, police, military, education, infrastructure, and above all, in the case at hand, health-care systems as the 'external cadre to the valorisation of capital' (72).

The functioning of this *partage de rôles*, between the competitive dynamic of the market and the reproduction of human life, is wrought by various contradictions. This is most obviously the case in the form of the contradiction between the historicity of human needs and the ongoing neoliberal demand for privatization. In the contemporary conjuncture, however, another contradiction has come to the fore, in the form of a contradiction between the survival of the state and the survival of its population. The manifest form of appearance this contradiction repeatedly takes in the time of Covid is the ever-renewed oscillation between the falsely polarized priorities of saving people's lives (via the shutting down of economic activity) versus saving the economy, whatever the human 'collateral damage' this may incur. This is a false polarization, the authors argue, since it speciously separates what is a real contradiction internal to the valorisation process itself (i.e., capital must valorise value both through ongoing increases in absolute and relative surplus value, but also in the longer term via the viable reproduction of living labor, the unique source of surplus value).

Ultimately, the authors of *De virus illustribus* argue that this dynamic contradiction remains subject in the last instance to the predominant social compulsion of the valorisation of value, and humanity can thus expect the state always to opt, in the last instance, to perpetuate its own capitalist existence. This may be the case, I would add in light of the Spinozist critique, insofar as the state, like any other thing (though we must, with Spinoza, avoid the risk of anthropomorphic images), necessarily remains determined by the nature of its conatus, such that its human population risks being served up as the dwindling fuel thrown upon the pyre of valorisation. This contradictory process, while perhaps initially leading to the sacrifice of millions and the perpetuation of the state on life support, can only, according to the logic of *Wertkritik*, lead in consequence to the collapse of the state itself, as the source of its revenue, the taxation of surplus value, dwindles with entombment of living labor (83).

Critique and the Positive Dialectic of Capital

The contemporary degeneration of the powers of reason in the age of Covid demand something more, however, than the topical critique of such effects as those noted by the authors of *De virus illustribus*. Ultimately, for all the force of their insights into the contemporary crisis, the repeated assertion of the necessity of collapse, in the absence of any

concrete demonstration of the laws of the tendencies of the capitalist social form and their singular iterations in the contemporary conjuncture, such claims remain empty assertions, ultimately convincing, perhaps, only to those already convinced of the *Wertkritik* 'value-dissociation' prognosis of imminent collapse. A Spinozist demonstration of necessity cannot-- in distinction to the readiness of Kurz and his followers to repeatedly announce the impending downfall of the capitalist social form and as Macherey argues in his discussion of the *EI* appendix--foretell future events in their subjection to the infinite determinations governing phenomena. Instead, such a critique can hope to adequately grasp the laws governing all natural phenomena.

I have dwelled at length on Macherey's demonstration on the nature of Spinozist materialism precisely because of the promise it continues to hold not simply for a general emendation of our general collective intellect, but even more in the conviction that it is precisely a renewed, Spinozist reading of Marx's *Capital* as what Macherey calls a positive dialectic' that continues to provide the most adequate means to grasping the essential nature of the contemporary conjuncture. As he writes of Spinoza, it is clear that for Macherey himself, theory cannot stand on its own as an autonomous and general protocol, but must instead follow in the wake of a determinate materialist analysis such as that he initially produces on Marx's *Capital*.²⁴ Let me briefly indicate just three of these possible paths for reading *Capital* in a Spinozist way:

1) In his 1965 contribution to *Reading Capital*, Macherey already discerns in *Capital* what he will subsequently, in *Hegel or Spinoza*, name a 'positive [Spinozist] dialectic.' In this long-overlooked yet insightful treatment of Marx's initial exposition of his concepts, Macherey argues that the movement of Marx's exposition is governed by a number of logical 'intermediaries' that allow for a rigorous, apodictic demonstration of the initial characteristics of the value-form, a demonstration that develops *synthetically* rather than via dialectical *aufhebung*.²⁵

In particular, Macherey argues for the fundamental heterogeneity of concepts such as wealth, use-value, and value, a heterogeneity that itself constitutes 'one of the fundamental conditions of scientific rigor' (RC 188). The relations between what Marx calls the various 'factors' of the commodity and the movement of Marx's exposition occasion no procedure of dialectical *aufhebung*, Macherey argues, but Marx's demonstration instead proceeds in a series of synthetic 'ruptures' or leaps from one order to the next following the analytical exhaustion of each concept.

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²⁴ Pierre Macherey, 'On the Process of Exposition of Capital' in *Reading Capital* 175-213; see also Nick Nesbitt, 'Value as Symptom,' in Nesbitt ed., 2017: 243-249.

²⁵ Macherey returns to Marx, via a critique of Foucault, in his recent book *Le sujet des normes* (Editions Amsterdam 2014).

It is only in 1979 that Macherey will subsequently explicitly theorize this dialectic without negation²⁶ in the closing pages of *Hegel or Spinoza*. Macherey there identifies in Spinoza a dialectic without subject, teleology, or negation. This invocation of a positive, Spinozist dialectic puts in its place the logical subject (of free will, intentionality, and of all the rampant psychologistic, individualistic explanations of unfolding of the pandemic) along with its ontological function to ground all true propositions: 'What Spinoza refuses to think is the dialectic in a subject. [Spinoza] poses the problem of a dialectic of substance, that is, a materialist dialectic that does not presuppose its completion in its initial conditions through the means of a necessarily ideal teleology' (2011: 170). In this manner, the principle of contradiction and its grounding in the subject remains strictly limited by Spinoza to existences and not essences. As such, Macherey concludes, Spinoza's 'theory of the subject' pertains above all to the constitution of bodies in extension (175). This limitation, moreover, holds for all bodies as such, not merely the human body that constitutes Spinoza's privileged example, but, for example, the body of the state and of the capitalist social form more generally.

A Spinozist limitation of the dialectic to existences can therefore serve to ground a materialist analysis of the (actually existing) body of the capitalist social form in the conjuncture of Covid, an analysis that starkly contrasts with all Hegelian idealism (*Capital* is no mere reorientation of the Hegelian dialectic placed 'on its feet'), an analysis in which contradiction (between the state and the market, between population and the demands of valorisation) is strictly limited to the phenomenal features of the social forms constituting the body of capital in its existence (in the form of actual contradictions between given forces and means of production such as the struggle over the working day). At the same time, the *essential* nature of this social form will be adequately

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 26 It should be recalled that in French usage, the notion of *dialectic* refers quite generally to 'the set of means deployed in discussion to demonstrate or refute' (Robert) prior to its more specific indication of the negation of contradiction as in Aristotle, Hegel, or Adorno. We have become so accustomed to conceiving the 'dialectic' as the Hegelian metaphysics of contradiction and sublation, as the negation of the negation, and/or Marx's materialist inversion of this antinomy-based logic (these for example are the only two definitions offered by the Duden Wörterbuch), that it is often forgotten that the principal meaning in English of 'dialectic,' according to the OED, is simply 'logical argument' and in French (from which the English derives), 'the art of reasoning in general', while in German the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* defines *Dialektik* as 'der Art einer Disziplin mit der Analyse und Synthese von Begriffen und dient vornehmlich der Erkenntnis des Seienden, um die Ideen zu begreifen'; in Latin *dialectica* (from which the English, French, and German each derive) is defined as 'the art of methodical reasoning' (*Le Robert historique*). Patrick Murray is the only reader of *Capital* as far as I am aware who underlines, via this general, non-Hegelian meaning of 'dialectic,' the synthetic nature Marx's method of exposition, though he confusingly identifies the synthetic method of exposition with Descartes, rather than Spinoza and the latter's critique of the Cartesian 'analytic' method in the Introduction to *The Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* (Murray 131).

Murray 396. Since Marx appears only to have known Spinoza's *Ethics* through Hegel's mischaracterization of that work, it seems that in developing his materialist critique of Hegel, Marx arrived spontaneously at his own original brand of a Spinozist materialism. On the disavowed proximity of Hegel to Spinoza, see Macherey 2011 [1979].

known by the intellect only as a thought-concrete without negation (*Capital*, or its contemporary iteration as the synthetic critique of the political economy of Covid).²⁷

In this view, human social relations bear no inner, essential drive toward their culmination in capitalism, as the imaginary doctrines of liberalism and neoliberalism would have us believe. Instead, as Marx first argued in his presentation of so-called primitive accumulation, and Robert Brenner and Ellen Wood have further insisted, the historical body of capitalism is composed through a fundamental and renewed *system of constraint* based upon the methodical dispossession of the means of production and reproduction of the working class, to form a *proletariat* in the precise sense Marx gives the term, through the existential, juridical, and regulated compulsion of human bodies to compose themselves, in real subsumption, as subjects of the valorisation of value under capitalism.²⁸

2) A positive dialectic, such as Macherey already discerns in the opening pages of *Capital* in 1965 and subsequently articulates in *Hegel or Spinoza*, requires for its adequate conceptualization the *synthetic* mode of presentation that Spinoza upholds (*more geometrico*) against the Cartesian defence and deployment of an *analytic* analysis. While Althusser famously defends Marx's 1857 epistemological distinction between the thought-concrete (*Gedankenkonkretum*) and the 'real' in Spinozist terms, a Spinozist *synthetic mode of presentation* arguably determines *Capital* to an even greater and unsuspected degree, and furthermore comes to displace the initial Hegelian negative dialectical formulations of the *Grundrisse* in the actual drafts of *Capital* after 1861.

The Spinozist defence of a synthetic method of presentation over the Cartesian *analytic* points forward to the crucial distinction between Marx's initial *analysis* of capital in the *Grundrisse* notebooks, and his subsequent and painstaking elaboration of an adequate synthetic demonstration—famously proceeding from abstract to concrete without ever leaving the realm of ideas—in *Capital*. Macherey's crucial commentary on the Spinozist synthetic method in this sense constitutes an oblique development of Althusser's famous analysis in *Reading Capital* of Marx's 1857 Introduction. The key advantage of the synthetic method, Spinoza argues in his only extended statement on his method,

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 27 'In response to [Hegel's] finalist conception that abstractly summarizes an infinite sequence of determinations in the fiction of a unique intention, we must substitute an integrally causal explanation, one that does not take into account anything but the external relations of bodies.' (2011: 177).

28 'Each part of the [Spinozist] body,' Macherey writes, 'belongs to this global form that is the body taken in its entirety, not according to its own essence, but in light of this external liaison, whose *transitive necessity is one of constraint, which holds together all the elements....* The reason for this harmony is not found in an obscure predetermination of singular essences that inclines them to converge all together toward a unique essence (an ideal nature) but in *the transitive relationship of determination that constrains them, provisionally, to associate*' (1979: 177, my emphasis).

the Preface to the 1663 *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, is that while analysis proceeds from the knowledge of effects to that of their causes, synthetic demonstration proceeds in contrast 'from the knowledge of causes to that of their effects, in conformity with the real order of things.' Synthetic demonstration thus intimately corresponds to the 'manner in which things are actually produced.'²⁹

The synthetic method should thus be understood, against Hegel's misrepresentations of Spinozist method, as the truly materialist and dynamic method of demonstration: rather than *reproducing or representing* the real order of things in another order (that of thought), it constitutes instead the *presentation* of the real, it is, in other words, one and the same real order, grasped in the domain or attribute of the intellect. The synthetic method is thus just the opposite of a sterile reproduction; synthesis deploys the productive and creative dynamism of the intellect, 'empowering ideas and things with an identical force whose basic principal is found in nature, taken absolutely, [... making manifest] the rigorous and complex syntax to which the real itself obeys in its effective constitution' (1998: 18, 19). As Macherey first indicated in *Reading Capital*, Marx's *Gedankenkonkretum*, the unfinished work-in-progress we know as the three volumes of *Capital*, contains a fundamental, if largely invisible, synthetic mode of presentation of its claims.³⁰

3) *Capital* should be read in light of the Spinozist epistemology of the three forms of knowledge: 1) imaginary, 2) via general or common notions, and, as Althusser reminds us, 3) in light of eternity, as 'the adequate knowledge of a complex object by the adequate knowledge of its complexity' (RC 255). Each of these modes of understanding has in turn its element of truth and necessity, though only the third is fully adequate to the comprehension of its object.

An example of Marx's deployment of the *imaginary* occurs for example in his famous, image of the 'language of commodities':

.....
29 Macherey 1998: 17.

30 Jacques Bidet has insightfully identified crucial moments of what I am calling after Macherey a positive dialectic in *Capital*. Implicitly developing Macherey's precocious, Althusserian identification of various non-dialectical conceptual leaps in the opening pages of *Capital*, Bidet points to the crucial movement from the concept of the commodity to that of capital in Marx's exposition (from Part 1 to Part 2, chs. 4-6)—a passage devoid of dialectical continuity, genesis, deduction, or transition—between the presentation, that is to say, of C-M-C and that of M-C-M'. Bidet describes this as an 'isolated intervention' at this crucial axial moment of Marx's argument, one in which contradiction (the apparent impossibility that the exchange of equal values can nonetheless produce surplus value) is not a matter of essence, but ideological existence, a merely apparent contradiction that in fact shrivels away in the face of Marx's synthetic presentation of the concept of surplus-value and valorisation in chapter 6 ('The Sale and Purchase of Labour-Power') (Jacques Bidet, *Exploring Marx's Capital* 2005: 160-62).

Everything our analysis of the value of commodities previously told us is repeated by the linen itself, as soon as it enters into association with another commodity, the coat. Only *it reveals its thoughts in a language with which it alone is familiar, the language of commodities*. In order to tell us that labour creates its own value in its abstract quality of being human labour, it says that the coat, in so far as it counts as its equal, i.e. is value, consists of the same labour as it does itself. (1976: 143, my emphasis)

Marx here supplements the synthetic analysis of the structure of capital as a social form (the object of Chapter I prior to the appearance of this passage) with an imaginary figure, that of two animated commodities, a length of linen and a coat, in an image that bears its own measure of truth and even necessity. Marx seems to be telling his reader that the abstraction that is value must be thought, not just as concept, but also vividly imagined, in the form of an animated manifestation in the concrete materiality that is the human symbolic order. This is indeed the key conclusion to the question I posed initially as to the object of Marx's materialist analysis; Laplanche and Pontalis, invoking at once Lévi-Strauss and Lacan, articulate this materialist concept of the object of analysis that is the symbolic order with elegant simplicity: 'The reality of a symbolic order structuring interhuman reality' constitutes in this view a 'symbolic system': for Lévi-Strauss, kinship, language, and 'economic relations,' for Lacan, the structure of the unconscious, and for Marx, I would add, the social form of commodity production and valorisation.³¹

Fredric Jameson has in this sense identified the more general repetition of what he terms 'figural demonstration' as central to the stylistic apparatus of *Capital*, a rhetorical process to which Marx repeatedly resorts in the attempt to represent to his reader the immaterial, real substance of surplus-value, abstract labor (in the above example), or, in another of example Jameson develops, in the sense of the figuration of 'separation' that occurs in Marx's analysis of primitive accumulation.³²

A second, by now familiar order of demonstration inherent in *Capital* is its presentation of a structure of general notions or categories,

.....
31 Laplanche and Pontalis, *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse* (PUF, 1967: 475). The encompassing nature of the symbolic, both exceeding and preceding the interpellation of the subject, was reaffirmed by Slovenj Žižek in the context of his initial critique of Althusser: 'The "real abstraction" is unthinkable in the frame of the fundamental Althusserian distinction between the 'real object' and the 'object of knowledge' in so far as it introduces a third element which subverts the very field of this distinction: the form of the thought previous and external to the thought—in short: the symbolic order' (cited at Alberto Toscano 2008 'The Open Secret of Real Abstraction. *Rethinking Marxism*, 20:2, 279). The point here is not Žižek's oblique critique of Althusser, but rather his fundamental reassertion of the Lacanian notion of the symbolic order as the objective field in which Marxian critique and subjectivity itself unfold.

32 Fredric Jameson, *Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume One*. (New York: Verso 2014) 31, 81-93.

as what Marx calls the 'value-form' (Vol. I, Chapter 1.3, 'The Value-Form'), an order that, grasped in the complexity of its general articulation, constitutes the 'structure' of capital in the Spinozist sense of the synchronic that Althusser indicates (RC 255). This structure forms a general, universal exposition of the laws of the tendencies of capitalist valorisation, accumulation, and reproduction. In addition to the various writings of the ISMT indicated above and, in France, those of Jacques Bidet, Moishe Postone's reconstruction of Marx's system in *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* constitutes a crucial moment in such a reading of *Capital* as a system of general notions.³³

Finally, Macherey's thought demonstrates—with no contradiction in terms whatsoever—that an adequately *materialist* analysis of the contemporary conjuncture, requires above all that we learn to read *Capital from the perspective of the eternity of the singular nature of its object*. Such a reading might take many forms; for this reader of *Capital*, and as a necessary, apodictic supplement to the mere assertions of imminent collapse from the *Wertkritik* school and *De virus illustribus* in particular, it seems essential to take into account the full development of Marx's founding epistemological distinction between the production of surplus-value as a total mass and its subsequent distribution among many individual capitals in the manifest form of profit via competition, such as Fred Moseley has systematically argued. While Marx famously defines abstract labor as the *substance* of surplus value ('The labor that forms the substance of value is equal human labour, the expenditure of identical human labour-power' [1976: 129]), we might further say with Moseley that *surplus-value, as distinct from material wealth, itself forms the general substance of capital*.³⁴ It is the crisis of the production of this substance, for example, that may be said to underwrite the *Wertkritik* assertions of the necessity of the collapse of valorisation.

In this view, Marx abstracts from the temporal existence of production and the phenomenology of individual laborers and capitalists, to present, at every level of the increasing degrees of concretion that characterise the analysis of *Capital*, a *monetary analysis* that might rightly be characterised via the eternity of the concept of the equivalency of two phenomenally heterogeneous use-values (in the sense that Spinoza speaks of the adequate concept of the triangle³⁵): 'Money,' Moseley

33 Jacques Bidet, *Explication et reconstruction du 'Capital'* Paris: PUF 2015; Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

34 'The most essential common property of all capitals [i.e., its 'substance,' ...] is the production of surplus-value.' Fred Moseley, *Money and Totality: A Macro-Monetary Interpretation of Marx's Logic in Capital and the End of the 'Transformation Problem.'* Chicago: Haymarket 2017, 43.

35 'From the nature of a triangle it follows from eternity to eternity that its three angles are equal to two right angles.' *E* IP17S. It should be noted in the context of this argument, that to indicate the movement of *Capital from the abstract to the concrete* is to grasp the 'concrete' not as the abandon-

writes, 'is derived in the very first chapter (Section 3) of Volume I, as the *necessary form of appearance of abstract labor*, and from then on Marx's theory is about quantities of money that represent, and thus are determined by, quantities of labor time' (9).

This in turn—as Moseley demonstrates in detail across Marx's innumerable manuscripts—entails that *Capital* is constructed at two levels of determination: first, an initial determination of the production of a total mass of surplus volume (its 'substance'), and subsequently, in analytical terms, via the determination of the distribution of that mass of value among competing individual capitals.³⁶ Marx's presentation, repeatedly invoking individual processes and factors of production, is admittedly confusing on this point; Moseley convincingly argues, however, that 'Marx's theory in Volume I is about the total capital and the total surplus-value produced in the economy as a whole, [even though] the theory is [necessarily] illustrated in terms of an individual capital and even a single, solitary worker. [...] Individual capitals are not analysed as separate and distinct real capitals, but rather as representatives and "aliquot parts" of the total social capital' (45-46). As Marx himself writes, 'In capitalist production [i.e., in Volume I], *each capital is assumed to be a unit, an aliquot part of the total capital*' (cited at Moseley 46, Moseley's insertion). Here again, we confirm Spinoza's insistence upon the necessary inherence of all three forms of knowledge in the adequate presentation of (Marx's) object, even including in his apodictic, synthetic analysis the imaginary figure of the 'single, solitary worker.'

Horkheimer and Adorno's dialectic of enlightenment, refigured in light of Robert Kurz' critique of the sacrificial subject of capital, culminates in this destructive dialectic of the pandemic in the form of human and social catastrophe, in which the elderly and juvenile, the sick, and unproductive are the first to be sacrificed to the demands of valorisation (*De virus illustribus* 64, 67). A Spinozist critique of Covid thus must ask, in conclusion, how does the capitalist social form necessitate these pandemic effects? It must seek to avoid the personalization of causes, the psychologizing stories we tell ourselves about the free will and malevolent decisions of the governing classes (Trump, Johnson, or Babiš' negligence or malicious intent), but instead strive adequately to grasp the necessity not only of the true (the scientific nature of Covid-19 as much as that of the

ment of an abstract conceptual order for that of an empiricist, sensuous concretion, but, to invoke instead the meaning of 'concrete' closest to the Latin *concreescere*, indicating the cohesion or growing together of parts into a complex mass, compound or composite (always remaining in the attribute of thought) (cf. Bidet 2009: 174).

36 'The total amount of surplus-value must be determined prior to its division into individual parts' (Marx, cited at Moseley 46).

capitalist social form itself in its contemporary iterations), but of the false, as the index of its own, necessary falsity (Covid as the horrible revelation of the inherent and narcissistic inadequacy of the governing classes, in which Trump is only the extreme variation of the law of this tendency). If in the spring of 2020, from where I write in the Czech Republic, masks first appeared as the totemic guardian and salvation against the onslaught of the global plague, the raging onslaught of second and third waves of the pandemic has necessarily lead subjects to sacrifice the totem itself in public bonfires of libertarianism. Trump and Biden, themselves totemic wardens of the teleology of American salvation, stand as the evil and benevolent fetishes of a promised, vanishing redemption; should Biden actually win the American presidency, he too may predictably be sacrificed to the bonfires of capital, as the pandemic rages on into the spring and the bodies of the dead continue to accumulate globally, our imaginary tendencies to renewed hope and faith once again confronted, in essence, with the real contradiction between the valorisation of value and the reproduction of capital.

Prague, October 2020

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