

Possessive Individualism and Trans-Atlantic Slavery as Mirrored in Early Modern Philosophy

Canetti's Hobbes

In an essay devoted to the theme of fear, Roberto Esposito reminisces about Elias Canetti's distrust of the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes. The ambivalent delight that Canetti felt about Hobbes's most erroneous assumptions leads directly to the issue that will be explored in the text at hand: To what extent does the political theory of possessive individualism since Hobbes reflect the violent foundational crises of modern statehood and of colonial-capitalist globalization?¹

"Thinkers not bound to any religion can impress me only if their thinking is extreme enough," Canetti wrote in 1949:

Hobbes is one of these; at the moment, I find him to be the most important. Few of his thoughts strike me as correct. He explains everything through selfishness, and while knowing the crowd . . . , he really has nothing to say about it. My task, however, is to show how complex selfishness is; to show how what it controls does not belong to it, it comes from other areas of human nature, the ones to which Hobbes is blind. Why, then, does his presentation so greatly impress me? Why do I enjoy his falsest thought as long as its expression is extreme enough? I believe that I have found in him the mental root of what I want to fight against the most. He is the only thinker I know who does not conceal power, its weight, its central place in all human action, and yet does not glorify power, he merely lets it be.²

Canetti regarded Hobbes as a negative anthropologist and as the great economic thinker of fear, who wrote a philosophy of potentiality and will to act that is symptomatological in its unacceptability, in which the ability to do is always understood comparatively as the ability to do more, as an overcoming and harming of others. Canetti identifies in Hobbes's work a biological egoism and economic concept of agency that serves the purpose of the absolutization of state sovereignty. The Canadian political scientist C. B. Macpherson coined the term "possessive individualism" for this discourse of ego economics in which practices are deemed to be "offensive and defensive strength against others."³ Even if—because of its

belligerent character and disregard for any kind of social cohesion—Hobbes's model of all-round competition was unable to prevail over John Locke's model of reciprocal exchange and legal dispute, the idea that the individual is "the sole proprietor of his own person and capacities" occurs for the first time in the former's work.⁴ Independent of any sociality, he owns himself with his own abilities. If we seek one of Hobbes's contemporaries, who undertook the survey about which Canetti complained involving the social composition of self-love and -interest, then we come across the philosophy of Benedict de Spinoza. The deep discord between these two philosophers derives from the alternative conclusions that Spinoza drew from the Hobbesian revolutionization of natural law: Hobbes considered natural law to be rooted in the individual ability to kill, while Spinoza saw it in the transindividual ability to produce life. Hobbes identified desire as an individual drive for survival, while Spinoza viewed it as a collective affirmation of creative power. Hobbes wanted to sublimate societal relations within the sovereign, while Spinoza sought to embed the sovereign in societal relations. Hobbes secularized and naturalized the Christian idea of collective guilt, while Spinoza sought to overcome this through the politicization of human faculty. Therefore, inscribed deeply into the beginnings of modern philosophy was strife about questions of appropriation, guilt, and sovereignty, which reflects the conflicts of early modern statehood and colonial-capitalist accumulation, and, in its extremity, is still today being explored in the context of political philosophy. This strife manifests its weight through a question on which both authors remain silent—the globalization of slavery in the Black Atlantic of the seventeenth century.

Being as Potentiality to Act

It is thanks to Hobbes that the ancient traditions of natural law, as compiled by Cicero and later studied by Christian authors, especially Saint Thomas Aquinas, were revolutionized.⁵ In the classical tradition of natural law, people's rights were equated with their very being, primarily with that of an *animal rationale*, or "thinking animal."⁶ Since people are called upon to obey the purposes of their nature, because they are intrinsically intended to

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fulfill such purposes, an aim and an obligation are derived, in the classical tradition, from the essence of man. Natural law correlates with an *officium*, an imperative duty. This is why the nature of individuals is not considered to be precivilized, but rather its natural being corresponds with good governance. Political society is the legitimate means of realizing intended human purposes, and people are in turn obliged to live in the *polis* and can recognize the obligative power of their capacity of reason. Because of their enhanced ability to comprehend human essences and their means of realization, philosophers are considered privileged protagonists within political society. It is this time-honored series—essence, duty to society, special right to a higher authority—that Hobbes and, as his successor, Spinoza destroyed. Both authors equate natural law with a potentiality to act, and no longer with an essence or purpose.⁷ When people are not obliged to a higher norm, when they are allowed to do anything they want, then the terrain of natural law shifts. A rigorous egalitarianism of potentiality or ability arises. All resemble each other in their capacity to be active, powerful, and intervening and hence to produce reality. The order of obligations is replaced by the order of capacities, the regime of the competent by the equality of the able.⁸ The obligation is transformed into a secondary commandment that limits instead of constituting rights. Being human becomes, in the most fundamental sense, being able to act.

From Biological Egoism
to an Economization of Life

Macpherson pointed out that the Hobbesian concept of natural law is subject to conditions based on market and proprietary logic, conditions that reduce all human endeavors to calculations of interest and competition. At the beginning of his *Leviathan*, Hobbes outlines a great program of motion, in which movements are translated into desires or antipathies along an appetitive-aversive structure. Man is described as a self-directed causal mechanism that reacts positively or negatively to the pressure of external movements, depending on whether they correspond to his physiological mechanisms. This system is endowed with powers of awareness. Imagination and memory allow for the creation of an experience-based benefit

analysis of all movement-related and causal contexts. The Hobbesian individual represents an egoistic machine that “in calculating the future becomes the will to power.”⁹ He is nothing other than appetite for movement, desire for heightened potentiality, craving for recognition of this increased power. The traditional finalism of higher values is replaced by a utilitarian finalism of survival and benefit calculations. As a result, for Hobbes biological egoism is insurmountable and underlies life in society in the form of an idea of survival based on the logic of competition. Unlike in Spinoza, the *conatus* and the ability to act are not immanently affirmative in the context of the transindividual forces with which an individual can cooperate in his or her surroundings, but rather it operates transitively in private effects of transfer and enrichment. The human being strives on the edge to remain alive at the cost of others or, as Canetti explains, “to survive ever greater numbers of men.”¹⁰ Every act of appropriation here corresponds with an act of expropriation, with the transfer of abilities and assets to oneself. Hobbes’s theory of *conatus* is therefore subtractive and lacks any synergetic effects. Wherever there is accumulation, something is being taken away. The *potentia*, the power of being able to act, is “acquired power as ability to command the services of other men,”¹¹ “command”¹² over human ability to strive to do harm to others for the sake of one’s own self-preservation. Human beings survive, as Esposito says, “at the expense of others”; they live “in their place,” in the extreme case “at the cost of their life.”¹³

As David Brion Davis emphasizes, this im-munitary anthropology implies a naturalization of slavery, which Hobbes understood to be a necessary element of the state of nature of human beings and “an inevitable part of the logic of power.”¹⁴ Ironically, Hobbes gives the assumed non-social nature of Native Americans as an example of the natural war of all against all. Indigenous life that gets by without a “common Power”¹⁵ shows that the natural society of competition ruins, in its universal uncertainty, all taking and possessing, all increasing and utilizing. For that reason, Hobbes founds the political society that in itself sublates the natural logic of competition on the contractual establishment of legal obligation,

which is supposed to create the secure conditions for human existence in its competitiveness. The fact that the legally framed relations of property and markets of the state of society include a globalizing slave trade in which men and women of African origin were transformed into “human-objects, human-commodities, human-money”¹⁶ is not criticized by Hobbes, who, via his patron Lord Cavendish, was a shareholder in the Virginia Company. As Davis and Susan Buck-Morss show, Hobbes was not an isolated case.¹⁷ Although the contradiction of freedom and slavery represented the key political category of early modern philosophy, the deportation and deprivation of the rights of African people was not just barely criticized but also in part defended. Slaves were either assigned to the domestic economy, which stands outside the social contract, or codified as private property, which from Hobbes to Locke was considered the basis of freedom. In this way, the Enlightenment and rationalism fused the contrary ideals of personal freedom and social utility and conveyed them through education and discipline, which could achieve thanatopolitical dimensions. Thus Samuel Pufendorf agreed with Hobbes that “the majority of men,” as Davis writes, “were governed by selfish impulse, and that slavery was therefore a highly useful instrument of social discipline which might solve the problem of Europe’s idlers, thieves, and vagabonds.”¹⁸

Negative Egalitarianism

In the sense of the Latin word *delinquere*—to be wanting, to fall short, to lack—Hobbes’s state of nature leads to a “community of the crime,”¹⁹ in which there is no ability to act in a way compatible with politics. Society results from the lack of this ability and perpetuates the natural nonconnection of human beings, who are linked solely in the need to “distrust, suspect, take heed, provide.”²⁰ Leo Strauss emphasized the rigor with which Hobbes defined human actions by fear. He explains natural equality with the ease with which even “the weakest man” can “kill the strongest.”²¹ The democracy of the state of nature corresponds to an egalitarianism of the ability to kill. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel summarizes Hobbes’s basic thought: “each man is weak as regards others.”²² Strauss emphasizes that the English

philosopher prefers “the negative expression ‘avoiding death’ to the positive expression ‘preserving life.’”²³ Fear of death is, in Hobbes, the first and most causal thing. It motivates life and causes people, despite their egoism, to appoint a sovereign who sanctions their social coexistence. It is at the beginning of all transitions between affectivity and politics because, as Strauss writes, “we feel death and not life; . . . because we fear death infinitely more than we desire life.”²⁴ In their desires for power, goods, and services, an extreme limit experience is imposed on people in death, a “*summum malum*,” a “supreme evil” that prescribes one goal on the drive for self-preservation: avoiding death.²⁵

From this diagnosis of destructive, natural sociality, Hobbes concludes by *argumentum e contrario* that the political solution must lie in the interruption of this sociality. That is why human beings are united in their dissociation. They live in the suspension of the common, artificially bound by a state sovereign to whom they transfer their rights to act. When people come together out of fear of violence and death in order to appoint a sovereign for their protection, they do not find any means by which they could get out of their natural competition and the “fright of fiends.”²⁶ For that reason, the sovereign is transcendent over the multitude and its consensus of fear. His rule is not based on the relations of social forces but rather immortalizes their interruption. The state of nature’s abilities to kill has not disappeared but is rather concentrated in the sovereign under the assumption of reversed effectiveness as defense “from the invasion of Forraigners, and the injuries of one another.”²⁷

The tendency of self-preservation and self-sacrifice to coincide drives Hobbes to the margin of his texts. It is the “dark border” of a way of thinking that, as Antonio Negri writes, ensures “the recognition of appropriation as a . . . foundation of Modern philosophy” by “betray[ing]” it.²⁸ What Hobbes suppresses in his thinking, at the price of immunitary paradoxicality, is what Spinoza makes the foundation of politics in an inverted criticism of liberalism: the ability and hence the right of the *multitudo* to change the constitution of society based on their passions, and in the extreme case to depose the sovereign and reclaim

for themselves all the constituting rights of action in order to build an alternative society.

Spinoza, Anti-Hobbes

Spinoza, Negri writes, is the first anti-Hobbes that the philosophy of the seventeenth century offers us.²⁹ Adopting the equation of potentiality and natural right, Spinoza has the courage to orient politics not around the fictive harmony that the theory of the social contract demands but around conflictual sociality. Neither nature and society nor potentiality and institution are categorical alternatives. People by nature always find themselves in at least a minimal civil state, to which, seeking protection from loneliness and vulnerability, they always “aspire” and cannot “ever utterly dissolve it.”³⁰ By breaking with competitive and egological standards for thinking, in Spinoza we tend to be dealing with “a natural right without a corresponding state of nature.”³¹ Whereas Hobbes was persuaded that natural faculties are private, transitive, and destructive in character, necessitating mediation or the contract in order to be socialized, the masses in Spinoza compose the forces of their existence from below, setting out from the conditions into which they are thrown, the physical chance encounters they experience, and the imaginary and affective images they form of these physical encounters. Affirming their ability, because of their excessiveness, the social forces of existence are “elements of socialization in themselves”³² and produce the polity in an internal transformation of their potentialities that gets by without transferring their rights to a separate sovereign. Long before Friedrich Nietzsche, Spinoza imagined a vitalism that not only incorporated conflict and destruction into life but also attributed the transformation of life to the joyous forces of existence because they can suspend that which wants to burden it with an external, higher, judging meaning.

The difference between Hobbes and Spinoza is made clear by the concept of striving for power—desire for fame or *ambitio*—that Canetti emphasized. When Spinoza saw all people as individuals seeking glory and recognition, he seems to have been taking up Hobbes’s anthropology directly. The dynamic of the *ambitio* is,

however, fundamentally different: striving for recognition or personal advantage includes a positive passionateness that undermines the logic of property and individualism from within: on a first level, according to Spinoza, the joyous affects register an increase of the forces of existence, which emerge from local, perhaps arbitrary, but nonetheless successful combinations of forces of action and in the final instance can catalyze a leap into thought. The materialist grounding of Spinoza’s epistemology is revealed here from the degree of reality attributed to the passionate and the imaginary. When we are mistaken, we refer not to the negativity of our spiritual inability but to the positivity of its ability to correct.³³ As soon as the spirit is in the position to absorb rationally the forces of the body that produce reality and are surrounded by affects and imaginations, it develops beyond external reflections as an internal increase of potentiality. On a second level, however, Spinoza makes this schema more complicated by explaining the sociability of the affects no longer by object choices but through the mechanism of imaginary identification. If as a rule people act in a way based on seeking glory and recognition, then they are constantly doing or avoiding something “to please [other] men.”³⁴ These affect imitations are based on the ambiguous principle of similarity: we are pleased by that which we imagine would please individuals similar to ourselves. We mourn what we assume would make them sad, and we vacillate when they like what we reject.³⁵ In order to consolidate these projections and introjections, we endeavor “that our own likes and dislikes should meet with universal approval.”³⁶ For that reason, affect imitations can reinforce one another and produce institutionalizations that are “at once very powerful and highly instable.”³⁷ Because they are based on imaginary stereotypes that in the final instance are in turn based in the fear of difference, they tend to communicate with nationalism, racism, or political-theological hate. Overcoming this intrinsically reactionary structure of the passions is, however, available only to the power of the passions themselves. In their positive variation, for Spinoza they form the only resource of human beings to introduce a tendency to turn from the imaginary to the rational in the milieu of affects. Social institutionalizations are

therefore only as strong as they are anchored in the positive passions of the masses, that is to say, in maximizing their practice of cooperation and self-government.

Neither Master nor Slave

That means that however instable a joy motivated solely by wanting to please others may be, people register in this emotion that they can combine actions, multiply forces of existence, even when their image of the reasons for this combination remains inadequate. In the desire for fame, the most egoistic of all passions, this affective cognition occurs along the joy about others’ joy, which should not be understood as either purely egotistical or as unselfish action that is “altruistic in the Comtean sense.”³⁸ It should be situated “at an original location beyond this alternative,” writes Matheron, “where egoism and ‘altruism’ coincide . . . ; being joyous about the joy I gave my fellow human beings is the same as loving myself by way of the love that they express to me.”³⁹ In this view, people are a means without external ends in a powerful and ontological sense. They are therefore advantageous not because they make services or goods available for survival, but rather because they are what they *are*: desirous, active, alive, producing things that do not yet exist, realizing the as yet unthought and undone, affirming existence. If it were not for this immanent self-transgression of affect imitation, human beings would alternate between a “social” and “unsocial” cycle of the imitation of feelings. From empathy and the desire for fame, by means of which they can tie themselves to others in a positive way, they would arrive at the desire to rule jealousy, by means of which they seek to dominate and possess others until finally the others would become unbearable for them, so that, as in Hobbes, an external factor would have to intervene to break up the social conflict.⁴⁰ When authors such as Badiou and Žižek sum up the “ordinary behaviors” of human beings that exist without excess or violation under the principle of *conatus*, because they can be redirected to the “pursuit of interest,” the “conservation of self,” and the “principle of survival of the human animal,”⁴¹ they fail to understand the revolutionizing of the concept of interest and means with which Spinoza achieves an immanent

politicizing of the economical and opposes any heroicizing of the political based on a theory of the exception.

The modernity of Spinoza’s thought and the possibility of escalating it for post-Marxist philosophy is demonstrated by the thesis of the potentiality of the masses to organize themselves, which includes destruction and violence, without hypostatizing negativity ontologically or through the philosophy of history. Hobbes’s thesis that the desire for recognition necessarily leads to master-slave relationships (contractual subjugation, obligations to obey and to work)⁴² is disputed just as much as the dialectical depth to which this logic undergoes in Hegel. Being need not pass through the nothingness of death in order to prove itself capable of transformation, nor achieve teleological calm by the process of work and negation coming to his supposed end (the state based on the rule of law, absolute knowledge). In Spinoza’s *Ethica* (Ethics) and *Tractatus Politicus* (Political Treatise) we find instead elements of a politics of violence that point ahead to a Nietzschean question: Can conflict and hate be separated in such a way that it is possible to imagine a political violence that, in Balibar’s words, does not amount to the “imaginary de-humanization of the other” or its complete “transformation into an ‘enemy’”?⁴³ Using the example of the globalization of colonial slavery in the seventeenth century, I would like to show the extent to which Spinoza found this sort of critical idea of the political violence based on the possibility of interrupting imaginary identifications.

The Dutch Atlantic

Spinoza lived in an age in which the Netherlands and its two colonial trading companies—the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (United East India Company, VOC) and Geootroyeerde West-Indische Compagnie (Chartered West India Company, WIC)—formed the heat of capitalist accumulation, despite the economic failures of the WIC in the sugar business. As Immanuel Wallerstein has shown, Holland built up an enormous framework of unequal relationships of trade, capital, and rule that extended overseas and brought heterogeneous hemispheres, places, and times into violent contact by way of the

slave trade, the plantation economy, mining, and shipping.⁴⁴ By means of this transatlantic structure of circulation, the Dutch cities were provided with sugar, cotton, tobacco, and precious metals, all of which were produced or mined by slaves who were brought to Brazil and the Caribbean Islands by the WIC, among others, by way of trading posts in West Africa and ports such as El Mina and Luanda. At the same time, the Dutch used silver from the Americas to import spices and tea from South and Southeast Asia, where with trading posts in Batavia and Makassar, among other places, they built the second center of accumulation for European colonialism. Spinoza was well aware of these developments because Sephardic Jews in Amsterdam were involved in the Dutch West India Company. The guarantee of religious freedom motivated hundreds of Jewish families to immigrate to the colonies; several of them were some of northern Brazil's "largest plantation owners, slave-holders, and slave traders,"⁴⁵ although the majority of the profits were realized by Dutch Protestant capital. Spinoza's father owned a store trading colonial wares; his brother Gabriel moved to Barbados in the 1660s, where the first synagogue of Bridgetown was founded by emigrants from Recife.⁴⁶ Even so, Spinoza mentioned colonization only in a single, enigmatic statement.

Colonial Hallucinations

In a letter to his friend Pieter Balling—a merchant with trading relationships in the Spanish colonies, a radical Mennonite, and the author of *Het licht op den kandelaar*, whose idea of a divine world that could be immediately experienced influenced Spinoza's *Tractatus de Deo, de homine ejusque felicitate* (Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being)—Spinoza told of the face of a "black and leprous Brazilian,"⁴⁷ who was standing before his eyes one morning when he was half asleep. The letter has no further references to colonial history and is concerned above all with consoling Balling, who had just lost a son and was accusing himself of ignoring the portents of the child's death. The subtly xenophobic mention of a "leprous" Brazilian serves Spinoza to distinguish between two kinds of imaginations with which he seeks to reassure Balling: a mental

imagination of predictive quality, which is due to the circumstances of a situation and is normally ignored (such as Balling's imagined presentiment of his child's death); and a mere bodily imagination that does not have a predictive quality (such as Spinoza's dream memory of a "black and leprous Brazilian").

The Freudian-Marxist sociologist Lewis S. Feuer was the first to identify this dream memory with Henrique Dias, a mythopoetic figure of the restoration of Portuguese control over Pernambuco, the commander of a mercenary army of escaped slaves who fought on the side of the Portuguese planters against the Dutch and in 1654 won the war for the Portuguese crown.⁴⁸ Because enslavement "under the Calvinist Dutch was more cruel than under the Catholic Portuguese,"⁴⁹ the Maroon units⁵⁰ offered a small but precarious chance to secure the freedom gained by escaping through a military association with Portugal. Unlike Negri, who sees Spinoza's "Caliban"⁵¹ in the image of the black Brazilian, Feuer speaks of an ambiguous dream memory in which identification with the *multitudo* and the collective fears that the Sephardim of Amsterdam endured in northern Brazil were condensed and shifted against each other.⁵² Feuer interprets the distinction of the imaginations of the mind and those of the body, which contradicts the mind-body parallelism, as Spinoza's psychological resistance to recognizing the collective traumatization of the Jews of Amsterdam. In the hallucination of an Afro-Brazilian, he sees the suppressed memories of the siege of Recife by Portuguese troops and Maroon mercenaries, which Isaac Aboab da Fonseca, the rabbi of the Jewish community in Pernambuco, who after returning to the Netherlands issued the excommunication of Spinoza, must have related. During the charge of Dias's Terço da Gente Preta in Recife in 1654, many members of the Jewish community had starved, been massacred, or been handed over to the Inquisition. The intimacy and horror of that morning's dream are interpreted by Feuer as projections of the "hostile forces that await a Jew in the external world,"⁵³ forces which Spinoza would have to address alone after being excluded from the synagogue and which he would now direct at those who had excommunicated him.

If one assumes, in the spirit of more recent scholarship, that Spinoza had played a role in his exclusion from the synagogue and was therefore not very traumatized by it,⁵⁴ a more politically powerful thesis emerges: the figure of Henrique Dias, whom Feuer recognizes in the dream image of the seventeenth letter, stands for Spinoza's unfinished effort to draw an innovative conclusion from the reflexivity of mass fear that preoccupied him when searching for a way out of the Hobbesian economy of fear. Spinoza assumes that the terrorization of people by means of political religion and rule communicates through the violence that the people are prepared to inflict on themselves and others. This heteronomous circulation can cause a "causal chain" of terrorizations from above by the rulers and "violent passions" from below, in which the "hatred between classes, parties and religions"⁵⁵ escalates all the more, the more the masses are suppressed and held in check by the introduction of transcendent figures of legitimation (God, king, social contract).

In this context Dias symbolizes two problems. On the first level, he stands for the catastrophic overlapping of practices of rule, persecution, and resistance in Portuguese-Dutch Brazil: he embodies the fear of the slaves who joined the Maroon armies to avoid losing their rights or being exploited. He represents the colonizers' fear of the unrelenting attacks by escaped slaves from the *mocambos* and the immediate danger of an uprising, which the black troops were supposed to keep in check but were suspected of supporting. He stands for the fear that dominated in the Maroon settlements of the excursions of the Portuguese and the Dutch, which were accompanied by black and indigenous mercenaries. Finally, he symbolizes the fear of the Sephardim in Amsterdam of the war technologies of the black regiment and the return of the Portuguese Inquisition. These overlapping motifs of rule and resistance are manifested in the decision of the Portuguese Conselho Ultramarino (Overseas Council) to not grant the request that the black troops be permanently instituted and to transfer to Dias the property of the Jewish cemetery and the synagogues of Recife in recognition of his military achievements⁵⁶ and to award him several royal honors including making him a knight of the Christian Order.

On a second level, Dias's promotion to Governador dos Negros, the establishment of Afro-Brazilian Maroon troops, and their multifunctional deployment—which extended as far as the African continent—point to the dynamic formation of hierarchies of colors in the Black Atlantic at a time when the modern concept of race had not yet taken hold. Until the seventeenth century "to have race" would be equated with infected blood, which since the Reconquista had been attributed to Jews, Christian converts, and Moors. Not until the early eighteenth century were there cases in which black commanders of colonial troops of mercenaries were denied the privilege of royal honors for "having race." Amaro Cardigo, the son-in-law of Henrique Dias and an important lieutenant in the Maroon units, was the first representative of the black military elite of the Portuguese Atlantic who was unable to reverse the objections of the Mesa da Consciência e Ordens to his being awarded the order of knight.⁵⁷ This irreversibility demonstrates the increasing identification of black skin with descent from slaves and the total social exclusion that gained acceptance as the plantation economies and triangular trade expanded.

Spinoza and Palmares

The real point of the identification of Spinoza's dream memory with the Maroons of the Black Atlantic, however, lies not in the person of Henrique Dias but in the alternative against which his military units were fighting when they went to battle against the Maroon States, the most powerful manifestation of which was the communities of escaped slaves in Palmares. The *quilombo* located in the hinterlands of Pernambuco had as many as ten thousand residents at times. Although the Dutch and the Portuguese organized annual military expeditions, this alliance of settlers successfully defended itself against all attacks from 1605 to 1694. As more recent historical research on the Black Atlantic in the seventeenth century has shown, the military power of the settlements of freed slaves can be traced back to, among other things, the experience of the African Imbangala soldiers, whose sociomilitary influence explains why some settlements such as Palmares were called *quilombos*.

When the Portuguese penetrated the coastal areas of West and Central Africa in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and opened up transatlantic slave trade to São Tomé, they plunged the territories that correspond today to Congo and Angola into an even deeper whirlpool of social and political chaos.⁵⁸ Accelerated by the breakdown of the Congolese kingdom, a period of armed conflict over the trade of slaves and natural resources began that destroyed villages, displaced people, and devastated entire sociopolitical milieus. Scholarship on Portuguese colonization has shown that the inner-Africa conflicts were overdetermined by the evolution of the transatlantic slave trade.⁵⁹ As part of this process, in several waves of migration, soldiers from the interior of the continent, who were deracinated from matrilineal traditions and called themselves Imbangala, moved into the coastal areas of what is now Angola. They penetrated several relatively strong mercantilist states (Ndongo) or founded them (Matamba, Kasanje) and began to engage in the slave trade. On their march to the southwest, the Imbangala integrated an institution into their social structure that the Mbundu call *kilombo*: “a male initiation society or circumcision camp where young men were prepared for adulthood and warrior status.”⁶⁰ This institution of initiation helped the Imbangala to build a sociomilitary structure that could unite a large number of people (in certain cases including women) of different ethnic, sociopolitical, and religious backgrounds who had been deterritorialized by the globalization of colonial capitalism and the wars in Central Africa. Relationships based on kinship are replaced by the rites of an initiation society which can be joined by anyone who subjects himself to its rigorous practices of warfare.⁶¹ The institution of the *kilombo* helped alleviate the spiritual uncertainty of a tribeless, militarized group that no longer had stable contact to its dead. The political-military institutions of the Imbangala, who were engaged in the Portuguese-dominated slave trade, were imported to Brazil by the Atlantic slave trade, where they found their way into the communities of escaped slaves and brought together people with very different languages and origins to form a kind of alternative society. A system of raids and local trade guaranteed them

a social and political existence outside the plantation system in which they simultaneously participated in a parasitical way (robbery, ambushes, trade). The wretched of the earth, whose social connections were cut off and their cultural and religious knowledge demolished by the accumulation of colonial capitalism, created, from the remnants and shards, institutions of settlement and battle that turned the organizational structure of slave traders from West and Central Africa into a “creole”⁶² structure of resistance to the globalizing system of slavery of the Portuguese and Dutch Atlantic.⁶³ This immanent transformation of the potentiality to act from below is eminently political and rises above the semantic context of origin, culture, and religion. It manifests the human ability to rigorously transform their faculties without the transcendent mediations—an ability that Spinoza sought to reflect on in his *Tractatus Politicus*. It moves Hegel’s account of the ideal development of peoples, as presented in the *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* (Lectures on the Philosophy of History), into the realm of political fairy tales, where non-European societies always lack institutions (archaic) or have too many (despotic). Spinoza had registered in his thinking the masses of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries storming the stage of history with slave and plantation rebellions and revolts over bread and taxes, from which early modern political philosophers such as Hobbes wanted to evacuate them again. Despite his silence on colonial slavery, his *Ethica* and *Tractatus Politicus* contain elements of a politics that opened up an alternative *avant la lettre* to the thinking and practice of anticolonial violence. Whereas Frantz Fanon’s transformation of the Hegelian worker-slave into a soldier-slave suffers from the continuation of guarantees of the philosophy of history, the uniqueness of Spinoza’s politics of violence lies in the desacralizing and un-founding of the uprising. Spinoza’s idea of the immanent transformation of the *potentia multitudinis* (the multitude’s potentiality) from actions of subjugation to actions of liberation is not based solely on the “alterity of rupture, of struggle and combat,”⁶⁴ but also on the nonidentification with this alterity. Rather than closing itself off in identity, it opens up to its internal differences and can interrupt the production of imaginary

images of fictive identities of belief, race, nation, and struggle. Centuries before Nietzsche and Michel Foucault, Spinoza thus recognized that the forces that run through human beings are at once catalysts of liberation and anchoring points for domination. That is why Spinoza does not treat life as ideal, the multitude as sanctified, or history as teleological. He creates a nontautological concept of politics that is conscious of conditions and conflicts and both reflects on the corruption of processes of uprising and emancipation and dismantles the human ability to create immunitary and imaginary self-images—including those of the revolutionary society itself—without this dismantling becoming the new telos of politics. On the contrary, we regain politics as a question and a problem: a politics that is just as aware of the necessity of imaginary identifications as it is of the fact that no collective, no party or cause, no type of institution can represent the foundation for mass affectivity and its excess since this mass affectivity has no foundation, so that politics operates in and with this paradoxical tension and demands attention to the breaking points between liberation and new forms of subjugation.

1. See Roberto Esposito, “Fear,” in *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, trans. Timothy C. Campbell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), pp. 20–40.
2. Elias Canetti, *The Human Province*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (1978; repr., London: Picador 1986), pp. 115–16.
3. C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*, with a new introduction by Frank Cunningham (1962; repr., Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 37.
4. See *ibid.*, p. 231.
5. See Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Zone, 1990), pp. 258–72.
6. See Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On the Republic*, in *On the Republic, On the Laws*, trans. C. W. Keyes, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1943), pp. 12–285. See Alexandre Matheron, “Éthique et politique chez Spinoza,” in *Études sur Spinoza et les philosophies de l’âge classique* (Lyon: ENS Éditions, 2011), pp. 197–98.
7. The word “potentiality” is used here to render Spinoza’s *potentia* and is synonymous and interchangeable with the concepts of “capacity,” “ability,” and “faculty.”
8. See Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy*, pp. 258–60.
9. Alexandre Matheron, *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1969), p. 86.
10. Elias Canetti, “Macht und Überleben,” quoted in Esposito, “Fear,” p. 26.
11. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, p. 37.

12. Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza’s Metaphysics and Politics*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: Minneapolis University Press, 1991), p. 218.
13. Esposito, *Communitas*, p. 27.
14. David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 263.
15. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan; or, The Matter, Forme, and Power of a Common-Wealth, Ecclesiastical and Civil* (London: Andrew Crooke, 1651), chap. 13, p. 63.
16. Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 2.
17. See Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), pp. 26–34. For more on this, see Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, and Louis Sala-Molins, *Le code noir; ou, Le calvaire de Canaan* (Paris: P.U.F., 1987).
18. Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, p. 263.
19. Roberto Esposito, *Communitas*, p. 26.
20. Thomas Hobbes, *Philosophical Rudiments concerning Government and Society*, ed. William Molesworth (London: John Bohn, 1841), chap. 1, sec. 2, p. 6 n.
21. *Ibid.*, chap. 1, sec. 3, p. 6. See also Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 13, p. 60.
22. G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson, vol. 3 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1896), p. 317.
23. Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963; orig. pub. 1936), p. 15.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
26. Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes: Meaning and Failure of a Political Symbol*, trans. George Schwab and Erna Hilfstein (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996), p. 33.
27. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 17, p. 87.
28. Negri, *The Savage Anomaly*, p. 142.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
30. See Baruch de Spinoza, “A Political Treatise,” in *A Theologico-Political Treatise, A Political Treatise*, ed. and trans. R. H. M. Elwes (New York: Dover, 1955), pp. 279–387, esp. p. 316.
31. See Étienne Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, trans. Peter Snowdon (London: Verso, 2008), p. 105.
32. Gilles Deleuze, “Preface to *The Savage Anomaly*,” in *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews, 1975–1995*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Ames Hodges and Mike Taormina (New York: Semiotext(e), 2006), pp. 190–94, esp. p. 193.
33. See Léon Brunschvicg, *Spinoza et ses contemporains* (Paris: P.U.F., 1951).
34. Baruch de Spinoza, “The Ethics,” in *On the Improvement of the Understanding, The Ethics, Correspondence*, ed. and trans. R. H. M. Elwes (New York: Dover, 1955), pp. 43–271, esp. p. 150 (E3p29s).
35. On *fluctuatio animi* (vacillation of soul), see *ibid.*, p. 151 (E3p31 and d).
36. *Ibid.*, p. 151 (E3p31d and s).
37. Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, p. 111.
38. Matheron, *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza*, p. 164. Cf. Auguste Comte, *The Catechism of Positive Religion*, trans. Richard Congreve, 3rd ed. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1891).

39. Matheron, *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza*, p. 164.
 40. See *ibid.*, pp. 287–354.
 41. Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2013), pp. 46 and 60.
 42. See Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 20, pp. 101–7. Cf. Matheron, *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza*, pp. 164–65.
 43. Étienne Balibar, “Spinoza’s Three Gods and the Modes of Communication,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 20, no. 1 (2012), p. 42.
 44. See Immanuel Wallerstein, *Modern World-System II: Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World Economy, 1600–1750* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011), pp. 57–65.
 45. Lewis S. Feuer, “The Dream of Benedict de Spinoza,” *American Image: A Psychoanalytic Journal for the Arts and Sciences* 14, no. 3 (Fall 1957), p. 230.
 46. See Kevin von Duuglas-Ittu, “Spinoza the Merchant: The Canary Islands, Sugar and Diamonds and Leprosy” (2008), <https://kvond.wordpress.com/tag/a-m-vas-dias/>.
 47. Baruch de Spinoza to Peter Balling, July 20, 1664, in Spinoza, *On the Improvement of the Understanding, The Ethics, Correspondence*, pp. 325–27, esp. p. 325.
 48. See Hebe Mattos, “Black Troops and Hierarchies of Color in the Portuguese Atlantic World: The Case of Henrique Dias and His Black Regiment,” *Luso-Brazilian Review* 45, no. 1 (2008), pp. 6–29.
 49. Feuer, “The Dream of Benedict de Spinoza,” p. 232.
 50. Escaped slaves in both Americas were called Maroons or *cimarrónes* (Spanish for “savages,” “untamed”). They called their settlements *mucambos* or *quilombos*. *Mukambo* is Kimbundu for “hiding place, hideout.” The word *quilombo* first occurs in contemporaneous sources at the end of the seventeenth century.
 51. Negri, *The Savage Anomaly*, p. 86.
 52. See Feuer, “The Dream of Benedict de Spinoza,” p. 232.
 53. *Ibid.*, p. 240.
 54. See Richard H. Popkin, “Spinoza’s Excommunication,” in *Jewish Themes in Spinoza’s Philosophy*, ed. Heidi M. Ravven and Lenn E. Goodman (Albany: State University of New York, 2002), pp. 263–79.
 55. Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, p. 39.
 56. See Feuer, “The Dream of Benedict de Spinoza,” p. 231. From 1532 onward, the Mesa de Consciência e Ordens was the legal authority for issues of political and theological conscience for Portuguese monarchs and managed the military and religious orders.
 57. See Mattos, “Black Troops and Hierarchies of Color in the Portuguese Atlantic World,” pp. 20–22.
 58. See David Birmingham, “The African Response to Early Portuguese Activities,” in *Protest and Resistance in Angola and Brazil: Comparative Studies*, ed. Ronald H. Chilcote (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 11–28.
 59. See *ibid.* and David Birmingham, “The Date and Significance of the Imbangala Invasion of Angola,” *Journal of African History* 6, no. 2 (1965), pp. 143–52.
 60. Stuart B. Schwartz, *Slaves, Peasants, and Rebels: Reconsidering Brazilian Slavery* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), pp. 126–27. See also José Rivair Macedo, “Jaga, Cannibalism and the ‘Guerra Preta’: the Mbangalas, between the European Myth and the Social Realities of Central Africa in the XVII Century,” *História* 32, no. 1 (2013), http://www.scielo.br/pdf/his/v32n1/en_05.pdf
 61. See Robert Nelson Anderson, “The Quilombo of Palmares: A New Overview of a Maroon State in Seventeenth-Century Brazil,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 28, no. 3 (1996), p. 558.
 62. See Stuart Hall, “Créolité and the Process of Creolization,” in *Créolité and Creolization*, ed. Okwui Enwezor et al., Documenta 11 Platform (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2002), pp. 27–42.
 63. See Schwartz, *Slaves, Peasants, and Rebels*, p. 122.
 64. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 2008), p. 197.

DAS HEILIGE UND SEINE PROFANIERUNG

THE SACRED AND ITS PROFANATION

*DIE BESTIE UND
DER SOUVERÄN*

*THE BEAST AND
THE SOVEREIGN*

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