

Spinoza and the Specters of Modernity: The Hidden Enlightenment of Diversity from Spinoza to Freud

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I.

Spinoza and the Specters of Modernity gets its name from Jacobi's characterisation of Spinoza's influence on Western modernity:

A spectre has recently been haunting Germany in various shapes and it is held by the superstitious and by the atheists in equal reverence... Perhaps we will witness some day that an argument will arise over the corpse of Spinoza equal to the one which arose between the archangels and Satan over the corpse of Moses. (3)

And in line with Jacobi's invocation, Mack's book locates moments in eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth-century thought where an alternative—Spinozist—idea of modernity haunts the intellectual tradition. These are specters in the Derridean sense; Mack quotes, 'If we have been insisting so much... on the logic of the ghost, it is because it points towards a logic of the event that necessarily exceeds a binary or dialectical logic.'¹ Figures from the work of Herder, Goethe, Rosenzweig, George Eliot and Freud are unearthed as singular, discomfiting presences that upset binaries, as presences irreconcilable with the modern mainstream. These presences haunt philosophy, theology, literature and psychoanalysis alike precisely by and as difference.

Mack defines spectral modernity in a number of ways. First, as a Jewish modernity: a series of thought experiments intent on taking the Jewish tradition seriously either due to biographical circumstances (Spinoza, Freud) or curiosity about excluded thought-forms (Herder, Goethe). Second, these singular occurrences of spectral thinking are defined by their inclusive universality:

This book articulates a line of thought which has often been silenced in standard accounts of modernity: that of an inclusive rather than exclusive universalism – one that does not condemn the particular and one that does not oppose it to the universal but rather makes the two dependent on each other. (8)

That is, Spinoza, Herder, Goethe, Eliot, Rosenzweig and Freud remain committed—like all modern thinkers—to a fundamental ground, eschewing relativism; however, such a ground does not separate off, discriminate or exclude phenomena. Their thinking takes place without abjection. The universal is seen to subsist *in every* particular *without exception*. Everything is an equally intense manifestation of the ground of what is. In consequence, hierarchies are to be rejected in every domain: the intellectual is no more valuable than the physical, nor the past than the present, nor the Christian than the Jew. Nothing is imperfect in comparison with anything else; there are merely divergent perfections. According to Mack, such an alternative modernity is the only modern example of the thought of radical democracy, and Herder's exclamation outlines its scope: "All spaces! All times! All peoples! All forces! All hybrid identities!"²

At the heart of this affirmation of equality is a rejection of, what Mack variously calls, autoimmunity, anthropomorphism or totalitarianism—the identification of one partial set of interests with the whole. Indeed, it is this negative moment which dominates Mack's presentation. He shows at length how Spinoza, Herder, Goethe, Eliot, Rosenzweig and Freud critique the theological, imperial, and rationalist pretensions of those who would determine once and for all the value of life (human thought 'become absolutist' (101)). Mack shows how each of these thinkers traces a dialectic demonstrating how such value-selection subverts itself and leads ultimately to self-destruction. This is the logic of autoimmunity that Mack appropriates from Derrida: 'a form of self-preservation that is not sustainable and thus turns out to be self-destructive' (1). Exclusivism leads to death and must instead be replaced by a healthy, holistic, and inclusive mode of self-assertion. In other words, the sacralisation of one set of interests and so their abstraction from all others is rejected by means of re-embedding all parts back into a necessarily incomplete whole.

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 63; quoted in Mack, *Spinoza*, 146.

² J.G. Herder, *Journal meiner Reise im Jahr 1769* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1983), 17; quoted in Mack, *Spinoza*, 103.

Mack's project in *Spinoza and the Specters of Modernity* is, therefore, to unearth the moments when 'this ghostly work of thought' (146) comes closest to incarnation, either positively through a thinking of equality or negatively through a critique of autoimmunity. The book begins with two chapters devoted to uncovering this spectre in Spinoza, before considering Herder's thought in detail for four chapters. In Chapter Seven, Rosenzweig and Goethe's paganisms are examined in this context, Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* in Chapter Eight and Freud in the final chapter. Through following these diverse, if overlapping strands of literature, philosophy, theology, and psychoanalysis through eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth-century Europe, the reader builds up an increasingly rich understanding of spectral thought experiments in diversity.

II.

Mack's study of Herder's thought forms the heart of the book, and his exegesis of Herderian *Besonnenheit* (Chapter 3) is particularly successful. To think diversely, Mack's account runs, requires a new kind of thinking with alternative modes of procedure and principles. This is because reasoning about the particular as particular means that it cannot be subsumed under a general concept, it cannot be abstracted, it cannot be written off as an irrational remainder. The wealth of its particularity must be maintained at all costs even under the glare of reason. Such is precisely the work *Besonnenheit* (reflection) achieves for Herder, according to Mack: it eschews general laws of thought to respond on a case-by-case basis to the gleam of universality uniquely embedded in each phenomenon. In consequence, Herder is able to fulfil the promise of spectral diversity. Mack then goes on to pursue Herder's application of this inclusive universalism into politics, history, and anthropology, taking particular pleasure in demonstrating that Herder's conception of a non-hierarchical diversity of races all participating in the universal trumps Kant's creation of a philosophical racism that fails to take seriously the need for non-hierarchical pluralism.

Thus, Herderian *Besonnenheit* thinks diversely recalling Goethe's imperative for a 'delicate empiricism',³ an 'active listening' (80) to differences no matter how subtle. It finds a new philosophy of the diverse, a philosophy that revels in the limits and powers of being human. *Besonnenheit* recalls therefore Kantian reflective judgment or Aristotelian *phronesis*; Mack's own very helpful term is 'mindfulness'.⁴ Herder himself labels this kind of thinking anthropology in his famous slogan, 'Philosophy must become anthropology', which Mack perspicuously glosses as the 'submergence of philosophical enquiry into the infinite diversity of the historical and natural world' (130).

Herder is due a reconsideration and Mack's sophisticated and ambitious reconstruction of his thought is certainly a contribution to that end. Mack is right to trumpet that 'this study establishes Herder as a philosopher who is capable of enjoying a remarkable contemporary relevance' (5). Moreover, Mack is equally successful when he moves on to track other spectral epiphanies of mindfulness in literature. He is surely right to identify Eliot's realism with a literature of diversity that practices a 'delicate empiricism' intent on doing justice to both singularity and interrelation. Moreover, this basic insight is developed masterfully by Mack in his subsequent analysis of *Daniel Deronda*. What is especially intriguing here is Mack's cogent argument that Eliot's appeal to fantasy and the fairytale in her last novel intensifies rather than diminishes her literature of diversity (178-9). In fact, even if Mack's interpretation of literary texts occasionally tends towards the strained (his reading of Goethe's *Tasso* is a case in point (180-6)), his recovery of inclusivism as one driving force behind modern art is refreshing.

III.

The above account only provides a weak version of the thesis presented in *Spinoza and the Specters of Modernity*—a weak thesis that interprets Mack's task as a potted history of the diverse repetitions of inclusive universality in modernity. However, Mack himself is after something stronger: a genealogy of Spinozism in modernity. That is, Mack turns out not to be a thinker of diversity himself, but attempts to homogenise these various specters into one line of thought indebted to Spinoza. This stronger thesis immediately faces two problems: first, Mack's interpretation of Spinoza cannot bear the weight of the entire counter-tradition of non-hierarchical diversity; second, Mack's emphasis on the Spinozism of this tradition seemingly excludes other significant sources.

³ J.W. Goethe, *Maxims and Aphorisms*, trans. E. Stopp, ed. P. Hutchinson (London: Penguin, 1998), §507.

⁴ I have attempted a similar interpretation of Herder in 'The Discipline of Pious Reason' in *Moral Powers, Fragile Beliefs: Essays in Moral and Religious Philosophy*, eds. J. Carlisle, J. Carter and D. Whistler (London: Continuum, 2011), 53–81.

Mack's interpretation of Spinoza has been questioned at length elsewhere⁵ and there is no need repeat the specifics here. Generally, Mack's questionable procedure is to directly extrapolate from Spinoza's epistemological and metaphysical claims to ethical, social, political, and religious consequences, independently of what Spinoza himself says. For example, from the fact that Spinozan parallelism implies the absolute equality of the intellectual and the physical Mack concludes that Spinoza is always and everywhere committed to a non-hierarchical inclusivism – 'a plural world consisting of different social and religious ways of life' (33). This makes for an unorthodox interpretation of Spinoza at the very least, and Mack's reluctance to quote from the primary texts (especially in Chapter One) merely exacerbates the problem.

Second, Mack's insistence on the fundamental Spinozist core to Herder, Goethe, Eliot, and Freud's thinking of diversity masks other possible sources. For example, references to debates on equality and tolerance in eighteenth-century Britain are noticeably absent.⁶ While Jonathan Israel may well be correct in insisting that Locke's view of toleration was far more restricted than Spinoza's,⁷ this is less true of Locke's heirs in the Scottish Enlightenment who radicalised both his epistemology and his political theory in the name of common sense. Herder's allegiance to this radical tendency was just as strong as his allegiance to Spinozism, and the following ode to Beattie fits as snugly with Mack's concerns as anything Herder writes about Spinoza,

Beattie is a friend, a fighter, a zealot for the truth, but not for that colourful, iridescent kind of truth which a few rays of sunlight paint upon the dark, cloudy and watery brain of *so-called* philosophers. Such truth shines on fumes and dissolves with them... He boldly attacks the hair-splitters, quibblers, metaphysicians, idealists and sceptics, and whatever else I should call them. He wants to show that all their sophistries are only shadows on the wall, which, however beautiful, cannot displace anything of substance, having no substance themselves.⁸

Moreover, while Mack's reproduction of Herder's critique of Leibniz and the French Enlightenment is illuminating, it is only ever a partial critique and Mack's exclusion of these sources from the genesis of Herder's inclusive universalism smacks of polemic. As I earlier pointed out, Herderian *Besonnenheit* also seems as close to Aristotelian *phronesis* and Kantian reflective judgment as it does to Spinozan reasoning—despite the fact that Mack would above all deny the connection to Kant, who plays the part of pantomime villain throughout the book.

In short, Mack's stress on Spinozism to the exclusion of all else performatively contradicts the thinking of diversity his book is meant to describe.⁹ Given the subject matter of *Spinoza and the Specters of Modernity*, he should be the first to recognise the diversity of these spectres—and also the first to recognise that acknowledging such a diaspora free from a unitary connecting thread is not necessarily to consign it to trivial relativism. Universal meaning can still be found in the most diverse of texts.

IV.

If Mack's strong thesis that the thinking of diversity in modernity is always Spinozist fails, his weaker claim to have identified singular instances of inclusive universalism in modern philosophical, literary, and psychoanalytic thought still holds true. Indeed, the violence of Mack's interpretations are surprisingly helpful in justifying this weaker thesis to the extent that it forces the reader to rethink her commonplace prejudices. A good example is Mack's audacious assertion that Kant, not Herder, is *the* late eighteenth-century thinker of teleology. Like all the best interpretations of the history of thought, *Spinoza and the Specters of Modernity* provokes the reader. Hence, despite being in places badly formatted, hastily written and idiosyncratically argued, the book remains one to cherish.

Mack's intention is not merely descriptive, however; *Spinoza and the Specters of Modernity* is not merely an exercise in the history of ideas. The notion of inclusive universalism and its correlative critique of autoimmunity are also meant to possess normative significance for the future of thought.

⁵ Omri Boehm, 'Review of *Spinoza and the Specters of Modernity: The Hidden Enlightenment of Diversity from Spinoza to Freud*', *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, <http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=21769> (accessed: 14/04/2011). Beth Lord, 'Review of *Spinoza and the Specters of Modernity: The Hidden Enlightenment of Diversity from Spinoza to Freud*', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 19.2 (2011): 339–55.

⁶ When Mack does mention Locke, it is to make the bizarre claim that Herderian *Besonnenheit* must be Spinozist rather than Lockean in inspiration, because it has a positive relation to the senses! (65)

⁷ Jonathan I. Israel, 'Spinoza, Locke and the Enlightenment Battle for Toleration,' in *Toleration in Enlightenment Europe*, eds. O.P. Grell and R. Porter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 102–13.

⁸ Quoted in Manfred Kuehn, *Scottish Common Sense in Germany, 1768-1800* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987), 153.

⁹ Thus, Mack raises the spectre of Schiller as a thinker of inclusive universality in a footnote (180), but excludes him from the main text presumably because of the lack of any tangible Spinoza-connection.

Mack is explicit that he intends these ideas to have ‘implications for understanding global politics in the twenty-first century’ (1); he intends, that is, to insert them into contemporary debates on terrorism and impending ecological catastrophe. In conclusion, therefore, it is worth considering their prospects. Mack is clear that the spectral tradition rejects the establishment of exclusive goals. Everything must be affirmed; therefore no particular can be valorised. To choose a value would lead to the self-destructive dialectic of autoimmunity; it would be to discriminate.¹⁰ In fact, the very idea of the normative, of an exclusive conception of ‘what ought to be’, is lost to Mack; instead, inclusive universalism leads to a form of stasis: the indifferent and indiscriminate affirmation of all actualities and all possibilities. Setting up inclusivism as the norm for future thinking seems self-contradictory to the extent it excludes exclusivism.

Less trivially, however, Mack’s championing of diversity can be read in the light of a recent debate in continental philosophy between the ideals of hope and survival.¹¹ Martin Hägglund, for example, has recently appealed to Derrida’s critique of autoimmunity in the name of a healthy mode of self-preservation in much the same way Mack does here.¹² The question, however, is whether too much emphasis on the pursuit of self-preservation as opposed to any higher ideal—a tendency present in both Hägglund and Mack—implicitly rejects other crucial ethical concepts, like hope, or crucial political concepts, like revolution. One hopes, of course, for what does not yet exist but what ought to be; hope implies a radical break with and exclusion of elements of present reality; it sets up ‘what ought to be’ in opposition to ‘what is’. The question, then, is whether the spectral modernity Mack celebrates in *Spinoza and the Specters of Modernity* excludes this kind of discourse, whether his thinking of diversity ultimately fails to make room for hope, promise and other forms of eschatological thinking.

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¹⁰ Inclusivity often translates for Mack into abstaining from judgment (144, 170).

¹¹ See Michael O’Neill Burns, ‘The Hope of Speculative Materialism,’ in *After the Postsecular and the Postmodern: New Essays in Continental Philosophy of Religion*, eds. A.P. Smith and D. Whistler (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2010), 316-34.

¹² Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).