



Spinoza, Strategy, and Transindividuality

Dave Mesing¹
mesingd@gmail.com

Resumo: Este ensaio examina o trabalho de Laurent Bove sobre a estratégia espinosista, a fim de considerar um possível encontro teórico com a abordagem transindividual de Spinoza delineada por Étienne Balibar. Argumento que o projeto de Bove de articular uma teoria da estratégia espinosista é mais bem lido como uma ontologia política e reconstruir a lógica dessa ontologia política por meio de uma análise de seus principais termos e argumentos. Afirmando que a ontologia política substitui a ontologia pela política, baseando-se, em última instância, em uma concepção fixa da ontologia como primeira filosofia que estabiliza e organiza sua estrutura teórica. Isso leva a três implicações do relato de estratégia de Bove: uma criação do mundo para organização estratégica, a colocação de um sujeito autêntico ou genuíno adequado a esse mundo e uma orientação *a priori* para toda a estratégia. À luz desses três problemas, sugiro pensar o projeto da estratégia espinosista como uma articulação da ontologia e da história, e voltar-se para alguns insights da leitura transindividual de Spinoza feita por Balibar, a fim de esboçar um esboço para uma abordagem alternativa à estratégia espinosista.

Palavras-chave: Spinoza; transindividualidade; ontologia política; estratégia; história.

Abstract: This essay examines the work of Laurent Bove on Spinozist strategy in order to consider a possible theoretical encounter with the transindividual approach to Spinoza outlined by Étienne Balibar. I argue that Bove's project of articulating a theory of Spinozist strategy is best read as a political ontology, and reconstruct the logic of this political ontology through an analysis of its key terms and arguments. I claim that political ontology substitutes ontology for politics, relying ultimately on a fixed conception of ontology as first philosophy that stabilizes and organizes its theoretical structure. This leads to three implications of Bove's account of strategy: a creation of the world for strategic organization, the positing of an authentic or genuine subject adequate to that world, and an *a priori* orientation for all strategy. In light of these three problems, I suggest thinking the project of Spinozist strategy instead as an articulation of ontology and history, and turn to some insights in Balibar's transindividual reading of Spinoza in order to begin sketching an outline for an alternative approach to Spinozist strategy.

Keywords: Spinoza; transindividuality; political ontology; strategy; history.

¹ Professor Adjunto da Villanova University.

Introduction

My aim in this essay is to begin developing an account of strategy as part of the transindividual reading of Spinoza. Although the concept of the transindividual has its roots in the work of Gilbert Simondon, scholars such as Étienne Balibar have turned to it in order to articulate several crucial aspects of Spinoza's philosophy.² Balibar claims that Spinoza's work allows for the initially negative definition of transindividuality ("a doctrine which is *neither* individualistic *nor* holistic, just as it is *neither* mechanistic *nor* finalistic" [Balibar, 1997, p. 11]) to be transformed into a positive definition which accounts for a schema of causality, the integration of simple and complex causality, and the relation between imagination and reason. Importantly, Balibar insists on the point that a transindividual reading of Spinoza does not "adapt Spinoza's doctrine to the formulas which can be found in this or that newly discovered guide," but rather that Spinoza himself can be understood as a consistent theorist of transindividuality.³

Balibar's initial discussion of Spinoza and transindividuality was a lecture delivered in Rijnsburg on May 15, 1993, which was later revised and published in 1997.⁴ The three hinges of his sketch for a positive definition of Spinozist transindividuality can be succinctly summarized as follows. First, as a schema of causality, it is both non-linear—that is, it involves complex interaction in every causal action, rather than a simple relation of necessary succession—and it establishes an order of connection between *res singulares* or individuals, rather than isolated objects or events (p. 13). Second, such a schema is only an initial or first order causality; the concept of an individual is a determinate level of integration between other individuals and itself, as a constant proportion of motion and rest. As a dynamic regeneration, an individual should not be conceived statically as something integrated with other individuals and part of Nature implicitly thought as a hierarchy of given forms. Instead, the individual as complex causality is a metastable equilibrium, continuously abandoning some part or parts of itself while incorporating some part or parts of others, meaning that the individual's status as form is a regulated effect within a relation of forces. In other words, causally accounting for any individual requires other individuals which reciprocally need one another in order to preserve their forms of existence (pp. 17-18). Finally, transindividuality as a complex and dynamic schema of causality can also help for conceiving the relation between imagination and reason in human beings. Transindividuality allows imagination and reason to be understood as dynamic structures rather than faculties or capacities. Balibar concludes: "A concrete

2 On Simondon, see (Combes, 2013). (Read, 2015) provides a helpful overview of several transindividual themes and thinkers in a decisive study. See also (Morfino and Balibar, 2014).

3 Balibar clarifies further in a footnote that there are several concepts of transindividuality at work in canonical modern philosophers, including Leibniz, Hegel, Freud, and Marx, noting that Kojève uses the term to analyze Hegel, and Lacan uses it in order to discuss the unconscious in Freud. Accordingly, there is no common program for the transindividual, and although Simondon introduced the term in his work, it can be appropriately understood as a way of naming how certain modern philosophers deal with the problem of the individual, and not simply as a more contemporary projection onto the work of various thinkers. I will return in more detail to Balibar's work below, but I aim to provide a discussion of strategy that orients itself in relation to the understanding of transindividuality he has outlined in Spinoza's work. As such, I will be less concerned with the particular nuances of the concept in Simondon or other modern or contemporary transindividual thinkers.

4 Balibar does make reference to the "trans-individual" in an earlier text, *Spinoza and Politics*, originally published in 1985, albeit without reference to Simondon, and he does not elaborate on the notion much further: "Singularity is a trans-individual function" (1998, p. 108).

concept of transindividuality therefore implies that relationships between individuals, or parts of the individuals' Minds and Bodies, are considered *in the transition* from Imagination to Reason, i.e. from a lesser to a greater power to act" (p. 31).

Together, these three hinges of Balibar's conception of transindividuality provide a positive sketch of key arguments and themes within Spinoza's thought. I will examine some of these themes in more depth below in order to consider strategy as a lens for thinking about Spinoza's politics. The problem of strategy in Spinoza was introduced and given substantial treatment at around the same time as Balibar's initial sketch of Spinoza and transindividuality. Laurent Bove's *La stratégie du conatus: Affirmation et résistance chez Spinoza* (1996) constitutes a complex and compelling analysis of Spinoza's philosophy in strategic terms, and is perhaps one of the most substantial theoretical treatments of strategy as such.⁵ Despite this slight overlap (and it is worth noting here as well the posthumous publication of the final part of Simondon's doctoral thesis in 1989), Bove does not read Spinoza as a transindividual thinker. In part for this reason, my attempt to outline a Spinozist understanding of strategy will largely take the form of a transindividual critique of Bove, or more simply, I will reconstruct some important arguments in Bove's analysis in order to consider their implications in an encounter with a transindividual approach. Before turning to an important point of tension between Bove and Balibar, I want to make two interrelated general comments about theory and strategy, both of which speak to the commendable status of Bove's book as a substantive theorization of strategy.

First, despite its clear and central place in military discourse, as a political concept, strategy is underinvestigated. Etymologically, strategy can be traced to the Greek *stratēgós*, but it does not receive extensive analysis in classical Greek texts. Aristotle, for example, only mentions the genitive form in passing at the outset of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, as part of a list of different types of ends related to various arts: "since there are many actions and arts and kinds of knowledge, the ends also turn out to be many: of medical knowledge the end is health, [. . .] of strategic art it is victory [στρατηγικῆς δε νικη]" (2002, p. 1). As the discussion of arts here suggests, strategy is presented as a kind of *technē*, which makes for a puzzling conclusion if we note that *technē taktike*, later translated into Latin as *ars bellica*, signifies the arrangement and organization of troops for battle: strategy or strategic art would thus encompass tactics, but no strong conceptual distinction between strategy and tactics is evident. Indeed, etymologically, *stratēgós* does not refer to strategy, but rather to the general or overall leader of the Greek army. *Stratēgós* is a compound of *stratós* (army) and *ágein* (to lead, guide, command), and hence strategy or the strategic is what pertains to the office of the *stratēgós*. This means that strategy or the strategic could also refer to the period of time the leader oversees in battle, or the area ruled by their army on the battlefield. The more common separation of strategy and tactics as they are used in military discourse today can be traced to the period around the Napoleonic wars (Freedman, 2013, pp. 69-81).

Second, and more relevant to the task of thinking strategy in light of transindividuality, this underinvestigated status of strategy as a political concept often manifests itself in the way that certain language and imagery takes on an assumed or implicit, but undefined,

5 My references will be to Filippo Del Lucchese's 2002 translation of the work (Bove, 2002), but I highlight the original French publication in order to make note of the near contemporaneity with Balibar's formulations of transindividuality. Where necessary, I have inserted the French in brackets for clarity.

orientation as strategic. One emblematic text in this regard is Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. Laclau and Mouffe do lay claim to a Schmittian conception of politics as constitutively antagonistic and in need of an adversary, but they do not explicitly identify or defend a strategic approach. Instead, they reconstruct large swaths of European political and theoretical history, arguing that the categories of Marxist theory are the products of contingent syntheses. Within this history, they reestablish and expand upon the category of hegemony, which they claim is vital for confronting the then-emergent neoliberal political consensus. Accordingly, hegemony becomes the name for a specific *form* or *logic of politics*; this form or logic is presumably also strategic, but readers are left without a sense of strategy in terms of either its history or contemporary conceptual purchase.⁶

Both of these points help to briefly underscore why Bove's text, with its extensive treatment of strategy and related concepts, constitutes a welcome and substantive point of reference for theoretical reflection on strategy, in addition to being a creative reconstruction of Spinoza's thought. I will turn to what I think are Bove's key arguments for a Spinozist conception of strategy in the next section, but in order to frame that analysis, I want to briefly bring into focus a place where a Balibar-Bove encounter seems most apparent, but also, I will argue, fundamentally in tension, with implications that are decisive for thinking strategy in a Spinozist way.

The two central concepts of Bove's analysis, as even a cursory glance at the book reveals, are affirmation and resistance. Bove repeatedly emphasizes that affirmation and resistance are simultaneously the key powers and activities of what he will refer to as the strategy of the political-*conatus* (pp. 27, 137, 149-150, 269-270). Interestingly, Balibar emphasizes the same two ideas in framing how the concept of transindividuality forbids conceiving of isolated processes of individuation:

This will prove decisive when it is a question of understanding why the *conatus* of the individual essence (or the essential *conatus* of the individual), which by definition is a *self-affirmation*, should immediately mean a *resistance* to its potential destruction by other things, therefore *intrinsically* requiring a combination or coalition with some other "similar" or "convenient" things against other things which are "adverse". And it will of course prove even more decisive in the political realm (where the *conatus* of the individual is called *natural right*) as an argument which both proves (against "individualism") that the autonomy or power of the individual is not reduced, but enlarged, by the constitution of a State or Civil Society, and (against "holism") that the sovereignty or power of the State is not reduced, but enlarged, by the growing autonomy of the citizens (especially their freedom of thought and expression) (Balibar, 1997, p. 10).

Balibar thus foregrounds the concurrent actions of self-affirmation and resistance. However, Balibar's further specification regarding these powers of the *conatus* in the political realm introduces an important, but initially puzzling caveat. It is unlikely that

6 "Hegemony is, quite simply, a political type of relation, a form, if one so wishes, of politics; but not a determinable location within the topography of the social" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 139). "Struggles derive their meaning from their hegemonic articulation, and their progressive character – from a socialist point of view – is not assured in advance. History, therefore, is regarded not as an ascendant continuum of democratic reforms, but as a discontinuous series of hegemonic formations or historical blocs" (p. 71). Despite some similar formulations and vocabulary, I do not take the project of Laclau and Mouffe to be in continuity with a transindividual approach to strategy that I begin to sketch at the conclusion of this essay.

Balibar intends to suggest Spinoza's thought is amenable to some version of the autonomy of the political with this remark. Indeed, elsewhere, he writes "the relationship between philosophy and politics is such that *each implies the other* (1998, p. 4)."⁷ While this might initially appear to be merely a question of semantics, I will use this puzzling question of the political status of these ideas as my entry-point into the problem of strategy in Spinoza's thought. Bove's full analysis can rightly be understood as a political ontology of strategy, whereas Balibar's remark suggesting the reciprocal implication of politics and ontology belongs to a different framework,⁸ especially when understood in the context of the transindividual approach to Spinoza. I will first outline Bove's larger analysis in order to establish some helpful points of reference for considering strategy in Spinoza's thought. With that in place, I will sketch some more specific points of contrast to Bove's understanding of strategy as political ontology, instead offering an approach to political strategy in Spinoza as the articulation of ontology and history.

Strategy as Political Ontology

As I have suggested, in addition to its extensive treatment of strategic problems, Bove's text can also be read as a multi-faceted account of Spinoza's thought in general. In reconstructing his analysis, then, I will remain focused on what I think are the key elements of his central narrative regarding strategy, which I will argue functions as a political ontology. Bove unfolds and develops his account of Spinozist strategy across several arguments, rather than stipulating a definition of political ontology or strategy in a few words. In part, then, my aim here is diagnostic: rather than simply reconstructing the primary threads of Bove's account of Spinozist strategy in order to refute it, I will attempt to draw out a logic of political ontology which I think underpins it and leads it astray from specific commitments of the Spinozist theories of causality and history. In synthesizing Bove's argument for strategy as political ontology, I do not seek to establish an account of the autonomy of the political, or otherwise clearly mark out ontology from politics or vice versa. Indeed, the responses I will suggest to Bove's argument are attempts to think through the mutual imbrication of ontology and politics without falling into the traps of political ontology.

In order to frame Bove's account of strategy as political ontology, it is helpful to grasp the key terms involved across his arguments. The following two passages, from the introduction and conclusion respectively, introduce these terms and allow us to organize a reading of Bove's analysis:

7 And again, perhaps even more clearly in opposition to any logic of the autonomy of the political, Balibar writes in the preface to *Masses, Classes, Ideas*: "Spinoza's philosophy [...] is perhaps the most lucid example we have of a combination of politics and ontology" (1994, p. xi).

8 I here collapse the philosophy and ontology, because the primary sense of Balibar's suggestion regarding mutual implication is that speculative inquiry into essential questions is not divorced from practical questions of application, and indeed any distinction such as this "is not simply meaningless, it is the *principal obstacle* to achieving wisdom" (1998, p. 4). Of course, the precise language of ontology is alien to Spinoza's thought, likely having been introduced into philosophy after his death by Christian Wolff. Despite this important historiographical detail, it is common to utilize the label of ontology in order to mark speculative and/or metaphysical questions, as Balibar does throughout *Spinoza and Politics* and elsewhere, and I follow that practice here. A detailed engagement with some of these questions, which informs the approach I will take later in this essay, is (Morfino, 2014).

Spinoza does not abandon the metaphysical—or ontological—terrain, its imperatives, questions, and problems. For politics as well as ethics the very essence of strategy—or its ontological status—must be grasped from the point of view of the absolute affirmation of cause (the real movement that defines the *causa sui*). Spinozist political strategy is founded, in the real, on a theory of the immanent strategy of the collective body itself—or the political-*conatus*—conceived as the multitude or, more precisely, as the power of the multitude (p. 27).

In this way, Spinoza leads us towards a dynamic ontology of problems. [...] The problem is not a ‘given’ encountered in experience. It is a product of the very power of the affirmation of any being (individual or society) in its dynamic and complex articulation with the real. The problem, as such, insofar as it is a real object, is the affection of which a body is capable and simultaneously the idea of this affection through which the body is affirmed and the problem is posed. It is therefore in the nature itself of affirmation (which, necessarily understood in a complex of relations of force, is also the constitutive activity of a resistance) to problematize the real, that is, to constitute it as a problem and, in the same gesture, produce the situation [*cas*] of corresponding solutions to this position. This is the real movement of the real in a singular affirmation, or the strategic and hermeneutic dynamic of the *conatus* (p. 328).

These two passages delineate the key vocabulary for reading Bove’s account of Spinozist strategy: causation, the political-*conatus*, the real/movement, the problem, affirmation, and resistance. By tracing the connections between these terms, we can arrive at an understanding of Bove’s concept of strategy, in order to consider some of the implications of its logic.

Bove identifies causation as an essential aspect for explaining the strategy of the *conatus*, and inscribes both power and resistance into the concept of the *conatus*, defining it as indissociably both the power of resistance and the power affirmation in its own productivity (p. 137). At the initial level of analysis, each and every *conatus* has its own strategy. “The idea of strategy implies the idea of total causal action and, for each *conatus* - in every instant of existing - the decision of the life or death of the way of existing” (p. 24). In this way, Bove argues that Spinoza’s concept of *conatus* can be understood as “a strategic practice of decision” (p. 24). However, he notes, we must be careful not to understand this notion of decision as modeled on free will. The causal action of decision does not originate from an internal finality capable of transcending the causal order, but is instead immanent. Bove argues further that the strategic causal action of the *conatus* is not to be understood in a metaphorical register. He takes EIVA1 in the sense of a “total war” for the *conatus*: “There is no singular singular thing in nature than which there is not another more powerful and stronger. Whatever one is given, there is another more powerful by which the first can be destroyed.” Bove understands the continual action of the *conatus* as initially a certain construction and conquest of space, for both ideas and bodies (p. 26).

Bove draws an important conclusion from his examination of the nexus in which causal action is contained for the *conatus*: “it is not possible [. . .] to reduce the operative field of the notion of strategy to the sole dominion of the individual and its survival” (p. 26). This necessary interaction between the *conatus* and external ideas and bodies in finite spatial and temporal situations stages the problem of political struggle at a general level. However, as noted in the long quote above, which draws these introductory clarifications

to a conclusion, for Bove, Spinozist political strategy is based on the political-*conatus*. In order to arrive at this term, Bove heuristically introduces the language of subject, which allows him to establish both how this initial concept of the *conatus* forges its own perseverance, and how it comes to be displaced in the establishment of a political-*conatus* and thereby opened onto political strategy.

Drawing on the *Metaphysical Thoughts*, Bove argues that in nature, “there exists only Substance and its modes, which must not be confused with the accidental qualities that we attribute to things which are actually only modes of thinking, such as opposition, order, agreement, diversity, the subject, complement, but also beauty, color, form, etc.” (p. 62). With this caveat in place, Bove uses the term practical subject in order to describe the perseverance of the *conatus* (in his initial sketch of the term). The practical subject is above all constituted by its orientation towards a useful end, which for Bove follows from Spinoza’s claim in the appendix to *Ethics* I: “all men always act on account of an end, namely, on account of their advantage, which they want.” However, this practical subject is completely ruled by its causes, and Bove defines it according to two principles of association. First, based on its continued action to see its own advantage, the practical subject contracts habits and forms a memory that is able to carry on this process through continuously searching for the pleasure correlated to the principle of utility. Second, what also characterizes the practical subject is a recognitive logic whereby the external objects desired by habit and memory are constantly affirmed. Together, habit, memory, and recognition help forge continuity in the persistence towards acting on the basis of a useful end:

The subject that acts in view of an end is defined, therefore, on the one hand according to two principles of association: acquiring habits, forging a memory and seeking pleasure (correlatively with a principle of utility); but also, on the other hand, [this subject] is defined as what in and through which these two principles are reflected and from which only the problematics of means and ends are utilized (under the determination of causes that remain essentially hidden) (p. 79).

In order for the political-*conatus* to be established, the practical subject must undergo a transformation and distance itself from the repetitive cycle of these processes. It is through this transformation that what Bove labels Spinozist political strategy, which is founded on the political-*conatus*, can be formed. However, a key presupposition of this transformation is that the practical subject is not characterized by a lack of strategy. According to Bove, the practical subject is in fact “essentially strategic,” but only insofar as it is “a consequence of a Strategy that overcomes and determines it, without beginning or end, which is the Strategy of the mathematical necessity of life, in the absolute affirmation of each of its own singular affections” (p. 83). It is within this situation of being determined by external causes that the practical subject can begin to transform its orientation by these processes. Bove argues that when problems of life and death come to be posed, the practical subject, through an “active” and “joyous” resistance, “encounters the affirmation itself of life” (p. 84). By affirming life, the practical subject can come to be oriented more by the active affects of joy than the repetitive search for useful ends; the vital necessity to affirm its own life enables it to organized the forces exercised on it “according to a process of knowledge that is different from recognition” (p. 84).

Bove’s account to this point already raises a number of suggestive points for more detailed contrast with a transindividual perspective, both in terms of individuation and

causality, as well as the relation between imagination and reason, but before formulating some responses to his analysis, I want to continue to analyze the key terms of his vocabulary. On the basis of this, in the next section I will conclude by drawing out some contrasts between transindividual and political ontological perspectives, with the aim of suggesting some paths forward for conceptualizing strategy in light of transindividuality. We have analyzed Bove's account of causation and the political-*conatus*, and can now turn to the remaining terms: movement/the real, the problem, resistance, and affirmation.

In fact, movement plays an important role in the establishment of Bove's notion of political-*conatus*, and also functions as a bridge term to bring Bove's most central concepts of affirmation and resistance onto center stage. As we noted, Bove argues that when the practical subject encounters the problems of life and death, the affirmation of life itself allows for it to begin organizing the forces exercised on it in a way that breaks with the recognitive and repetitive problematic of means and ends. Bove summarizes the heart of this transformation through what he labels a dynamic equilibrium characterized by a double-movement. What qualitatively differentiates this movement from the useful end pursued by the practical subject is that it is oriented instead towards the love of self that is prescribed by reason. Bove cites EIV18S: "since reason demands nothing contrary to nature, it demands that everyone love himself, seek his own advantage, what is really useful to him, what will really lead man to a greater perfection."

According to Bove, this advantage opens onto a movement that is more complex than the repetitive pursuit of utility by the practical subject. Instead, love of self is an ethical task arranged according to a double movement. First, the dynamic equilibrium is a return to an essential relationship between movement and rest. In other words, Bove claims, it is a return both in the sense of being a return to self and a repetition of its being. Second, the dynamic equilibrium is also characterized by a movement that is a productive affirmation of new desires, pleasures, and ideas according to which the essential relationship is positively modified with an increase in affecting or being affected in body and mind. The return to self and repetition of its essential relationship between motion and rest is therefore not motivated by nostalgia for a past or idyllic state, but rather, through an active resistance that always dynamically puts the essential relationship into question, an affirmation of "indefinite productivity" (p. 134).

Through this double movement, the practical subject is able to actively enter into an altered relationship with the causes external to it. By entering this double movement, the practical subject breaks with the repetitive processes which as a Strategy, overcome and conquer it. Bove summarizes the transformation of the practical subject as follows:

The question of strategy is in this way displaced from the domain of representation (that of the practical and ethical subject under the guide of Reason, put into effect as the means according to ends) to that of the production of the adequate idea according to an order of affections identical in body and thought. [...] This new logic—actually eternal—is that of essence and its actualization or existence in its absolute and perfect affirmation" (p. 140).

The two key aspects of the double movement, which characterize the strategy of the political-*conatus*, are resistance and affirmation. Resistance and affirmation together make up the dynamic double-movement whereby the practical subject breaks with the Strategy that had overcome and dominated it.

The language of movement here is helpful for untangling the stakes of Bove's complex analysis on this point more carefully. As I've suggested, we can understand the processes in the practical subject—habit, memory, and recognition—as a kind of repetitive and ineffective movement, and with the displacement of strategy from representation to the production of adequate ideas, Bove also sees a displacement to a more complex movement no longer oriented around the useful end for a practical subject. A series of important passages help bring the status of movement in Bove's argument further into focus. First, Bove argues that Spinoza's conception of unity is one that frees an infinite multiplicity of strategies, which are understood as that in and through which substance is constituted (p. 160). Bove refers to this very general level of the characterization of substance as an "innocent necessity" or "the absolute and eternal movement of the self-generation of substance in its modes" (p. 167). The integral movement that constitutes substance itself in Bove's reading therefore enables him to offer his most succinct but demanding account of strategy, when he writes: "In the real there are only strategies of individuation. The Real is strategy" (p. 188).

Bove's account of movement or the Real is what enables him to explain both the practical subject and the political-*conatus* as essentially strategic. Yet, in order for this analysis to work, Bove still aims to make distinctions between types of strategies. On this point, it is helpful to recall Bove's claim in the second of the two framing passages with which we opened this section. Here Bove summarizes that part of the strategic and hermeneutic dynamic of the political-*conatus* is to problematize the real, and in the same gesture, to produce a situation [*cas*] of corresponding solutions. Bove's understanding of the concept of problem, which is not simply a given encountered in experience, is what helps to differentiate between strategies. The sense in which the problem is not given in experience but constructed at a complex level through coordination with other bodies and ideas as part of the political-*conatus* should be understood as a contrast to the state in which the practical subject originally finds itself: overcome by a Strategy that determines its action. The problem is not an obstacle lying before the political-*conatus* that needs to be overcome, and the activity of resistance and affirmation that characterizes the political-*conatus* should not be understood in a reactive sense.

Instead, and this brings us to the heart of Bove's reading of strategy in Spinoza, the way in which the political-*conatus* poses problems for itself in order to adapt to them, and increase its own power through affecting and being affected, is the integral task of politics. Bove's position can therefore be understood as a political ontology.⁹ The ability of the political-*conatus* to pose and solve problems for itself, increasing its own power, is best understood as a political-ontological postulate. The key terms of this postulate, which are also the key terms to the transformation from the practical subject to the political-*conatus*, are affirmation and resistance. Bove writes: "The strategy of active resistance of the collective body is immediately inscribed in the ontology of the absolute affirmation of each existence. In this power of resistance and affirmation the systematic order of reason already expresses itself" (p. 312). Insofar as the individual *conatus* is capable of breaking

9 For the purposes of this essay, I use this term only in an idiosyncratic sense to characterize Bove's argument, and not necessarily to suggest a unified program of political ontology, despite the widespread use of this term in certain fields of contemporary philosophy. For grammatical reasons, on occasion I refer to a political-ontological approach, by which I mean an approach of political ontology as worked out in Bove's thought.

with external determination through a double-movement oriented by its resistance in affirming itself and by its simultaneous affirmation of new, expansive powers, it ascends to a level on which it contributes to the moving production of reality itself. Active resistance is the crucial driving force of the ascension to the political-*conatus* from the practical subject. Bove suggests both that resistance is finally what orients human life (p. 155), and that resistance in its connection to liberation is also the basis for the subjectivities of the political-*conatus* to affirm human singularity (p. 319). As he puts it, “From the resistance of several—a veritable nucleus of autonomous self-organization within the collective body—to the liberation of all, this is the political sense (and historical direction) of the Spinozist project. The articulation of ontology and history is accomplished therefore, in Spinoza, through the concept of resistance” (p. 320).

Between Politics and Ontology: Transindividuality contra Political Ontology

More could be said about the details of Bove’s argument, but organizing it around the development of key terms, leading from the practical subject to the political-*conatus* on which political strategy in Spinoza is based (and articulated through the political-ontological concepts of resistance and affirmation), allows us to appreciate the scope of his reading of Spinoza’s thought. On the basis of this sketch of his argument, I want to try and diagnose the logic of political ontology that runs throughout it, in order to sketch a different way forward via some insights in the transindividual approach to Spinoza. Bove’s imposing effort, especially in its attempt to think problems of strategy beyond the schema of simple means-ends calculation, is a decisive resource for thinking through the theme of strategy in Spinoza, and for theorizing about strategy in general. My comments here in conclusion will remain tentative and suggestive, seeking primarily to introduce strategy as a problem beyond the political-ontological cast in takes in Bove’s analysis.

Perhaps the central organizing tendency of political ontology as it operates in Bove’s work is an ambiguity regarding how terms comes to function as political and/or ontological. This ambiguity is above all at work in the key terms resistance, affirmation, and ultimately strategy itself. Political ontology substitutes ontology for politics, relying ultimately on a fixed conception of ontology as first philosophy that stabilizes and organizes its theoretical structure. I will demonstrate this underlying logic through an analysis of these three terms. For Bove, strategy is simultaneously ontological and political, but this simultaneity allows only for a static repetition within an undifferentiated history. I will argue that this ambiguity and repetition leads to at least three implications: a creation of the world for strategic organization, the positing of an authentic or genuine subject adequate to that world, and an *a priori* orientation for all strategy. In light of these three problems, I will suggest thinking the project of Spinozist strategy instead as an articulation of ontology and history.

A snapshot of these implications in the logic of political ontology can be observed in the way that the terms resistance and affirmation function. As I noted in the introduction, Balibar emphasizes the same two terms in his discussion of transindividuality. However, the interaction between these two terms is different for the transindividual and political-ontological approaches. For Balibar, these two terms are reciprocal: just as the essence of an individual *conatus* implies self-affirmation, so also does it imply a resistance to its potential destruction. This reciprocal relation means that the *conatus* “intrinsically [requires] a combination or coalition with some other ‘similar’ or ‘convenient’ things against

which other things are ‘adverse’” (1997, p. 10). However, this requirement is crucial, as it speaks to one of the basic principles of a transindividual approach, namely the primacy of individuation over the individual. The individual as a form constituted by affirmation and resistance is a metastable equilibrium, and so its essence or invariant is the result of a relation of forces (Balibar, 1997, p. 17-18). In other words, the individual as metastable equilibrium is never a complete form; its form depends on encounters with its outside, to which it is always open and as a result of which it is always an ongoing tension between reproduction and destruction. Or to put it yet another way, in Balibar’s words:

To say that an individual keeps existing is tantamount to saying that it is regenerated or reproduced. An isolated individual, having no ‘exchanges’ with the environment, would not be regenerated, therefore it would not exist. Right from the beginning, what Spinoza implies is that any individual has *a need of other individuals* in order to preserve its form and its existence (1997, p. 18).

The same is not true for an individual as dynamic equilibrium. While the relation of the individual and its external surroundings is taken to be dynamic, the level of this dynamism does not extend to the form of the individual as such. This slippage is symptomatic in the ambiguous status of the language of affirmation and resistance on Bove’s account.

One of the key passages we examined in the previous section regarding the transition from the practical subject to political-*conatus* makes this clear. Bove writes:

The question of strategy is in this way displaced from the domain of representation (that of the practical and ethical subject under the guide of Reason, put into effect as the means according to ends) to that of the production of the adequate idea according to an order of affections identical in body and thought. [...] This new logic—actually eternal—is that of essence and its actualization or existence in its absolute and perfect affirmation (p. 140).

In this way, the political-*conatus* ascends to a level of the absolute or perfect affirmation of its essence. Just a few pages before this conclusion, Bove suggests that the process of this double-movement is a spiral, and that its equilibrium is found at always different levels of perfection. In itself, the process does not have “a model, finality, or limit. It is a dynamic of infinite perfection” (p. 137). Bove thus seeks to deny that an individual would attain a perfect form, instead positing that the order affirmed here is absolutely indeterminate (p. 175). However, this argument ends up hypostasizing an absolute and infinitely indeterminate order as the object of affirmation for the political-*conatus*. Here is the key passage which makes it clear that the object of affirmation is finally an indeterminate sense of world:

In his conception of Nature, Spinoza reconciles [...] the idea of structure [...] and the idea of genesis (which implies the idea of movement, of the temporal changing of form). [...] Structure is the innocent necessity, without beginning or end, the real movement of the production of the Real, the absolute and eternal movement of the auto-generation of substance and its modes; the duration itself of eternity. [...] The immanent cause is not a behind-the-world, but the necessity itself of this world in its explanation and affirmation (pp. 166-167).

Affirmation thus assumes a world opened for strategic organization. The creation of this world is ongoing, and ascending to this ongoing creation is the task accomplished by affirmation. The object of affirmation is again captured symptomatically in Bove's contrast between two types of unity, only one of which correlates to the world:

The point of view of the practical subject [...] is an essentially abstract point of view. [...] The ethical project consists therefore in finding, in the lucidity of the true, the singular relation between confidence and love that every life implies and develops in its essential affirmation. [...] It is the point of view of Desire that is always-already singularly related to the world and itself, absolute confidence in the Real in itself. It is the real point of view of the strategy of the *conatus*. And the entire first part of the *Ethics*—namely the true conception of Nature or God—should be read as the opening of the possibility itself of the absolute affirmation of this ethical singularity, both free and necessary. For this, Spinoza had to radically reconsider the question of the unity of the Real. To proceed from the unity that oppresses to the unity that frees the infinite multiplicity of strategies, in and through which substance itself is constituted (pp. 159-160).

In this way, then, affirmation within the movement of dynamic equilibrium involves accessing the actual unity of the Real, thereby participating in the ongoing creation of the world.

Just as this movement ends up hypostasizing a certain order of unity as the world, so also does the logic of political ontology imply an authentic or genuine subject which is adequate to the world. This implication is implicit in the passage we have just cited, insofar as there is a fundamental contrast between the (abstract) point of view of the practical subject and the point of view of desire or absolute confidence, or simply in the suggestion that there is finally a “real point of view of the strategy of the *conatus*.” Later, Bove arrives at this conclusion more explicitly, summarizing the transition away from the practical subject ruled by a kind of rationality in useful means and ends and towards the political-*conatus* or *multitudinis potentia* in democratic society:

For democratic society it is the subject-people who are determined by rational action. The rational is no longer the product of the determination of reason on the practical subject, but the product of the subject itself according to its own actions of confrontation, exchange, deliberation, interior dialogue, and finally decision. While in the individual human the subject-form is always an effect, the political body of the multitude, whose power is constitutive, can be understood as the real subject of political reality in both matter and form (p. 276).

Accordingly, although Bove initially introduces the language of the subject as heuristic, he ends up positing the subject-people of the multitude as a genuine subject adequate to the world created in affirmation.

Finally, Bove's remarks on resistance demonstrate that the strategy of the political-*conatus* is marked by an *a priori* orientation. As we noted at the end of the previous section, Bove links affirmation and resistance insofar as both are ontological powers which express the political-*conatus*. In a sense similar to Balibar, these terms are reciprocal with one another, but the underlying framework of political ontology lacks the postulate that individuation has primacy over the individual, and thereby ends up asserting a dynamic equilibrium which is dynamic insofar as there is a tension between participating in the

creation of the word or remaining in isolation. Resistance, which additionally orients human life (p. 155), tends towards the former:

From the resistance of several—a veritable nucleus of autonomous self-organization within the collective body—to the liberation of all, this is the political sense (and historical direction) of the Spinozist project. The articulation of ontology and history is accomplished therefore, in Spinoza, through the concept of resistance” (p. 320).

This means that, in the last instance, any true strategy must have as its fundamental principle the dynamic unity of affirmation and resistance, i.e., the continual repetition of this schema within an undifferentiated history. The task of any strategy worth the name is resistance, and simultaneously the affirmation of the productive and infinite order of nature.

In light of this logic of political ontology, I would like to conclude by sketching a different path forward for understanding Spinozist political strategy. In Balibar’s initial discussion of Spinoza and transindividuality, he suggests that Spinoza himself can be read as a transindividual thinker, rather than the concept of transindividuality serving as a new guide for rereading and translating his thought. If the transindividual doctrine is a shorthand for a mutually reciprocal logic of the simultaneous rejection of abstract opposites such as individualism and holism, Balibar’s provocation is that Spinoza enables a positive or constructive notion of transindividuality, above all as a causal schema accounting for the interweaving of processes of individuation and individualization,¹⁰ and imagination and reason. Although they are reciprocally dependent and stable structures rather than opposites, two key notions that a transindividual account of strategy must be careful not to ontologically inscribe are subject and world. To avoid these twin pitfalls of political ontology, I will suggest three starting points for a transindividual theory of strategy.

First, political strategy can be understood as the articulation of ontology and history. Bove ascribes this function to resistance, but stipulating resistance as an *a priori* orientation for strategy leaves it as repetitive affirmation of indefinite productivity, thereby losing its grasp on historical determinacy. At the limit, the aggregate resistance of the political-*conatus* may amount to the subject of history. In clearly marking off political strategy from such a logic of political ontology, my aim is not to isolate a particular political sphere, or even to codify some language as political and some as ontological. Rather, strategy remains open to both ontology and history according to their demands and co-implication. What it draws from ontology is a space in which it can think and act in historical determinacy. Insofar as its statements are ontological, it is only in a paradoxical sense of ontology as a second philosophy, that is, an ontology open to historical change.¹¹

This initial and most significant starting point receives a more precise formulation in light of a second starting point, which entails a denial of any concept of world in favor

10 For our purposes, I have stressed the primacy of individuation over the individual. Balibar, drawing on Simondon, discusses processes of both individuation and individualization (1997, pp. 8-9).

11 Bove draws close to this analysis in his remarks on the *TTP*. He argues that in historical study, Spinoza does not break with an ontological conception of politics, but rather “with the onto-teleological conception of those who require a transcendent foundation of society (God, Reason, or Nature). Spinoza’s ontology does not have these legitimating functions” (p. 257). While Bove’s political ontology remains resolute in avoiding these legitimating functions for the foundation of society, it seems to me that the political-ontological concepts of affirmation, resistance, and ultimately strategy have legitimating functions in establishing the genuine strategy of the political-*conatus*.

of the concept of conjuncture, understood as a historically contingent set of relations. Through its function as articulating ontology and history, strategy takes the conjuncture as its object. The constitution of a conjuncture is subject to change; this point is similar to the logic we sketched above regarding affirmation and resistance in Balibar leading to an understanding of the form of dynamic equilibrium as a result of relations of force, an ongoing tension between reproduction and destruction, open to change in its composition due to encounters. The denial of the concept of world in favor of a concept of conjuncture stands in continuity with immanent or structural causality and Spinoza's abandonment of an understanding of order as serial in the *TdIE* to order as a *connexio* or complex weave in the *Ethics*.¹² Morfino puts the point succinctly as follows:

The variety of things is not *a priori* deducible from extension, since the essence of real things is constituted in and by relations and connections; the essence of things can therefore in no way logically precede these relations and connections (2014, p. 62).

From a certain perspective, then, Bove's instinct regarding the practical subject as a consequence of a strategy that overcomes and determines it actually speaks to this point (p. 83). Without seeking to hypostasize its logic, there is indeed strategy everywhere, inasmuch as the conjuncture is overdetermined. Rather than transcending this order in favor of an indefinitely productive, qualitatively different order that participates in the ongoing creation of the world, strategy's task is to intervene in and for the conjuncture.

This leads us, then, to a third and final starting point for an initial sketch of transindividual strategy: the rejection of any subject of strategy in favor of struggle. One of the key missteps in the logic of political ontology lies in the way it parses unity, ultimately identifying a genuine subject with a liberating unity understood as the absolute affirmation of nature's indefinite productivity. Strategy does face the necessity of weighing the balance of forces in the conjuncture, but not in order to identify and emulate a given formal unity. Rather, strategy struggles for its own place within the conjuncture. Writing in an entirely different register, the words of the Marxist theorist Amílcar Cabral are relevant here: "Unity is a means towards struggle, and like all means, a little goes a long way" (1979, p. 31). We can read this statement as both a reflection on strategy's shifting relation to unity, as well as strategy's requirement to focus on the logic of means-ends calculations. Regardless of the problems I have attempted to outline in the logic of political ontology, one especially productive insight for theorizing strategy as a political modality in Bove's work lies in his distancing of strategy from means-ends calculation: here, too, perhaps a little goes a long way. Strategy intervenes in the conjuncture, articulating ontology and history as it struggles to gain its footing onboard a moving train. This understanding may seem to relegate the form of the individual or subject to a passive, overwhelmed status as it is in Bove's conception of the practical subject, but I have tried to emphasize that the concept of individual not simply be collapsed into the concept of subject.¹³ The subject, like means-ends calculation, is not the concern of strategy, much less the historical agent standing behind its conjunctural struggle.

¹² For a fuller discussion, see (Morfino, 2002, pp. 133-230).

¹³ Although I have not emphasized the point strongly, one of the implications to the transindividual approach is to avoid thinking passivity or activity in isolation from one another. Balibar puts this point as follows, even heuristically adopting the language of subject: "The essence of causality is the unity of activity and passivity (we might suggest, in quasi-mathematical terms, that it is the 'differential' of activity and passivity) within one and the same 'subject' (or individual, as Spinoza prefers to say), a unity which defines the individual's singular *conatus* and relates it to an infinite multiplicity of individuals" (1997, p. 15).

Leaving the tangle of implications for future labor, we might say that the subject may perhaps be a tactic in service of encounters to increase the power of strategy within the conjuncture, but this subject does not exist outside of historically determinate struggle.

By way of conclusion, I would like to turn to a passage from Balibar, who conjugates the transindividual logic of mutual reciprocity into language that I think is foundational for any strategy adequate to the demands of the conjuncture:

Science must no more be sacrificed to revolution than revolution to science; it is the malaise or 'angst' consequent upon this permanent tension that should stop us from slumbering (2017, xx).

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