

2020 May 20 Spinoza: God-intoxicated man (TLS) - Snippets from a Thread

<https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/god-intoxicated-man-spinoza-philosophy-essay/>

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I'm going to push you again to buy Hardt & Negri's *Empire* (or get it from the library if they ever open up again). It keeps giving me Aha moments, and I can't just keep copying out segments to send to people I know who would love them. Just finished pages where they examine what they say is the high point of modern critiques of modernism, Spinoza's attempt to bring immanence and transcendence, reality and divinity, together (ultimately failed, they say, like all other great attempts, in "phantasms of mysticism").

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I'm hardly a pomo aficionado, and get totally turned off by the jargon of Derrida, Barthes, Butler and a bunch of the others. I'm not finding H&N that way. They know and use the terminology, but it seems to me they do so in a way that actually makes me understand what the terms were produced to clarify. (check out again the two passages I sent you)

Mostly, *Empire* is good to me because it puts modern (14th-21st CC) history in a very clear schema, a decidedly leftist schema that makes a wonderful parallel reading to the "bourgeois" schema we were nurtured on (and that I used to teach, as you will recognize as such if you pick up on their reading. Would that I had had this perspective then). They explain modernism in a way I wish I had had in my kit while I was writing PL.

Their explanation of the process, focuses on the by-definition diverse, secular and democratic "multitude" (cf demos) for liberation struggling against the oppressive dominant (usually religious) force (immanence vs transcendence) --and the way that dualistic condition is being transformed in the new post-nationalist global *Empire* (which is imperial but not imperialistic in the usual 20thC sense).

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A good friend of mine often asked, after our psychedelic trips "What good is it if you can't remember it?"

I've always been aware of what a bad memory for details I have. Esp. (ss you note) the fine details of philosopher's arguments, or my professors' lectures, or critics' points about the authors in question. (or mathematical formulas)

My way around that in writing papers was well-described by one prof who gave my paper an A but wrote, "A fine piece of open-field running Mike," instead of downgrading me because I really neither refuted the critic's argument nor made one of my own.

I later came to see this as a kind of obfuscation on my part, and learned to recognize it as a standard technique of various poet-novelist types.

Another generation might have called it impressionism. Or, later, expressionism.

In the past 10 years I've been able to keep in mind a lot more details about certain kinds of topics - mostly history and contemporary politics - due probably to an aging, less imaginative brain, but also because these things seem really important to me as most literary topics never did.

Interesting, but not important. In my present state of pre(one hopes)-dotage, human affairs of that sort are where my mind goes seeking understanding of la condition humaine, and I seem to have gained some comprehension not of the details (which still often escape me) but the overall sweep of the subject. [That general thrust you mention, and probably, like any academic brainwashee, cannot help retaining and being (in)formed by.]

A lot of that is because I made an effort for 10 years or so (after retirement, when I had time) to read and make sense of postmodernist theory, which took over the intellectual landscape after I got out of school, and provided a sharp and lovely perspective on my own era, including my formal education, an outside view I could never have gotten on my own. Kenneth Burke and the Pound Industry critics helped me to see the Romantics through the 30s period, Frederic Jameson et al helped me see my own period, 40s to the present.

Reading really competent authors on the overall cultural picture really does help. Hannah Arendt comes to mind as one who helped me get an overview, but there were others that don't come to mind right now. Authors who have it all down and compacted for us, from Sumeria to today (like Nietzsche evidently did for you), who can summarize Plato and Dante and Galileo and Kant et al for us freshmen. Cultural (not literary or political) history. Which is what postmodernist critique/theory is, in great part.

One of the reasons I stopped reading fiction and poetry is precisely because I found little in them pertinent to that interest. I've read almost nothing but non-fiction for 20 years or so - except for what I thought might have something to teach me as a writer, which I still like to think of as my real vocation.

Having also managed to make my way to some sort of vantage point and judge my own weight in another field, environmental politics (all poets should have an auxiliary field of expertise, said Pound), I also by the time I retired had achieved a kind of self-confidence that allows me (in my own estimation) to speak with a kind of authority I never felt 40 years ago. But maybe that's something that just comes with experience and seniority.

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The big questions.

Some decades back, after pondering the imponderables till I was blue in the face, in ordinary as well as various alternative states, I shelved all of that with a kind of primitivist conclusion

(occlusion?)

> that probably something like immaterial being does exist (though 'exist' is not the proper word for it);

> that such "spiritual" being probably warrants some acknowledgment of "the sacred";

> that personifications of "it" were likely projections of our own psyche and therefore suspect when not downright dumb or sacrilegious;

> that monotheism was an especially denigrating way of looking at things;

> that most attempts at rational descriptions or understandings of it (from pre-Plato on) were useless metaphysical efforts to rationalize the ontological endpoint of thought where opposites come together and abstraction makes everything a black cat in the dark;

> that most thinking about that whole realm was a waste of time better spent chopping wood and hauling water.

Or something like that.

What I like about Hardt & Negri's take is that they translate the theological tease and mystical woo-woo and ecclesiastical prod of the West's immanence/transcendence dualism into political terms that make a whole lot of history (especially the modern world, which they date from the 14thC) clear as it's never quite been for me before.

Among other things, they note (following Guattari, it seems) that Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise (a text largely ignored in my formal education and most of my reading since) is at least as important in our history as his Ethics, a foundational text, in fact, in the growth of western democracy, and emphasize that the part of his quasi-panteism his age found most objectionable was not the cosmography but the fact that it put man on an equal footing with God.