

Do we still not know what a body can do? Spinoza,

Arendt and *The Productive Body*

'We live, as we dream – alone'.¹ Joseph Conrad writes in *Heart of Darkness* (1899) of the debilitating individualism of the human condition. But this sense of isolation is discovered not through some aloof moment of solitude, but in being among others – the fellow opportunists, adventurers and crooks narrated in Conrad's imperialist voyage down the River Congo. But despite the esteem it's sometimes given as revealing deeper psychological truths of human existence, *Heart of Darkness* is primarily a critique of European imperialism and racism, and the destructive psychological and physical changes it wrought on its proponents. The characters find themselves increasingly alienated not just from each other, but also from a certain experience of being human, of feeling passions, of being corporeal. The Europeans become disembodied, ghost-like, separated from the earth. Confronted by 'prehistoric man' – Conrad shared at least some of the racist triumphalism of his British readers – he writes that

we glided past like phantoms ... We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember ... The earth seemed unearthly... and the men... No, they were not inhuman ... what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity –; like yours – the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar.²

¹ Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (London: Penguin, 2007), 33.

² *Ibid.*, 43-44.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt dedicates the second of her three-part analysis to late 19th century European imperialism and the “Scramble for Africa”. In particular, she identifies a new ambition for unlimited expansion, as the European bourgeoisie dreamt of ‘the unlimited accumulation of capital’.³ ‘Expansion is everything’, she quotes Cecil Rhodes. ‘[T]hese stars ... these vast worlds which we can never reach. I would annex the planets if I could’.⁴ This was the ‘moving principle’ of the new imperialist era, a unique combination of rapacious capitalism, scientific racism and the rise of modern bureaucracy.

For Arendt, the Industrial Revolution had generated surplus capital (from increased production and decreased labour costs) and surplus people, expropriated by land enclosures and rising rents, or unemployed by cyclical economic crises and the disappearance of old forms of work. They were exiled, ‘spat out’ from bourgeois European society. These ‘superfluous men’ came from many different European states to join the various commercial expeditions like that in Conrad’s tale. ‘The mob’, as Arendt called them, were the ‘shadows of events’; they existed without necessarily being alive.⁵ They were “‘hollow to the core,” “reckless without hardihood, greedy without audacity and cruel without courage””, she writes, quoting Conrad’s character Marlow. “They believed in nothing and “could get (themselves) to believe anything –

³ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1979), 137.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 189.

anything.”⁶ They were a peculiarly modern person, a by-product of a new kind of productive capitalism.

The mob, dispossessed from society by the extraordinary developments in industrial production analysed in Marx’s *Capital*, had coalesced around a new kind of human association, one premised on isolation and individual subsumption into wider political mass movements, like Nazism. But Arendt’s point about imperialism, whose consequences for British history remain inadequately confronted, is that its concepts, processes and effects were all consequential to the rapid development of industrial capitalism. Moreover, this logic of unlimited accumulation would inevitably continue, thought Arendt, warning readers in the revised 1960s edition of the continued spectre of economically and socially superfluous men, dispossessed refugees and a collective state of ‘organized loneliness’ among many in the West.⁷

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It may seem strange to begin an essay on François Guéry and Didier Deleule’s *The Productive Body* (*Le corps productif*, 1972) with an excursus on imperialism, which is mentioned only once in this short, elliptical polemic. ‘Since Lenin, we know that the maximum spatial extension of the productive body may be that of the planet itself, since imperialism has effectively covered its entire surface’.⁸ Guéry’s brief remark contains more of Arendt than Lenin’s theory of imperialism, whose *Origins* were beginning to be

⁶ Ibid., 189.

⁷ Ibid., 478. Part 3 would continue to be revised until 1966.

⁸ Guéry and Deleule, *The Productive Body* [hereafter *TPB*], trans. Philip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro (Alresford: Zero, 2014), 62.

published in French from 1972. *The Productive Body's* demarcation of the biological, social and productive bodies (more on this shortly) also bears more than a passing resemblance to Arendt's categorisation of labour and work in *The Human Condition*.⁹ But imperialism gives one historical outline for thinking about the economic and political causes of the isolation and fragmentation of societal bonds (or decline of the 'social body', in its lexicon) produced by capitalism. To live as one dreams - alone - is, in Conrad's context and via Guéry and Deleule's analysis, to exist to produce economic value for the capitalist. Or, as the book formulates, to be merely a productive body and a biological body, while also alienated from the social body. Like Arendt, Guéry and Deleule seek to rediscover some kind of human agency from what Walter Benjamin called 'the rags, the refuse' of modernity, the damaged bodies and minds created by industrial capitalism.¹⁰

But whereas Arendt will make a case for the value of spontaneity, creativity and democratic deliberation to energise political life, Guéry and Deleule take a more difficult, circumlocutory route. One immersed in the Spinozist vitalism of Gilles Deleuze and the Althusserian conceptual framework of ideology, but which also offers an insightful and original series of responses to what we might call *the problem of June 1968*. That is, after several weeks of spectacular student and worker occupations involving up to ten million across France over May, General Charles de Gaulle was re-elected on a landslide on 23rd June with the promise of restoring civic order amid a

⁹ Translated into French in 1961.

¹⁰ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2002), 860.

'communist plot'.¹¹ Given that, for many, France had been on the cusp of a new kind of socialist revolution, why had so many workers gone back to work and so many students given up on the occupations? '*Retour à la normale*' joked one iconic poster from May, bitterly. But had they?

New intellectual and political energies were brewing in the years immediately after, as young intellectuals came increasingly to blame the French Communist Party for apparently conspiring to subdue the demonstrations. They instead drew on the wider influence of a New Left that was more internationalist, feminist and attuned to personal and embodied forms of political oppression. An older intellectual generation of the 1940s-50s that had venerated Hegel, Heidegger and then the Structuralism of Merleau-Ponty and Levi-Strauss was being supplanted by ambitious new theoretical work that drew on Nietzsche, Freud and the young Marx – whom Paul Ricoeur called the 'three masters of suspicion' – alongside Spinoza.¹² Important figures within this tradition included Althusser, Foucault and Deleuze, the latter two of which were associated with a new kind of revolutionary leftism, as much pitched against existing large-scale left-wing political parties and unions as against the 'silent majority' that had supported De Gaulle.

In particular, Deleuze had recently published two incisive studies of Spinoza – *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza (Spinoza et le problème de l'expression)* in 1968 and *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy (Spinoza: Philosophie pratique)* in 1970.¹³ In 1969, Deleuze had moved to Paris to teach at Paris-VIII Vincennes, alongside other radical luminaries

¹¹ For a good historical assessment, see Julian Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary Thought* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 24.

¹² Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 33.

¹³ Translated into English in 1990 and 1988 respectively.

like Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière, Jacques Lacan, Luce Irigaray and Judith Miller.¹⁴ That same year, he met and began collaborating with the radical psychoanalyst Félix Guattari, the first fruits of which appeared as *Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Anti-Oedipus* (*Capitalisme et schizophrénie: L'anti-Œdipe*) in 1972. Remembering this period, François Guéry recalls seeing Deleuze lecture at Vincennes, while preparing this new material. The effect was like having a 'mental bath', becoming immersed – or even baptised – in a new kind of conceptual universe.¹⁵

One of the foundational questions of *Anti-Oedipus* is what Étienne de la Boétie had called, four centuries earlier, the problem of 'voluntary servitude'.¹⁶ Why do the oppressed and exploited masses support and defend undemocratic regimes? Deleuze and Guattari write:

Even the most repressive and the most deadly forms of social reproduction are produced by desire That is why the fundamental problem of political philosophy is still precisely the one that Spinoza saw so clearly, and that Wilhelm Reich rediscovered: "Why do men fight *for* their servitude as stubbornly as though it were their salvation?" How can people possibly reach the point of shouting: "More taxes! Less bread!"?¹⁷

¹⁴ On Vincennes Paris-VIII, see François Dosse, *History of Structuralism. Volume 2*, trans. Deborah Glassman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), chapter 14.

¹⁵ Guéry said this during his keynote lecture at "The Body Productive" conference, 8th December 2018 at Birkbeck, University of London.

¹⁶ La Boétie, *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*, trans. James B. Atkinson and David Sices (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2012), 17.

¹⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 29.

For Deleuze and Guattari, the question had to be approached via the rubric of desire. Desire 'produces reality', and social relations are bound up by investments of desire.¹⁸ Desire is at the foundation of everything, and can express wonderful, formidable and revolutionary power, 'calling into question the established order of a society'.¹⁹ Hence the lengths the authorities will go to repress or redirect ('reterritorialize') these desires into more conventional, socially reproductive forms.²⁰ Lacan would later wryly describe this as the moral imperative of the 'service of goods' of consumer ideology: "Carry on working, work must go on.' Which, of course, means: 'Let it be clear to everyone that this is on no account the moment to express the least surge of desire'.²¹ Desire finds itself again pitched against the utilitarian, *boring* morality of the authorities.

But one problem with Deleuze and Guattari's Spinozist concept of desire is its sub-idealist, transcendental treatment. Desire seems to have a life of its own, one that predates and interrupts all forms of social inscription. If one accommodates oneself to life under a violent regime and refuses on pragmatic grounds (like the survival of one's family) to oppose it, does that therefore entail that one desires it? This may be a step too far. The question for progressive and revolutionary thinkers remains how to speak of political agency or revolutionary consciousness amid passivity and disempowerment.

Marx's solution to this question was to turn it on its head. 'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence', he writes, 'but their social

¹⁸ Ibid., 30.

¹⁹ Ibid., 116.

²⁰ Ibid., 257-262.

²¹ Lacan, *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 318.

existence that determines their consciousness'.²² This problem was articulated forthrightly (if less clearly) by Althusser, whose theoretical work and seminars at the École Normale Supérieure over the 1960s used Marx to explore how this social existence ideologically conditions subjects. They come to accept their own place within these wider structures as natural, realistic even, a condition achieved through the family, education system and the church. For Althusser, in his famous 1970 essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", 'ideology interpellates individuals as subjects'.²³ One experiences and recognises oneself as a subject when one is hailed, for instance by a policeman in the street. Guéry has this in mind in his hyperbolic attack on the 'guards' that are said to police 'all public or private property'.²⁴ But Althusser still rests a great deal on the linguistic and symbolic structures within the heads of subjects to achieve this interpellation. What if passivity and disempowerment was inscribed in oneself long before one was addressed and subjected by a figure of authority – what if this passivity was not only inscribed but embodied, felt, lived through, lived alone?

It is to these questions that Deleuze and Guéry's *The Productive Body* offers a fruitful contribution, with its turn to the body under capitalism, rather than the mind – and indeed, the mind's separation from the body. It presents a threefold distinction in bodies and their relation to capital: the biological, the social, and the productive. The biological body concerns what sustains life. The social body corresponds to the division of labour which predates capitalism, and associated in their discussion with the guilds.²⁵

²² Marx, *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*, ed. Maurice Dobb, trans. S.W. Ryazanskaya (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 21.

²³ In Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review, 1971), 170.

²⁴ *TPB*, 57.

²⁵ Particularly by Guéry, *TPB*, 66-72.

But the productive body relates to a peculiar separation of minds from bodies, associated with the mind-body dualism of Descartes, which has led to specialisations in psychology and a growing machinification of the body. This becoming productive, becoming what is variously called a 'body-machine' and 'living machine', is to be put to use and integrated into the functional processes of capital. The power and agency of the body take on decisive significance.

It is through the power (or, indeed, weakness) of bodies under capitalism that the work makes its most startling and original contributions, taking a separate route to desire and ideology to account for a new kind of alienation of workers under modern capitalism. This is one in which, as the co-written foreword sets out, the body has become an instrument of capital, subject to a 'conversion into a means of production' which is also a 'privatization' of the body's social functions.²⁶ Yet from the outset, this contribution is indebted to the thought of Spinoza.

Guéry begins his half of the book with a question of the body in Spinoza. 'Spinoza said: we don't know what a body can do.'²⁷ The line is not an obvious place to begin with Spinoza, but bears the influence of Deleuze, who emphasised what he called this 'war-cry' found in the *Ethics*, Part 3, Proposition 2.²⁸ What is meant by it? The argument comes in the context of a radical turn to Spinoza in France during the 1960s, which often placed him antagonistically against the Christian mind-body dualism of Descartes. For Deleuze, Spinoza is a philosopher of immanence, the body, desire and joy. 'The *Ethics* is necessarily an ethics of joy', he writes, 'only joy is worthwhile, joy remains,

²⁶ Guéry and Deleule, *TPB*, 51.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁸ Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Edwin Curley (London: Penguin, 1996), 71; Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Zone, 1992), 255.

bringing us near to action, and to the bliss of action'.²⁹ In Deleuze's explanation of Spinoza's metaphysics, the power of substance depends on the modes which constitute it – not a top-down but a bottom-up power, a power understood and expressed through material structures and relations.³⁰ For Guéry, this leads to the question of a given body's power: 'We need to know what it can do, before we can worry about what it is.'³¹ The body is identified early on by its power or range of activity, which effectively constitutes its essence (what it *is*). This political interest in metaphysical power is one of the central tenets of the French materialist revival of Spinoza over the late 1960s, associated with the seminars of Althusser and major publications by Martial Guerout, Deleuze and Alexandre Matheron over 1968-69.³² It would lead Antonio Negri to later emphasise the productive power or *potentia* of the multitude.³³

But what makes such a body powerful or weak? For Guéry, the 'question about power refers to an experience of perception about intensity, an experience of knowledge'. Beyond the Deleuzian framework ('intensity', 'perception'), this definition raises more questions than answers. What is an intensity? What is the nature of this perception or knowledge? Are these not the mental, psychological categories the book is attempting to think its way around? This problem is reminiscent of the earlier critique of Deleuze and Guattari on desire – how can we speak of the revolutionary or insurrectionary power of a given desire, intensity or 'experience of knowledge' when it remains embedded in the material structures that the authors are supposedly deploying

²⁹ Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Lights, 1988), 28.

³⁰ Deleuze, *Expressionism*, 11.

³¹ *TPB*, 57.

³² For an historical overview, see Knox Peden, *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

³³ E.g. *The Savage Anomaly* (1981) and *Empire*, with Michael Hardt (2000).

it against? Indeed, throughout the work, both Guéry and Deleule struggle to articulate in what way bodies might become more powerful, that is to say, less productive, and in Deleule's latter half of the book, part of 'the resistance of life'.³⁴

But we can reconstruct an account through how the pair describe a given body's weakness. This occurs principally in two ways – by an identification with and internalisation of the machinic nature of modern work, or becoming a productive body; and by a 'privatisation' of the individual who becomes disconnected or alienated from the social nature (or body) of this work, and so separated from others.³⁵ These two ways are accomplished by a more general conceptual separation or 'scission' of minds from bodies, associated with Cartesian dualism, which Deleule associates with the development of the discipline of psychology.³⁶ Let's consider each in turn, before exploring how a kind of Spinozan monism is brought against this duality.

The becoming-productive of the body forms the bulk of the argument. Early on, productivity is distinguished from a more general condition of production. 'We call it the *productive* body, not the *producer*', as Guéry writes, as it 'exists for and by the consumer's products. To be the proprietor of products is to dominate production.'³⁷ This dense, unclear formulation – characteristic of the text – implies that productivity involves a more direct integration of the individual's body (their biological body) into the reproductive processes of industrial capitalism. Guéry's analysis explores this through Marx's *Capital* Volume I, Part 4, through the concept of relative surplus value, achieved in Marx's analysis by a specialisation in production through machinery, which

³⁴ Deleule, *TPB*, 133.

³⁵ Guéry, *TPB*, 51.

³⁶ Guéry, *TPB*, 65; Deleule, *TPB*, Part 2, Chapter 2.

³⁷ *TPB*, 60.

reduces the cost of labour and increases the surplus value to the capitalist of the completed product. For Guéry, this is also achieved by a profound identification with the new machinery of production, and of conceiving oneself as mere ‘accessories or substitutes for [its] mechanical organs’.³⁸ What it reveals is that ‘capital was obliged to incorporate these elements all over again, to integrate them into a new body, which is the productive body’.³⁹ But how precisely were these elements incorporated?

Deleuze offers more detail on this count. Once more, there’s an implicitly Spinozan framework of bodily power used, wittingly or not. ‘For what this metamorphosis brings about is first and foremost an increase in power’.⁴⁰ Without understanding this ‘fundamental point’, everything else remains mysterious:

In effect, the idea is not that the machine should be able to replace living things in a project of conquest that is impossible for them, but rather that in its essence life is conquest and that the machine, to accomplish its function, must be inscribed in a motion that prolongs that of the living organism.⁴¹

In other words, the emergence of bourgeois capitalism involves a new philosophical perspective of life, one in which life is conceived in Promethean terms as a ‘conquest’ and ‘mastery’ over nature.⁴² While it goes unremarked, this view could be reinforced

³⁸ Ibid., 90.

³⁹ Ibid., 63.

⁴⁰ Deleuze, *TPB*, 103.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 104.

with C.B. Macpherson's thesis of a tradition of 'possessive individualism' in early modern philosophy, contemporaneous with the rise of this mode of production, particularly in Hobbes and Locke, which had been translated into French in 1971.⁴³ 'The body-machine is both life affirmed in all the exuberance of its dominating movement', Deleule writes, and 'the machine required for the development of effective potentialities, required as the guarantee of functional movement'.⁴⁴ The biological body becomes 'a tool' of the new machinic processes of capital, and increasingly comes to be experienced as mere machinery ('machinified'), or what Guéry called the mechanical organs, under the direction of a foreman, manager or more distant and magical economic forces.⁴⁵

The second key contribution of their argument theorises how this tighter integration of the body into the productivity of capitalism also results in a decline of the individual's social relations and make-up. In their co-written foreword, the pair offer a useful corrective to Althusser and indeed to Foucault's later concept of disciplinary power. All the sites of disciplinary power – the family, church, school, prison, hospital, factory – which imply an 'intended socialization' are 'replaced by a privatization of social functions'.⁴⁶ Productivity involves a tendency 'toward the privatization of these organs, toward their integration within the productive body as elements of production'.⁴⁷ The old sites of disciplinary socialisation serve to produce pliable and productive bodies, no longer slowed down by solidarity, friendship or workplace

⁴³ Macpherson, *La Théorie politique de l'individualisme possessif* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971 [1962]).

⁴⁴ *TPB*, 103.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁴⁶ Guéry and Deleule, *TPB*, 51.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

militancy. Industrial specialisation involves a de-skilling of the old 'work' (in the Arendtian sense) of the artisan and the guilds, and a new world in which creative genius belongs not to the worker, but to the tool. Workers become expendable, superfluous, a 'perfected tool',⁴⁸ like that of the Fordist conveyor-belt and the rise of piecework.

Some of the most convincing material in demonstration of this comes via Marx's discussion of the modern factory. 'Their unification into one single productive body, and the establishment of a connection between their individual functions, lies outside them', Marx writes of the modern workforce.⁴⁹ 'These things are not their own act, but the act of the capital that brings them together and maintains them in that situation.' Workers experience what might be called a double alienation: alienated not just from their own social bodies and into the machines, but also from any sense of agency or participation in the production process. As Guéry notes, quoting Marx, 'the interconnection between their various labours (those of the wage labourers) confronts them, in the realm of ideas, as a plan drawn up by the capitalist, and (that) the unity of their collective body appears to them, practically, as his authority, as the powerful will of a being outside them, who subjects their activity to his purpose.'⁵⁰ They are like the lonely men of 'the mob' in Arendt, disempowered, de-skilled, hollowed out, no longer quite believing in anything except their individual survival.

Whereas Deleuze's Spinozism emphasises joy and becoming, Guéry and Deleule focus more on how bodies are restricted, subjugated and disempowered. This extends to what they call the 'illusion' of Trotskyism, that the body possesses a natural

⁴⁸ Guéry, *TPB*, 83.

⁴⁹ In Guéry, *TPB*, 74 (and the only instance of 'productive body' in *Capital*).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 74, 76.

productivity that is then expropriated by parasitical capital. While Deleuze's later analysis will unwittingly make a fairly similar claim for the body's living power against dead capital, it's the peculiar Spinozism of what happens next that's interesting. 'From a Spinozan perspective that has been adopted in the Althusserian exegesis', Guéry writes, 'this is a simplistic conception of the illusion. Attacking the illusion will accomplish nothing unless we do away with its real basis'. But what was the Althusserian exegesis?

Althusser didn't publish anything substantial on Spinoza over this period – one rumour has it that his plans were shelved after reading Matheron's *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza* (1969), which had apparently made his own argument better than he could have done.⁵¹ But Spinoza had been a vital interlocutor in Althusser's seminars and research on ideology. What Althusser saw as demonstrated in Spinoza's analysis of the religious customs, ceremonies, historical narratives and societal rules of the Jewish people in the *Theological-Political Treatise* was 'the materiality of ideology'.⁵² For Althusser, this provides 'perhaps the first historical form of a theory of ideology', in establishing how bodies were conditioned into collective obedience through cultural rites and shared imaginaries.⁵³ As Althusser writes elsewhere, 'ideology' exists both as a real (i.e. economic) and as an 'imaginary' or 'lived' relation.⁵⁴ The two are mutually reinforcing: to function effectively in the former, our desires and identifications must be bound up with the latter.

⁵¹ In English, the title would be *The Individual and Community in Spinoza*, though the work has yet to be translated. The Althusser anecdote appears in Ted Stolze, "Revisiting a Marxist Encounter with Spinoza", *Crisis and Critique*, 2.1 (2015), 153.

⁵² Althusser, "The Only Materialist Tradition, Part 1: Spinoza", trans. Ted Stolze, in *The New Spinoza*, ed. Warren Montag and Translator (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 3.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁴ Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2005 [1965]), 233-34.

Again, to think from a Spinozan perspective is to think from one of bodies and their power, but one that also recognises that their power is established and conditioned by formidable social structures. But for Spinoza, one can only overcome a state of slavery (*servitudo*) by learning to understand what causes harmful ideas or passive thinking, like false representations of nature and the world, or powerful sad passions like hatred and fear, which often compel us to obey tyrants.⁵⁵ It requires something along the lines of what second-wave feminists of this period would call ‘consciousness-raising’ – meeting with others and sharing one’s experiences of disempowerment, in order to better understand their causes and how to challenge them. A form of bodily power that is necessarily social and interrelational then. But in Spinoza’s argument it also requires a return to the state, to capturing and reorganising the political state as a democratic, liberal republic. The purpose or ‘end of the republic is really freedom’, he says in the *Theological-Political Treatise*.⁵⁶ His arguments for the state and the political were often overlooked by his Marxist readers over this period. One finds few similar sources of enthusiasm for the state during this time, with the exception perhaps of Arendt, and her emphasis on establishing political spaces of deliberation and democratic decision-making.

Spinoza’s thought also challenges Descartes’ dualism, an important point for *The Productive Body*. Whereas Spinoza’s monism is metaphysical – there is one substance, of which a body and a mind are two different attributes of one being that exist in parallel, sometimes called ‘parallelism’ – Guéry and Deleule historicise dualism as reflecting a separation or scission between minds and bodies that reflected the intensification of

⁵⁵ Paraphrasing *Ethics*, Part 5, Proposition 10, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza: Volume I*, trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

⁵⁶ In *Collected Works: Volume II*, trans. Curley (as above, 2016), 346.

capital into European society. For Guéry, this scission is also one of ‘the body from its powers’ – while the body is reduced to mere machinery, the mind is elevated to the origin and force of production.⁵⁷ In the combination of the two, he writes, the ‘body-machine thesis is supplanted by the humanist thesis that makes *knowledge* (in contrast to the more practical, social and less aloof *know-how*) the weapon with which man makes himself “master and possessor of nature,” and ... of the machine-like nature of the body in general’.⁵⁸ In other words, the mind (or ‘capital’, riffing on the etymology of the latter as relating to the head or top) becomes the place of knowledge and management over passive, mechanical, desocialised bodies. This point is continued in Deleule’s account of Descartes, who had famously considered bodies as like mechanical things, operated (in humanity) by the soul through the animal spirits. In response, Deleule pitches up a certain parallelism. Quoting André Godfernaux (“The goal of parallelism is precisely this: to put what is called the mind, this imaginary edifice constructed through the centuries, back into its real home, the body’), Deleule provides a rare instance of clarity around the book’s intentions: ‘The goal of our work will be precisely to determine what sort of body this is, how it is put together, and how it sustains itself.’⁵⁹

As readers will know, this concludes a section that had begun with a delightful, unexpectedly light-hearted phenomenology of touch, as a ‘pair of iron calipers with cork tips at the ends’ explore what a given body can do.⁶⁰ Indeed, before turning to some of the lingering problems of the account, it’s worth contextualising this within a wider

⁵⁷ *TPB*, 65.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 118; Godfernaux, “Le parallélisme psycho-physique et ses conséquences”, *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l’Étranger*, 58 (1904), 499.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 110.

secret history of bodies, as opposed to the rather tired canonical history of ideas. A form of active inquiry that explores how bodies are constituted by, communicate, imitate, inscribe, reinscribe, subvert or actively resist societal norms, rules and ‘acceptable’ pastimes and occupations, from work to sex to definitions of leisure. One in which transmission occurs not through the intellectual influence of a printed *magnum opus* say, or a family tree of conceptual development led by Great Men, but through places and spaces of relationality;⁶¹ through encounters with others, be they public or private, marked as much by affects of love, care, solidarity or humour as of hatred, anger, or loneliness – the latter characterising the private retreat of the ‘productive body’ so usefully outlined by Guéry and Deleule.

The secret history of bodies draws on Foucault’s method of genealogy – ‘a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying’.⁶² It serves as a counterpoint to the prevailing phenomenology of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, with its supposition of a raw, unmediated, transparent experience of the mind or the body. Such an experience, which Derrida dismissed as a ‘metaphysics of presence’,⁶³ would be also

⁶¹ Some theoretical precursors for this approach might include Foucault’s later writing on embodiment and power, e.g. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), as well as in the field of relational autonomy, e.g. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar (eds.), *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Human Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). It might draw inspiration from practises of workers’ inquiry, undertaken in the late 1960s/early 1970s by Italian radical leftists – a form of knowledge-production from below that is embedded in existing social relations while seeking to transform them. (For an introduction, see Marcelo Hoffman, *Militant Acts: The Role of Investigations in Radical Political Struggles* (New York: SUNY, 2019), chapter 3).

⁶² Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?”, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. trans. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 46.

⁶³ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 24.

economically conditioned, if we keep in mind Marx's claim that it is our social existence that determines our consciousness, and not vice-versa. A secret history of bodies then is alert to how social and economic forces suffuse, empower or restrict the very range of what our bodies can do, feel, act or act on, reciprocate, exchange. Yet it remains secret by eluding or being overlooked, remaining hidden in plain sight, by histories whose focus is predominantly on cultural texts and ideas.

What would be the standpoint of the body on industrial production? Guéry suggests this question later in the work, in asking us to consider Marx as a physician who studies the 'physiology of manufacture' and finds everywhere 'sickness, torture and enfeeblement'.⁶⁴ What does the doctor prescribe? While Marx often invoked monstrous imagery, Guéry and Deleule suggest images of physical decay – 'contagion', 'parasitic', the 'sick patient'.⁶⁵ But both seem overwhelmed by what they conceive as the power of capital's *will* – one which has the power to animate and control the undead productive bodies of the workers under its management. Against the gruelling onslaught of modern capital, Guéry recommends only a war of attrition, as unemployed intellectuals attempt to forge transient alliances with proletarians and the wider 'forces of non-history', like a 'paradoxical weed that springs furiously from the ground after every attack'.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, Deleule appeals not to any existing social or political forces, but to a distant, eschatological principle of life itself, in opposition to death. While hinting tantalisingly at the possibilities of the standpoint of the body, both writers ultimately row back to vague divinations that cannot empower bodies to collectively become forces of history, or at least their own history. In this they might have drawn on

⁶⁴ *TPB*, 64.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 62, 65.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 95.

developments in other parts of the post-68 New Left, like processes of ‘consciousness-raising’ mentioned earlier, vital to a new wave of feminist activism in this period, outlined in the Anglophone work of Carol Hanisch, Kathie Sarachild and others, or in France, in organisations like *La Mouvement de libération des femmes* (MLF).⁶⁷ Or, among wider industrial struggles, in practices of mutual aid and worker self-management that had shown fleeting possibilities in the May 1968 occupations, like of Rhône-Poulenc (Vitry) or Renault Cléon and Billancourt – forms of collective organisation by which individuals become more powerful, collectively.⁶⁸

On one level, this position justifiably concedes to the continued expansion of capital’s power over everyday life, which grew over this period and has subsequently intensified with the shift to post-Fordist or neoliberal capitalism and decline of unionised labour (presaged here with references to ‘surveillance’, ‘software’ and the rise of ‘temp work’).⁶⁹ *The Productive Body* can be fruitfully read alongside Deleuze’s 1990 ‘Postscript on the Societies of Control’ in this respect.⁷⁰ Both respond in different ways to the problem of June 1968, in a fusion of the economic, the cultural and the

⁶⁷ E.g. Hanisch, “The Personal is Political” [1969]; Sarachild, “A Program for Feminist Consciousness-Raising” [1968], both in Barbara A. Crow (ed.), *Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader* (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 113-116; 273-276.

⁶⁸ These occupations were however short-lived and sometimes only involved a small amount of the workforce. The Citroën strike committee was criticised for being more focused on arranging games of ping-pong and cards than workers’ education (are both incompatible?). In the UK, the 1976 Lucas Plan indicates another opportunity for workplace self-management in which workers were actively involved in producing an alternative plan for an aerospace company facing large redundancies and relocation. On 1968 French worker movements, see Michael Seidman, “Workers in a Repressive Society of Seductions: Parisian Metallurgists in May-June 1968”, *French Historical Studies*, 18.1 (Spring, 1993), 255-278.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 66, 77, 81.

⁷⁰ This originally appeared as ‘Post-scriptum sur les sociétés de contrôle’ in *L’autre journal*, 1 (May 1990), and translated into English under the above title in *October*, 59 (1992).

psychological. But the argument is too fatalistic: a secret history of bodies would richly incorporate the many instances of the subjects of capital not merely preferring not to – as per Herman Melville’s *Bartleby*, an important resource for this period – but actively disrupting, protesting or refusing, as bodies occupying streets, workplaces and public places. And, sometimes, succeeding.

*

In Part 8 of *Capital*, Volume I, Marx gives an historical outline of the emergence of capitalism. ‘Primitive accumulation’ is marked by violence and terror, as powerful and ambitious figures expropriate common land and impose forced labour on the poor. In characteristically grotesque imagery, ‘capital comes dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt’.⁷¹ While focusing on early modern Europe, Marx was aware of an accelerated form of primitive accumulation taking place in the imperialist race for Africa. But whereas Marx believed capitalism would inevitably collapse through its own internal economic conditions, Arendt’s analysis of late 19th century capitalism identified two additional features key to its adaptation and survival: the development of an extensive and powerful state bureaucracy, with which it became interlinked, and the creation of a new kind of human nature: one not merely befuddled by the opiates and false consciousness of the capitalist superstructure, but affectively conditioned to fear and distrust others and to uncritically obey authority.

Addressing this loneliness in the third part of Arendt’s *Origins*, Claude Lefort argues that Arendt ‘underestimates’ what he considers ‘one of the most characteristic

⁷¹ Marx, *Capital. Volume I*, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), 926.

features of fascism and communism, namely the attempt to create in the social sphere a species of bodies in which individuals are united'.⁷² But this overlooks one of Arendt's more startling points: the loss of reliable social bonds (being 'deserted by all human companionship') is conditional to the isolated individual identifying not with peers but wider mass movements of global, historical ambition.⁷³ In other words, individualism is conditional to mass conformity and obedience. But in the phrasing of Deleuze, this individualism is, if not dead, then half-alive. It describes the miserable persistence of individual minds, whose scission is not just from other minds, but also from their own body's power of acting, its joyous passions and electrifying desires.

By the Spinozist stakes of Guéry and Deleuze, we still do not know what a body can do. Our own era is shaped by increasing automation, while work itself becomes more precarious, "self-employed", subject to surveillance and management. Can we speak of an agency that belongs only to the body, and not the mind? This would involve a shift away from exploring workers' ideas about their subjection, something necessarily limited and difficult to accomplish given the decline of the social body, towards the behaviours and breakdowns of bodies. Just as, in recent years, mental illness has been politicised as an effect of living under the insecurity of late capitalism, could we also politicise bodily disorders and breakdowns, like off-work sickness, anxiety disorders or stress? Nic Murray suggests that with the decline of trade union power, the 'experience of distress' that can give rise to longer illness constitutes 'a form of embodied resistance

⁷² Lefort interviewed in "Hannah Arendt et "atomisation de la société"", *France Culture*, dir. Michel Bossuet (1996) <https://www.franceculture.fr/philosophie/hannah-arendt-et-atomisation-de-la-societe>.

⁷³ Arendt, *Origins*, 474.

to the current nature of work'.⁷⁴ Might we speak then of some bodily agency, even resistance, however desperate, in the ways that say physical tics and catatonic states effect non-compliance? In a recent reading of Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholia", Judith Butler has written of 'mania' as an insurrectionary force that effects a 'dis-identification' from the status quo in response to a lost loved object.⁷⁵ Whereas melancholia involves a process of self-beratement and self-destruction, as the self refuses to let go of this loss and internalises it, mania actively renounces this loss, breaks bonds and refuses reality, challenging the internal tyranny of the super-ego. By the terms of Guéry and Deleule, the biological body breaks down, sabotaging the productive body. For Butler, in the unrealism of such a 'refusal' is a struggle for life itself.⁷⁶

If so, it gives little hope for political resistance. In the UK at least, off-work sick days are at their lowest level on record, as people increasingly work when fatigued or ill, reflecting the precarity of employment.⁷⁷ Figures also indicate rising rates of mental

⁷⁴ Murray, "No Crying in the Breakroom" in David Frayne (ed.), *The Work Cure* (Monmouth: PCCS, 2019), 45.

⁷⁵ Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence* (London; New York: Verso, 2020), 167 [emphasis removed]. While Butler sounds a note of caution, suggesting mania as instead being a possible cipher for insurrection, this desperate position could do more to confront the personal harm such states can cause not just the sufferer, but those around them. Mark Fisher offers another politicisation of mental health via anxiety and depression that deals more thoroughly with this issue in "The Privatisation of Stress", *Soundings*, 48 (2011), in which he acknowledges the influence of David Smail, an NHS clinical psychologist, e.g. *The Origins of Unhappiness* (London: HarperCollins, 1993).

⁷⁶ Cf. Herbert Marcuse's 1964 call for an equally desperate but utopian 'Great Refusal' against 'that which is' – consumer society, positive thinking and the apparent inevitability of capitalism's historical success – *One-Dimensional Man* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 66.

⁷⁷ ONS, "Sickness absence falls to the lowest rate on record", 2018

www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/sicknessabsencefallstothelowestrateratein24years/2018-07-30.

illness among the most precarious – often young, female, of minority ethnicity;⁷⁸ while life expectancy rates between the wealthiest and poorest have significantly widened (one recent measure gives around 9.3 years for women, 7.5 for men).⁷⁹ This reflects one of the more serious blind-spots of *The Productive Body* – that there is no universally singular experience of embodiment, but that capitalist (and other) ideologies gender, racialise and classify bodies in different ways.

Instead, via Spinoza, we could consider the affects, or ideas of the body's affections, which involve an increase or decrease in our body's power of acting. Affects like hope, fear, anger and love indicate how given bodies experience and persist through capitalism. The recent turn to the affects in critical theory⁸⁰ gives a rich domain to think through the question of why the masses seemingly and willingly 'become subjugated', in Guéry's phrase, which *The Productive Body* does not answer.⁸¹ But to focus purely on affective states, like collective joy, radical happiness or anxiety, is to overlook what the affect itself signals: a given body's power of acting, which is conditioned by their relations with others. Joy doesn't beget joy, power does. To know what a body can do, we need to know what makes a body powerful.

In contemporary thought, these questions were explored by the late cultural theorist Mark Fisher, who described 'mandatory individualism' as an effect of living in

⁷⁸ NHS, Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2017 (<https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2017/2017>).

⁷⁹ Gareth Iacobucci, "Life expectancy gap between rich and poor widens", *BMJ* 2019; 364:l1492.

⁸⁰ E.g. Brian Massumi's influential 1995 essay "The Autonomy of Affect" in *Cultural Critique*, 31, 83-109. Massumi also translated Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* into English, where the affects (a Spinozan concept) are extensively discussed.

⁸¹ *TPB*, 90.

the miserable, boring, desocialised spaces of capitalism.⁸² Drawing on a similar brew of '60s counterculture and Spinoza in his final, unfinished manuscript *Acid Communism*, he suggested that we need to rediscover 'the spectre of a world which could be free'.⁸³

While the form of this spectre remains necessarily elusive, *The Productive Body* suggests a process by which we might approach such a freedom. It would be through collective consciousness-raising of a universal, pluralistic sort. This would not involve the restrictive group identifications of, say, nationalism, nor would it involve what Deleuze presciently described as a brand of "empathy-spontaneity-creativity" ... accompanied by its trusty sidekick, "wellbeing".⁸⁴ The abundance of wellbeing meditation apps and self-help books that have flooded today's market provide an invaluable function, making the immediate present more tolerable in ways that utopian daydreams do not.⁸⁵ But they cannot accomplish more than that. Treatments that focus solely on an individual's self-narrative or neurochemistry continue to perpetuate the productive at the expense of the social. They may increase (or at least reduce what impairs) an individual body's power of acting, but without a lasting collective re-foundation and transformation in making bodies more powerful under neoliberal capitalism – through reductions to enforced work, debt and the creation of places of collective joy and liberating encounters – such bodies are likely to still find themselves distant from others, depressed, alone. What a secret history of bodies might instead call

⁸² Fisher, *k-punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings*, ed. Darren Ambrose (London: Repeater, 2018), 757.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 753.

⁸⁴ *TPB*, 131.

⁸⁵ One might consider them alongside the rise of individual-orientated exercise regimes (running, gyms, cycling, yoga), and the ubiquity of prescribed antidepressants.

for is bonds of touch, collectivity and solidarity with others, through which bodies affect and are affected by one another, increasing their powers exponentially.

My warm gratitude to Steffan Blayney, Joey Hornsby and Savannah Whaley for all their helpful comments and suggestions, which have indelibly improved this chapter.