

## Ideology and the ‘Multitude of the Classroom’: Spinoza and Althusser at school

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### ABSTRACT

This paper approaches the question of Spinoza and education via the work of Louis Althusser. One important aim is to show how Spinoza’s description of the imagination underpins Althusser’s description of the ideological ‘infrastructure’ of educational practices and institutions. To achieve this, I begin by addressing Spinoza’s treatment of the physiological foundation of the imagination: by showing that the realm of ‘individual consciousness’ is more like the effect of an anonymous field, or process, Spinoza, we see, becomes a kind of immanent cause for the Althusserian claim that ‘ideology has a material existence’. I go on to examine, in detail, Althusser’s description of ‘educational apparatuses’, locating these as the expressions of a Spinozistic ontology. However, Althusserian anti-humanism can also appear to negate transformative agency; and in the specific context of the classroom, Althusser suggests, apparently ‘heroic’ teachers seem almost doomed. Hence a ‘return’ to Spinoza, enacted, here—that is, an examination of Spinozistic potentialities, mainly adumbrated in the unfinished *Political Treatise*. My article concludes by suggesting that, in light of these, the foundational unit of pedagogical practice—the group, the class—might still be reconfigured as a collective subject, rather than the mere object of ideology.

### KEYWORDS

Spinoza; Althusser; ideology; schools

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We could no doubt portray Spinoza’s overall philosophical effort as being concerned with a kind of *Bildung*—not just an emendation of the intellect, but a broader attempt at training ourselves in ‘blessedness’ (*beatitudo*). My concern here is less about the general intent of Spinoza’s thought and more about how—*via* the work of Louis Althusser—we might construct a Spinozistic critique of contemporary schooling; more specifically, I want to examine how Spinoza’s treatment of the imagination (*imaginatio*) translates as a description of the ideological infrastructure of contemporary educational practices and institutions.

First, by way of foundation, I consider Spinoza’s depiction of our ‘three types of knowledge’, giving particular attention to the extent of the imagination (and its physiological foundation). As we shall see, the way in which Spinoza shows an assumed realm of interiority and ‘individual consciousness’ to be the effect of an anonymous field or process becomes, in turn, a kind of immanent cause for the Althusserian claim that ideology has a material existence. With this established, I go on to outline something of Althusser’s general treatment of ideology, before focussing on his analysis of the ‘Ideological State Apparatus’(ISA) and, especially, on what Althusser regards as the most significant ISA in contemporary society—education. One of my central concerns is to demonstrate (1) that the descriptions Althusser provides—of education’s contemporary

ideological dominance, of the extent of its formative grip, of its 'self-understanding' and self-presentation as essentially non-ideological, etc.—are fundamentally Spinozistic expressions, and so (2) that Spinoza's thought informs one of the most trenchant—and significant—accounts of contemporary schooling.<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, I want to do more than show the Spinozistic presuppositions of Althusser's materialization of ideology—however, important these might be. Famously (or infamously), Althusser's depictions can appear to undermine the significance of transformative agency: given that, for Althusser, the subject is more like the symptom of wider structures and forces, the possibility of critical resistance becomes entangled in a wider, metaphysical, problematic; furthermore, and addressing the specific context of the classroom, Althusser explicitly suggests that teachers who might seem to act as exceptional 'heroes' are almost doomed to be overcome by the ideological forces that they imagine themselves opposing.<sup>2</sup> Hence, a 'return' to Spinoza that I shall try to enact, here—that is, an examination of certain Spinozistic suggestions which take us beyond the letter of Althusser's reading. As my paper concludes, Spinoza's 'collective subject' provides at least the adumbration of positive possibility in what remains the pre-supposition of so much pedagogical practice—the group, or class.<sup>3</sup> These final remarks should not be taken as some sort of 'Spinozist triumphalism' (Berardi, 2009, p. 160): they are bare, non-programmatic, and merely formal. Nonetheless, they might still perform an important role, inasmuch as they indicate an *ontological* principle which—in turn, and beyond the limits of this paper—could provide the basis for further reflection and research.

### Spinoza's three types of knowledge

A comprehensive survey of Spinoza's epistemology is beyond the scope of this paper. However, in order to understand Althusser's description of the ideological core of educational practices and institutions, we need to appreciate at least the broad shape of Spinoza's description of the tripartite structure of knowledge: (1) imagination, (2) rational cognition (*ratio*), and (3) intuition (*scientia intuitiva*). In particular, we need to appreciate the sheer extent of the imagination, and the way in which, for Spinoza, it is 'the only cause of falsity' (E2P41; Spinoza, 2002, p. 268); as we shall see, we can treat Spinoza's treatment of the imagination as the presupposition of Althusser's treatment of ideology.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Imagination*

Perhaps the central point for us to bear in mind is that, for Spinoza, all varieties of imagination are assumed to have a physiological basis. Imagination is the expression of the ways in which bodies are affected by their environments. And, although different 'levels' are progressively more refined, this affective foundation ensures that the kind of knowledge provided here always remains determined *externally* 'by the fortuitous run of circumstance [*fortuito occursu*]' (E2P29; Spinoza, 2002, p. 262).

Certainly, imagination allows for that 'knowledge from casual experience [*experientia vaga*]' (E2P40S2; Spinoza, 2002, p. 267) in which we link up past, present, and future events, draw inferences and make predictions. Or again, it finds its most rarefied form in our use of so-called universals, whereby we abstract from so many (sensed) particulars. Nonetheless, affectivity remains foundational—and so, because the imagination is always tied (at every level) to 'the common order of nature', the type of knowledge provided is never binding and certain.

In short, imagination may be central in determining our day-to-day existence; nonetheless, it cannot provide properly deductive certainty. Ultimately, the kind of cognitive connections (or *concatenatio*) that imagination establishes depend on the affectations of the body; as such, these

are fundamentally distinct from those *concatenatio* established by the intellect, and ‘by which the mind perceives things through their first causes’ (E2P18S; Spinoza, 2002, p. 258).

### Reason

Whereas imaginative knowledge is determined ‘externally’, as a result of our being (passively) subject to bodily effects, rational cognition, or reason, entails the mind being ‘internally’ directed, or determined, according to the concatenations of (clear and distinct) demonstrations. Rational cognition establishes genuinely scientific insight, by transcending the arbitrary and instead providing properly adequate understanding of the universal features of nature. Our comprehension of these features, which is quite distinct from the so-called ‘universals’ of the imagination, is thus, the perception of what is genuinely common to all physical entities (or bodies)—in other words, the common notions (*notiones communes*) we can have of substance *qua* extension.

Better to understand the difference between the first and second types of knowledge, we might consider an example that Spinoza himself provides. To the imagination, the sun might appear no further away than any other ‘semi-distant object’. The inference is not incorrect, as such: it reflects, perfectly well, a series of bodily affects. However, when we augment this imaginative knowledge with properly founded scientific insight (regarding optics, physics, causal determinations, etc.), we gain proper, rational, insight. Reason provides explication and deduction; imagination, by contrast, gives ‘accounts’ (of different degrees of vagueness) and—at best, induction. It seems, then, that the stronger or firmer our knowledge, the further removed it is from bodily affects—a point underlined by Spinoza’s sketch of the third and ‘highest’ type of knowledge: intuition.

### Intuition

Although Spinoza’s enigmatic description of *scientia intuitiva* is hardly as full as we might want—‘[t]his kind of knowledge’, he tells us, ‘proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to an adequate knowledge of the essence of things’ (E2P40S2; Spinoza, 2002, p. 267)—the general point seems to be that intuition can be understood as a kind of immediate application of reason to, or within, particular circumstances, thus allowing for knowledge of the essence of singular entities.<sup>5</sup>

Quite how we should regard this ‘highest type of knowledge’ remains unclear. Spinoza’s elliptical presentation may be a deliberate, tantalizing, provocation, designed to entice his readers into further exploration. Perhaps, too, a labored exposition would act as a kind of performative self-contradiction: the point may be that we must grasp *scientia intuitiva* in a way that is almost akin to mystical insight (albeit in rational form). Whatever Spinozistic intuition entails, the key point for us, here, is the gulf that separates rational insight and illumination from the largely illusory domain of the imagination: the former gives us certainty (justified by autonomous, internal, criteria); the latter remains constituted by ambiguity and contingency. As Spinoza himself puts it: ‘Imagination by itself, unlike every clear and distinct idea, does not of its own nature carry certainty with it’ (*Theological-Political Treatise* [TTP], ch. 2; Spinoza, 2002, p. 405).

All of which is not to suggest that Spinoza—through some rationalist reflex—urges the total repudiation of the imagination. For sure, properly philosophical insight depends on us achieving critical distance; nonetheless, Spinoza’s concern is to describe (rather than proscribe) the condition in which, as parts of nature, we spend most of our lives. Imagination is more like an element in which we inhere, and any worthwhile philosophical assessment must take account of its sheer ubiquity—of how, in Negri’s description, ‘this corrupt imagination effectively constructs the world’ (Negri, 1991, p. 89). As we shall now see, Althusser’s depiction of ideology in effect gives us the twentieth-century recurrence of Spinoza’s account of this same, apparently all-powerful, force-field. And, given the

centrality of education in Althusser's account, Spinozism can be taken, *pari passu*, as forming the core of one of the most significant critiques of contemporary schooling.

### Althusser on ideology

Althusser's profound engagement with Spinoza—perhaps we could even speak of a parallelism of the two thinkers' projects—now seems established beyond any reasonable doubt.<sup>6</sup> My concern here is mainly with what has been handed down to us as Althusser's ISA essay, and its particular configuration of ideology (*qua* imagination). But, of course, the Spinozism of the ISA work presupposes a longer and deeper engagement; to make sense of Althusser's efforts from later in the 1960s, we need to consider what they were both built upon and intended to 'answer'.

Roughly speaking, the Spinozism of Althusser's work from the first half of the 1960s is mainly *epistemological*: Spinoza helps Althusser to demarcate a domain (a Generality, even) of properly scientific theory irreducible to empiricist principles or to the 'lived experience' of phenomenology. Meanwhile, the work of the second half of the 1960s—culminating in the ISA essay—entails a shift to more *onto-logical* considerations, whereby ideology becomes less of a formal and more of a substantial issue: now Spinozism—"the matrix of every possible theory of ideology", as Althusser will later declare it (Althusser, 1997b, p. 7)—allows Althusser to consider ideology in its material actuality.

As well as constituting part of an ongoing engagement with Spinoza, Althusser's wider treatment emerged from more specific circumstances—namely, the 'profoundly reactionary' anarchism that, as far as he was concerned, had come to dominate discourse around May 1968 (see Althusser, 2014, p. 178). The anarchists' rallying cry of 'Get rid of the cop in your head! [*Chassez le flic que vous avez dans la tête!*]' was particularly pernicious (or so Althusser claimed): for all its radical appeal, the slogan encapsulated a vague, underdeveloped, analysis that equated exploitation with direct repression and that thereby failed to account for its specifically *ideological* aspects. For Althusser, by contrast, 'exploitation is not reducible to repression; [...] the state apparatuses are not reducible to the repressive apparatus alone; and [...] individuals do not have their own personal "cop" behind them or "in their heads"' (Althusser, 2014, pp. 179–180; see, too, p. 39).

Hence the particular significance that Althusser places on analyzing how ideology functions, how it 'makes us go' [*fait marcher*]. And, roughly, what this analysis yields is the following: (1) a 'thicker' conception, according to which ideology is presented, not as the imaginary representation of reality, but, instead, as the representation of an *imaginary relation* to the real relations in which we live<sup>7</sup>; and (2) Althusser's (closely related) insistence, not only on the material *conditions* of ideology, but also on the material *existence* of ideology, 'inscribed' within wider apparatuses (religious, educational, legal, moral, political, esthetic, etc.)<sup>8</sup> These in turn lead to (3) Althusser's famous description of the formation—or, rather, interpellation—of our *subjectivity*, or 'the elementary ideological effect', as Althusser also terms it (Althusser, 2014, p. 189): traditional assumptions of 'interiority' are banished and the subject is presented, instead, as a *production*. Altogether, these three aspects of his analysis are designed to reveal the sheer ubiquity of ideology, of how we 'live and move and have our being' *in* ideology (Althusser, 2014, citing Saint Paul, Acts 17:28), and of how ideology achieves 'the daily, uninterrupted reproduction of the relations of production in the "consciousness"' (Althusser, 2014, p. 198).<sup>9</sup> As Althusser will express this same point, elsewhere: 'Human societies secrete ideology as the very element and atmosphere indispensable to their historical respiration and life' (Althusser, 2003, p. 232).

What has particular significance for this survey is the invocation of *Spinoza* that becomes central for Althusser's presentation, in *Reproduction*, of the ubiquity of ideology: although Althusser had gestured, earlier in the text, to the importance of psychoanalytical descriptions of reality and 'illusion', here, at the climax of the piece, Spinoza is presented as a kind of privileged source for his thought. Not only are Spinozism and Marxism declared identical in their understanding of ideology's

functioning—especially, the way in which ideology disguises its own operations—but Spinoza is now taken to have explained ‘perfectly well’ (some 200 years before Marx) both the materiality of ideology and its scientific assessment.<sup>10</sup> Spinoza, it seems, provides us with an exemplary insight into our immersion in ideology, as well as into the immanent critique of this same immersion.

As it happens, Spinoza’s significance is adumbrated rather than developed in this ‘climax’ to the *Reproduction* text. Nonetheless, we can unpack Althusser’s meaning—to some extent, at least—by turning to the later, and more explicit, treatment that he provides in ‘The Only Materialist Tradition’ (Althusser, 1997b). For one thing, these notes remind us that the apparent repudiation of Spinozism, enacted in the 1974 *Essays on Self-Criticism*, is precisely that: merely apparent. But, more significantly, they also make explicit that Althusser’s work always presupposes ‘the first historical form of a theory of ideology’ (Althusser, 1997b, p. 9) which Spinoza provides. The very notion of ‘apparatus’ is a Spinozistic borrowing, Althusser now reveals; moreover, the imagination is shown to be ‘an apparatus of reversal of causes into ends’ (Althusser, 1997b, p. 6), a kind of inevitable structural inversion of reality. Through the operations of this imaginative apparatus, we inflate ourselves into putative ‘kingdoms within kingdoms’, distinct from all else: in terms of the ‘first kind of knowledge’, we are chosen ones for whom the rest of reality has been teleologically (and even eschatologically) ordered; our capacity for illusion, and delusion, is apparently boundless. But, of course, what reason (and, even more so, intuition) can demonstrate is that we are no more—although no less—than finite modes of greater attributes, devoid of either privileged ontological status or transcendental guarantor. The great Althusserian distinction between ideology and science, between the ‘given’ of the everyday and the properly philosophical interrogation of that givenness, becomes the *reprise* of an original Spinozistic differentiation between imagination and rational insight.

### Althusser on schools

With this general context established, we can now turn to Althusser’s specific, and famous, consideration of the ‘Ideological State Apparatus’—the most important contemporary example of which, he claims, is the school. In effect, this will allow for a *Spinozistic* reading of contemporary education; through Althusser, we might say, we can take Spinoza to school.

For sure, what has come down to us as ‘Althusser’s ISA Essay’ is the outcome of various editorial interventions and historical vicissitudes that have, in effect, bequeathed merely a segment of a much larger work, unpublished until 1995. A detailed mapping of the ISA essay onto this ‘parent’ text is beyond our scope and concern; and, if we are to be faithful to a Spinozistic-Althusserian imperative, we should be wary of any assumption that the ISA essay has some sort of ‘pure origin’. What we might say, in summary, is that the essay has a status somewhere between trace and compendium: in Montag’s description, ‘[the essay] is not an essay at all but an assemblage of more or less self-contained passages taken from their original context’ (Montag, 2013, p. 103).

This is as much a substantial as it is textual (or contextual) point: as we are reminded by the title of the larger work from which it emanates, the ISA analysis is part of a wider consideration of the *reproduction* of the capitalist mode of production; accordingly, it seems worthwhile recalling the broad shape of Althusser’s claims. In part, he suggests, this reproduction is a straightforward, material, affair: housing, food and clothes are essential conditions for labor-power to continue ‘competent’ production; so too are the reproduction of skills and technical knowledge. But this is not all. With Spinoza’s famous observation that ‘[people] will fight for their servitude as if for their salvation’ (TTP Preface; Spinoza, 2002, pp. 389–390) no doubt acting as a sort of palimpsestic guide, Althusser also wants to consider the ways in which subjection and submission to bourgeois mores, values and attitudes are continued largely without opposition. In other words, a central issue for his analysis of the capitalist mode of production becomes the reproduction of capitalist *ideology*.



Accordingly, Althusser goes beyond consideration of the repressive apparatuses of the state—especially its foundational ability to unleash violence—to consider what he will term the ISAs. The details hardly need rehearsing. A state that depended predominantly on direct or threatened physical repression would prove exceptionally weak and unstable; the *ideological* apparatuses of the capitalist mode of production are thus central in its *re*-production. And what demands specific consideration, Althusser urges, is the role of education and educational apparatuses: where once the Church was central in terms of ideology, the dominant ISA since the Enlightenment has been the *school*.

Again, a ‘contextual’ point about the centrality of pedagogical concerns seems worth noting, at this stage: the ‘conjunction’ within which the ISA work emerged—May 1968 and its wash—reveals the topic of education to be catalytic for the wider investigation. Althusser had been particularly keen, after a period of illness, to continue his exploration of ‘base and superstructure’, giving specific attention to the role of ideology within this larger frame (and trying to avoid subscribing to any metaphysical dualism that might lurk in Marx’s original notion). Separately, a group of his former students—Étienne Balibar, Christian Baudelot, Roger Establet, Pierre Macherey, and Michel Tort—had begun a collective investigation of the school system (or ‘scholastic apparatus’) in contemporary capitalist society. All agreed that the two projects should be fused (see Balibar, in Althusser, 2014, p. xi); no such linkage was to prove possible, however—not least because of party political differences (in effect, Maoist versus ‘official’ French Communist)—and the entire project was left unfinished and unresolved, as the various participants went on to pursue their separate interests. Nonetheless, this ensemble makes clear that pedagogical questions were central in the formation of Althusser’s ISA work: the references to schooling reflect a foundational concern, rendered particularly urgent by the role that students (and their leaders) had assumed in the great events of the time.

And when it comes to specific analysis of schools and schooling, Althusser is unequivocal: ‘the Ideological State Apparatus that has been elevated to the *dominant* position in mature capitalist social formations ... is the *scholastic* [*scolaire*] ideological apparatus’ (Althusser, 2014, p. 143; see, as well, p. 249); schools, it seems, enjoy a unique formative role. We need to identify different functional, quantitative, and qualitative aspects, for sure; but ultimately, the said dominance of the ‘educational ideological apparatus’ depends upon the fusion of these elements into a composite whole.

The functional significance of schooling is probably the most obvious point here: schools provide the variegated skills—from basic literacy and numeracy to more refined technical knowledge—that are a prerequisite for the market’s successful operation. Schools give us different types of ‘know-how’ (*savoir-faire*), each deemed appropriate for different roles and ‘aspirations’. What is more, the way in which schools can impart this ‘know-how’ alerts us to the quantitative aspect of the educational apparatus. ‘No other Ideological State Apparatus’, Althusser reminds us, ‘has a *captive audience of all the children of the capitalist formation* at its beck and call ... *for as many years as schools do, eight hours a day, six days out of seven*’ (Althusser, 2014, p. 146). The sheer extent of the time we spend at schools gives them a primary status in terms of ‘formation’: schools make us as much as they shape us.

But, of course, the importance of education is not solely about the provision of skills and technical expertise (however, essential this may be); nor is it solely about the vast chunks of our lives that we spend within schools. Intrinsic to all of this process is a crucial *ideological* aspect to ‘training’: ‘the reproduction of labor-power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the ruling ideology’ (Althusser, 2014, p. 236); ‘the school ... teaches ‘know-how’, but in forms which ensure *subjection to the ruling ideology*’ (Althusser, 2014). For sure, the school’s ideological role may not seem obvious, and is no doubt less explicit than that of the directly political apparatus. But this very inconspicuousness is crucial for its significance: it is

not just that the school's status and 'constitution' are assumed uncritically; it is more that the very existence of schooling is taken to be *natural*, like some indispensable element.

In this respect, schooling seems, not just to reflect a wider, ruling, ideology, but also to function as a central component of the same: the 'universally reigning ideology of the school' goes unnoticed *qua* ideology because it is also the universally reigning ideology. Like the state, the school is a supposedly 'neutral' environment, in which 'freedom' and 'conscience' are always respected; it instills 'virtues', the rules of good behavior, conscientiousness; it exists as if apart from any sectional interest. And in forming us in terms of what society expects, it thereby forms society itself: the isomorphism is more like an identity.

To reiterate, however: the dominance of the 'Educational Ideological Apparatus' is most apparent when we consider its various aspects—the functional, the quantitative and the qualitative—as a unity: how, what, and when teaching and training take place are inter-connected aspects of schooling's foundational significance. As Althusser puts it:

From nursery school on, the school takes children from all social classes and, from nursery school and *for years* thereafter, the years when children are most 'vulnerable', ... pumps them full, with old methods and new, of certain kinds of 'know-how' (French, arithmetic, natural history, science, literature) *packaged* in the dominant ideology, or, simply, of *the dominant ideology in the pure state* (ethics, civics, philosophy). Somewhere around the age of four-teen, an enormous mass of children are dumped 'into production', to become workers or small peasants. Another segment of the school-age population sticks with it and somehow manages to go a bit further, only to fall by the wayside and find jobs as lower-level supervisory personnel or junior managers, white-collar workers, minor or middle-level civil servants, and petty bourgeois of all kinds. A last group makes it to the summit, either to sink into intellectual underemployment or semi-unemployment or to fill the posts of agents of exploitation or agents of repression, professional ideologies (priests of all kinds, most of whom are convinced 'secularists'), and also agents of scientific practice. (Althusser, 2014, p. 145)

Throughout, each element is served up 'the ideology that suits the role it is to play in class society' (Althusser, 2014): the exploited are provided with a certain conscience (national, civic, professional, and so on); the agents of repression are taught how to issue orders; the professional ideologues learn cynically to couch their power in terms of 'morality', 'national interest', etc. And while all of these characteristics—from submissiveness to self-importance—are no doubt instilled by other ideological agencies (family, church, media, etc.), it is the carefully regulated consubstance of function, quality and quantity that gives schooling an unrivaled power and significance.

In short, education is at the center of Althusser's depiction of contemporary capitalist production—and, of course, the *reproduction* of this mode of production. And given that Althusser's depiction of ideology constitutes a 'reprise' of Spinoza's depiction of the role (and rule) of the imagination, we can take Althusser's specific treatment of schooling to be a profoundly *Spinozistic* presentation. It is as if the famous Appendix to Book 1 of the *Ethics* has been reconfigured, with contemporary schools taking the place of seventeenth-century churches.

### **Beyond the limits of Althusser's analysis**

Althusser's Spinozism is no doubt a shifting, evolving, affair—to the extent that even referring to 'Althusser's Spinozism' risks rendering static what is better conceived as a dynamic process. And yet the particular aspect of Althusser's Spinozism that I have sought to highlight, here—namely, the main concerns of the ISA analysis—confronts us with a kind of inevitable difficulty: the possibility, given that the 'interior lifeworld' of the (putative) subject is more like the effect of wider structures and forces, that ideology is so powerful, so all-embracing, that critical resistance becomes hopeless.

Obviously enough, the significance of this issue is hardly restricted to pedagogical concerns; arguably, it dominates so much of Althusser's thought in general (or, at least, the discourse on

Althusser's thought in general).<sup>11</sup> The question of how we might 'transcend' ideology had already been articulated—although not answered—in *Reading Capital*<sup>12</sup>; the self-critique of 1974 centered on the question of an inherent 'formalism' in Althusser's thought; and to a large extent, it seems, the later Althusser's exploration of ontological contingency and the aleatory, his philosophy *for* Marx (and not just *of* Marx), was the sketch of a response to this conundrum. Further discussion of 'Althusserian determinism' is beyond my present scope; and it is important to avoid reducing Althusser's work to some easy caricature. However, it seems worth noting that the issue takes on a particular (and particularly problematic) shape *via* Althusser's treatment of the 'Educational Ideological Apparatus'—for, as he insists, in *Reproduction*, resistance within this domain will inevitably be absorbed and exploited for ideological purposes. Apparently exceptional 'heroic' teachers are almost doomed to be overwhelmed and exploited, he tells us, by the ideology they oppose, or try to oppose, as evidence of its 'freedom', 'openness', and so on: the majority of these 'heroes'

... do not even begin to suspect the 'work' the system (which is bigger than they are and crushes them) forces them to do, or worse, put all their heart and ingenuity into performing it with the greatest possible conscientiousness (the famous new methods!). So little do they suspect it that their own devotion contributes to the maintenance and nourishment of this ideological representation of the school, which makes the school today as 'natural', indispensable-useful and even beneficial for our own contemporaries as the Church was 'natural', indispensable and generous for our ancestors a few centuries ago. (Althusser, 2014, p. 252)

Of course, this very claim regarding the apparently overwhelming omnipotence of ideological structures has provoked important and well-known pedagogical responses and counter-claims. Henry Giroux, for example, as well as offering a vigorous critique of Althusserian 'determinism' (see, e.g. Giroux, 1983, pp. 79–83, 132–133), has also provided an alternative, 'dialectical', conception, according to which ideology should be seen as having potentially enabling (as well as restrictive) aspects.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Peter McLaren has urged that we treat ideology as multiform, rather than univocal, and remain aware of its liberating possibilities.<sup>14</sup> And Michael Apple has consistently wedded critical analysis of the ideological 'infrastructure' of education with an unflinching commitment to the importance of crafting counter-hegemonic and empowering spaces within this wider field.<sup>15</sup>

Notwithstanding the significance of these claims (and of so many others that have emerged from within 'critical pedagogy');<sup>16</sup> and given that, as much of this paper has tried to show, Althusser's depiction of ideology emerges within and is profoundly shaped by his engagement with Spinoza; I want to outline a different sort of response—one that, as it were, remains true to a Spinozistic commitment. Specifically, I want to suggest that the way in which the general problematic (of ideology's apparent omnipotence) takes on a particular formation (with the case of 'heroic' teachers doomed to failure) alerts us—inversely, as it were—to an alternative exploration, immanent within yet underdeveloped in Althusser's own treatment. This involves us treating Spinoza, not just as 'source', but also as a kind of *response* to Althusser: Spinoza, it seems, can shift our focus from the aporia of the individual ('trapped in and by ideology') to the power of the *collective*. Put otherwise: the remarkable extent of the first, imagination-based, type of knowledge may have provided the foundation for Althusser's depiction of the sheer ubiquity of ideology; nonetheless, Spinoza's suggestions regarding 'trans-individual' activity provide at least the indication of a way beyond total impasse. In particular, what seems worth consideration is the kind of collective subject described in Spinoza's enigmatic, and unfinished, *Tractatus Politicus*.<sup>17</sup>

In wider discourse, the TP is probably best known for its apparently startling equation of right (*ius*) and power (*potentia*)—a position already suggested in the TTP,<sup>18</sup> but given more solid prominence in Spinoza's final work.<sup>19</sup> Yet, however shocking its initial appearance, Spinoza's point was never to give an apology for Calliclean anti-moralism; rather, his concern was to puncture the pretensions of any 'transcendent' juridical claim and so to promulgate a consistent naturalism. Rights are expressions of our ontological condition, Spinoza argues; they are not ideals floating free



from our situation as ‘part of nature’ (see, also, EP35D). Our rights are what we can do, think and achieve in given conditions; to transmute these into abstract notions of entitlement is to posit a supra-natural fiction based on (and bolstering) the notion that we are somehow substantially separate from the rest of reality. Again, fuller discussion of this equation of right and power is beyond my scope. But what we can note here is the *dynamic* character of this equation, and the way in which production and process are more or less intrinsic elements in its definition. However unfinished and provisional the TP, overall, this ‘labile’ aspect of the Spinozistic equivalence of right and power seems to carry enormous suggestion, and so demands fuller unpacking.

First, we might consider TP, 2.13, and Spinoza’s unambiguous statement of collective agency: ‘If two men come together and join forces, they have more power over Nature, and consequently more right, than either one alone; and the greater the number who form a union in this way, the more right they will together possess’ (Spinoza, 2002, p. 686).<sup>20</sup> Next, we can also consider TP, 3.7:

... the man who is guided by reason is most powerful and most in control of his own right; similarly the common-wealth that is based on reason and directed by reason is most powerful and most in control of its own right. For the right of a commonwealth is determined by the power of a people [*multitudinis*] that is guided as though by a single mind [*mente*]. But this union of minds could in no way be conceived unless the chief aim of the commonwealth is identical with that which sound reason teaches us is for the good of all men. (Spinoza, 2002, p. 692; see, also, TP, 3.2)

The development from the first to the second point suggests that it is not simply a kind of ‘brute force’ that is increased by unity and collective action: where the common good is pursued, Spinoza suggests, the ‘collective subject’ can produce an increase in *reason itself*. Through its praxis, its self-organization in democracy, the *multitudo* reduces sad passions, and increases its joy and its power—which also means increasing its rationality. (The collectivity, it seems, can fulfill the famous promise of E5P40: ‘The more perfection each thing has, the more active and the less passive it is. Conversely, the more active it is, the more perfect it is’ (Spinoza, 2002, p. 380).) Throughout, the issue is *not* about positing reason as some sort of antithesis of affect: instead, and as Deleuze has shown so perspicuously (see Deleuze, 1992, pp. 255–272), reason is more like a particularly powerful expression of affect—and so the imagination could even be viewed as a crucial dynamic, or motor-force, rather than some hurdle to be overcome.

## Conclusion

Certainly, so much of the above might seem devoid of any direct, programmatic, content. But what Spinoza articulates is a crucial *ontological* principle regarding the multitude as a continuous production. In the context of education, this carries a particularly important weight, by indicating that, whatever the inevitability of Althusser’s ‘heroic’ teacher being crushed by wider ideological forces, the *group* retains at least the possibility of becoming, through its own praxis, and from its basis in the imagination, a collective subject rather than the mere object of ideology. (We could bear in mind Spinoza’s apparent admonition, at TP 1.6, regarding individualistic political ‘solutions’.) Put crudely: Althusser’s (Spinozistic) analysis comes to a kind of halt with the ‘inevitable’ failure of the individual teacher; but Spinoza’s own ‘further’ suggestions can shift our focus, to the potency of the class, the multitude, that functions as the prime unit of so much pedagogical practice.

Of course, and as Spinoza as much as Althusser would insist, there is no utopian finality here, no once-and-for-all solution. The group always remains capable of a reversion to backwardness and superstition; there is no *telos* to be realized; and the production of a democratic ‘collective subject’ remains a constant, ongoing, task, ‘a metamorphosis that does not stop’, as Negri has put it (Negri, 2004, p. 111).<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, it is precisely the group’s power of self-organization and self-production that seems worth highlighting, given the necessitarian problematic that we encounter in Althusser’s rethinking of ideology: Spinoza does not only provide us with the basis for thinking about the materiality of the ‘educational ideological apparatus’; he also provides the suggestions of

what constitutive activity in and of the school might achieve.<sup>22</sup> How we might develop these suggestions—how ‘the multitude of the classroom’ might be configured—seems a central issue for any pedagogy trying to rise above and beyond the crushing apparatuses that Althusser’s Spinozistic account describes.

## Notes

1. Throughout, I refer to *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* (rendered here as *Reproduction*), the 2014 English translation of Althusser’s *Sur la reproduction*, rather than the more famous ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’ essay of 1970 (English translation: Althusser, 1971); hopefully, my reasons for doing so will become clear as the paper unfolds.
2. In the context of pedagogy, Henry Giroux has been particularly critical of what he regards as Althusser’s reductive, ‘one-dimensional’ and ‘undialectical’ conflation of ideology and domination. See Giroux (1983, pp. 79–83).
3. I mean ‘possibility’ to suggest *potestas*: a situated capability, or power to effect (in accordance with what nature allows), rather than some ‘unlimited’ potential.
4. See Althusser’s description of Spinoza’s description of the imagination (Althusser, 1997b, p. 6).
5. Full discussion Spinoza’s ‘intuition’ is beyond my scope: the main point to stress, here, is the distinction between imagination and a ‘higher’ type of knowledge. For important recent treatment of intuition, see Soyarslan (2016).
6. As Michel Pêcheux has put it, Spinoza was always Althusser’s ‘real companion in heresy’ (Pêcheux, 1982, p. 214). See, too, Montag (1993, p. 51).
7. See, for example, *Reproduction* (Althusser, 2014, p. 183), and *For Marx* (Althusser, 1996, p. 215).
8. For a useful supplement to Althusser’s text, see McLaren (1988, esp. pp. 170–176).
9. For a scrupulous close reading, see Montag (2013, esp. 141–161).
10. See, too, Althusser, 1997b, p. 102.
11. See, for example, Elliott (1987, p. 225), Thompson (1995), and Laclau and Mouffe (1985, esp. pp. 97–105).
12. See, for example, Althusser (1997a, p. 56).
13. For example, Giroux (1983, p. 145) speaks of ideology as providing ‘the terrain for self-reflection and transformative action’.
14. See, for example, McLaren, 1988. As he suggests (p. 179), ‘educators forget at their peril that ideologies both constrain and ennoble the project of empowerment’.
15. See, especially, Apple (2004, ch. 2, pp. 26–42), on the distribution of knowledge *qua* continuation of inequality.
16. Which is not to suggest, however, that we should remain uncritical of critical pedagogy itself: see, especially Ellsworth (1989).
17. Rice (1990) has voiced important reservations about the risks entailed in extending aspects of the *Ethics*—like the discussion of individuation (E2P13)—to social and political phenomena. My point here, however, is mainly based on the TP, and concerns the class, or group, rather than the state *qua* individual.
18. See TTP ch. 16 (Spinoza, 2002, p. 527): ‘... the right of the individual is coextensive with its determinate power’.
19. See TP, 2.4.
20. See, as well, TP, 2.15).
21. See Kwek (2015, esp. pp. 172–177).

22. See Althusser (2006, pp. 273–274).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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