Freud’s Mass Hypnosis with Spinoza’s Superstitious Wonder: Balibar’s Multiple Transindividuality

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Abstract:

This response focuses on Balibar’s method of thinking transindividuality through multiple figures, in their similarities as well as their productive differences. His essay ‘Philosophies of the Transindividual: Spinoza, Marx, Freud’ combines the three titular figures in order to better think the multifaceted idea of ‘classical’ transindividuality.Balibar’s method combines the three but nonetheless maintains their dissimilarities as real differences. This response attempts to test or apply that method in two ways. The first application links Balibar’s analysis of Freud’s hypnotic leader with a theme Balibar does not here discuss: wonder’s connection to superstition in Spinoza. At the level of their effects, superstitious wonder and hypnosis are nearly identical transindividual processes which lead to affective mass formation. However, their causes are quite distinct. This response details the similar effects and different causes, then asks the question: does their difference render them irreconcilable or complementary? Given the prominent role Spinoza plays in Balibar’s work, and the strong overall equivalence of wonder and hypnosis, this first application of Balibar’s method of multiple combination likely presents a complementarity rather than a conflict. This response’s second application, attempting to integrate another figure into the transindividual multiple, presents greater difficulties: what role, if any, could Foucault play in Balibar’s transindividuality? With Foucault, the tensions or differences perhaps amount to fundamental and thoroughgoing incompatibilities. However, combining Foucault with ‘classical’ transindividuality potentially extends and deepens each. This response concludes with examples of these problematic tensions as well as possibly fruitful combinations.

Introduction

In Balibar’s ‘Philosophies of the Transindividual: Spinoza, Marx, Freud’, readers familiar with his previous writings can sense the continual unfolding of his thinking. He is willing to let his ideas undergo modification as he adds qualifications to certain earlier theses. He admits there may be something which exceeds, as a line of flight, what philosophies of transindividuality can express. All three thinkers have been treated in his previous works, but here their combination is more sustained. He also acknowledges certain differences between the three thinkers he here connects: for instance, the divergent roles that imagination plays in Marx and Spinoza. My response takes the productive tension generated by such differences, between different thinkers aligned within transindividuality, as its theme.

Their alignment is not strict equivalence: rather than a single, set ‘*object*’, the transindividuality these three express is a ‘programmatic name… opening onto multiple, perhaps mutually contradictory possible interpretations’ [2]. Re-reading thinkers through ‘what they have in common and what distinguishes them’ [4] generates a productive tension. The formal method seems to mirror the content: transindividuality is multiple, and, his conceptual resources also are multiple. Balibar uses this re-reading style to great effect, multiplying the impact of each of these three thinkers. However, for those of us attempting to build upon Balibar’s insights, it raises an issue of how we can best re-read other possible contributions to the multiple transindividual. Little would be gained by multiplying infinite nearly identical examples, but conversely, no productive tension would be established with fundamentally incompatible thinkers who contest, not complement, his most recent expression of transindividuality.

Since the working of his method is best seen in the practice of philosophy which his re-readings enact, my response itself practices a comparative re-reading. Wonder’s link to superstition in Spinoza is almost exactly equivalent to the hypnotic Freudian leader—except they also involve fundamentally different causes and desires. Balibar’s essay contains a possible response, but a question lingers: what greater difficulties may face an attempt to integrate another philosophy into Balibar’s classical philosophies of transindividuality?

# Freud on Hypnosis

Balibar’s essay speaks of the two major processes through which identification sets up mass formation in Freud. As with transindividuality in general, these processes are ‘reversible’ [18] : they can be analyzed at an individual level (libidinal desire) and at the mass level (a group identity through the shared love object of the leader). Through libidinal impulses directed toward the leader, narcissistic antisociality is minimized, permitting the mass to bind together. I will focus on the hypnotic means to this identification, rather than the amorous process.

When hypnotized, a state is induced in which the world falls away, as in sleep. ‘The hypnotist is the sole object; no other object… receives any attention’ [Freud 1921: 67]. Disconnected from the real world, one accepts the hypnotist’s description of reality. If the hypnotist says, ‘you are on an island,’ one ‘sees’ the island. Hypnosis prevents the ego from thinking conscious thoughts of its own. Further, one becomes suggestible in terms of action. As with ‘the fright hypnosis of animals’ [ibid.: 68], hypnosis causes ‘reduced narcissism’ [ibid.: 66] and a ‘soaking up of personal initiative’ [ibid.: 67] to such an extent that it paralyzes the individual and can even lead to self-harm. Paralysis is broken only on the command of the leader. As Balibar notes, hypnosis causes a ‘*suspension of the judgment of reality*’[19] as the hypnotist supplants the functioning of the superego.

What distinguishes hypnosis from the mass is merely the number, Freud says: hypnotized and hypnotist fuse into a mass of two. Two are not yet a social mass, which requires that the ego is identified with other egos—which further reduces narcissistic aggression since ‘he is me’. In short, on the basis of one’s hypnotic/libidinal attachment the leader, one identifies with the mass as comrades or siblings, since each has an attachment to the same object. This produces non-narcissistic submission as a precondition for the mass. But there is an original precondition allowing for such attachment: the desire to appease guilt related to the primal horde’s slaying of the father (and correlative Oedipal desires). Before any hypnosis, the individual already “wishes to be dominated by an absolute power, it is in the highest degree addicted to authority’ [Freud 1921: 82]. Institutions nurture and stabilize this addiction. The paradigmatic institutions of army and church work differently, but have similar foundations and functions. Balibar notes these institution’s differences without reducing them to species of an identical general process [22]: a specific example of transindividual multiplicity. A transindividual is not one process churning out an infinity of instances, but many irreducible levels and co-constitutions, working as an *ensemble* in their differences to make a metastable transindividual.

# Spinoza on Wonder

The following comparison of hypnosis with Spinoza’s wonder will put Balibar’s comparative method into practice. Wonder (re-read after Freud) is nearly identical to hypnosis. However, the two remain fundamentally different. The tension of this difference-in-similarity, once addressed, can assist us if we later expand the multiplicity already established by Balibar to other conceptual resources.

Spinoza’s *Ethics* showswonder in its initial state. Wonder is caused when one is affected by something so new and so incomprehensible that one cannot connect it to —or think of— anything else. Spinoza defines wonder in Part III, Proposition 52: ‘When … we imagine in an object something singular, which we have never seen before,… there is nothing in itself which [the mind] is led to consider from considering that’ singular thing [1985: 523]. Part V, Proposition 9 further specifies: wonder ‘prevents the mind from being able to think [because it] engages the Mind solely in considering one [object], so that it cannot think of others’ [ibid.: 601] Like hypnosis, conscious thought is blocked in wonder as the mind focuses intensely on only one thing.

If fear accompanies wonder, desire is paralyzed and the ability to strive for self-preservation is reduced. ‘Consternation is attributed to one whose desire to avoid an evil is restrained by Wonder at the evil he fears. … But because consternation arises from a double timidity, it can be more conveniently defined as a fear that keeps a man senseless or vacillating so that he cannot avert the evil’ [ibid: 540], as Spinoza says in Part III, Definition of the Affects XLII. Beyond wonder’s stunning of thought, fearful consternation stuns one at the level of desire, too—we cannot act, as with the paralysis of hypnosis.

Wonder is related to the affect of ambition in leaders, through the link of superstition, which is how wonder becomes transindividual. Wonder is ignorance by definition: one cannot understand the object. Wonder’s void of thought and action typically does not go unfilled: the world always has more than enough ambitious people ready to suggest their own superstitious ideas and theological-political rules for action. Part 3, proposition 31 of the *Ethics* defines ambition generally as the desire ‘that everyone should love what he loves, and hate what he hates… This striving to bring it about that everyone should approve his love and hate is really Ambition.’ In the *Ethics*’Appendix to Part I, wonder is repeatedly linked to priestly ambition: for instance, ‘those whom the people honor as interpreters of Nature and the Gods… know that if ignorance is taken away, then foolish wonder, the only means they have of arguing and defending their Authority, is also taken away.’

In addition to wonder at God, or Nature, consternation about fortune or political events also calls up a flight to leaders. Superstition builds on natural ignorance, by proclaiming seductive imaginative ideas to fill the hole wonder leaves in the mind, and claiming that those in authority must be followed to avoid consternating fears. This is seen most clearly in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, which bears out the same affective relational nexus as the *Ethics* and extends it to leaders’ use of institutions. ‘But since people are often reduced to such desperate straits that they cannot arrive at any judgment… [they] are quite ready to believe anything… When the mind is in a state of doubt, the slightest impulse can easily steer it in any direction’ [Spinoza 2007: 3]. As with hypnotic suggestibility, the paralyzing fear and vacillating doubt of consternation can be broken by the advice—or command—of a leader on matters moral and political. Wonder can even lead to self-harm, circumventing the desire for self-preservation, as in hypnotic suggestibility. On the command of the leader, people “will fight for their servitude … and will not think it humiliating but supremely glorious to spill their blood and sacrifice their lives’ [ibid.: 6].

 As with Freud, individual affects prepare the way for a relation to a leader, which then has a mass effect as the superstitious are bound together in obedience and institutionalized ceremonies. Theological-political authority requires obedience, that is, similar actions amongst members of the group. Because over time laws and customs modify the *ingenium* or character of the people, wonder’s receptivity to following advice and instruction is not a matter only of an individual’s inadequate ideas, but affects the thoughts and characteristic behaviors of the people as a whole: a transindividual process which up to this point, resembles Freud’s hypnosis point for point.

I will now briefly note tensions between Spinoza and Freud within the just-described process of transindividuality. Wonder has very similar *effects* to hypnosis but its *cause* is prior to any leader and requires no intermediary: sheer ignorance in the face of a singular event. That is, in Spinoza, it is possible to be ‘hypnotized’ in wonder without a relation to a hypnotist, whereas pre-existing love of the leader (… and a father-figure, and an archaic relation to the primal father) is a cause or condition of Freudian hypnosis. Further, wonder catches us completely by surprise: one cannot desire even unconsciously to be in wonder since it is defined by its heretofore-unmet singularity. However, in Freud, one always already desires to be hypnotized: the individual is already reaching out, begging for a leader. At a minimum, the initial desire pre-exists in Freud and has a father-figure object. Depending on how one reads the myth of the primal horde, this desire might be a horde instinct. In Spinoza’s wonder, there is initially neither a desire directed to an object nor a relevant relational—let alone mass—affect.

Finally, the desires which wonder does prompt (to truly know and to have confidence in one’s power of acting) can be satisfied through increased knowledge and power, before any leader presents the pseudo-satisfaction of superstition. This is of course rare but it is possible. However, it appears that only a father-figure of some sort can resolve the desire for domination which lies behind hypnosis. (Even if the reader thinks these distinctions fail to show any significant difference between hypnosis and wonder, at a minimum, hopefully the reader will find that the affect of consternation specified Balibar’s remarks on the political double relation of utility-affect, and that the connection to Freud illuminated Balibar’s comments on the role of hypnosis in mass formation.)

Despite wonder and hypnosis being so close in many ways, the different causes and desires which they involve can hardly be ignored. Let us recall, however, that Balibar’s method of comparison does not require exact identity among its multiple constitutive references. In fact, much like a transindividual, his work is robust and resilient precisely through its maintenance of certain tensions between multiple factors. It is in this way that Balibar’s essay contains a possible response to the divergences between Freud and Spinoza. Balibar noted that the Freudian transindividual is constituted in multiple, non-identical principles (amorous and hypnotic) and in multiple, non-identical institutions (army and church). Balibar states that their non-identity is complementary. These “antithetical principles” nonetheless support “an intrinsic duality” of narcissism-reducing mass identification [19], thus securing the transindividual more comprehensively. In a roughly similar fashion, the divergence of hypnosis and wonder could presumably be complementary despite their different principles.

# Foucault

However, questions remain: how might the three classical transindividual thinkers be usefully compared to other thinkers, and what kind of divergences would cause unsolvable problems rather than productive tensions? Can a thinker explicitly opposed to elements of Marxian and Freudian thought nonetheless be placed alongside them in the element of transindividuality? This is a rather higher hurdle to clear than the wonder-hypnosis divergence. Let us again query Balibar’s comparative method, but now through Michel Foucault. (Forgive my temptation to go a step beyond the multiplicity of Marx-Spinoza-Freud, as Balibar was tempted to go a step beyond the letter of Spinoza.) Is there a place for Foucault within this multiplicity? If not, whichever specific aspects of Foucault bar him from it will be instructive about how the comparative method works.

Some of Balibar’s fellow travelers have made valuable contributions to transindividuality which might establish a tentative rapport with Foucault, though I am most curious what Balibar himself would say in this regard. Jason Read notes that Foucault occasionally links his own theory of subject formation to Marx [2015: 233]. Warren Montag has discussed Foucault and Louis Althusser through their tension on ideology alongside their shared antihumanism [1995]. Althusser himself briefly links between Spinoza on religious ceremonies and Foucault on disciplinary power [1997: 3]. Pierre Macherey, at greater length, connects Foucault to aspects of Spinoza which are relevant to transindividuality [1989].

There are allusions to Foucault in Balibar’s essay, such as ‘the *episteme* underlying the “human sciences”’ [18] and quasi-transcendentals [27-8]). It also contains themes Balibar has discussed alongside Foucault in other works, such as philosophical anthropology [2017], points of heresy [2015a], and Foucault’s productive tensions with post-Marxian political thought [2015b; 1992]. The complexity of Balibar’s thought in these works cannot be done justice here, let alone their relation to transindividuality. However, speaking generally, such references to Foucault seem to require neither his exclusion nor his inclusion in the multiple constitution of the transindividual.

The question remains, then: might specific aspects of Foucault contribute substantially to transindividuality? Conversely, which parts of Foucault might be obstacles to thinking the transindividual? I offer some initial thoughts here.

Balibar speaks in this essay of multiple levels (Spinoza’s individual *conatus*, interpersonal imitation, and broader political totality; Marx’s doublet of commodity fetishism and juridical fetishism), and of horizontal and vertical relations (Freud’s identification with other egos, and relation to the model). These relations are distinct in their functioning, much as Foucault’s three “axes” (knowledges, power-relations, and ethical subjectivity) are co-constitutive of experience through distinct operations which cannot be reduced to each other. In Foucault and Balibar both, the divergence of axes, which also cross at the very heart of the subject, generates complex and non-reductive accounts.

Practices of the self and governmentality (governing oneself in order to better govern others, as well as governing others so that they can eventually govern themselves) seem to be transindividual at their very core. Both exist socially—one finds oneself already born into a mode of subjectivation or governmentality—and yet that social mode offers specific practices by which the individual works upon and transforms itself.

Power in Foucault can work on pre-individual parts of a person, as in disciplinary power’s fragmenting of the body, just as much as it can work on the transindividual population, as in biopolitics’ use of statistical norms. On a certain reading of Foucault, power is—to employ Balibar’s description of transindividuality—not a monolithic, top-down totality which would ‘pre-exist’ individuals but instead needs to ‘be individualised’ in different bodies [2]. Power is productive: it is not a strictly negative, repressive prohibition of what is, but leads to the not-yet. Foucault constantly underscores the inherent mobility of history, which Balibar locates in Marx’s *Veränderbarkeit* and Spinoza’s shifting *ratio* of utility and affects.

Further, at every point of its operation, power produces unpredictable resistances to its functioning. This puts one in mind of psychosis in Freud, which Balibar says is a radical anti-sociality caused precisely by processes of socialization: psychosis reveals the ‘*the edge of the transindividual*, where it “decomposes”, or tends to exceed itself, by destabilizing the figures of individuality and of community it instituted’ [27]. As but one example, Foucault claims that confession produced a rash of cases of demonic possession in nuns [1999: 204-17]. The very process of regulating bodies sometimes provokes unforeseen outbursts. Knowledge-power (itself a relation of relations) similarly constructs forms of knowledge that inevitably render unknowable their privileged objects. The norm is constructed on the basis of analyzing the abnormal, yet the definition of “abnormal” is constantly reformulated since it never quite captures its intended object.

There are difficulties, however, in integrating Foucault into transindividuality. If Foucault has no ontology, then that likely blocks him from transindividuality, the thinking together of ontology and politics. Or perhaps he has the wrong ontology: other readers of Foucault argue that he presents not *un ensemble* but *das Ganze*—an abstraction of ‘social being to the detriment of the individual’ [3]—just that which Balibar critiques. Also, Balibar has charted Foucault’s complex contestation of Marxist thought. Given certain post-Marxian themes in Balibar’s transindividuality, do any specific disagreements disqualify Foucault from the transindividual multiple?

What Balibar has established—and what his newer work further elaborates—about multiple classical discourses of transindividuality needs no assistance from Foucault, nor from me. However, I thought it worthwhile to raise these questions, to follow Balibar’s indication ‘that it may be profitable, at this stage of exploration and of construction of a new “grammar” for philosophy… to unfold—as far as possible—*all* the potentialities’ [3] of transindividual thinking.

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