Hasana Sharp's *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*: A Response

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Hasana Sharp's *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* revitalizes the power of Spinoza's naturalism by bringing it into close proximity to strands of contemporary theory with which it bears strong affinities. In the process, Sharp generates a new concept, the "politics of renaturalization," which, like the finite modes of Spinoza's ontology, acquires its form and force partly in agonistic relation to rival concepts—such as Judith Butler's post-Hegelian politics of recognition—that threaten to diminish its potency. Key categories in Spinoza's system (affect, idea, reason) combine with Elisabeth Grosz's "renaturalization," Gilles Deleuze's "ethology," Gilbert Simondon's "transindividuality," among others, to accentuate the strengths of cutting-edge theorizing and abate the dominative effects of new humanisms. Sharp's book thus endeavors not only to explicate but also to enact a project of renaturalization, understood as a "strategy to attenuate the antipathy that plagues our psyches and our life in common" (5).

Stated more fully, what Sharp finds in Spinoza's naturalism is an effort "to engender self-love in humanity by eroding those models of man that animate hatred, albeit indirectly, by suggesting that we are, at one extreme, defective Gods or, at the other, corrupt animals who need to be restored to our natural condition" (5). She discerns the contemporary legacies of such super- and sub-natural paradigms in modes of thought ranging from social constructivism to so-called normative political theory to deep ecology. That's not to say these bodies of work are to

be opposed in their totality, as if they were wholly pernicious. Sharp's critiques are appreciative, sympathetic in nature, often because her own project is aligned in impulse if not in execution with those of her interlocutors—e.g., feminist theorists or antiracist activists who, in their critiques of oppression, remain bound by the identitarian framework of recognition politics.

Sharp presents the political dimensions of renaturalization in various ways: as a politics of affect, an impersonal politics, a posthumanist politics, an anti-antipathetic politics, and a politics of imperceptibility. Early on, she offers an example of a protest rally on the National Mall in Washington, DC to highlight how her conception of an “impersonal politics ... of composition and synergy” would experience and evaluate the occasion differently than a more mainstream “politics of rights and representation,” the main foil throughout the book (13). Rather than focus exclusively on whether the protestors' demands come to be reflected in law or represented to a broader public, an impersonal politics would concern itself with the affects that enable protestors to forge new connections and compose new powers of thinking and acting. Sharp characterizes this impersonal politics as “an art of not being governed quite so much,” which is Foucault's definition of critique (Sharp 14). I find this alliance with Foucault—whose late work on the politics of truth hinged on rather Spinozist readings of Kant—to be very suggestive, and so I'll take it as an invitation to think further about the political specificity of renaturalization as a practice of critique.

One of the most distinctive features of renaturalization, on this score, is that it apprehends the political life of ideas through the scheme of a vital materialism wherein ideas affect each other as forces in their own right. Against the grain of inherited wisdom, Sharp argues that the force proper to ideas is neither a function of their truth nor the mere effect of some “non-ideal determinants” that would be located in, say, the realm of bodies or the material “reality” of

exploitation and inequality (63). Here, then, Sharp's politics of renaturalization diverges both from the sort of project that would turn on the "discursive redemption of normative validity claims" (Habermas 11) and from various other traditions of ideology critique (Marxist, Lacanian, Frankfurt School) or discourse analysis (Foucauldian), all of which stop short of examining the struggle of ideas in their natural environment. The technical aspect of Sharp's argument concerns Spinoza's characterization of ideas and bodies as belonging to autonomous causal networks, each of which expresses the infinite power of nature. Leaving that aside for now, what deserves emphasis is the relative priority that her effort to "renaturalize ideology" grants to "power-bound" over truth-bound inquiry (80). It seems to me that this priority is what lends her Spinozist critique a decidedly political valence and purchase. Sharp's point isn't, of course, to dismiss claims to truth and knowledge as irrelevant, but to insist that such claims only become *politically significant* in certain conditions. And these conditions are not exclusively epistemological, which is why the emancipatory dynamic of critique requires "not just a perspectival shift but a rearrangement of constituent corporeal relations and activities" (77).

Modes of politics premised exclusively upon consciousness-raising, exposure, or doctrines of transparency often rely on a voluntarism or intellectualism that blinds them to the collective—and non-human—dimensions of thinking life that sustain and starve ideas, whether true or false. Consider some "revelations" of recent times such as the various disclosures by WikiLeaks of human rights violations and government wrongdoing. What is striking in such cases is the gap between the publicization of some truth and what a public does with this truth. Again, the point is not to say that the truths revealed in these instances had no effect; it's that the question of their efficacy—as matters of public concern—was a practical, contextual, and affective matter that did not simply follow from their truth content. Mainstream press often takes

the position that there is “nothing new” in such revelations.¹ But even if, strictly speaking, no wholly unknown facts are disclosed, the epistemological framing of such a verdict (that there’s nothing we don’t already know) obscures a more pressing political question, namely: how do things we may well know become more than meaningless particulars? How do they become facts of concern for politics (see Zerilli)? As Sharp underscores using a very different example, a feminist apprised of the causal context that sustains patriarchal beauty standards will continue to feel the affective force of these hegemonic ideas because they continue to produce power and pleasure in present-day societies (80). It would seem, then, that anyone interested in challenging such beauty standards needs to do more than simply reveal their structural causes or their pernicious effects on women. Following Sharp, a renaturalized form of political critique would also require efforts to proliferate counter-images and to form alternative communities, thus “destroying the truth-value of certain judgments through reorganizing the vital forces that have sustained them” (83).

The outlines of a practice of mobilizing counter-ideas remain sketchy, perhaps in part because, as Sharp notes, Spinoza’s own position on “the shared development of thinking power is marked only by abstract prescriptions” (81). Nonetheless, she turns to Spinoza’s account of collective deliberation to draw a lesson for critical practice: Spinoza “recommends large assemblies ... because ideas need to be connected and their strivings joined to one another by actual proximity” (82). Actual proximity would entail “the actual co-presence of human bodies,” because this is the condition for generating new, “emancipating ideas” powerful enough to challenge the hegemony of oppressive ideas (82). This is certainly a plausible argument to make, but it also invites a line of questioning about the status of media, a topic that Sharp touches on briefly in both parts of the book.

What role, if any, do media (televisual, web-based, textual, etc.) play in the mobilization of counter-ideas and how might that role affect the co-presence requirement? Are media simply a tool for disseminating ideas that are first composed in an assembly setting or can media take on a more constitutive role in the generation of ideas? For the most part, Sharp is insistent that “being moved and moving others require[s] corporeal proximity;” the “somatic co-presence” of human bodies “activates us in ways that cannot be simulated” with mediated forms of communication (181; 53, 82). But at other times, she acknowledges the potential for thinking power to develop through remote and virtual communication, as when “new media allow local groups to go viral and make unforeseen contacts” (177).

A response to some of these concerns might be found in Sharp’s account of Spinozist reason. The more diverse a body is, for Spinoza, the more its mind can relate to a variety of things in an increasingly rational or adequate way. Moreover, the direction of this process, as it were, is from the local outward. In a near reversal of the cliché, “think globally, act locally,” Spinoza’s depiction of reason prompts individuals to, so to speak, “affect and be diversely affected locally, think (increasingly) globally.”² To make this more concrete, Sharp speculates that language might serve as a useful example of

bodily diversification that begins in (relatively) passive experience and evolves into an increasingly adept power of connection to others. The more languages one learns, the more auditory and lingual dispositions one’s body is capable of, and thus the more one can communicate and share. (98)

This strikes me as an important insight. And yet language also seems to be a case in which an “actual co-presence” of human bodies is not required. The comprehension of *spoken* language might best be accomplished through an immersion experience with native speakers. On the other hand, I can learn a *written* language by relating my body to non-human bodies such as texts. And

this possibility bears crucially on politics. For as Michael Warner has argued, the formation of publics and counter-publics is better conceived in textual terms, as a reflexive circulation of multi-generic and multi-citational discourse, rather than as dialogic interaction (see *Publics*). It might be fruitful to bring together Sharp's work on ideology with Warner's work on publics, given that there are important resonances between the two, including an attention to affect and a non-reductionist approach that treats ideas (or discourses) on their own terms.³

From the question of media, it seems natural to shift to the broader issue of how the politics of renaturalization relates to—or better, how it might engage with—the politics of representation. The ways in which renaturalization and representation might intersect in practice would seem to be situational, largely because the former's goal of composing enabling relationships does not prescribe in advance any particular form of action. At times, renaturalization would call for more experimental and counter-cultural practices, as Sharp discusses in relation to radical queer “imperceptible politics” (180). At other times, renaturalization would partake of more mainstream forms, such as public deliberation, demonstrations, marches, or institutional reform (182-3). Sharp makes plain, in any event, that renaturalization is neither radically antinormative nor a broad critique of juridical power (11). Its departure from the politics of representation and rights is not, to borrow from Foucault, “a kind of face-off by the opposite affirmation” (Foucault 44). Renaturalization is, rather, an endeavor not to be governed so much in contemporary political theory and practice by humanist norms and forms.

Still, my sense is that the relationship between Sharp's renaturalization project and mainstream rights politics could be brought into clearer focus with a more differentiated account of political representation, which is a category that is undergoing a revival and revision in both

contemporary and historically-inflected political theory (see Urbinati).⁴ Relatedly, recent protest movements such as Occupy Wall Street (with its slogan “We are the 99 Percent”) and Quebec’s Maple Spring have invited a fresh examination of the role of representation in the grassroots politics of critique (see Dean and Jones).

In my view, a reappraisal of *Spinoza*’s thoughts on the politics of representation is also in order. Sharp’s incisive point about the received Hegel/Spinoza opposition—that it is cast in fundamentally Hegelian terms and then differently evaluated—has a parallel in the way that some of the most influential political interpretations of Spinoza have, to date, positioned him as an anti-juridical and anti-representational thinker (120, 123). That is to say, they cast Spinoza as occupying the negative space of a problem whose terms are not his own. Negri, for example, construes Spinoza’s rejection of Hobbes’s version of representation as a rejection of representation *tout court*. However, Hobbes developed his theory of representation, or “personation,” as a theory of sovereignty in an attempt to discredit rival versions that linked representation more essentially to the idea of the power of the people. Some political theorists argue, in this vein, that representation has a radically democratic genealogy wherein it is conceptualized not in mimetic terms, such that the people are to find themselves reflected in the acts of the political sovereign, but in agonistic terms, such that the people are to retain a critical distance from the business of government that enables them to challenge and resist it (see Vatter, “Republicanism” and “Pettit”). This agonistic conception of representation, I would wager, is something that could profitably join forces with Sharp’s project of renaturalization. Indeed, as I’ve suggested, Spinoza’s political theory might itself prove useful for thinking that relation and, along with it, the possibility of renaturalizing—rather than rejecting—representation. Pursuing

that sort of project would require approaching his thought from a slightly different, if complementary angle—more as a renaturalization of politics than a politics of renaturalization.

Notes

¹ Jacques Rancière has shown how this standard gesture of declaring events to be non-events is a fundamentally depoliticizing move that seeks to enact what it claims—namely, that “there is nothing to see, nothing happening, nothing to be done but to keep moving” (cited in Ross 22). See Ross (19-64) for an excellent discussion of this “police logic” in relation to the revisionist history of May ‘68 in France.

² I was inspired to offer this formulation by Sharp’s gloss on the “practical imperative” of Spinozist reason: “Diversify your body so as to generate agreements (*convenientia*) with other bodies and become increasingly rational” (99).

³ Sharp herself suggests another point of convergence when she cites Warner’s *The Trouble with Normal* as an example of the link between the counter-publics of queer politics and the politics of imperceptibility (176n71).

⁴ For a treatment of political representation that attempts to incorporate non-human constituents, see Disch.

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