

**Thinking Transindividuality along the Spinoza-Marx**

**Encounter: A Conversation**

Bram Wiggers and Jason Read

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**Abstract**

Ever since the publication of Read's *The Politics of Transindividuality* (2015), the academic interest in transindividuality has steadily mounted. In this conversation, Bram Wiggers and Jason Read discuss the current state of affairs around the concept of transindividuality. The conversation begins with a definition of transindividuality and discusses what sets the term apart from other philosophies of social individuation. Having defined the concept of transindividuality, the conversation then engages with the question of how transindividuality can be adopted as a means of social-political critique. First, Bram and Jason discuss how transindividuality is evoked but not explicitly mentioned in the social-political critiques of Spinoza and Marx. Secondly, the conversation takes up the social-political critiques of Paolo Virno and Bernard Stiegler who make explicit use of transindividuality. Central to the later parts of the conversation is the complicated interrelation between the political and economic domains of individuation, as well as the tendency of collective modes of representation to be effaced and obscured by (neo-liberal) individualism and the post-Fordist conditions of labor. Overall, the conversation highlights the relevance of transindividuality for social-political philosophical critique.

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## Thinking Transindividuality along the Spinoza-Marx

### Encounter: A Conversation

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#### Introduction

Gilbert Simondon's concepts are "extremely important; their wealth and originality are striking, when they're not outright inspiring" (Deleuze 2004, 89). These are the words of Gilles Deleuze, who, being no stranger to grand gestures, gives us a sense of the relevance of Simondon's philosophy. Of all the conceptual innovations Simondon makes throughout his *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information*<sup>1</sup> (IL), it is perhaps the concept of transindividuality that stands out the most. In the context of his philosophy of individuation, the term transindividuality is meant to designate the way in which any individual individuation always implies an amplification of its process in terms of the individuation of the collective. Transindividuality, therefore, literally comes to designate the mutually constitutive process of what Simondon aptly calls psycho-social individuation. Outside the context of Simondon's theory of individuation, the concept of transindividuality has been invoked to overcome the duality between the individual atomistic subject and the collective that, at least in political philosophy, has resulted in the impasse between the individualist, contractarian school of thought, and the holist schools of thought. In terms of critical philosophy, Simondon's concept has been appropriated by thinkers such as Étienne Balibar, Bernard Stiegler and Paolo Virno as a tool to critically rethink Marx's analysis of political economy.

In the following conversation – recorded via Zoom on January 6, 2022 – I reflect on these diverse philosophical topics surrounding the notion of transindividuality with Dr. Jason Read, professor of philosophy at the University of Southern Maine and author of *The Politics of Transindividuality*. Published in 2015, the latter work provides, as Balibar states on the cover of the book, a "comprehensive discussion of sources and creative contributions to a renewed Marxist interpretation." What makes the work a remarkable read is that it does not merely proceed from Simondon's original formulation of transindividuality and its invocations in the work of Stiegler and Virno, but also returns to philosophers such as Spinoza, Marx, and Hegel, who for obvious reasons never mentioned the term transindividuality, but who did work around the issue of individuation as well as the relation between the individual and the collective. The result is a book that not only situates the current literature on transindividuality in a systematic manner but also critically engages with the concept of transindividuality by putting the various invocations of transindividuality in conversation with one another. What Read aims to indicate by putting these various readings of transindividuality together is that "the question of collectivity, of transindividuality, is not only simultaneously ontological, political and economic, encompassing the different senses in which things, or people, can be said to be individuated, but it is so in a manner that cannot be neatly, or hierarchically, organized" (2016, 19). Transindividuality as such indicates that individuation is a complex spectacle crossing various domains.

The extensive and thorough nature of Read's work has made the book somewhat of a focal point for any serious engagement with the concept of transindividuality.

For instance, Balibar, whose 1993 lecture *Spinoza: From Individuality to Transindividuality* held in Rijnsburg (possibly) initiated the transindividual reading of Spinoza, refers to Read in his recently published *Spinoza the Transindividual* (2020). In the domain of feminist theory, Read's work has been used by Chiari Bottici in her recent publication *Anarchafeminism* (2021) in which she expands upon the transindividual interpretations of Spinoza provided by Read and Balibar to think through the question "what is a woman?" in pluralist terms. John Robert's *Capitalism and the Limits of Desire* (2021), on the other hand, explicitly adopts Read's Spinozist-Marxist approach to the problem of how capitalism produces (individuates) joyfully submitted subjects. The recent academic interest in transindividuality, however, is not merely confined to critical theorists working roughly in the Spinozist-Marxist domain. With the recent translation of Gilbert Simondon's *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information* (2020) by Taylor Adkins the interest in Simondon's theory of individuation, in general, is on the rise.

Considering these developments, a critical reexamination of *The Politics of Transindividuality* is warranted. In our conversation, we discuss the critical potential of transindividuality, the specific transindividual philosophical practices of Spinoza and Marx, the status of work in today's (neoliberal) capitalist society, and the complicated relation between the political and economic. Overall, our conversation once more highlights the significance of transindividuality as a philosophical tool to critically (re) think political economy.

**Bram Wiggers:** The concept of transindividuality, especially in the non-French speaking world, is relatively new. Simondon's magnum opus, *Individuation in Light of Notion of Form and Information*, was only recently translated into English (2020). Whenever I try to explicate the notion of transindividuality to people who are unfamiliar with the term, they attempt to connect it to other notions of (social)individuation such as Fanon's sociogenesis or Butler's performativity. Indeed, both deal with problems of social individuation in which there seems to be a sort of two-way movement from the individual toward the collective and the reverse. If we accept that these theories describe a similar idea of transindividuation as Simondon does, then the concept of transindividuality is perhaps not that much of a rupture in the way we think about individuation. What do you think about that?

**Jason Read:** I think that transindividuality is a name for something that other people have tried to think under different names; I mean the Fanon reference of sociogenesis is certainly one. Whenever the concept is invoked – and as you mentioned it does have a strange history outside of the Francophone world or at least in the Anglo American world where some of the first translated references show up in things like Marcuse's work, but where it really started to show up is in the work of people like Étienne Balibar, Paolo Virno and Bernard Stiegler, etc. – it is often used as a way to avoid a kind of dead-end way of thinking the relation between the individual and the collective in terms of a zero-sum game. Right, the more individuated you are the more you are separated from collective practices and processes, whereas if you are more integrated

into collective practices you are less of an individual. Transindividuality suggests the mutual constitution of the two [individual and collective].

But the escape from this kind of binary of the individual and the collective, like other binaries that we are caught up in – e.g. mind-body, etc. – is often easier said than done. It takes more than just invoking it, it takes a sort of really working through. Often, theories of social relations that attempt to escape the binary end up invoking an intersubjective way of thinking. Intersubjectivity is a relation between constituted subjects that relate to each other through their own individual tastes, desires, affects, etc. Transindividuality, on the other hand, is a relationship between the constitutive elements of individuation, which means that things can be individuated based on a shared transindividual basis but that they can individuate in different ways with respect to that. For example, a pervasive feeling of economic instability or anxiety could be a transindividual condition that can be individuated in different ways; it can be individuated in a right-wing version, a left-wing version, you can stress the nation, one's sense of belonging or you could see it in terms of the worker and globalization. So you see that the same constitutive element can become the basis for different individuations. This is different from intersubjectivity which suggests that there's ultimately a relationship of recognition between already constituted subjects underlying individuation.

**BW:** Connected to the binary of individual and collective, one of the charges I often get when attempting to explicate the notion of transindividuality is that it appears to be just another theory of compatibilism. We can see how this idea is able to emerge. As you pointed out, there seems to be on the one hand a sort of individuation on the part of the individual that would suggest a form of autonomy, but on the other hand, the individual individuation is equally guided, perhaps even determined, by collective constitutive elements. How would you respond to this charge against transindividuality?

**JR:** Really, I think that along the lines you mentioned, transindividuality is a different way of engaging with determinism. This comes up quite strongly in Étienne Balibar's pamphlet on transindividuality,<sup>2</sup> in which Balibar stresses that the underlying ontology and physics of transindividuality in the Spinozist sense is one that tries to break from a causality understood in linear terms. Rather, we have to think in terms of multiple intersecting causes. This comes out in a different way in Simondon, who is constantly trying to unpack the various levels and layers of individuation from the physical to the natural,<sup>3</sup> to the psychic, and so on, in order to understand how each level of individuation sets the conditions, in terms of a problematic, for further stages of individuation. As human beings, for instance, shaped by thousands of years of evolution, the incorporation of new habits and desires into our existence continuously sets the problems for further progressive individuations. The tricky thing then is, and this comes up in some of the other Spinoza scholars, especially in that of Chantal Jaquet (2014), that even deviations from ascribed cultural values and norms have to be understood as being determined by the complexity of the collective values and norms from which they deviate.

The Simondonian term for this is metastability. Metastability is a term used to describe the fact that determination (by our economy or culture, etc.) is never linear,

but rather that the determination of processes of individuation is made up of multiple intersecting factors and relations that are each individuated in different ways. So on an ontological level, transindividuality is the attempt to think of a kind of complexity through determination, or rather a determination that is less linear and more about multiple overlapping levels of determination.

**BW:** Recently, I encountered an article on the notion of the problem in Simondon and Deleuze by Daniela Voss (2020) in which she explicates this complex, transindividual determination by means of the concept of chrono-topology, which describes the idea that the (psychic) individual is a topological structure with a history. This, I believe, is an elegant way to describe Simondon's idea that individuation is the constant reassessment of problems into new solutions – i.e., new (topological) structures. In your book *The Politics of Transindividuality*, you reflect on this complex determination by arguing that each individuation is both produced and producing, constituted and constitutive – i.e., each individual is a solution to a problem but also poses new problems. Transindividuality allows us to think about how the individual is the result of these complex relations of determination and determining.

Moving on to my next question. I think it is striking that the philosophy of individuation of Simondon, which as you point out is mostly an ontological examination of the constitutive elements of various beings, is taken up by thinkers such as Stiegler, Virno, Balibar, and yourself in terms of a critical theory that engages with political economy. Certainly, Simondon does on occasion refer to Spinoza or Marx, but the passage toward a critical theory is not apparent. How do you think this passage was initiated?

**JR:** I think it connects to two things that I have already briefly mentioned. One is, as you mentioned, that I think that there is a tendency with all new concepts or approaches to maybe overstress the difference with everything that has come before. Simondon definitely does that. The interesting thing about Balibar's approach is that he stresses that once we have this concept, we can see the way in which other philosophers were thinking towards transindividuality without articulating it. As such, we could investigate to what extent there is an unnamed transindividual dimension in, for instance, Spinoza and Marx. On the other hand, and this is the second point, I think that the individual can be understood as both a problem and a solution to problems. In a similar sense, I think that a philosophical concept is both a problem and a solution to a problem. The question of how to connect the ontology of transindividuality to socio-political and economic individuation is a problem that Simondon's thought poses but does not resolve. As a result, you see thinkers such as Balibar, Virno, and Stiegler who, from very different philosophical backgrounds, invoke the concept of transindividuality by each formulating very different responses to the same problem. For them, the problem is to investigate to what extent the concept lends itself, or poses a problem for how we think about politics and economics today.

**BW:** Can we then understand your *The Politics of Transindividuality* as an attempt to provide a more systematic overview of the various transindividual thoughts?

**JR:** Yes, in some sense to try to think through the various intersections of these different invocations of transindividuality and to see how they connect as well as what their limitations are. However, I definitely do not consider transindividuality a school of thought in the strong sense, but more a study of a set of interconnected problems and questions.

**BW:** Let us then turn to the transindividual interpretations of Spinoza and Marx. The way I see it is that when you read transindividuality back into the philosophies of Spinoza and Marx, transindividuality almost seems to become a method rather than a theory of individuation as it had been for Simondon. In a different paper on Spinoza and Marx you call their respective philosophical practices of transindividuality as proceeding on the basis of a preemptive strike. Both Spinoza and Marx take the idea of the free, autonomous individual to be the spontaneous philosophy of man<sup>4</sup> and critically dissect that spontaneous idea by way of transindividuality (Read, 2021). The preemptive strike, therefore, initiates almost something like a genealogy, investigating the conditions under which individuals come to understand themselves (perhaps falsely) as free, autonomous individuals.

**JR:** Yes, in the sense that I think that it is not enough to simply say that the transindividual is correct and people who think in terms of already constituted individuals [intersubjectivity] are wrong and juxtapose the true to the false. It rather consists in trying to show how individuals come to understand themselves in a particular manner due to the underlying conditions of individuation. This is effectively the project of the *German Ideology*. Marx does not merely aim to indicate why the idealist account of history as a history of different competing and contesting ideas criticizing each other is wrong, he wants to show how the material conditions have led people to misrecognize, in a sort of camera obscura inverted world, and think ideas drive history rather than material conditions. In a related but different sense – Marx is more socio-historical and Spinoza more anthropological – Spinoza wants to understand why we, as individuals, see ourselves as a Kingdom within a Kingdom, why we believe that we are the cause of our desires and why we do not see the relations that constitute our affects and desires. The shared critical dimension of Spinoza's and Marx's transindividuality thus consists in the fact that both attempt to indicate how the perspective of the isolated, autonomous individual is generated from the very transindividual social relations that exist but that are in some sense effaced by the individualist conceptions that they give rise to.

The idea of preemptive strike emerged from the fact that one of the things that I find very interesting is that both Marx's *Capital* and Spinoza's *Ethics* contain possibly the two most famous short texts; the "Commodity Fetishism" chapter in *Capital* and the "Appendix to Part One" of the *Ethics*. These are incredibly important critical texts that have been turned to again and again for theories of ideology, fetishism, reification, and so on. But the other interesting thing about both texts, and this is where the preemptive comes up, is that both Spinoza and Marx are basically saying to their reader: "I know you do not agree with me because I know that you are still thinking in terms of", whether it be in the case of Spinoza the idea of an individual as freely determining a

Kingdom within a Kingdom, or in the case of Marx where it is the idea that commodities inherently possess value. And so both Spinoza and Marx need to write these very polemical and ahead-of-themselves texts, for neither Spinoza nor Marx at that point of the texts have worked out either their anthropology or the historical conceptions necessary for their theories. It is their shared materialism through which they recognize that our ways of thinking are shaped by our ways of living and that because our ways of living are such that they in some ways compel us to recognize ourselves as individuals, *that* has to be dealt with critically before they can even go on to write the rest of what it is they are going to write.

**BW:** One of the ways in which Spinoza and Marx, however, differ is that Marx is very much bound to a Hegelian teleological understanding of history. Marx at times appears to be saying that as soon as the material conditions that prevent us from seeing our true transindividual condition change, we would acquire, in the form of communism, a recognition of our true transindividual self. Spinoza does not have this teleological move toward recognition. Balibar argues, for instance, that Spinoza develops what he refers to as the double constitution of the state, which is always marked by a certain polarity between reason and imagination. We can extend this idea of a double constitution to the singular individual. The constant polarity between reason and the imagination, which is so pervasive in our everyday life, blocks any recognition of our true transindividual condition. Connecting Spinoza to Marx, as you do throughout *The Politics of Transindividuality*, would therefore be necessary to overcome a teleological reading of Marx's transindividuality.

**JR:** Yes, I think you are correct, and in some sense Marx struggled with that teleological element. On the one hand, Marx was optimistic about the revolutionary movements happening in Europe at the time, which at times seemed to have made him think that these illusions would simply dissipate, allowing us to see through them and recognize our real collective existence. On the other hand, Marx often argues in the opposite direction, and the commodity fetishism chapter in *Capital* is part of this category, stating that there is no outside of commodity fetishism. In the *Grundrisse*, for instance, Marx seems to think that the capitalist society is organized in such a way that we come to see ourselves as autonomous individuals because the things that we rely on to make our autonomous existence possible – e.g., the labor of others – are effaced for we simply see the commodities and not the labor of individuals that produces them. Before we began, we were talking about how things are going with COVID and I think one of the things that COVID has done with the ensuing supply chain issues is that people are beginning to realize that for them to get the products they want on the shelves, they are dependent upon other people to make that happen. Marx's point is precisely this, that capitalist relations of exchange guided by the principle of "Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham,"<sup>5</sup> this sort of spontaneous philosophy that emerges from capitalist society, is one in which we do not see our relations with others but only see the products that are produced through those relations.

This is also why in the book I tried to make a passage from Marx to Simondon to say that the relations of capitalism should be understood as an alienation from the pre-individual and as an exploitation of the transindividual. We are alienated from the pre-individual when we are incapable of grasping the very constitutive elements of our own affects, desires, etc. In relation to capitalism, for instance, we do not recognize how much of our affects and desires are produced for us to desire more products, which is Stiegler's point. The transindividual is exploited in that we are collective not merely because the things that we consume are produced by others, but also in that our labor usually depends upon the existence of others, present or not present, to have any kind of impact or be meaningful at all. But that aspect of production is exploited and, I would also argue with Marx, in some sense effaced at the same time.

**BW:** I think that Balibar, in the final chapter of *Spinoza the Transindividual* (2020) in which he turns to the transindividual nature of the philosophy of Marx, has a very interesting approach to Marx's understanding of the transindividual relations of capitalism that reflect some of the things we have just discussed. Balibar suggests that Marx is not so much interested in showing how individuals are alienated from social relations due to the capitalist mode of production, but rather that Marx traces how alienation itself can exist *as* constitutive relations. In this sense, commodity fetishism is an alienated form of relation that is constitutive of a particular way of living and acting in the world. In your article on the *Preemptive Strikes* (2021), you describe a similar idea. For Spinoza, the prejudice which states that we are conscious of our appetites but ignorant of the causes of things causes a superstitious belief in God, which in its turn becomes the cause of our collective and individual lives by way of dictating certain norms, habits, and beliefs that are in line with our initially mistaken, superstitious understanding of the world. Marx almost describes a reverse process in which the fetishized relations of capitalism become the cause of a particular self-understanding, namely the idea of the individual laborer as a commodity, which reenters the world of social relations, namely those of consumption and production, as a thing to be bought and sold reifying the appearance of commodity fetishism.

The Spinoza-Marx encounter seems very promising in the way that both, from different philosophical positions, describe the way in which alienated relations can themselves be constitutive of a particular transindividual reality. Nonetheless, it seems to me that Spinoza and Marx do not share a similar understanding of alienation. Marx seems to suggest that alienation implies the total loss of self into something else. Spinoza, who refers to *conatus* as the very essence of man, on the contrary, does not talk of alienation in terms of a total loss of self, but rather in terms of a variation in the capacity to act, in terms of variations in the degree of power.

**JR:** Right, you know there is a lot of debate within the community who are interested in the Spinoza-Marx intersection as to whether alienation is one of those concepts that survives the Spinoza-Marx encounter. One of the reasons is that in terms of Spinoza's ontology in which everything is defined by its striving to preserve itself, the idea of a loss of self does not really make any sense. Then there is another, almost reverse way



of looking at it, which is the approach taken by Frédéric Lordon. Lordon argues that if alienation is understood as a loss of autonomy then alienation is itself universal and even constitutive because there is no true autonomy, no kingdom within a kingdom, given that we are ultimately always affected by our relations with others. There is also the perspective taken by Franck Fischbach (2015) who states that read together, Spinoza and Marx suggest that alienation is not, as is often conventionally understood, a loss of subjectivity to an object, but rather the reversal of that, a loss of objectivity into pure subjectivity. Fischbach's point is that Marx's interest in alienation originates primarily in the (capitalist) transformations of human beings who lived in a particular community, interacted with that community, and reproduced themselves in and through social relations toward a capitalist subject who is defined first and foremost as a possessor of labor power and nothing else. As a capitalist worker, you have no way of reproducing your existence other than selling your labor power. Fischbach connects this to the Spinozist idea that the more we see ourselves as a Kingdom within a Kingdom, the more we come to see ourselves as subjects disconnected from the world. For many philosophers, this in fact might be considered the basis of autonomy, but Spinoza sees it as the basis of our subjection. In order to become more active and powerful, it is not a matter of affirming our pure subjectivity, but rather recognizing that our subjectivity is conditioned by our relations with others, the natural world, and so on. In this sense, it is pure subjectivity that is in fact alienation.

Similar to Marx, Bernard Stiegler argues that contemporary capitalism is transforming people from individuals with certain cultural habits and norms into pure consumer power. For Stiegler, just like Marx's laborer who is reduced to pure labor power, the abstract consumer is alienated from social relations and 'know-how' that are the conditions for autonomous individuation. The fundamental difference between contemporary capitalist production/consumption from that which came before can be illustrated by means of an example. Take something relatively simple like learning a song or a (video)game. Before the capitalist era of production and consumption, learning a song was also a condition for being able to produce it. There is a certain passivity and activity, internalization and externalization involved in which the consumer is also a producer – i.e., the individual is sort of two sides of the same relation. However, with the capitalist era of consumption and production, especially with the creation of mass media and so on, we get the transformation where the subject becomes passive and subjective capacities are reduced to pure combined power, that is, pure buying power and pure desires. Just as the reduction of the subject to pure labor power is a form of alienation from the subject's capacities through the isolation and separation from the conditions which produce them, so too the creation of a subject as pure buying power is also an alienation in the realm of non-working life.

**BW:** It seems to me that a sort of interesting contradiction emerges between the accounts of Marx and Stiegler and it is one that I think we can also find in Simondon. On the one hand, both Spinoza and Marx seem to suggest – which I think is a move that we see recurring in the modern philosophies of nature of, for instance, Haraway and Latour – that by placing the subject back into social relations, fostering a moment

of recognition with the reality of one's social and interconnected existence, alienation can be overcome and the subject regains autonomy. On the other hand, and this is I think the sort of position that Stiegler and Virno take, there might be a moment where the tremendous amount of relations, affects, and forces at play in modern capitalism overload the subject and turn it into a passive receiver. I think it is this sense of overdetermination that you referred to previously as being alienated from the pre-individual. The power of the relations of capitalism to make one desire certain things and not others results in an alienation from the pre-individual capacity to individuate in a different (non-economic) manner and one thus becomes subject to the forces of capitalism. How is it that transindividuality as a concept allows for these rather diverse critical positions?

**JR:** I think that around the concept of transindividuality there are different ways of understanding its critical potential. One of the ways would be simply to assert that – and I do not want to attribute this to Simondon but he is often read in this way – we are always-already transindividual, it is there in every possible relation, so that there is not really anything to say critically or normatively about different social relations. Then there is the opposite extreme of that, which is Stiegler's idea, who is very adamant in pointing out that we do not live in an atomistic society because we do not have the necessary transindividual conditions to individuate ourselves. In the modern capitalist consumer society, Stiegler argues, it is impossible to say 'I' or 'We'. It is impossible to say 'I' because the very things that make up one's identity are manufactured and marketed, and it is very difficult to say 'We' because there is not really a shared basis for collectivity. One of my go-to examples to clarify this point is driving on the freeway. Driving on the freeway is neither an individuated experience because it is so generic as everyone is doing the same thing, nor is it a collective experience in the sense that the other cars exist as obstacles to you. So on the freeway, there is no 'We' or 'I' and I think that that is how Stiegler sees much of contemporary society. The perspective that I take is neither the one that argues that everything is always-already transindividual nor the sort of disindividuation that Stiegler is describing, but to rather think about this rather paradoxical [Simondonian] idea that we are transindividuated in our own isolation and separation.<sup>6</sup>

**BW:** This connects nicely to my next question. One of the things you criticize Stiegler for is the way in which Stiegler's understanding of individuation, or rather disindividuation as you just mentioned, of the individual subject is entirely limited to the domain of consumption and production. It thereby seems to be implicated in a reading of Marx that argues that the material base entirely determines the superstructure. Individuation, for Stiegler, is economic individuation and this form of individuation suppresses other forms of individuation, such as the political. By use of Balibar's reading of Spinoza's double constitution of the state you try to stress that the individual is not only individuated in the economic sphere but also in the political domain, or perhaps even between these two domains. You put forward the idea of a short circuit between the economic and the political to clarify the fact that economic relations require political forms of representation in order to be meaningful, and that political forms of individuation are

informed by, and inform, economic forms of individuation. Could you expand on the relation between the economic and political as transindividuation?

**JR:** Yes, it is something that I have not been thinking about for a while, so I appreciate that you bring it up. One of the things that Balibar does is to focus on proposition IVp37 of the *Ethics*, where Spinoza argues that there are two different ways in which we come into collective life. On the one hand, there is the affect-based way where I want other people to like what I want so that my desires are, so to say, recognized.<sup>7</sup> This is a fundamentally unstable way of constituting a collective because I do not really want you to desire what I desire, because then we are in competition over the same thing, but I also do not want you to *not* desire what I desire because I do not want to be the only person who desires it. The affective constitution of the collective is thus marked by constant, ambivalent social relations of attraction and repulsion. The other side of collective life is grounded in Spinoza's idea that "nothing is more useful to man than man" (Spinoza 1996, IVp18schol), which informs the rational idea that our lives are better when we live collectively. What Balibar stresses is that both the rational and the affective constitution of the collective are always happening, in the sense that they happen alongside each other in a mutually constitutive manner.

Coming back to your question. At times I think that Balibar wants to suggest that, for instance, the nation is the site of imaginary [affective] identification which is part of the reason why national identities are so fixed. You see this best reflected in Balibar's interest in immigration. Part of the issue with immigration is this weird sense in which domestic inhabitants are getting frustrated by immigrants because they do not love the national object of love in the same way that 'locals' love it, the immigrants are perhaps loving it wrong, so that there is always this conflict within the national identity. Contrary to the nation as the site of imaginary identification, Balibar would then argue that the economy is the domain of utility, of "nothing is more useful to a man than man". But then Balibar, as a Marxist, is confronted with the fact that we learn from Marx that the economy is the domain of exploitation, which Spinoza as a less sophisticated economic thinker, simply does not recognize.

I would therefore argue, which reflects the idea of a short circuit that you mentioned, that rather than think that the nation is the domain of imaginary identification and the economy of rational utility, both the nation and the economy have their imaginary and rational components. Balibar develops a similar idea with the figure of the citizen. The citizen is a figure of a kind of equality and collective belonging framed in terms of the nation, so that the citizen is the domain of rational utility and the nation of imaginary identification. But added to that I would also argue that just as there is a rational basis for our economic relations, there is also an imaginary identification in the economy. You see this imaginary identification reflected for instance in the idea of the worker, who in politics is constantly split and divided between *real* worker and *not-real* worker. Especially in contemporary ideology, the capitalist or CEO bizarrely present themselves as the *real* worker, because they are responsible for innovations and creating profits, whereas the 'ordinary' worker is reduced to the status of not-real worker. So in that sense, we should extend upon Balibar's imaginary/rational division between the

nation and the economy in order to think, in a Spinozist manner, of the relation between the imagination and reason as the basis for all social relations, political and economic.

**BW:** Stressing, as you do, the relation between the economy and the political via the idea of a short circuit seems to me to open up the possibility for political resistance against economic exploitation. This would then offset an overly materialist reading of Marx that argues that only a definitive change in the relations of production would be able to overcome exploitation, effectively foreclosing the possibility of any political resistance. I think such an intervention in Marx, stressing the interrelation between base and superstructure, is very helpful. But if we then look at the cultural analysis of Stiegler, but especially keep in our minds the thesis of Wendy Brown's *Undoing the Demos* (2015) which argues that neoliberalism is succeeding in its mission to replace homo politicus with homo economicus, can we then still speak of political individuation that could resist the forces of the economy? In other words, is the short circuit not cut short?

**JR:** Yes, coming back to what we just talked about. Just as Balibar sees political individuation as split between the imaginary identification of the nation, with a certain shared culture, language, and customs, etc., and the rational identification of the citizen, who is a person with certain rights and duties attached to them, I would also argue that on the flip side, the figure of homo economicus is also split between two modes of economic life. There is, on the one hand, the homo economicus side in which we see ourselves in terms of competition, individual investments, and where we strive to maximize utility. But, on the other hand, there is also a collective, perhaps imaginative, dimension in any and all work process. This is something that Marx stressed, namely that the capitalist does not just exploit individual labor power, it exploits the fact that once you get multiple people together their shared labor is always greater than the sum of their parts. He refers to this combined labor power as *Gattungsvermögen*, or species-capacity. Marx is not necessarily very concerned with where this species-capacity comes from, but rather with the fact that there is something that happens when you bring people together that exceeds the simple sum of all isolated workers working independently.

We can connect this to neoliberalism, which I think attempts to efface and obscure the collective basis of labor itself and see it as a purely individual activity. Which obviously is not correct, for it seems to me that most people when they start a new job have this moment where co-workers will pull you aside saying; 'look I know this is what they are telling you to do, but we figured out this way of doing things which is faster, it is going to be easier this way and you are not going to wear yourself out'. Such informal knowledge sharing between co-workers is not at all a relation of competition, because if we truly had been homo economicus the person who figured out a faster, easier way to do something would hoard it and keep it to themselves. Yet, this collective aspect of labor is exactly what neoliberalism is trying to efface. So Wendy Brown is right to say that homo economicus is an attempt to obscure kinds of political belonging. But homo economicus also has to be understood as an attempt to obscure certain aspects of economic relations. So what is at stake in neoliberalism is not just an attempt to efface the political byways of the economic, but to have effaced the economic understood

as the use of the powers of cooperation by really imposing the market side of the economy on labor relations.

**BW:** The neoliberal attempt to isolate the individual worker by means of effacing and obscuring the collective side of labor processes has in recent times obviously been aided not merely by the globalization of labor processes and financialization, but also by the growing virtuality of work. When working online from the comfort of one's own home becomes the norm it becomes increasingly hard to recognize the collective processes of labor in which one is involved.

**JR:** Yes, I think that is true. Marx really understood well that the subject of capital is split. When subjects are in the sphere of exchange, where they are out in the world buying things, subjects see themselves as an individual with their own individual tastes, desires, and needs. But when workers then clock in at work they recognize that there are others who are doing the same thing and so on. In other words, they see a different mode of individuation with a different social existence. Contemporary working conditions have tended to more and more obscure the collective nature of work, in the sense that, as you point out in for instance the COVID pandemic, people are isolated, sitting in front of their screens not seeing the extent to which their labor is dependent upon the labor of others. Marx already saw this tension between two different domains of individuation in capitalism, namely the individuation of the consumer market and the individuation of the working place. I think that, especially in today's capitalist relations, we see that the tension between these two different domains of individuation has lent itself towards one domain becoming predominant – that of the consumer market – whereas the other – the working place – is more or less obscured.

Although, as we were talking about before, there is a sense in which, due to Covid, we are forced to recognize our dependency on others. That obscured collective individuation then suddenly comes to light and you get something like the great resignation in the US, where people leave their jobs because they are getting to see the extent to which they have been rendered disposable and interchangeable, but also because they see the collective nature of work. Sharing stories such as a restaurant having to close because all the workers just walked out one day, makes it more likely that someone else in another place might resist in this way. So in a sense, the isolation and invisibility of work have to some degree, paradoxically, given way to increased visibility and awareness throughout the Covid pandemic.

**BW:** The final question that I would like to turn to concerns the notion of colinearization advanced by Frédéric Lordon (2014). The way I understand Lordon is that he attempts to adapt Marx's analysis of capital to the modern, neoliberal capitalist model by confronting Marx with Spinoza's anthropology. Marx's notion of labor exploitation, at least in much of the Western world that outsourced its production chains to African and Asian countries, seems no longer to adequately describe the relation between laborer and capitalist. A lot of workers really enjoy their work and find fulfillment in it. Lordon, therefore, argues that the notion of exploitation has made way for passionate servitude.

Individual laborers' desires are colinearized to that of the capitalist so that the laborer finds joy in being put to work for the desires of the capitalist. Could you expand on this notion of colinearization as a distinctively modern aspect of capitalism? And also, how does the concept of colinearization relate to your notion of the short circuit as relation between the economic and political, as once more there seems to be a threat of the economic overtaking the political when all desires are capitalist desires?

**JR:** Yes, the notion of colinearization is certainly interesting. Lordon describes colinearization as the moment where the gap between the striving (conatus) of individuals and the striving of the capitalist enterprise is reduced to a minimum. Lordon then maps out this history of colinearization, where the first way that capital got people to do what it wanted them to do was simply through the absence of alternatives, in the sense that you either worked or starved. The second way is the sort of Fordist compromise in which the pains of your labor were being offset by the ability to consume things. Then the third way, which is the neoliberal way, is the sense in which you should realize yourself in your labor. This is exemplified by the slogan "if you love what you do, you never have to work a day in your life".

What I think is odd is that Lordon does not seem to think of the economic and political domain as two separate organizations of affects and striving, for him they are kind of intertwined. However, Lordon does offer an interesting perspective on the relation between the economy and politics by appropriating a Spinozist idea concerning the affective nature of causation. Spinoza argues that we get more angry or happy when someone does something that harms us or benefits us which we understand as freely undertaken, rather than if we understand them to be compelled by necessity. For Spinoza, this idea is part of the way in which we can overcome the power of the affects that dominate our lives. If I understand, for instance, that part of the reason why someone I know is not as friendly and warm to me as I would like them to be is caused by the fact that their parents are even colder, I am more likely to see the necessary causes that determined that person to be that way and therefore less likely to be upset about it. What Lordon does with that distinction is that the economy always presents itself under the modality of necessity, in the sense that, when economic decisions are made they are being made in terms of market statistics, the demands of competition, innovation, etc., and no one is really truly responsible. Politics, on the contrary, is often presented as freely determined. And this is why politicians are more prone to create anger for us and economic figures hardly do so.

I think that this affective distinction between politics and economics is very suggestive and interesting. Although I would add to that, perhaps through Marx, that the economy, like the domain of politics, is a human institution so that we have to talk about the *perception* of necessity and freedom rather than their *actuality*. But nonetheless, I do think that this idea allows us to explain why people are more prone to get angry at things that are perceived to have been freely chosen versus things that are perceived to have been necessary. We can come back to a COVID-related example. For instance, in the US you have this sort of reasoning that, even given the rise of new variants and the increasing caseloads, the economy cannot withstand another lockdown, so that

we have to open up the economy. But the interesting thing of course is that – and this goes back to the idea that our sense of necessity and contingency are themselves shaped by social forces – recent evidence has shown that president Biden and others are completely convinced that if they were to impose new lockdown measures they would basically ruin themselves because these measures would be incredibly unpopular. What is weird about this is that, on the one hand, what is seen to be necessary, namely that the economy has to open, is itself contingent and that what is seen as contingent, namely the imposition of new lockdown measures, is to some extent itself necessary. So here we are talking about the perception of necessity or contingency that determines, in a sense, the likelihood of people getting angry and prone to resistance. I think this affective distinction is certainly an interesting way to think about the division between politics and economics.

**BW:** I saw that you are publishing a book on Marx in the near future, what can we expect from that?

**JR:** Yes, well the book is really a sort of collection of essays that I have written over the past 20 years or so. There are some essays on Marx, some on Deleuze, Althusser and others. But I also have a book coming out from Verso on work called *The Double Shift: Marx and Spinoza on the Ideology and Politics of Work* which is my most comprehensive attempt to synthesize a Marx–Spinoza critical perspective. That is going to be coming out probably around late 2022 or early 2023.

## Notes

**1** Originally published posthumously in French as *L'Individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information* in 2005 as a collection of the two previously, separately published *L'individu et sa genèse physico-biologique* (1964) and *L'individuation psychique et collective* (1989).

**2** Read refers to Balibar's lecture *Spinoza: From Individuality to Transindividuality* held in Rijnsburg for the Spinoza Society in 1993. This lecture was originally published for a small circle in 1997 but has now been reprinted in Balibar's *Spinoza the Transindividual* (2020).

**3** Simondon has various terms to describe the individuation of simple, living organisms. He most often refers to living, vital, or natural individuation.

**4** The spontaneous philosophy refers almost to a sort of common sense of individuals. It is not necessarily a worked-out idea or ideology, but results from the lived experiences of individuals.

**5** This famous quote figures in *Capital: Volume 1*, Part II “The Transformation of Money into Capital”, chapter 6 “The Buying and Selling of Labour Power”.

**6** In his account of psycho-social individuation, Simondon argues that, because the individual cannot possibly individuate the pre-individual entirely within itself, it must amplify its individuation externally in collective modes of representation. The passage toward collective individuation is however not an intersubjective phenomenon, but, and this is Read's point, something that the individual recognizes in its failed endeavor to individuate the pre-individual within itself – this attempt results in the state of anxiety (*angoisse*) (2020, 282–85).

**7** Spinoza refers to this affect whereby I want others to want what I want as ambition (1996, IIIp29schol).

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Bram Wiggers is a recent graduate of the Research Master Philosophy at the UvA. His areas of interest include social and political philosophy, the history of philosophy, and critical theory. In his Master's thesis, titled *Individuation in Light of Notions of Power and Control: An Interdisciplinary Transindividual Approach to post-Fordist Individuation*, Bram adopts the conceptual vocabulary of transindividuality to assess the conditions of individuation under post-Fordist capitalism using an interdisciplinary approach that aims to connect the economics of post-Fordism to the philosophy of transindividuality. Currently, Bram is working to rewrite chapters of his MA thesis into publishable articles.

Jason Read completed his Ph.D. at the State University of New York at Binghamton in 2001, with a dissertation titled *The Production of Subjectivity: Marx and Contemporary Continental Thought*. His most recently published book, *The Politics of Transindividuality* (2015), engages with the thought of transindividuality and develops its use for social-political critique. His areas of scholarship include social and political philosophy, 19th and 20th century continental philosophy, critical theory, philosophy of history, and Spinoza studies. Currently, Jason is working on two book publications, *The Double Shift: Marx and Spinoza on the Ideology and Politics of Work* (New York: Verso, 2023) and *The Production of Subjectivity: Marx and Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill 2022/Chicago: Haymarket, 2023).