

Michael Mack, *Spinoza and the Specters of Modernity: The Hidden Enlightenment of Diversity from Spinoza to Freud* (London: Continuum, 2010). 222pp.

Stephen Nadler recently remarked that we are in the midst of a Spinoza revival.¹ If Michael Mack is to be believed, based on the strong case presented in this ambitious and valuable book, this revival has been going on since the mid-eighteenth century. It is evident in the thought of writers promoting a universality that preserves particularity, diversity, equality and inclusivity, based on the interdependence of beings rather than their hierarchy. Mack's contention is that this cluster of ideas starts with Spinoza and is carried through a "hidden Enlightenment" of thinkers including Herder, Goethe, Franz Rosenzweig, George Eliot, and Sigmund Freud. Mack impressively researches the interconnections between these thinkers, tracing their ideas back to Spinoza's and building a trajectory of thinking that reaches into the present day.

Mack is compelled by this alternative Enlightenment thinking and the implications it has for theory and practice today. He suggests that the ideals of the "traditional" Enlightenment – the power of reason, the acquisition of universal concepts, the exaltation of freedom and faith in progress – lead to destructive tendencies in and between individuals and cultures. In order to live more sustainably, he argues, we should adopt "Spinoza's vision of a non-hierarchical modernity" (4), which rejects anthropocentrism and teleology for a doctrine of our interconnectedness with one another and the rest of nature.

This is an important, original, and worthwhile project. The criticism of Enlightenment values is a common theme in modern and postmodern writing. But rather than embrace the quasi-nihilism of some postmodern positions – which would have us replace reason, universality and progress with uncertainty, instability, and rupture – Mack asserts that we need different versions of the Enlightenment ideas we oppose. He shows how Spinoza's philosophy departs from prevailing doctrines of Cartesian science, Christian theology, and Kantian rationality, and indicates how Spinoza's positive programme might ground non-hierarchical ways of thinking about selfhood, nationality, and history. Eliot and Freud, Mack argues in two particularly strong chapters, develop just these ideas in their texts. The range and depth of Mack's research, across philosophical, literary, and theological sources, is extremely impressive, as is his ability to bring this material together to serve his core argument.

Unfortunately, in his critique of traditional Enlightenment thinking, Mack commits two fallacies typical of this genre. The first is to assume that epistemological positions lead necessarily to socio-political outcomes. For example, Mack claims that in questioning Cartesian dualism, Spinoza "undermined the societal force of various ideologies that have their foundation in specific epistemological assumptions" (23). The ideologies in question are, we gather, those that exalt intellectual pursuits above bodily activities, thereby valuing certain kinds of people over others. Yet the Cartesian position does not *necessitate* those ideologies, any more than the Spinozist position necessarily overcomes them. It is possible to criticize Descartes' hierarchy of mind over body and to hold sexist, racist, or elitist views, just as it is possible to affirm Descartes' epistemology without subscribing to those views. Similarly, belief

¹ Steven Nadler, "Within Reason", *Times Literary Supplement*, 9 October 2009.

in teleology does not commit a thinker to the “moral and intellectual superiority” of one group over another (43). Herder himself is evidence that a teleological viewpoint need not be an elitist one. Yet one of the book’s main premises is the assumption that teleology leads directly and unavoidably to the division of human communities, inequality, hierarchy, and even violence. This is a dangerous assumption, because it suggests that rejecting teleology is *enough* to indicate our opposition to historically ingrained forms of exclusion. But it isn’t enough, because there is no necessary connection between the two.

The second fallacy is the assumption that any thinker holds the single set of views ascribed to “traditional Enlightenment thinking”. The bogeyman here, as in so many cases, is Kant. Ignoring the complexity of his thought, the book presents a Kant obsessed with the unhindered march of reason through science, morality, and history. This caricature leads Mack to make some invalid claims, such as that “Kant cannot accept that sense impression precedes the conception of ideas” (49) and that he sought to “establish an a priori system that is not limited by epistemological constraints” (132). (Both these claims are falsified by the first page of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.) No credence is given to the non-hierarchical aspects of Kant’s thought: his arguments for moral equality, autonomy, and human freedom (areas in which, Kant claimed, the Spinozists could not deliver).

Worse, Kant’s philosophy of history is presented as aiming for “an unlimited state of reason” (132) that does away with diversity, irrationality and imperfection. In fact, Kant’s essays on human development and diversity are rich works that defy this broad-brush criticism. What is objectionable in these works – particularly Kant’s racist view that skin colour is linked to rational capacity – needs to be carefully explained and assessed. Kant does not claim that non-whites are irrational or that they should not exist, as Mack accuses. Rather, Kant claims that each race has a fixed capacity for rational activity, and that these differences are necessary if all the goals of human reason are ultimately to be achieved. The latter is by no means a certainty, but an assumption that, Kant argues, our limited state of knowledge requires us to make. It would have been advisable for Mack to engage with the detail and complexity of this material, not least because it would make clearer the opposing position taken by Herder.

J. G. Herder, the subject of four of the nine chapters of the book, is the centre of Mack’s study. Herder is a neglected figure in the history of philosophy who deserves more prominence given the contemporary relevance of his thought. An advocate of cultural pluralism, ethnic diversity, and the multiplicity of historical narratives, and an opponent of colonialism, cultural superiority, and environmental degradation, perhaps Herder is finally due a revival of his own. Mack makes the case passionately for Herder’s recognition as a significant contributor to modernity, while demonstrating that his thinking is grounded in Spinoza’s philosophy. Though Herder’s thought has been better explained elsewhere,² Mack impressively draws together much secondary literature to make a powerful case for Herder’s enduring relevance.

² Namely in Frederick Beiser, *The Fate of Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), and John Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant’s Critique of Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) and *Kant, Herder and the Birth of Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

These chapters celebrate rather than critically assess Herder's contributions. The result is a largely unquestioning affirmation of Herder's rightness, both theoretical and socio-political. For instance, Mack states that Herder's cultural diversity "questions the value of monolithic and absolute ideas" (77). But might not "cultural diversity" itself be in danger of becoming an absolute idea? And what about the absolute status of the idea of organic force, Herder's *explanandum* for the form of the universe? More problematically, Mack insists – in accordance with his view that such positions are necessarily progressive ones – that Herder is anti-teleological and anti-anthropocentric, whereas Herder's texts suggest the opposite. It is true that Herder denies a single linear progression and that he has "no notion of improvement through development" (104), but Herder does argue that the universe is directed by organic force towards a goal wherein all human capacities will be realized (*Humanität*). Mack does not adequately respond to the contention that Herder *does* hold teleological and anthropocentric views, nor to Kant's point that there is an irresolvable discrepancy between Herder's teleology and his naturalism.

I similarly felt that Mack needed to do more to convince us that Spinoza is a non-hierarchical thinker. Mack suggests that Spinoza aims "to do away with privilege and other forms of hierarchical rankings" (6). This claim is never really justified, and it does not take into account what we might call the Nietzschean reading of Spinoza. If Spinoza's universe is interpreted in terms of the differing powers of things, it is hard to escape the conclusion that things that are more powerful are also more virtuous, more rational, and more free – in short, not equal to but *better than* those things that are less powerful. It is not obvious that Spinoza really does "break down the hierarchical divide between those who succeed and those who fail" (7) rather than reinforcing it. It is a shame that beyond a brief footnote (37), Mack does not address this interesting question.

Finally, I must note that *Spinoza and the Specters of Modernity* is full of typographical errors. This would not be worth mentioning except that it seems indicative of a certain haste in the book's preparation. Mack's wide-ranging and interdisciplinary research, along with the sheer plurality of ideas he wants to convey, means that the text frequently changes direction and focus. This makes for difficult reading. Many points needed better contextualization and a longer, more sustained treatment. It is because Mack's position is so interesting and original that the reader longs for a slower, more drawn-out explanation and assessment. The services of an editor would have been beneficial, as would a proper conclusion and bibliography.

Despite its problems, *Spinoza and the Specters of Modernity* is a compelling text whose core idea is well conceived and researched. Its distinctive approach is to draw intriguing new connections between thinkers not usually treated together, and to show the relevance of these connections for contemporary thought. This book is well worth seeking out. Mack has assured Spinoza's place at the heart of an alternative history of modernity, and assured his own place in the interdisciplinary history of ideas.

Beth Lord
University of Dundee