



SPINOZIST POLITICS SUSAN JAMES

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In a way it's too soon to write this report. I'm sure that the experiences of this year will continue to change me, and I'm curious to see what will happen next. Already, though, I can safely predict that intellectual life away from my fellow Fellows is going to feel rather flat, that I shall miss my shady green office in the Neubau, and find it a shock when hours at the computer no longer slide seamlessly into impromptu discussions, seminars or concerts. What an intense and exhilarating group of colleagues. What a welcoming and solicitous staff. What an enriching programme of events. And what a marvellous city to explore.

Some of the many pleasures of the Wiko have been the opportunity to learn a little about many things (reading the Koran, ants, Schoenberg, types of capitalism) and the discovery of unexpected points of contact between people working in different fields. Lucretius, for example, brought together a group of philosophers, literary critics and historians, while a shared interest in political philosophy formed the basis for another group, which met throughout the year. I hope that these occasions, along with many more haphazard conversations, have helped me to think a bit differently, and I feel enormously grateful for the unobtrusive generosity with which the Kolleg supports all intellectual ventures, large and small.

Such a lively atmosphere also made it easier to get on with writing a book. This is not the one I originally proposed, but rather a book about the political writings of Spinoza, who continues to strike me as one of the most imaginative and absorbing philosophers of the Western tradition. An adamant opponent of violent conflict within the state, he argues for a form of religious pluralism, together with a way of life that nurtures “the freedom to philosophise”. Achieving these goals is in Spinoza’s view a matter of finding a point of equilibrium between sovereign and citizens. It is the job of the state to guarantee security by making and enforcing the law; but in order to succeed it must take account of what citizens will stand, and of the limits of its own power. Equally, while citizens are bound to strive to realise their interests, they need to bear in mind the likely consequences of pushing the state too far. In order to manage this balancing act, however, both sides must be sensitive to the passions that guide human action. The capacities of individuals and groups are largely determined by their hopes and fears, devotions and resentments, so that gauging these affects, and finding ways to modify them, form a vital part of political life, and understanding these processes is the key to political philosophy.

At one level, Spinoza offers a political theory which blurs the oppositions between truth and falsehood, reason and passion, superstition and well-grounded belief. He addresses the situation of people who have a partial understanding of the world they inhabit, rely for their sense of identity on imaginative identifications with nations, peoples or gods, and reason in the light of their passions. How, he asks, can people like these form harmonious political communities? At another level, he addresses himself to a range of readers who already have passionate commitments to diverse beliefs and ways of life, and tries to speak to them in ways that they will find persuasive.

In an effort to do justice to the complexity of this political programme, I have tried to follow out both these strands of Spinoza’s argument. The central place that he awards to

the passions, and his insistence that one must attend to the specific characteristics of individual communities, are at odds with the dominant presuppositions of much contemporary political philosophy and open up a number of challenges. By writing about Spinoza, I hope to be able to make progress with a series of papers on this theme, about which I've learned a great deal from my colleagues at Wiko.

Now the ivy has almost covered the window of my office, and the mouse that lived in the greenery outside has alas just died. It's time to go.