

Transcript

Matthieu Angevin - "Spinoza against Hippocrates"

Matthieu Angevin:

I'd like to thank Marie and Dan organizing this event, and Anthony for chairing the panel. And also thank you to Ahmed for this very interesting talk. So, despite the fact that we're meeting to celebrate the 350th birthday of the TTP, that text has been quite peripheral to my work. I have mainly focused on the Ethics and the TP. My focus was to try and understand what freedom and emancipation would mean for individuals such as states and social movements. And so, I take a methodological perspective on that problematic, like quite a few commentators of Spinoza and by methodology, I mean a perspective that takes into account the role played by the milieu in the process of individuation, reproduction and emancipation. So, in that regard, for example, Justin Steinberg argues in his latest book that, I quote "Spinoza was very much alive to the fact that human freedom and self-control depend critically on external causes. If we want to live joyful and intellectually rich lives, our environment must be structured in ways that conduce to this aim". And likewise, Laurent Bove argued about two decades before in "La stratégie du Conatus" that for Spinoza, I quote "the political problem for bodies and for ideas or minds is that of a space to produce, liberate and defend" [then gives French original].

So, for my work I look at this phenomenon not from the perspective of human individuals but from that of individuals such as states and social movements. And of course, the conceptual move which I argue Spinoza's framework allows. So, these commentators make use of the notion of environmental milieu but in Spinoza's work and more generally during the time of Spinoza there is no recourse to the notion of environmental milieu and thinkers still speak of external causes of circumstances up until the 19th century. So, I endeavoured a while ago to understand the birth of these notions, those of environment and milieu, and to do that I studied what could be called their prehistory. So, there is one book in that regard which I came across quite randomly and which proved absolutely amazing to reconstruct the prehistory of these notions. That book is Clarence Glacken's "Traces on the Rodian Shore", subtitled "Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the end of the 18th century" and published in 1967. So, in French it was published under the name "A history of Geographical Thought", called [gives French title], and published in four volumes. So, reading this book and a few other sources led me to better understand the tradition which dates back at least to the times of the pre-Socratic, a tradition which strives to understand the influence of the climate. The climate understood in a classical sense includes the climate as we understand it today, but also astrology or the influence of the stars on the climate, as well as the kind of diets which certain climate offers, etc., so a much broader understanding of the term climate.

So, this tradition is often misinterpreted notably in France as emerging during the Enlightenment era, during which there was a famous debate between Montesquieu and Voltaire regarding, according to their own formulation, the role of nature, this is the role of culture in determining the people's ingenu. And for the English-speaking world David Harvey's the condition of postmodernity also seems to uncritically date this debate back to the enlightenment era. So, to give you an example, Montesquieu claimed that the empire of the climate is the first amongst all the empires [gives French original] ... to

which Voltaire answered that if the climate has any power, the government has a hundred times more, and religion together with the government has even more [gives French original].

So, on this continued presence of this tradition from Hippocrates and Herodotus to the enlightenment era, has led me in turn to make the hypothesis I will present to you today, regarding a new contextualization of the quote from the TTP that, I quote, "only laws and customs can lead a nation to have its particular ingenium", and that's in TTP chapter 17. So, first if we were to look at the context of this quote, it would seem that Spinoza specifies that only laws and customs are important in the constitution of a common ingenium in opposition to language, which is listed with laws and customs, in the sentence before as factors distinguishing individuals as part of certain nations. It is certain that modern linguists could make the case that language, directly or indirectly, does play some kind of role in the constitution of a common ingenium, and this was already argued by Rousseau, but I did not come across any texts during and preceding Spinoza's era that argued that this was the case. So perhaps someone present today could enlighten me in that regard if I were to be wrong.

Thus, although the climate is not mentioned I think Spinoza is in fact referring to it with the odd insistence he shows when he claims that I put again, "only laws and customs can lead the nation to have its particular ingenium". And I hope that it is possible to claim therefore that Spinoza is in fact intervening against the Hippocratic tradition, and also the climate understood in its classical sense, plays no role in the constitution of a common ingenium. So, there are a few elements that I take to support this reading.

First Spinoza writes this sentence in the context of making some kind of a distinction between nature and culture. Although unusual it is true in virtue of Spinoza's professed naturalism, he writes prior to that passage in the same paragraph that, I quote, "nature creates individuals, not nations. Individuals who are distinguished into nations only by the difference of language, laws and accepted customs". We can get back to that in the discussion if time allows, this is a passage that has been commented quite a lot notably by Matheron in his endeavour to argue that states, as conceptualized by Spinoza, may be understood as individuals in accord with Spinoza's account of individuality.

Second there is the literature on the role of the climate in shaping people's common ingenium and it's very widespread during the time of Spinoza. So, the discovery and approximate mapping of inhabited territories ensuing from the encounter with the new world greatly stimulated recourse to this ancient idea. The idea that factors such as astrology or the climate are the main determinants to a people's ingenium. Yet although unsystematical, reference to culture as a factor responsible for the shaping of a people's ingenium also become increasingly common and mixed with those.

So, in this period the author who most exhaustively treated and synthesized the question of the determinants to a people's ingenium is certainly Bodin. He considers the role of the climate as a determinant as well as the role of astrology in conditioning the climate, and therefore indirectly conditioning people's ingenium. He considers as conditioning those local particularities such as rivers and mountains. And finally, he also considers the influence of culture for, I quote, "the mix and exchanges between people are not without changing greatly the nature of man and obvious habits" [gives original]. ... Witness the Germans who according to Bodin used to live like beasts and who are now considered by the French jurist who have made such progress that, I quote, "they seem to surpass the Asians for civilization, the Romans for their military science, the Jews for religion, the Greeks of philosophy, the Egyptians for geometry and definitions for arithmetics, the Chaldeans for astrology and all the other people for industrial development", and I spare you the French quote.

Thus, according to Bodin even a people like the Germans whose climate would have apparently condemned to an unrefined life - such a people may as a result of cultural exchanges rise from its beastly condition so as to come second to none in comparison with those other people which had been gifted, or cursed perhaps, with a more favourable climate. So, given the exceptional popularity of Bodin's work across Europe during the course of the 16th and 17th century, and the more general widespread awareness of this problematic, it is likely I think that Spinoza was aware of this problem.

Third there is what Spinoza's library contained. So, Spinoza's library contained a copy of Hippocrates' aphorisms in two volumes it also contains Riolani's Anatomica of whom Colerus notes that he had inherited this passion for Hippocrates from his father it also contains a what could be a Hippocratic treatise is written by a certain Nicosius, although this reference might also point toward a certain use who wrote an absolutely unrelated "Thesaurus Ciceronianus". It also contains numerous treatises dealing with astronomy such as Longomontanus' "Astronomia Danica", De Sacrobosco's "De Sphaera" and Metius' "Universiae Astronomiae" and "Astrolabium" [?] to name a few. Although astronomy and astrology were indeed by the 17th century considered as very distinct disciplines, and in that regard, we have Colbert for example a minister of Louis XIV in France who excludes astrology from the academy of science he creates in 1666, and who promulgates a bunch of other decrees against astrology and these practitioners. Despite that, I have found that Metius' "Universiae Astronomiae" [?] published in 1598 and De Sacrobosco's "De Sphaera" published in 1490, two of the works of astronomy mentioned as containing Spinoza's library, to also be mentioned in a work called "A Catalogue Raisonne of Works on the Occult Sciences", subtitled "Astrological Books with a sketch of the History of Astrology", written in 1911 by a certain Westcott. So, I'm not a great Latinist at all so I will leave those confident in this matter to see whether or not this work actually contained anything astrological or whether or not they solely stick to astronomy.

So, these are the few elements that lead me to that somewhat incredible hypothesis that Spinoza is in fact intervening against the Hippocratic tradition, when he writes in his TTP that, I quote again, "only laws and customs can lead an action to have its particular ingenium". So, we have three minutes left, a bit more, so I'll be fast.

So, we can also ask ourselves whether Spinoza is correct or not beyond simply deciphering the context of this quote. So first we can ask of course whether or not there is such a thing as a common ingenium, or whether or not this idea is simply backward. It is something ... indeed something which we can rightly be secret about and I will let sociologists give their appreciation of that. I think maybe Anthony would like to comment on that too since he works on commonality.

Secondly if we were to take seriously the idea that there are such things as common ingeniums such as that such as stated in the TTP that the Hebrews are "stiff-necked" that the Greeks are "talkative" or that the Romans are "violent", I want to ask could we imagine factors influencing such a common ingeniums, ingenia, beyond those which Spinoza holds as mattering, that is, laws and customs. So, let us turn to the example of the Romans. If they are indeed violent, can this be solely attributed to their culture? So, what about the temperature, the climate? Some of you might know the song by the Third World called "96 degrees in the shade" which was remixed when I was a teenager by Patrice and the Science Super. So, this song is a reference to the fact that at 96 degrees Fahrenheit, the human body gets stressed, which can lead it to snap and get violent. So perhaps during the time of the Roman Empire, it was simply too often the case that it was hot like that, but not so hot such as to lead the Romans to fall dizzy and sick.

And what about the diet? Biology tells us today that trans fatty acid consumption leads to stress, which may lead to a surge in violence, and these are contains for example in overcooked olive oil, eggs and chicken meat. Were these not part of the Roman diets? Of course, they were. And you could make the case regarding diet that it is in fact a cultural and not a climatic thing, but in the classical sense of the term, the diet is a derivative of the climate.

Finally, I will end with a small autocritique, vis-a-vis the catchy title that I used for this short intervention. So, Hippocrates' treatise where the role of the climate is most considered had apparently remained undiscussed until the 16th century, as argued by Pearl in a paper published in 1975, it would seem that that treatise which is called "Of Airs, Waters and Places" was not referenced in any commentary up until the 16th century. But of course, the rest of Hippocrates' work was commented. So, despite this the role of the climate was discussed extensively and by a large array of different commentators over the period, that separates Hippocrates from Spinoza, whether these sources be Arab or Muslim - Ibn Khaldun and Ibn Battuta for example, or European for example Aristotle, Isidore of Seville, Saint Thomas, Alberti [inaudible] and many more. So, I like the following two verses from [inaudible] on the topic, so I will end on this [quotes the original French - unable to translate, apologies].

Thank you.