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IAN BURUMA. *SPINOZA: FREEDOM'S MESSIAH*. YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2024.

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Of the numerous biographical works on Baruch Spinoza currently in print, the one that bears the greatest similarity to Ian Buruma's recent book *Spinoza: Freedom's Messiah* is Rebecca Goldstein's 2006 book *Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity*. Both books were written for series on Jewish figures, Goldstein's in the Jewish Encounters series through Schocken and Nextbook, Buruma's in the Jewish Lives series through the Leon D. Black Foundation and Yale University Press. Both include anecdotes from the author's own lives, written with a lyricism typically missing from academic texts. Goldstein's personal additions are more substantial than Buruma's, though her book on the whole is about 100 pages longer. Both take seriously questions of Jewish identity.

Where Goldstein's personalized exploration of Spinoza provides a unique perspective on a thinker who — as Buruma is quick to acknowledge — has been all things to all people, the thesis of the 2024 *Spinoza* is abstractly political. Buruma sets his cards on the table in the first chapter: he will write about Spinoza from the angle of interest in the contemporary issue of intellectual freedom, for "[i]f one thing can be said unequivocally about Spinoza, it is that freedom of thought was his main preoccupation" (Buruma, 2024a, p. 9). He does not engage with Mogens Laerke's excellent 2021 book on the topic of freethinking in Spinoza, *Spinoza and the Freedom of Philosophizing.* Such engagement would have shown Buruma that Spinoza is far from a dogmatic defender of intellectual freedom.

In *Betraying Spinoza*, Goldstein vividly describes how the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions left Spinoza's community of Marrano Jews fixated on questions of identity: "obsession with the questions of who is a Jew, what is a Jew, can a person be un-Judaized, re-Judaized — all of these questions intertwined with the Marrano

preoccupation with redemptive possibilities — would have been, one imagines, like an incessant nervous murmur registering just below audibility" (Goldstein, 2006, p. 132-3). Buruma wants to claim that Spinoza was cast out by a Jewish community that thought too narrowly. He does not cite Goldstein[i], but he could have used her work to make his argument more sophisticated. Buruma might have suggested that Spinoza was banned from the synagogue for transcending the rabbis' narrow concerns with identity in favor of universal reason. As Goldstein reads Spinoza, from "the point of view of truth itself," or reality viewed under a species of eternity, "the sort of differences around which groups construct their social identities […] could not appear more inconsequential" (Goldstein, 2006, p. 15).

While Buruma does not engage with Laerke or Goldstein, he does borrow heavily from Steven Nadler's biography of Spinoza, which is widely regarded as the definitive introductory biography for students. Buruma relies, too, on Margaret Gullan-Whur's biography from 1998, *Within Reason: A Life of Spinoza*. The virtue of Gullan-Whur's biography is her fact-based acknowledgement of women's status in 17th century Dutch society, plus her discussion of misogyny in Spinoza's work, which is all too often brushed aside as a mere product of the philosopher's time. Indeed, Buruma brushes aside Spinoza's misogyny, rationalizing that "since women only got the right to vote in the Netherlands in 1919, in the United States in 1920, and in France in 1944, perhaps one shouldn't judge a seventeenth-century philosopher too harshly" (Buruma, 2024a, p. 162). Buruma reads Spinoza as bravely defending freedom of thought against the intellectual strictures of his day; why should he let Spinoza off the hook for capitulating to 17th century superstitions about gender?

Buruma cites Jonathan Israel's *The Radical Enlightenment*, but not his dazzling 1313-page biography of Spinoza from 2023. Perhaps this book went to print before Israel's biography came out, since Buruma mentions the work in a *New York Times* op-ed from February 2024 (Buruma, 2024b). It is a shame: engagement with Israel's biography would strengthen Buruma's book considerably. Buruma claims, for example, in a chapter titled "Mob Rage," that Spinoza is an elitist, saying that Spinoza did not want his *Theological-Political Treatise* translated into Dutch in part because he did not want the masses to read it (Buruma, 2024a, p. 125; see also his discussion of the *vulgus* on p. 157-8). Israel would be useful here because he argues against the claim that Spinoza was an elitist, suggesting that in his political writings, the Latin *vulgus*, usually translated as

common people, means people of any class or rank "who are addicted to *superstitio*" and averse to rational thinking (Israel, 2023, p. 101, 1183).

Buruma's biography of Spinoza was commissioned. That the book is commissioned seems an important disclaimer: to what standard can we reasonably hold a non-expert, a professor of journalism writing a book by invitation? The Jewish Lives series features biographies of figures as diverse as Mel Brooks, Mark Rothko, Leon Trotsky and Gertrude Stein, by authors as diverse as Vivian Gornick and Daniel Boyarin (indeed, the list of authors tells a compelling story of Jewish lives). There is in principle nothing wrong with a non-expert writing a book, and Buruma's journalistic style makes the book readable.

His discussion of the Dutch context, in the 17th century through the 20th century to the present, leads to all sorts of interesting insights. His paragraphs on the Dutch concept of *gedogen,* tolerance by turning a blind eye, are especially intriguing (Buruma, 2024a, p. 19). The best part of Buruma's book is the rich description of contemporary Amsterdam. He does not whitewash the history of the Holocaust. This history is brought to bear on Spinoza's legacy when, on page 3, the reader learns that during Nazi occupation, Spinoza's name was deleted from a plaque on the house where he died.

Buruma draws an equivalence between the *herem*, or the banishment that sent Spinoza out of his Jewish community in Amsterdam, and contemporary 'cancellations'[ii]. It attests to the flimsiness of the book's premise that the language of cancel culture (previously call-out culture) already sounds dated, replaced by other conservative figments such as wokeness and, most recently, DEI[iii]. Buruma calls cancel culture one of the "intellectual shibboleths of our own time" (Buruma, 2024a,p. 172). If by a shibboleth he means something outdated, something that should have been left in the 17th century, one might as well say that the use of cancel culture as a pejorative is outdated, too, a relic of the culture wars from 10 years ago.

Buruma later evokes this recent DEI coinage when he draws an apparent equivalence between diversity, internet echo chambers and identity itself: "in our world of diversity, identities, and internet bubbles, it is in any case too late" (Buruma, 2024a, p. 171) for the common civic commitments to charity and justice that Spinoza would have wanted[iv].

If Buruma is right and it is indeed too late for Spinozism, why study Spinoza now? Spinoza offers Buruma an ideal of objective truth, over and against what he perceives as the threat to truth posed by Donald Trump and DEI alike. One of Buruma's central

examples is trans people. He claims that Spinoza's distinction between theology and philosophy instructs us to uphold distinctions between "subjective feelings" and "biological truth," also glossed as "discernible reality" (Buruma, 2024a, p. 172). By subjective feelings, Buruma seems to mean gender dysphoria: "[s]ome people born in a male body feel trapped in the wrong gender and wish to live as women". (Buruma, 2024a, p. 172).

Buruma makes statements about biology that seem to come out of nowhere, until it becomes clear that he is setting up his use of Spinoza as a vindicator of biological truth. At the end of a chapter on Spinoza's death, Buruma gives an anecdote about Stuart Hampshire. He first quotes Hampshire's written work, that our intellectual life provides us glimpses of insight into eternity. Buruma interprets Hampshire as saying that reason provides us a flash of instinctive insight—indeed, that reason can be identified with such aphoristic flashes. He then tells a story of visiting Hampshire in Oxford just before the philosopher died. Hampshire was sick in bed, but in a seeming flash of rational insight, he sat up to tell Buruma that "Spinoza was right!" because "it's all about biology!" (Buruma, 2024a, p. 165)[v]. The anecdote here would be nothing but amusing and quirky, if the reader did not learn in the following pages that Buruma takes Hampshire's comments as an invitation to read Spinoza as a crude biological reductionist.

There is a tradition of reading Spinoza as a process philosopher, one for whom biological processes are metaphysically basic[vi]. However, Buruma does not take Hampshire's comments in this direction when he muses on gender. Rather, Buruma sees a "dangerous parallel" between "lived experience" (Buruma, 2024a, p. 172) as a source of truth — which he puts in quotation marks, as if lived experience is not a real category of knowledge — and Hitler's regime. This parallel is poorly founded, in part because Spinoza views experience as a kind of knowledge, albeit one that is subordinate to rational knowledge[vii].

By now, analogies to Hitler are well-rehearsed, but not all of them are legitimate. Nazis closed Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Science, which housed groundbreaking research on gender and sexuality. Hirschfeld himself was an advocate for the rights of trans people (Marhoefer, 2023). Hitler's regime provides stark historical examples of anti-trans politics, so it is chilling to see Buruma invoke Nazism to quash advocacy for trans people today.

What is Buruma so worried about? He is concerned that in our current intellectual climate, scientific findings will bend to a political lobby. Hence, he insists on biological

truth over and against "subjective feelings": "scientific thinking today can be risky if it fails to affirm particular beliefs in social justice" (Buruma, 2024a, p. 173). He thinks insistence on social justice produces "timidity and conformism" (Buruma, 2024a, p. 173). Social justice is a vague term, but in order to produce timidity and conformism, it would have to depart dramatically from any recognizable pursuit of justice, which is not for the timid. Trans activists fighting for healthcare and dignity display the opposite of timidity and conformism[viii]. In his 2024 op-ed for the *New York Times*, Buruma mentions "the notion in some progressive circles that the teaching of mathematics is a form of toxic white supremacy and must be pressed into the service of correcting racial injustices" and goes on that such a notion "is, as some people might put it, problematic" (Buruma, 2024b). Here Buruma aligns himself with the crudest participants in the culture wars. Who sincerely holds that notion? What justice is served by constructing caricatures of activists on the left?

Entire paragraphs of the final chapter are essentially meaningless. Buruma opens one with a quote from Emile Leon Cammaerts, the gist of which tells us that the end of organized religion heralds anarchy (the death of God forces us to find replacements wherever we can). The claim is a platitude. Buruma goes on to give examples of the gods that humans have chosen in the 20th century, in lieu of capital-G God. "They [the common people] might believe quite harmlessly in Elvis Presley or the Maharishi Yogi, or, with far greater harm, in Stalin, Hitler, Chairman Mao, or indeed in Donald Trump" (Buruma, 2024a, p. 170-1). Most of us have heard this sort of shiftless sentiment before, but nevertheless, we should not let it slide by uncritically. What would it really mean to believe in Elvis Presley? Hero worship is not the same as putting a vote behind someone, as the American electorate did with Donald Trump. Admiring someone's music is not the same as believing that what they say is true, even when it has been proven false by fact checkers — and so on. Buruma's comparison between figures is lazy, yes, but also pernicious, insofar as it encourages a context-blind and ahistorical assessment of political events.

Readers should be wary of misleading historical claims. Buruma speculates that a "possible reason" Spinoza moved from Amsterdam to Rijsnburg, a village outside of Leiden, is that he was driven out by his former teacher Rabbi Morteira, because the rabbi saw Spinoza's heretical views as a threat to Jews and gentiles alike (Buruma, 2024a, p. 77). In the idle half paragraph devoted to a claim that requires a strong historical argument, Buruma admits that Spinoza only left Amsterdam after the rabbi had died and

that there is "no evidence" of the rabbi pressuring municipal authorities to get Spinoza out of the city (Buruma, 2024a, p. 77). So why entertain the possible reason? Suggesting that Spinoza was driven out of Amsterdam for holding heretical views drums up intrigue and bolsters Buruma's thesis that Spinoza was canceled[ix].

Another example of a misleading claim is on 168, where Buruma cites Gullan-Whur's work to claim that George Eliot did not want her name attached to her translation of Spinoza. This claim is true. Buruma quotes (indirectly, via Gullan-Whur) a letter that Eliot wrote to Charles Bray in 1856, where she says she would like "not to be known as the translator of the 'Ethics,' for reasons which it would be 'too tedious to mention'" (Eliot, 1856). Buruma implies that Eliot's wish was related to a cloak of secrecy surrounding Spinoza's views in England during Eliot's day. This is unlikely, however, given that prestigious British journals like the *Westminster Review* published articles about Spinoza around the time of Eliot's tenure as an editor[x]. Eliot—whose birth name was Mary Anne Evans, the spelling of which she modified over time to Mary Ann and then Marian—was famously circumspect about her identity, evidenced not least by her taking on the pen name George Eliot. Possibly, Eliot did not want to be named as the translator because of the scandal surrounding her relationship with the married George Henry Lewes (Postlethwaite, 1984, p. 223). Gullan-Whur notes this possibility, while Buruma omits it (Gullan-Whur, 1998, p. 310).

Worse than misleading, some claims are patently false. Buruma states that "the most recent Spinozists are neuroscientists who hail Spinoza as a proto-biological philosopher" (Buruma, 2024a, p. 166). This claim gives a veneer of legitimacy to Buruma's reading of Spinoza as a biological reductionist who vindicates biological truth over and above trans experience. However, he cites only two figures as these recent Spinozists. One, Antonio Damasio, is indeed a contemporary neuroscientist with a 2003 book on Spinoza. The other citation Buruma gives for the claim is an 1896 book by Koenraad Oege Meinsma (Buruma relies heavily on this Dutch biography, *Spinoza en zijn kring*, or *Spinoza and His Circle*, throughout). One book by a neuroscientist written in 2003, one biography by an archivist written in 1896! Even Buruma has done enough research to know that this collection of two books does not constitute the most recent Spinoza commentary.

Save for a few scattered remarks[xi], Spinoza does not say much about gender. But if pressed to develop a theory from Spinozist principles, we can find a very different view of gender than one that is crudely reducible to bodies. For Spinoza, modes are in some

sense changeable, because our imagination is flexible enough to form endless combinations from ideas of our body and the bodies of others[xii]. If gender is a mode, gender expression is endlessly changeable. While we might question whether Spinoza should be used to develop a theory of gender at all, given his explicit misogyny, we should as well question if Spinoza is useful for a topic as distant to his thinking as gender dysphoria.

Many Spinoza scholars — Genevieve Lloyd, Moira Gatens, Chiara Bottici, Warren Montag, Jason Read, Hasana Sharp, Marie Wuth and others — have provided compelling reasons to study Spinoza now. Buruma is not among them. Nor does he achieve what Rebecca Goldstein does with *Betraying Spinoza*, because outside of his weak attempts to instrumentalize Spinoza's philosophical commitment to freedom for an ill-conceived political project, we have little sense of what Spinoza's work has meant to this author.

Buruma thinks that progressive thinking today threatens freedom of thought by advocating a conformity of opinion. Arguably, Spinoza advocates a kind of strong conformity through rational thinking, because reason gives us access to common notions and knowledge of God. Yet, Spinoza ends the *Ethics* with a strong call to excellence that defies the conformity of most people: "omnia præclara tam difficilia quam rara sunt" or "all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare"(Doppelt, 2024 and Curley, 1985, p. 617). What Buruma has accomplished with this book is something entirely common, the kind of conformity denounced in those final words of the *Ethics.* This biography of Spinoza is far from excellent.

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[i] Buruma responds equivocally to Yirmiyahu Yovel's *Spinoza and Other Heretics* on the relationship between Spinoza's Marrano background and his thinking (Buruma, 2024a, 28-9). See Yovel, 1989.

[ii] "When people are banished from their community, or 'cancelled' as people might now say, then can react in various ways" (Buruma, 2024a, 40) and "the rabbis advised the *ma'amad* to 'cancel' him before he could do more damage" (Buruma, 2024a, 68).

[iii] Diversity, Equity and Inclusion is a name given to workplace and university initiatives, especially for equitable hiring and admissions. DEI has become a culture wars flashpoint, with some people claiming the initiatives are unfairly discriminatory. See Sailer 2024.

[iv] Diversity, identities and internet bubbles make an odd list: the first may be good or value-neutral, the second is neutral and the third is potentially very bad. Diversity and identity are facts of human life. Internet bubbles—by which he means filter bubbles that create echo chambers through algorithmic searches—are a recent artifice. Cancel culture, however, is arguably a myth.

[v] For Spinoza, a rational insight without risk of error requires causal knowledge, or knowledge of how the insight came to be. See Spinoza's early treatise on method, where he says that unshakable perception involves knowledge of the thing's proximate cause. *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* [19] and [29] (Curley, 1985, 13 and 16).

[vi] See Whitehead, 1978 and Di Poppa, 2010.

[vii] See *Ethics* IIP40S2 (Curley, 1985, 477).

[viii] See *The Cut*'s profile of trans activist Andrea Montanez, which gives a snapshot of her fight for healthcare and rights in the conservative US state of Florida. Stahl, 2024.

[ix] One reviewer beseeches the audience not to replicate Buruma's work: "I sincerely hope that publishers will not encourage authors to refer offhandedly to the cancellation of, say, Socrates, or Joan of Arc in this fashion, in search of modern resonances" (Moshenska 2024).

[x] G.H. Lewes wrote an article for the *Review* in 1843 titled "Spinoza's Life and Works" (Carlisle, 2020, 17). The historian J.A. Froude wrote an article on Spinoza for the *Review* in July 1855 (Israel, 2023, 1219).

[xi] See his ironic comments about the genitals and gender of spirits in letter 54 to Boxel (Curley, 2016, 413) and the final passage of the unfinished *Political Treatise* (Curley, 2016, 603-4).

[xii] See especially the virtue of the imagination in *Ethics* IIP17S (Curley, 1985, 464-5).