

Marx's Anomalous Reading of Spinoza

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Karl Marx, the powerful investigator who applied the method of Spinoza to social science

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Spinoza and Marx were thinkers who attained sufficient notoriety to become associated with certain, rather fixed, doctrinal positions. For this reason, the study of Spinoza and Marx is never fully dissociable from an encounter with Spinozism and Marxism. A study of Marx's reception of Spinoza, then, is doubly perilous. Nonetheless, the doctrinal association of both thinkers with "materialism" suggests both its possibility and its importance. Two general points about the context in which Marx worked, in particular the early Marx, may serve as guidelines from which to begin. First, this context was overdetermined by Hegel and Hegelianism. Whatever one thinks of the outcome of Marx's encounter with Hegel, it remains that this encounter was a decisive element in his development. Second, one aspect of Hegel's reading of the history of philosophy was the production of a certain Spinozism, of the integration of Spinoza into the larger narrative structure of Hegel's history. In what follows, I wish to develop the thought that one constitutive element in Marx's efforts to overcome Hegel can be found precisely in his reading of Spinoza, against and outside of Hegel's Spinozism.

Hence, with the title of this paper and its obvious gesture to Antonio Negri's seminal work, I intend two thoughts at once.² On the one hand, Marx reads Spinoza anomalously, which is to say that his reading of Spinoza is opposed to that provided by the Hegelian environment in which he produced his early work. On the other hand, Marx reads Spinoza as an anomaly, which is to say that Marx reads the "materialist" Spinoza as contesting what might be taken as "mainstream" or "bourgeois" developments of the late seventeenth century. Initial evidence for both thoughts comes from *Capital*, where, after asserting that "with me . . . the idea is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought," Marx famously writes:

The mystifying side of Hegelian dialectic I criticized nearly thirty years ago, at a time when it was still the fashion. But just as I was working at the first volume of "Das Kapital," it was the good pleasure of the peevish, arrogant, mediocre *epigonoi*

who now talk large in cultured Germany, to treat Hegel in [the] same way as the brave Moses Mendelssohn in Lessing's time treated Spinoza, i.e. as a "dead dog." I therefore openly avowed myself the pupil of that mighty thinker.³

Marx adds that, although in Hegel dialectic was "standing on its head" and "mystified," in its "rational form it is a scandal and abomination to bourgeoisdom and its doctrinaire professors" and "its in its essence critical and revolutionary" (ibid.). The juxtaposition of the receptions of Hegel and Spinoza suggests that, for Marx, both thinkers have a "received" and a "rational" form, the former a fashionable apology for mediocrity, but the latter critical of exactly such mediocrity. Retrieval of the rational form against the received involves "awakening the text to life," and searching for elements which contradict or exceed the canonical reading. In a word, such a retrieval is a demystification or a profanation of textual canonicity.

From a comment in his 1845 *Holy Family*, it is clear that Marx understands the difficulty in the reception of Spinoza as a question of two competing strategies for the reading of tensions which are already present in Spinoza's texts themselves. Reading Hegel against the Hegelian Bruno Bauer, Marx writes that, according to Hegel, since "deism and materialism are two parts of one and the same principle, Spinoza had two schools which struggled over the meaning of his system." As always for Marx, participation in a struggle is above all a question of strategy and tactics, which suggests that Marx's reading of Spinoza is a strategic one, both in the sense that it pursues a definite purpose, and in the sense that Marx recognizes that reading is always such a strategic exercise. How one presents an historical event says as much about the presenter as the event; an official reading is always limited. In other words, questions of historical transmission and canon formation, understood as political and ideological processes, cannot be excised from the reading of historical texts. Hence, capitalism will be read against its apologists, and Spinoza will be read against doxic Spinozism. Spinoza himself, with similar (but not identical) strategic thoughts, perhaps, will reread the Bible against its most pious adherents. For both thinkers, demystification will be a process of reading against the grain. The reading I will pursue here is part of a larger investigation of the "materialism" of Marx's early thought, and of the extent that, although Marx's texts can be said to be "eschatological," in that they envision the cessation of politics, they simultaneously involve radically rethinking what such eschatology might mean. One aspect of this materialism will be Marx's recovery of the occluded materialist aspects of Spinoza.⁴

The preceding suggestions might seem premature: after all, references to Spinoza in Marx's work are extremely scarce. Even Marx's occasional remarks indicate an early familiarity with Spinoza, however. Further, in 1841, he kept a notebook of passages transcribed from the *Theologico-Political Treatise* (TTP) and a number of Spinoza's letters. It is these TTP notebooks, and the appearance

of Spinozian elements in Marx's early work, which are the topic of this paper. (For a more complete discussion and listing of Spinoza references in Marx, see Rubel, "Marx à la rencontre de Spinoza.") As an initial orientation to this topic, and as an orientation to the question of reading, allow me to propose the following passage about biblical interpretation from the *Treatise*: "I say that there were in fact more readings than we now find marked in the codices" (TTP, chap. 9, p. 129). Marx copies the sentence into his notebook verbatim and without further comment. Insofar as the codices represent an *official interpretation* of biblical narratives and events, the analogue with Hegel's *official interpretation* of the history of philosophy readily suggests itself. Again, the question of official interpretation has material and political aspects. Marx had struggled with questions of adherence to "philosophical" form and content in writing his dissertation, long before embarking on his much-discussed "exit" from philosophy in the eleventh "Thesis on Feuerbach," and before his explicit purpose was to open the space for a thoroughgoing critique of political economy. For his part, Spinoza could equally have been referring, in addition to the reduction of texts into codices, to the late medieval practice of hiding Averroist and other counterhegemonic manuscripts *inside* officially sanctioned codices.⁵

Marx had been concerned from the beginning with questioning official interpretations. Two passages should serve to illustrate the point. First, in his 1841 doctoral dissertation, Marx had not only attempted to separate the philosophies of Democritus and Epicurus, but had done so as part of a larger (uncompleted) project of decanonizing Aristotle as the high point of Greek philosophy. "It seems to me," he writes, "if the earlier [Aristotelian] system is taken for the content, and the post-Aristotelian system, preferably the cycle of the Epicurean, stoic and skeptical schools, for the subjective form, the character of Greek philosophy is more clear and interesting" (MEW I Supp., 268). Second, in the *Holy Family*, Marx dedicated a section to criticizing a neo-Hegelian translation of Proudhon, and contrasted the "critical," i.e., Hegelian, rendition, with the "mass" one evident in Proudhon's original text. Proudhon's text suffers, Marx says, "a double attack of Herr Edgar, a silent silencing in his characterizing translation, an expressed silencing in his critical marginal notes" (HF, p. 24). The question of marginal notes returns our attention to the question of biblical codices, and indicates that for Marx as for Spinoza, the question of the materiality of the text's production is essential: elements of the text's production and of the ideology of its producers are indissociable from its "meaning." It is this position which marks both Spinoza and Marx as "materialists," and it is this position which enables their "profaning" or "demystification" of sacred histories. Allow me to clarify.

That one effect of Spinoza's work was the profanation of sacred history seems not to require much further elaboration. The outlines of Spinoza's move should be sufficiently familiar: the Bible is not the work of one author; it contains various histories later assembled by one or more compilers without regard

to the concordance of those histories with one another; miracles and prophecies occurred in such a way as to impress the vulgar; and the superiority of the ancient Jews over others confined itself to their form of government, which was all that was revealed to them by God. God spoke to the prophets in a way designed to impress them, which in turn means that the Bible cannot be taken literally, either as a report of miracles or of science. Prophecy was a gift of a "lively imaginative faculty" (TTP, chap. p. 15), and not of intellect.

We should pause to underscore the notoriety these theses, presented in the one work Spinoza published during his own lifetime, immediately developed, because this notoriety has nothing to do with the usual current reception of Spinoza and little to do with a reading of the *Ethics*. As Paolo Rossi put it, "if all of this was true, then all distinctions between the sacred history of the chosen people and the history of the heathen peoples collapsed and the idea of an incarnation of the *meaning* of universal history in the particular history of the Hebrew people was destroyed." Spinoza's text had appeared in 1670. In 1668, Hobbes had issued a Latin *Opera*, including a reprint of his 1651 *De Cive*, which had said not only that scriptural interpretation was to be governed by the temporal sovereign, but also that "as there is a good deal of *Politics, History, Morals, and Physics* to be read in scripture . . . those passages, although they contain true teaching, and are a canon of such teaching, still cannot be a canon of the mysteries of the Christian religion." Further, since scripture requires interpretation, "the *word of the interpreter* of the scriptures is the *Word of God*." In an English text of 1668, Hobbes had declared that philosophy began in Ethiopia and Egypt, managing to avoid altogether reference to the ancient Hebrews. In 1655, between the first and second editions of Hobbes, Isaac de La Peyrère had suggested that people existed before Adam, and that therefore original sin meant not that people and sin did not exist before Adam, but only that sin had not been "imputed" to people before Adam.⁶ Hence, for the pious, Spinoza's text represented the culmination of an all-out assault on the sacredness of Scripture. As such, "the *Theologico-Political Treatise*—in both radical condemnations and cautious adherence, through both explicit or implicit references—was to remain for more than a century at the center of all discussion of mankind's earliest history" (Rossi, p. 212).

Hegel, on the other hand, presents an entirely different Spinoza. The dissonance between the Hegelian Spinoza and the "atheistic" one grounds the possibility that part of why Marx read Spinoza was precisely because he suspected that the Spinoza presented to him by orthodox Hegelianism was not adequately understood, and that a better reading of Spinoza would be useful to his own work against Hegel. In other words, perhaps Spinoza was excessive to Hegelian Spinozism. According to Hegel, "the Spinozist philosophy is related to the Cartesian only as a consequence of filling out and carrying out the principles of Descartes." Although such sentiment was certainly part of the seventeenth-century reaction to Spinoza, particularly among those who rejected all "new sci-

ence" at a stroke, this reaction was clearly not reducible to the sentiment that Spinoza was a Cartesian. Hegel, emphasizing the *Ethics* and with his own priorities, has clearly "translated" Spinoza. Hegel continues that the *Theologico-Political Treatise* shows that "the Mosaic law is limited only to the Jews—a critical treatment of the Mosaic books (VGP, p. 103). This passage is of central importance, because with it, Hegel creates a version of the "Jewish Question" which was to entangle many of the young Hegelians, including Marx.⁷

As Spinoza never tires of reminding his readers, his purpose is *not* to limit the Mosaic law to the Jewish people generally. Rather, the point is that the Mosaic law was given to Moses as secular ruler of the Jewish people, and only applied to those people as long as they retained that political state. When the Hebrews chose to have a king, their theocracy ended. As far as I can tell, Marx does not copy any of Spinoza's explicit statements in this regard, but he could not have failed to encounter them. In one of his most explicit passages on the subject, Spinoza says:

With the destruction of the Hebrew state, their revealed religion ceased to have the force of law. We cannot doubt that, as soon as the Hebrews transferred their right to the king of Babylon, the kingdom of God and the divine law came to an abrupt end: for in so doing they completely annulled the covenant whereby they had promised to obey all that God should speak, which had been the basis of God's kingdom. (TTP, chap. 19, p. 221)

Hegel, in other words, reads "Jew" as an ahistorical, conceptual determination. His reading therefore blinds itself to the possibility that "Jew" as the bearer of Mosaic law could be a concept with limited historical applicability. The difference is important. On the one hand, as I will indicate, the distinction is what grounds Marx's subsequent critique of Hegelian responses to the "Jewish Question." On the other hand, drawing a distinction between a conceptual determination which is always and essentially true and a conceptual determination which is true only at a certain time is precisely Marx's critique of reification. Elsewhere, for example, Marx accuses both the capitalists and socialists of reification of their first principles. Proudhon "borrows from the economists the necessity of eternal relations; [and] borrows from the Socialists the illusion of seeing in poverty nothing but poverty."⁸ The two borrowings are aspects of the same failure, and the problem is in failing to see that context is important to reading. When Spinoza analogously remarks that, "granting that any conclusion could be drawn from miracles, God's existence" was not a valid inference, since "an event can also be the result of several simultaneously occurring causes" (TTP, chap. 6, p. 77), Marx copies the passage in its entirety (MEGA⁴ IV/1, 235.3ff.).

When a legal order reifies itself and declares itself necessary, Marx names the result "despotism," and indicates that it is precisely real, individual people who suffer. That is, the "only thought of despotism is the contempt of the hu-

man, the human split from itself" (Marx to Ruge, May 1843; MEGA² I/2, 477). He adds: "where the monarchical principle is in the majority, people are in the minority, and it is not to be doubted, that there are no people there" (ibid.). The concern with despotism is common to Spinoza, who writes in the preface to the *Theologico-Political Treatise* that "the supreme mystery of despotism, its prop and stay, is to keep men in a state of deception, and with the specious title of religion to cloak the fear by which they must be held in check." He adds that "no more disastrous policy can be devised or attempted in a free commonwealth" (TTP, p. 7). One possible consequence is political instability, or even outright civil war. Such a possibility was of course not without interest for Marx; here I wish to point to the interest, common to both Spinoza and Marx, in how a despotism operates, and the manner in which despotism is sustained by an apparatus which simultaneously plants the seeds for its violent collapse. One aspect of this apparatus is the use of religion and religious language to induce quiescent behavior on the part of the multitude. As the emblematic "modem" political theorist, Hobbes's position on this point is strangely ambivalent, and this ambivalence generates a difficulty in reading Spinoza in a Hobbesian context. On the one hand, both *De Cive* and, more significantly, *Leviathan*, contain lengthy polemics against theocracy and nonsecular authority in religious matters. On these points, Spinoza was often read as being allied with Hobbes. On the other hand, Hobbes seems deliberately to invoke traces of the theocratic model in his own "geometric" one: the "mortal God" of Leviathan was named after the biblical monster which God used to humble Job, and the sovereign seems to be encouraged to use religion to promote the end of obedience. On these points Spinoza seems rather opposed to Hobbes.⁹ For his part, in the *Holy Family*, Marx declares that it is in Hobbes that materialism becomes "hostile to people [*menschenfeindlich*]" (HF, p. 136); he also copies the following line of Spinoza into his notebooks verbatim: "Happy indeed would be our age, if we were to see religion freed again from all superstition" (TTP, chap. 11, p. 148; MEGA² IV/1, 244).

As all of this might suggest, one mark of despotism, noted by both Marx and Spinoza, is the draconian effort to stifle expression ("seditious" language, in Hobbesian terms), since such expression indicates precisely "individuals" or humans who have not been fully integrated into the despotic principle. Spinoza writes, and Marx copies (in a chapter from which he copies almost nothing else), "Tyranny is most violent where individual beliefs, which are an inalienable right [*uniuscuiusque iuris*], are regarded as criminal. Indeed, in such circumstances the anger of the mob is usually the greatest tyrant of all" (TTP, chap. 18, pp. 215–16; MEGA² IV/1, 238–39). At one level, of course, it is important to note that Marx spent much of his early career in constant battle with the censors. At another level, however, one should note that the question is one of expression and right. This right however is not to be understood as a matter of law. In

Spinozian terms, this means it is a question of *conatus*: the right of any individual is its expression, which is to say: "Each thing, in so far as it is in itself, endeavors to persist in its own being" (E3 P6) and "the conatus with which each thing endeavors to persist in its own being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing itself" (E3 P7).¹⁰

The parallel term in Marx is "activity," which indicates what individuals do when free from despotism, when they are properly conceived as a "species being." The consilientation "species being [*Gattungswesen*]" and "activity" serve in Marx's *1844 Manuscripts* to indicate the socio-historically given character of human life, and the extent to which human activity produces human life: "productive life is however the species life. It is life-producing life." Activity and expression in this sense serve as critical principles against the interpellation of qualitatively identical, atomic individuals or "subjects." When Marx copies from the *Theologico-Political Treatise* that only "laws and customs" divide "individuals into nations" (TTP, chap. 17, p. 207), his thought is clearly moving with Spinoza's in that he is pointing to an organicity of life.¹¹ With the caveat that Marx's thought is radically historical, the following comment in his *1844 Manuscripts* carries distinctly Spinozian echoes: "In the type of life activity lies the whole character of a species, its species character, and free conscious activity is the species character of man" (MEGA² I/2, 369). The affirmations of "expression" and "activity" criticize despotic conceptual apparatuses for infringing on the essence of individuals in their being; in this sense, both are revolutionary affirmations. (The reference here is obviously to Negri: "*Potentia, conatus, mens*. It is a whole that is continually perfectible by means of imagination and passion." *Savage Anomaly*, p. 147). In both cases, "the versatility of the metaphysical being is transformed into the exuberance of the ethical being" (ibid., p. 151). Also in both cases, the matter is one of expression as the activity which counters a metaphysical system; such expression is thus in itself revolutionary. Marx famously concludes a letter to Ruge: "in order to have its sins forgiven, humanity needs only to explain them for what they are" (MEGA² I/2, 489).

Marx's comment is at the close of his letter calling for a "truthless critique of everything existing." In place of detailed exegesis of this passage, let me suggest that the emphasis on expression as a matter of right in both Spinoza and Marx indicates that, although both offer "critique," neither does so on the enlightenment model, according to which critique consisted in eliminating impurities from phenomena as they appear, in order to establish the purity of the origin of those phenomena. In the context of Marx's early work, an "enlightenment" critique is perhaps most obviously carried out by Proudhon, who declares that "equality" is the fundamental principle of society, that "property" introduces inequalities, and that therefore "property" should be abolished in order to resolve the contradiction.¹² In Spinoza's case, an obvious target is Descartes;

conceding the result of what sounds like a Cartesian deduction about the union of soul and body, Spinoza nonetheless warns that "when things are conceived in this abstract way and not through their true essence, they are at once confused by the imagination" (TdE, 238h). In other words, the Cartesian or enlightenment critique falls on immanent grounds, because imagination is a necessary part of knowing. The parallel with Marx is quite close: for Marx, all thought is "ideological" and reification or abstraction is the problem. The point in both cases is that thinking is necessarily embodied.

These considerations allow us to approach again the Jewish Question. As I have indicated, when Hegel reads the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, he says that in it, Spinoza shows that the Mosaic law is limited to the Jews, and that this is a "critical" treatment of the Mosaic law. We can also note that Hegel does not mention what Spinoza had said was his "main purpose—namely, the differentiation of philosophy from theology" (TTP, chap. 22, p. 35). Reading Spinoza's own discussion of the prophets and their imaginative (rather than rational) faculties against Hegel's Spinozism generates the same point of emphasis as reading Marx against Hegel: "The fundament of the religious critique is: *man makes religion*, religion does not make man." Marx adds, perhaps following Spinoza:

But man is no abstract essence sitting outside of the world. Man is the world of men, state, society. This state, this society produce religion, an inverted world consciousness, because they are an inverted world. . . . It is the *fantastic realization* of human nature, because *human nature* possesses no true reality. The struggle against religion is thus mediately the struggle against *every world* whose spiritual aroma is religion. ("Zur Kritik der Hegel'schen Rechts philosophic: Einleitung," MEGA^A V2, 170, emphasis original.)

He follows that "the critique of heaven is transformed into the critique of the earth, the *critique of religion* into the *critique of law*, the *critique of theology* into the *critique of politics*" (ibid., 171, emphasis original).

One such critique is of the Hegelian appropriation of the Jewish Question. According to Hegel's reading of Spinoza, a "critical" treatment of the Mosaic law discloses that "Jews" necessarily come with the Mosaic law attached, as an essential determination. Bruno Bauer adopted this position in his book *The Jewish Question*, to which Marx published his answer in 1843. As Marx presents it, Bauer provides "the Jewish question a universal meaning independent of specific German relations," which is "the question of the relation of religion to the state, of the *contradiction of religious imprisonment and political emancipation*" ("Zur Judenfrage," MEGA² V2, 143 [JF], emphasis original). This stating of the question leads Bauer to the following position:

Bauer thus demands on the one hand, that the Jew give up Judaism, and in general man give up religion, in order to be emancipated as a state-citizen. On the other

hand he consequently considers the *political* sublation of religion as the sublation of religion simply. (JF, p. 144, emphasis original).

Marx will thus accuse Bauer the Hegelian of having confused political emancipation with human emancipation.¹³ The response is deeply Spinozian. First, if one follows Hegel's reading of the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, the confusion is a necessary one: emancipation from "Judaism," i.e., from the Mosaic law, is not, on Hegelian grounds, a political question. Rather, the political question is collapsed into a question of the abstract identity of the Jew. The question of abstract identity, however, is in essence *not* political; it is instead theological: "In Germany, where no political state, no state as state exists, the Jewish Question is a purely *theological* question. The Jew finds himself in *religious* opposition to the state, which takes Christianity as its fundamental condition" (JF, p. 145, emphasis original). Hegelianism, in other words, confuses the Christian German state with the rational, human state, and in so doing, confuses religious and political questions.

Marx continues that at least in part of the "North American free states . . . the Jewish Question loses its theological meaning and becomes a real *worldly* question," which means that one can consider the relation of religion to human emancipation. Marx adds that in such places, where all commentators notice the "living, powerful existence of religion," one finds proof that the existence of religion does not contradict the fully developed political state. Rather, the presence of religion is an indication of, not a reason for, worldly limitations. When these limitations are overcome, the "imprisonment" of religion will itself be overcome. Hence, "we do not transform worldly questions into theological ones. We transform theological questions into worldly ones." Marx's conclusion is that the contradiction between the abstract state and determined religion is the "contradiction between the state and determined worldly elements." This means that the "contradiction of the state with *religion in general*" is the "contradiction of the state with its *assumptions* in general" (JF, p. 146, emphasis original). The foregoing is obviously schematic and would need to be supplemented by more detailed textual work. It seems, however, sufficient to establish that for Marx the Hegelian Jewish question involves conflating the spheres of theology and politics, that is, of the theological nature of the modern state: for Marx, such a modern state, in essence, conflicts with worldly life.

Ensuring the political resolution of political questions, which is to say the demystifying of so-called theological questions, is precisely the point of Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*, and in Marx's treatment of the Jewish Question, he shows his sensitivity to Spinoza's point. Indeed, if one considers only the sections of the *Treatise* which Marx copies, the matter becomes even clearer. Marx drops the passages from Spinoza which involve biblical exegesis or questions of "true" religion, which suggests that for Marx, religion is *always* a political question. (CF. Matheron, "Le T.T.P dans le vu du jeune Marx.?). The ten-

gency to mistreatment of this question as a theological one betrays the abstract, theological basis of the modern state form, and Marx drops precisely (it seems) what he takes to be the residual elements of this theological procedure in Spinoza.

In order to develop this last suggestion, I would like to examine a passage from one of Marx's letters to Ruge, the same letter in which Marx announces the need for the "ruthless critique of everything existing." Marx writes:

Therefore the social truth is allowed to develop everywhere out of this conflict of the political state with itself. As religion is the index of the theoretical struggles of humanity, so is the political state of its practical. The political state thus expresses inside of its form *sub specie rei publicae* all social struggles, needs and truths. (MEGA² I/2, 488).

The Spinoza reference should be obvious, and it discloses the depth of Marx's engagement with Spinoza. On the one hand, the reference suggests that for Marx the political state is to be considered in its most developed form, and in its conceptual determination. In this form the political state expresses its existence: which is to say that it has *conatus*; this is why it expresses social struggles.

On the other hand, that the political state can be considered *sub specie rei publicae* discloses that for Marx the political state is *itself* a theological determination. Spinoza writes: "our mind, in so far as it understands, is an eternal mode of thinking which is determined by another eternal mode of thinking . . . with the result that they all together constitute the eternal and infinite intellect of God" (E5 P40S). If our mind understands the political state *sub specie rei publicae*, then this understanding presupposes a theological proposition about the relation between our understanding and God, which is to say that it presupposes a theological proposition about the ahistorical nature of our understanding. This line of thought can be directed against both the modern state form and against Spinoza's invocation of *sub specie aeternitatis*.

The complaint against the state form and its theological presuppositions might be put as follows: the modern state form requires a conceptualization of the social as something exterior or prior to it ("state of nature"). Insofar as the state accounts for the social, however, it will only do so qua concept, i.e., as a static entity which does not refer to the individual elements of the socius as such. Even the conception of "subjects" or "citizens" will be abstract, insofar as they are understood to be qualitatively identical participants in a "social contract." On Spinozian grounds, this abstraction does not produce knowledge, and indicates that the singular essence of the modern state form is as an abstraction because it only considers its members as abstractions, or as governed by a process of abstraction. This is why Hobbes, for example, is able to give such priority to a *geometric* basis for his "civil science" and to speak of the meaningless-

ness of the multitude, and is part of why Spinoza's understanding of the historicity of the Mosaic theocracy in the *Theologico-Political Treatise* seems anti-Hobbesian.¹⁴

Whatever its force against Hobbes, however, this reading does not erase a tension in Spinoza's text: What about Spinoza's own invocation, in *Ethics* V, of what could be construed as the same theological proposition about the ahistorical nature of our understanding? We are thus returned to the tension between "atheistic" and "deistic" elements of Spinoza, and to Marx's strategic reading of this tension as an aspect of overcoming Hegelianism. Marx had complained in his dissertation notebooks about the "enthusiasm of Spinoza, when he speaks of the consideration *sub specie aeterni*, of the love of God, or of the *libertas mentis humanae*" (MEGA² IV/1, 104, cited by M. Rubel, "Marx à la rencontre de Spinoza," p. 242). As Marx has read the *Treatise* without the biblical references, so too here he seems to read Spinoza against himself. Marx's engagement with Spinoza can thus best be described as a critical appropriation, a reappraisal which reads the materialist elements of Spinoza against the ones which will be received into Hegelianism.¹⁵ In particular, the Hegelian reading of Spinoza had attached itself to the union of the understanding and God, at the ultimate expense of *conatus* and expression: knowledge is properly of individual things, but that knowledge is itself in some sense universal. For Marx, knowledge is always historically determined, and universals are thus the product of human imagination. In this sense, Marx's critique radicalizes the one presented by Spinoza in the *Treatise*: all declarations of eternality are symptomatic of religious thinking and thereby occlude consideration of the political. In so doing, Marx is able to resolve what might strike the reader, especially the reader who, like Marx, had been trained in the Hegelian appropriation of Spinoza, as a quietistic dilemma with which Spinoza concludes the *Ethics*.

The ignorant man, besides being driven hither and thither by external causes, never possessing true contentment of spirit, lives as if he were unconscious of himself, God, and things, and as soon as he ceases to be passive, he at once ceases to be at all. On the other hand, the wise man, in so far as he is considered as such, suffers scarcely any disturbance of spirit, but being conscious, by virtue of a certain eternal necessity, of himself, of God and of things, never ceases to be, but always possesses true spiritual contentment. (ESP42S. cf. Seidel, "Spinoza and Marx über Entfremdung," pp. 236-37.)

Marx had begun the letter to Ruge with reference to a "universal anarchy among the reformers" (MEGA² I/2, 486). In working toward a method of "ruthless critique," Marx works toward the possibility of being, in Spinozian terms, both wise and active. Regardless of whether Spinoza himself ever achieves such a position, its achievement would constitute overcoming Hegelianism, which could only operate from a "moment of sober reflection." Insofar as Spinoza's

texts exhibit a tension between activity and knowledge, and insofar as those texts contain possibilities which are not realized in Hegelianism and in Hegelian Spinozism, Marx's critical rereading of Spinoza provides one way of tracing Marx's thought as it moves toward the famous expression of the eleventh "Thesis on Feuerbach": "the philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it" (MEW 3, 7, emphasis original).

Do not misread: I do not want to be taken as saying that Marx had the same thoughts as Spinoza, or that Spinoza was a Marxist *avant la lettre*. Spinoza was not a Hegelian dialectical thinker, and even if one finds a prodigious number of Spinozian elements in Marx, it remains that Marx was both a prolific reader and an original thinker. Even at the time he prepared his notebooks on Spinoza, he was also engaged in both his immediate socio-political context and with other historical thinkers. (One such historical thinker whose presence is clearly felt in both Spinoza and Marx is Machiavelli; another is Epicurus.) Such caveats aside, I do wish to suggest that the affinities between Marx and Spinoza deserve to be taken seriously, because they suggest in both cases a thinker who resisted what one might loosely call the bourgeois development of thought. Adorno and Horkheimer quote Spinoza as a representative Enlightenment thinker. In this, I would suggest they are wrong. But they are right to suggest that "true revolutionary practice depends on the intransigence of theory in the face of the insensibility with which society allows thought to ossify."¹⁶ In this sense, one may call the texts of both Spinoza and Marx revolutionary. Marx clearly appropriates and reworks certain aspects of Spinoza against the reception of Spinozism, as well as against what Marx reads as other aspects of Spinoza's own texts. Thus for the questions of influence and the reduction of Spinoza into Spinozism. But thus also a warning against the reduction of Marx into Marxism. In neither Spinoza's nor Marx's case does one face a "dead dog."

NOTES

1. Lissagaray was a French refugee who knew Marx; quoted in Maximilien Rubel, "Marx à la rencontre de Spinoza," *Études de Marxologie* (Jan-Feb 1978), p. 258. My translation.
2. Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991). While I disagree with many of Negri's conclusions, in particular his reading of *Ethics* V, my indebtedness here to his work should be obvious. One should note Negri's indications of his own revisions to his thoughts on *Ethics* V, in his "Spinoza's Anti-Modernity," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 18, no. 2 (September 1995): 14 n. 22 and 15 n. 32. A useful summary of Negri's thought which includes a number of his other writings can be found in Jason Read, "The Antagonistic Ground of Constitutive Power," *Rethinking Marxism* 11, no. 2 (Summer, 1999): 1-17. Read suggests that, for Negri, the question of communism is the question "what are the possibilities of a society of constitutive power" (p. 15)? I wish to retain this suggestion insofar as it might be applied to the early Marx's use of "activity" [*Tätigkeit*], a term which functions analogously to Negri's *potentia*, in order (a) to indicate Marx's thinking against the Hobbesian seventeenth century, where "order has been thought and maintained . . . as the absolute other of disorder" (Read, p. 15); and (b) to indicate the limits of

a reductive reading of the early Marx as advancing "Feuerbachian humanism," "Hegelianism," etc. Both of these points will be developed over the course of this paper.

3. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Moscow: Progress, 1954), vol. 1, p. 29. Other Marx references are to the best available German edition, either the *Marx-Engels Werke* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1970-) [MEW] or the second *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* (Berlin: Institute für Marxismus-Leninismus, 1976-) [MEGA¹]. All translations are my own.

4. *Holy Family: "Deismus und Materialismus" zwei Parteien eines und desselben Grundprinzips sein, so harte Spinoza zwei Schulen, die sich über den Sinn seines Systems stritten* (MEW 2, p. 139 [HF]; emphasis in original). The tension between what Marx calls the deistic and materialistic Spinoza is discussed by Negri as the "two foundations" in Spinoza's thought. See *The Savage Anomaly*, passim.

For "reading against the grain," cf. Louis Althusser, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1979) suggests: "The first man ever to have posed the problem of *reading*, and in consequence, of *writing*, was Spinoza, and he was also the first man in the world to have proposed both a theory of history and a philosophy of the opacity of the immediate. With him, for the first time ever, a man linked together in this way the essence of reading and the essence of history. . . . This explains to us why Marx could not possibly have become Marx except by founding a theory of history and a philosophy of the historical distinction between ideology and science, and why in the last analysis this foundation was consummation in the dissipation of the religious myth of *reading*" (pp. 16-17). See also: "we can regard Spinoza as Marx's only direct ancestor, from the philosophical standpoint" (p. 102). For reasons which will become apparent, I do not endorse Althusser's "rupture" between the pre- and post-1845 Marx. The "against the grain" line is Walter Benjamin's; here I wish to emphasize the sentences before it: "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another" ("Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 256). One should recall that it is Hegelian historicism which Marx is contesting.

Étienne Balibar, reading Spinoza and Marx together against Rousseau, suggests that "in the materialism of Marx . . . there is also, very manifestly, an element of the deconstruction of the representation of the subject"; the "revolutionary subject" is essentially Rousseauian. See Balibar, "Le politique, la Politique: De Rousseau à Marx, de Marx à Spinoza," *Studia Spinozana* 9 (1993): 203-15; 212. For a different comparative reading, which emphasizes the utopian (in the traditional sense) element in Marx, see Yirmiyahu Yovel, "Marx's Ontology and Spinoza's Philosophy of Immanence," *Studia Spinozana* 9 (1993): 217-27, which contains a programmatic summary of relevant sections of his *Adventures of Immanence*.

5. "I say that there were in fact more readings": MEGA² IV/1, 243; the notebooks comprise MEGA² IV/1, 233-76. For dating and notes on the manuscript, see MEGA² IV/1, 773ff. Marx read the Latin Paulus *Opera* and included almost no commentary on his excerpts. I will generally follow the current translation of the Gebhardt edition found in Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991) [TTP, by chapter and page]. In a very important commentary, Alexander Matheron reads Marx's notebooks (which rearrange Spinoza's order) as a coherent text and compares that text with Spinoza's. One result of Matheron's study is that Marx's text systematically excises scriptural references and grounding from Spinoza. Marx's TTP has none of Spinoza's religious language. Here, however, I wish to express reservations about Matheron's argument that Marx "is not interested . . . in the exegetic method of the TTP." It seems rather that Marx radicalizes Spinoza's exegetic method, and applies that method to all canonical texts. "Le T.T.P. vu par le jeune Marx," *Cahiers Spinoza* 1 (1977): 159-212; 169.

The above comments are deliberately allusive and meant to suggest a possibility for further study. The early Marx's reading of medieval texts would certainly bear further investigation. For Marx's dissertation difficulties, see especially Bruno Bauer's cautionary letter of 12 April 1841 (MEGA² III/1, 358). For subaltern Judeo-Islamic elements in Spinoza, see Idit Dobbs-Weinstein, "Maimonidean Aspects of Spinoza's Thought," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 17, nos. 1-2 (1994): 153-74; and her "Gersonides's Radically Modern Understanding of the Agent Intellect," in *Meeting of the Minds: The Relations between Medieval and Classical Modern European Philosophy*,

ed. Stephen F. Brown (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1998), pp. 191–213. For Spinoza's embeddedness in the subaltern Marrano community, see Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, vol. 1, *The Marrano of Reason* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

6. Paolo Rossi, *The Dark Abyss of Time*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 212.

De Cive, trans. *On the Citizen*, trans. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), vol. 17, pp. 16–17. This edition is a translation of the Latin text, rather than a reproduction of the unauthorized 1651 English edition. I cite *De Cive* rather than *Leviathan* because, since it was originally in Latin, *De Cive* was more available on the continent. (It was *De Cive* of which Spinoza had a copy.) The 1668 *Opera* also included a translation of *Leviathan*, although the Latin text is substantially different from the English.

"Egypt was then as it were an university to all the world, and thither went the curious Greeks, as Pythagoras, Plato, Thales, and others, to fetch philosophy into Greece." *Decameron Physiologicum*, in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. Molesworth (London: J. Bohn, 1839), vol. 7, p. 74.

Isaac de La Peyrère: See the English translation of a year later: *Men Before Adam. Or A Discourse on the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth Verses of the Fifth Chapter of the Epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Romans. By which are proved, That the first Men were created before Adam* (London, 1656).

7. Hegel: "Die Spinozistische Philosophie verhält sich zur Cartesischen nur als eine konsequente Ausführenden, Durchführung des Prinzips des Cartesius." *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie, Teil 4: Philosophie des Mittelalters und der neueren Zeit*, ed. Pierre Gammeter and Walter Jaeschke. *Ausgewählte Nachschriften und Manuskripte*, vol. 9 (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1986), p. 102 [VGPI].

For further discussion of Marx's reading of Spinoza as it relates to the Jewish Question, see Rubel, "Marx à la reconte de Spinoza," pp. 241ff. For thoughts on the Jewish Question in context, see Will Goetschel, "Models of Difference and Alterity," in *The German Jewish Dilemma: From the Enlightenment to the Shoah*, ed. Edward Timms and Andrea Hammel (Lewisohn, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1999), pp. 25–38.

8. *The Poverty of Philosophy* (New York: International Publishers, 1946), p. 126.

9. Full treatment of these topics is obviously outside the scope of this paper. The opinion that Spinoza is "anti-Hobbesian" is stated with particular force in Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, and in Negri, *The Savage Anomaly*. Rossi assembles much of the historical evidence of Hobbes and Spinoza being read as allied in *The Dark Abyss of Time*. The relation between tyranny and revolution in the *Theologico-Political Treatise* is discussed at length in Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, pp. 25–49. The question of revolution in Marx is particularly difficult; as will be evident, it at least seems clear that in Marx's early writings, there is a strong correlation between demystification and the ending of despotic political orders.

10. Ethics references are to *Ethics: Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect and Selected Letters*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992) [E; TDE, etc.]. For thorough analysis of expression in Spinoza, see Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Zone Books, 1992). As a survey of his footnotes indicates, Negri relies heavily on Deleuze in understanding the *potentia/potestas* distinction.

11. "Productive life": "*Das produktive Leben ist aber das Gattungselben. Es ist das Leben erzeugende Leben*" (MEGA² U2, 369). I am aware that this is a heterodox reading of the 1844 *Manuscripts*. For other readings which emphasize the centrality of production, see David R. Lachterman, "The Ontology of Production in Marx: The Paradox of Labor and the Enigma of Praxis," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 19, no. 1 (1996), 3–23; and Gérard Granel, "L'ontologie marxiste de 1844 et la question de la 'coupure,'" in *Traditionis traditio* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), pp. 179–230.

Marx is of course post-Kantian, and "nature" is itself a historical category in Marx. In this sense, Marx breaks sharply with Spinoza. For further discussion in this direction, see Helmut Seidel, "Spinoza und Marx über Entfremdung," *Studia Spinozana* 9 (1993): 229–43. For the suggestion that Marx and Spinoza can be applied against the Rousseauian subject, see Balibar, "Le Politique, la Politique." M. Rubel suggests of Marx's dissertation notes that "One is tempted to speak of a Spino-

zist reading of Epicurus by Marx" ("Marx à la reconte de Spinoza," p. 244)—a suggestion which seems particularly insightful given that Marx's dissertation uses Epicurus to critique Democratic atomism.

12. See Kurt Röttgers, *Kritik und Praxis: Zur Geschichte der Kritikbegriffs von Kant bis Marx* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1975), from which I borrow the discussion of "enlightenment" critique and its reversal in Marx.

See P. J. Proudhon, *What Is Property*, ed. and trans. Donald R. Kelley and Bonnie G. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

13. Two years later, Marx confirms that he disclosed "his [Bauer's] fundamental error, the confusion of 'political' with 'human emancipation' ['Sein Grundirrtum, die Verwechslung der 'politischen' mit der 'menschlichen Emanzipation', wurde aufgedeckt]" (HF, p. 112, emphasis original).

14. Hence, Negri writes: "In Spinoza . . . civil society and the political State are completely woven together, as inseparable moments of association and antagonism produced in constitution. The State is not conceivable without the simultaneity of the social, and neither, inversely, is civil society conceivable without the State. The bourgeois ideology of civil society, then, is only an illusion" (*The Savage Anomaly*, p. 200).

15. One might say that Marx's critical appropriation of Spinoza accomplishes what Negri says Spinoza himself does, viz. the replacement of the "first foundation" (religion) by the "second foundation" (expression and praxis). It is curious the extent to which Negri attempts to do away with *Ethics V* as somehow a "regression." See *The Savage Anomaly*, passim. In a later writing—Negri locates the disfigurement of Hegelianism precisely at Spinoza's usage of *sub specie aeternitatis*: "If the transcendental wishes to absorb the energy of the singular, it does not however succeed in doing it justice. The 'acosmic,' 'atemporal' Spinoza expresses a concept of time as presence and as singularity that the great dialectical machine wishes to expropriate, but cannot" ("Spinoza's Anti-Modernity," p. 5).

16. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1993), p. 41.