

SPINOZA AND MARX

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Baruch Spinoza

What follows is in the nature of a thought-experiment. It is well known that Marx was familiar with Spinoza; indeed, he hand-copied whole passages of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* into his notebooks. Less clear is the significance of this fact, and the extent of Spinoza's influence on Marx's thought.¹ The aim of the experiment here is to deliberately exaggerate the extent of that influence: to think through some of the possible implications of placing Spinoza at the heart of Marx's endeavor.

First steps in such a thought-experiment have already been taken. Most notably, Althusser's efforts to expunge Hegelianism from Marx's work involved replacing Hegel with Spinoza in many respects, although the extent of Althusser's reliance on and confidence in Spinoza remains unclear. More dramatically, Antonio Negri has argued in favor of Spinoza's materialism, suggesting it is an important, early-modern precursor of Marx's fully modern materialism. Pierre Macherey has staged a direct confrontation between Spinoza and Hegel, stressing the degree to which the former eludes the grasp of the latter's history of philosophy, and therefore represents an important alternative to Hegelian views. Gilles Deleuze, finally, has mined the western philosophical tradition for alternatives to Hegel, among which Spinoza must be counted as one of the most important.² These are the primary resources upon which I will draw in tracing the outlines of a Spinozan alternative to Hegelian Marxism.

First, though, a brief sketch of why alternatives to Hegel and Hegelian Marxism have seemed so desirable over the course of the last few decades. In Althusser's own case, there were battles to be fought against Stalinism within the French Communist Party.³ For Deleuze and much of poststructuralism, there was the attraction of Nietzsche (who

had himself cited Spinoza as a precursor), whose views and method contrasted sharply with those of Hegel, if not of Marx himself.⁴ More generally, the impetus to reevaluate Hegelian Marxism in France arose in response to a number of post-war developments, in the fields of politics and academics alike: the decline of the French working class as a "class-conscious" political actor, and of the French Communist Party as its "revolutionary" vanguard, in Fifth Republic politics and society; but also the demise of Soviet and Chinese Communisms as viable or attractive Marx-inspired regimes; and within academics, the growing dissatisfaction with certain Hegelian elements of Marxism, among historians as well as philosophers themselves.⁵

Interpretations of the great Revolution of 1789 served as a lightning-rod for much of the historians' dissatisfaction, as revisionist scholars challenged the Marxist notion that 1789 was a "bourgeois" revolution which could serve as a model for a "proletarian" revolution to come.⁶ The issue was not so much the *results* of 1789 -- which undeniably shifted the balance of power away from the aristocracy and eventually led to the installation of bourgeois rule (albeit some 60 years later) -- as the role of the bourgeoisie *as a class* in prosecuting it. There is an important sense in which the French bourgeoisie *did not make* the Revolution: it was "started" largely by the aristocracy and "finished" in a way by the people of Paris; and the important roles played by members of the French bourgeoisie arguably do not add up to the actions of a class actively pursuing its economic interests by political means. In one version of a "materialist" philosophy of history, transposing the Hegelian master-slave dialectic from interpersonal into social terms made social classes (rather than "Absolute Spirit") the subjects of history; but they remained *subjects*: groups each conceived on the model of a single subject -- and yet comprised of many individual subjects -- acting (consciously or not) in pursuit of "its" class interests. The problem, in short, was how to square the actual diversity of motives and actions of particular French merchants, lawyers, and statesmen with the unifying notion of the bourgeoisie *as a class* acting as a (singular) political agent in the historical field (rather than as a personification of capital in the economic field, where class definitions and functions seem *relatively* unproblematic).

Whence the import of Althusser's preemptive move: to declare history to be a "process without a subject," and thus drive a wedge between "messy" narrative accounts of concrete actors' roles in historical process, on one hand, and "rigorous" definitions of class functions within the mode of production, on the other. One of the several important effects of Althusser's efforts within philosophy to discredit Hegelian "expressive causality," then, was to "solve" the problem of class agency in historiography by declaring it moot: Marxism was not a historicism. As in other facets of his attack on Hegel, Althusser drew here on the philosophy of Spinoza, who distinguished the humanly inexhaustible infinity of causal relations underlying historical process from the "clear and distinct" ideas humans can produce regarding the laws and mechanisms of that process.⁷ For Hegel, the real is the rational and the rational is the real, and a seamless, definitive account of the historical process is therefore possible. For Spinoza, by contrast, real and rational remain distinct, for the most part: there is on one hand the inexhaustibly rich yet ineluctably opaque world that we inhabit, and which we apprehend largely in the mode of imagination, conjecture, superstition, and the like; there is on the other hand a degree of

understanding of that world which human reasoning can provide, but only by taking a necessary distance from the first mode of apprehension. (A complete rational grasp of the real is possible in principle, in a third mode of apprehension which Spinoza calls "intuition," but it may be largely the prerogative of God.) It is this Spinozan distinction between two categorically different kinds of thought, crossed with Lacan's distinction between the Symbolic and Imaginary registers of the human psyche or experience, that underlay the science-ideology dyad so central to early Althusserian thought (though he later abjured any absolute distinction between science and ideology as a theoretician's error⁸).

In what is no doubt his best-known work in English, *A Theory of Literary Production* (1966), Macherey developed the implications of this dyad for literary studies.⁹ But in a subsequent (and so far un-translated) work, *Hegel ou Spinoza* (1979), he returns to the source of that distinction, and examines the issues at stake in choosing between Spinoza and Hegel.¹⁰ Althusser had, in his *Essays in self-criticism*, already outlined some of the benefits of Spinozan materialism to the project of freeing Marxism from Hegelian idealism: a conception of ideology as a "materialism of the imaginary" and of science as basically mathematical (derived from the first two of Spinoza's three kinds of knowledge); a model of non-transcendent causality whereby the ("absent") cause is immanent in its effects (which Althusser later regretted calling "structural" causality); and a view of human action and history that was anti-subjective and resolutely non-teleological. Against the backdrop of Althusser's work (cited p.11), but without considering the implications for Marx or Marxism, Macherey sets out in *Hegel ou Spinoza* to explain why Spinoza represents the "true alternative to Hegelian philosophy" (13). It is from here that our thought-experiment will proceed.

Before entering into the details of Macherey's comparison, we should be clear what the thrust of his major claim is, especially since its implications for a non-Hegelian Marxism are not spelled out. The key assertion is that "Spinoza... refutes Hegel, objectively" (13). Macherey insists that Spinoza and Hegel addressed many of the same problems, but solved them in very different, not to say diametrically opposed, ways. Hegel well understood that Spinoza was a strong precursor, but *had to misread him*, Macherey suggests, in order to maintain his subjective idealism and integrate Spinoza into his evolutionist view of the history of philosophy, whereby any predecessor had to be found inferior in some way (11-13, 90-94, 107, 137-42, 157, 258). Hegel's defensive misreading of Spinoza thus takes on "the value of a symptom" (12), in that it constructs "Spinoza" as deficient because Hegel's own teleological-subjective-idealist premises prevented him from seeing his precursor's non-finalistic, anti-subjective materialism. So by examining how and why Hegel's reading of Spinoza goes wrong, Macherey not only restores to the history of philosophy (and, I would want to add, to Marxism) what is valuable in Spinoza as an alternative to Hegel, but also *shows* that Hegel's history of philosophy *and therefore Hegel's philosophy of history* are wrong: Spinoza represents not a moment that could be simply cancelled-retained-surpassed (*aufgehoben*) by the march of philosophical progress, but a *road not taken*, an objectively pre-existing perspective in philosophy that *gets suppressed* with the (perhaps temporary, certainly local) triumph of Hegelianism and idealism in Western philosophy, including much Marxism)¹¹

Macherey's reading is thus classic Althusserian ideology-critique: not an assertion that Hegel happened to get Spinoza wrong, but a demonstration that, given his premises and project, Hegel *had to* get Spinoza wrong, *in a specific way* and for specific reasons.

In contrast with (and in defense of) his own position, then, Hegel construes Spinoza's philosophy as positivistic and static, entirely lacking that essential, dynamizing feature of his own system: negativity. In the Hegelian dialectic, negativity is what enables Spirit to posit itself as substance (the initial negation), then recuperate itself as Spirit (the negation of the negation) in a (or in "the") historical process that leads ultimately to the reconciliation-reintegration of substance in Absolute Spirit at the end of history. The charges against such a view, especially within Marxism, are well-known: idealism, in that the main actor or agency is Spirit or Mind; transcendental subjectivism, in that this historical agent, Absolute Spirit, is a subject that transcends any and all concrete subjects and indeed history itself; teleologism, in that the end of history is guaranteed by the dialectical process of negation of negation, so that even errors and mishaps eventually contribute to the realization of Absolute Spirit through history. And yet much of what passes as Marxist philosophy of history -- including much (though not all) of Marx's own -- merely translates or inverts Hegelian *idealism* into a "materialism" that nonetheless *retains* the transcendental subjectivism and the teleologism: classes act as transcendental subjects in the historical "dialectic" of class struggle, which will according to necessary laws produce a classless society with the collapse of capitalism at the end of history.¹² This grand eschatological narrative of history, as I have already suggested, no longer inspires total confidence, even among Marxists. Rather than rehearse the well-known critiques, Macherey's study proposes Spinoza as "the true alternative to Hegel" and, though only by implication, to Hegelian Marxism.

To be true alternatives, however, Spinoza and Hegel must have something in common: as Macherey shows, the basic principle they share is that thought and matter are "ultimately" identical. But the forms of this "ultimate identity" are very different. In place of Hegel's idealism, which submits matter to thought via the negation of the negation, Spinoza offers a position which (as Macherey notes), is certainly anti-idealist, if not actually materialist. Rather than elevate thought over matter (or matter over thought, as in a simple "materialist" inversion of idealism), Spinoza considers thought and matter to be absolutely *co-equal*: Thought and Extension are different but not opposed ("*non opposita sed diversa*") attributes of Substance. And as attributes of the *same* unique Substance, their identity is given -- whereas for Hegel, the identity of Spirit and matter is only achieved at the end of history. Even more crucial: for Spinoza, Thought is a property of Substance, *not* of a subject; in place of Hegel's transcendental subjectivism, Spinoza offers a kind of immanent objectivism, for which no negativity and no contradiction are possible or necessary.¹³ (The success of Cartesian geometry and Spinoza's own practice as an optician no doubt contributed considerably to his conviction that the universe is knowable in its own terms, that it has mathematical "Thought" as one of its innate properties.) The Spinozan universe, then, is objectively knowable; knowability is one of its inherent features.

But whether such objective knowability is ever subjectively realized in human thinking is a very different question, for Spinoza: it depends on humans overcoming the subjective limitations of the first kind of knowledge through critical reflection, thereby enabling the second kind of knowledge to approximate more closely the "objective" Thought inherent in Substance itself. The development of adequate ideas does not follow automatically from the march of Spirit and the ruse of reason, but depends on humans' ability to distance themselves from the distortions of subject-centered thinking, which Spinoza calls "imagination" (and Althusser, "ideology"). This ability varies (socially, politically, historically), and is *in no way* guaranteed to increase through time. So in place of Hegel's teleologism, Spinoza offers only the *possibility* that humans will forgo the illusions of subject-centered imagination and develop more adequate knowledge.

Finally -- and this is where Spinoza's materialism comes into play -- the prime measure of such adequacy is not some ultimate reconciliation of Spirit and matter, but rather the degree to which human powers are realized and increased. Humankind is a determinate mode of objective Substance just like everything else in Nature, and as such it tends (according to the principle Spinoza calls "*conatus*" - striving) to develop its powers to the utmost.¹⁴ What distinguishes humans is that, by acting in the mode of Thought as well as Extension, they are able to understand, submit to, participate in, and thereby *enhance* the forces of Nature, of which they nonetheless remain a part. (This insistence on the *situatedness* of humankind in and as part of Nature is what endears Spinoza to modern-day environmentalists, along with his critique of and "monist" alternative to Cartesian subject-object dualism.¹⁵) Unlike imagination, adequate thinking furthers human-natural development rather than hindering it.

On one occasion, Spinoza's own practice of "rational" critical reflection targeted religion as the dominant mode of "imaginary" thinking; yet his assessment of it was historical rather than strictly epistemological.¹⁶ The Judeo-Christian tradition whose history he was among the first to study from a secular perspective was not simply *wrong*: it served certain purposes for a certain group at the time of its development; but by Spinoza's own time, it had long out-lived its usefulness and now acted as a hindrance to the development of human-natural forces, especially in its opposition to the natural sciences. We might today, in a similar vein, claim that the ideology and practices of possessive individualism associated with the capitalist market may for a time have increased human-natural powers, but that they have by our time become a hindrance and even a threat to their continuing development.

It may now be possible to discern the kind of "materialist dialectic" that Macherey hints at (without developing) in the conclusion of *Hegel ou Spinoza*, which closes with the question of "what distinguishes an idealist dialectic from a materialist dialectic" (259): "Reading Spinoza after, but not according to, Hegel enables us to pose the question of a non-Hegelian dialectic... [even though] it does not in and of itself enable us to answer it" (260). A materialist dialectic derived from Spinoza might indeed bear comparison with one of the philosophies of history found in Marx himself: the one positing a dialectic of forces and relations of production instead of class struggle as the "motor of history." This is perhaps the least Hegelian of Marx's several philosophies of

history, inasmuch as it eschews the transcendental subjectivism of the class struggle model.¹⁷ For it is not a matter here of a contradiction between antithetical class-subjects necessarily leading to the synthesis of classless society, but of a tension between two ensembles -- forces and relations of production -- which not only are not subjectivities themselves, but also cut across class boundaries altogether.¹⁸

Yet this Marxian model, considered from the perspective of Spinozan materialism, still contains residual elements of transcendental subjectivism and teleologism: teleologism inasmuch as stagnant production relations, according to this model, *necessarily* come into conflict at some point with productive forces that *nevertheless continue to develop*, thereby eventually causing a revolutionary explosion which eliminates the old relations and replaces them with ones better able to continue developing the productive forces¹⁹; and a certain subjectivism inasmuch as the development of these *human-centered* productive forces, with something like "species-being" rather than classes as transcendental subject, is still considered the *motor* of history (though not necessarily its telos, which is rather the realization of human freedom presumed to *depend on* the development of productive forces). Spinozan materialism would eliminate these residuals in two ways.

First of all, for Spinoza the "productive forces" at issue in history are not exclusively or primarily those of humankind, but those of Nature as a whole, of which humankind is of course an integral part, but only a part. Spinoza thus offers a kind of anti-humanism (perhaps even more thorough-going than Althusser's own) that would impel Marxism to eschew "productivism" (i.e., the exclusive focus on *marketable* productive forces) and consider humankind (as Marx himself often does ²⁰) a *part* of Nature rather than its master. It is in this Spinozan vein that Deleuze and Guattari affirm in *Anti-Oedipus* that "Nature = Industry... = History".²¹

Secondly, and especially with "productive forces" understood in this way to mean those of Nature broadly construed (i.e. including but not limited to humankind), Spinozan materialism would completely remove the inevitability of revolution and the progressivism of historical process itself, for there is *no guarantee* for Spinoza that human thought will continually or even consistently achieve the objectivity required to help rather than hinder the development of productive forces. There is no guarantee, in other words, that developing marketable productive forces will *necessarily* break the shackles of stagnant production relations, nor even that productive forces in the broad sense will *keep developing* continuously. What if, on the contrary, stagnant production relations become so entrenched as to prevent revolution altogether, and even to cause the productive forces to *diminish* instead of continue developing? Couldn't it be said that this in fact already the case?²² For Marxism, a rigorously non-teleological philosophy of history would have to face the possibility (or is it the contemporary reality?) that, on balance, current production relations promote the *destruction* rather than the development of productive forces -- whether these are construed narrowly, as in classical Marxism (in which case that destruction targets the productive potential of human labor, and takes the all-too prevalent forms of genocide, malnutrition, sexism and racism, under- and unemployment, stunted intellectual growth through inadequate education, etc.), or more

broadly, as in Spinozan materialism (in which case we are talking about the productive potential of Nature as a whole, and the equally-prevalent pattern of world-wide ecocide: environmental degradation, habitat loss, species depletion, etc.). In either case, a Spinozan Marxism would eliminate teleologism from the forces/relation of production model in two ways: there would be no guarantee that forces of production will continue to develop even in the face of restrictive or destructive relations of production; and even if they were to, there would be no guarantee that such development will eventuate in any increase in human freedom.

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These are just a few of the implications for Marxism of making a choice between Hegel and Spinoza, for which Macherey's important study laid much of the groundwork. Then, two years after his *Hegel ou Spinoza* appeared, the Italian legal and political philosopher Antonio Negri published a very different kind of book on Spinoza, *L'anomalia salvaggia. Saggio su potere e potenza in Baruch Spinoza* (1981).²³ Where Macherey offered a purely philosophical, "internal" reading of Spinoza (and Hegel), Negri (while favorably citing Macherey on several occasions) situated Spinoza and the evolution of his philosophy in the context of 17th-century Dutch society, and made the relevance of Spinozan materialism to contemporary Marxism an explicit theme. Testimony to the book's importance, a French translation (*L'anomalie sauvage: Puissance et pouvoir chez Spinoza* ²⁴) appeared immediately, with no fewer than three prefaces: one by Macherey himself, the other two by the equally prominent French Spinoza scholars, Gilles Deleuze and Alexandre Matheron. In his short preface, Macherey is content to emphasize and praise the way Negri brings the thought of Spinoza "back to life" in connection with current political concerns, reserving for the very end a brief but pointed question regarding whether Negri's reading might still be too teleological. But in a longer essay published later that year (entitled "*De la médiation à la constitution: description d'un parcours spéculatif*" ²⁵), Macherey examines Negri's interpretation of Spinoza in greater detail, and returns to the question of its residual Hegelianism. As much as Negri wants and tries to break free of Hegelian modes of thought, on Macherey's reading he doesn't completely succeed.

The key to Negri's ground-breaking reading is the distinction he draws in Spinoza between an inferior, early pantheism (which he considers utopian and neo-platonic) and a more mature materialism that Negri takes as a precursor to Marx's own. Controversy and difficulties arise with this reading because the dividing line separating what Negri calls the first and second "foundations" of Spinoza's thought runs straight down the middle of his major work, the *Ethics*. While it is true that Spinoza did interrupt the composition of the *Ethics*, and drafted a theologico-political treatise before returning to revise and complete his *magnum opus*, it is far from clear from the finished text exactly how much and how thoroughly the "earlier version" was revised. Negri makes an already difficult philological problem even worse, Macherey argues, by *dramatizing* the evolution of Spinoza's thought in order to establish a clear *historical* break between an eminently disposable "first" Spinoza and an absolutely indispensable "second" one.²⁶

Negri's dramatization strikes Macherey as too Hegelian -- ironically enough, given that Negri wants to claim Spinoza as a true materialist and eradicate Hegelian dialectics and teleologism from Marxism. Not only is Negri's before/after narrative account of the two "foundations" suspect for Macherey, but even more so is his claim that it was "internal contradictions" in the first foundation that impelled Spinoza beyond them and into the second foundation, for such contradictions suggest for Macherey a classic Hegelian dialectical progression. Macherey feels Negri is on far firmer ground when he cites "external," historical circumstances instead of internal contradiction as the reason for the evolution of Spinoza's thought; and it is surely one of the unique strengths of Negri's reading that he situates Spinoza's thought so carefully in the context of the potentially democratic social relations of early Dutch capitalism: warding off the very real threat of encroaching state absolutism was a major impetus for Spinoza's explicitly political writings and, arguably but not obviously, for his revision of the *Ethics*, as well. And yet, even if one wanted to eliminate Hegelian contradiction *from accounts of historical process* -- as Macherey clearly does -- couldn't the notion of contradiction retain some validity *in accounts of philosophical thought* and the impetus for its revision? Granted, it may finally be more convincing (especially given the available textual evidence) to speak of a *tension*, rather than an absolute break, between two "foundations" in Spinoza (especially in the *Ethics* itself), but couldn't the development of the second be attributed (at least in part) to the recognition of contradictions in the first, particularly if such recognition were spurred (as Negri's contextual account suggests it was) by dramatic historical events?²⁷ Adequately addressing, much less answering, such questions is well beyond the scope of this essay; the point of raising them is merely to indicate that eliminating the notion of dialectical contradiction from accounts of historical process does not necessarily entail eliminating it from analyses of discourse and thought; there is no reason to assume that history mirrors thought, or vice versa; on the contrary.

In any case, Macherey accuses Negri of residual Hegelianism in this first instance largely because he retains a narrative account which includes the notion of contradiction at the level of thought. The second instance he diagnoses is somewhat more technical and certainly more far-reaching in its assessment of Negri's stance. It has to do with the role in Spinoza's thought of the notion of attributes (to which Macherey had himself devoted considerable attention in his own book, pp.95-136), regarding which Negri makes the same misinterpretation that Hegel had, according to Macherey. For both, attributes supposedly functioned as intermediaries between pure Substance and its modes, making them available to consciousness; for Hegel, then, Spinozan attributes represented a primitive and insufficient dialectic; for Negri, they were already *too* dialectical and would be abandoned by Spinoza himself in the "second foundation." Negri's misreading of Spinozan attributes thus plays a crucial role in his Hegelian dramatization of the alleged evolution of Spinoza's thought. But the ramifications go further, according to Macherey. By refusing attributes their *constitutive* function within an *identity* (rather than a dialectic) of Substance and its modes, Negri splits the Spinozan perspective in two: into a purely intellectual, ascetic project (corresponding to the first foundation) on one hand, and a materialist project (corresponding to the second foundation) on the other -- *whose realization would be deferred*, pending the development of productive forces, until the present of Negri's writing.

In thus claiming Spinoza as an "anomaly" whose "philosophy of crisis" at the dawn of modern market society would only really bear fruit centuries later at the twilight of modern market society, i.e. in the present-day capitalist crisis, Negri indulges in the kind of a posteriori Hegelian teleologism both he and Macherey are interested in eliminating from Marxian thought. According to this version of a Marxist philosophy of history, true democratic freedom becomes possible *when and only when sufficient development of productive forces* finally releases humankind from the grip of dire necessity. We have had to wait so long since Spinoza first put true democracy on the modern agenda, but now, at last, the moment has arrived... There are two problems with this ascetic teleology. For one thing, there can be no assurance for Spinoza that accomplishment of the "materialist" half of the ethical project would in itself necessarily procure the accomplishment (viz. the dissolution) of the "ascetic" half, no assurance that the ascetic personality will "wither away" of its own accord in order to partake of what Negri calls the "pleasure of the world": as noted above, humankind has only the possibility, not the guarantee, of attaining ideas adequate to true Thought and thus realizing freedom. Hence the importance of Deleuze and Guattari's project in the *Anti-Oedipus*: they insist, from a Spinozan-materialist perspective, on diagnosing *both* the ascetic personality *and* capitalist surplus-repression simultaneously, *without* giving causal priority to either. But perhaps more important, Spinozan materialism (pace Negri) rules out any such "dialectic" between "materialist" and "ascetic" projects: the productive forces of Substance (including human productive forces) are at any given moment always precisely equal to themselves and to the amount of freedom effectively realized (though they also always contain further possibilities for development, which may or may not be realized in history). There never is, never has been, any negativity within Substance; it is always full of productive force, even over-full with purely positive potential to develop.

Which is not to say that the potential of Substance is always everywhere realized, nor that whatever degrees of realization it does attain are ever simple or harmonious. On the contrary, Spinoza acknowledged that the development of Substance entailed increasing complexity, turbulence and conflict; on Negri's reading, nothing brought this home to Spinoza more than the emergence in 17th-century Dutch society of market capitalism, which pitted individuals against one another to a degree the corporate order of feudalism never had, thereby threatening the very fabric of social order. Negri refers to this development as the market-induced "crisis" of modern society, to which Spinoza alone, in his view, gave an adequate response. And Macherey, despite charging him with residual Hegelianism, clearly appreciates the way Negri has pinpointed the political relevance of Spinoza today. In an essay surveying other responses to the crisis, Macherey shows (as he did in his book) what Spinoza shares with Hegel and the tradition of modern European political thought, in order then to highlight what sets him radically apart.²⁸ And here, too, it turns out (on Macherey's reading) that Spinoza resembles Hegel in crucial respects more than either Hobbes or Rousseau, even while remaining a virulent critic of and viable alternative to the dominant tradition that, taken together despite their differences, they comprise. As Michael Hardt (Negri's American translator) also insists, what sets Spinoza apart is an original, materialist conception of the political relation between "force" and "power" (*potentia* and *potestas*), between the *basis* of political

power in effectively combined human activity and its mediated *expression* in political institutions and command.²⁹ This bears examination in further detail.

Like the others, Spinoza wanted to settle the question of the basis of human society, given that its feudal-corporatist basis had been thrown into crisis by the emergence of the market and the ideology of "possessive individualism." But he refused to consider that basis as somehow separate from human society itself -- either in the form of "natural rights" pre-existing, and then supposedly safeguarded by, the foundation of political society, as per the social contract theories of Hobbes and Rousseau; or in the form of transcendent Spirit and the ruse of reason, which merely use human societies to realize their own ends, as per Hegel. In contrast to Rousseau and Hobbes, humankind's natural state for Spinoza is neither un-mitigated war (Hobbes) nor solitary purity (Rousseau) but always already political: human beings always live socially, and that sociality is antagonistic except to the extent that humans realize (i.e. recognize *and* actualize) the superior force of individuals combined in cooperative groups relative to that of isolated individuals and those combined in uncooperative ones -- that is to say, human society is inherently and, as it were, aboriginally political. Indeed, Spinoza is most resolutely anti-Rousseau, as Macherey points out, in that he insists that the individual does not even exist *per se*, but only as an abstraction from the group(s) of which it is a part: as Macherey puts it, "individuals exist and become conscious of themselves only on the basis of reciprocal relations established between themselves and others, which cause them to communicate [with one another] in the first place" (*SID*, p.343). So for Spinoza, as for Hegel, the political precedes the personal, and thus cannot be conceived on the model of a voluntary contract among pre-existing individuals.

But whereas for Hegel, the political has *a* history (the History of subjective Spirit realizing itself objectively through peoples and the development of the State), for Spinoza the political exists immanently *in* history -- which is conceived as the (non-teleological) ensemble of realizations of natural-human powers. And whereas for Hegel, the supra-personal political instance is the transcendental subjectivity of Spirit, for Spinoza, it is simply natural force augmented by the equally natural but historically contingent combination of individuals in groups. Such combination produces a potentially infinite variety of socio-political forms in history, but always stems from the basic nature of human passion to knit interpersonal relations and form groups. Humans thus don't (have to) "give over" their natural rights to sovereign Power in order to safeguard their private interests and found political society: their interpersonal relations were already political to begin with, and their political force depends on how well -- how extensively, intensely, and harmoniously -- those passionate relations are composed. This rejection of social contract eliminates any need for transcendent authority (*potestas*), and instead grounds politics immanently (non-dialectically) in the force of the group (*potentia multitudine*).³⁰ There can therefore be no justification or motive for submitting to external command or the mediation of the State, inasmuch as human relations grounded in passion inevitably take immediate political forms, without requiring those passions to be contractually sublimated into the interests of citizenship in the State. And at the same time, of course, Spinoza's non-teleological view of history disallows any Hegelian "ruse of reason" outwitting human motives and guaranteeing that political forms as manifestations of

objective Spirit will improve; on the contrary, politics for Spinoza is a field of passion more than reason, and it is incumbent on reason to understand and try to make the most of natural-human passions in improving political organization, rather than dominate or suppress them.

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The political implications of Macherey's discussions of Spinoza are not spelled out in the philosophical works considered here; yet comparing Spinoza with the bourgeois tradition culminating in Hegel suggests the possibility of an anti-Hegelian, perhaps even a "non-dialectical," Marxist politics. A Spinoza-inspired politics would be non-dialectical in several related senses.³¹ It would for one thing repudiate the dialectical opposition of subject and object, according to which human freedom is (to be) wrested from nature through the ascetic development of marketable productive force at the expense of the productive force and human enjoyment of nature (including our own "human nature"). Instead, the struggle for freedom would be situated within and as part of the development of nature, rather than as its conquest and mastery; as Macherey puts it,

liberation is not a manipulation of reality by subjects who would situate themselves somehow outside of the arrangement they impose on it: [liberation] is the expression, the exertion of the ontological force that constitutes subjects themselves, not as independent individuals, but as the [most] versatile elements of the collective system within whose network of interrelations their action is inscribed. (CS, 27-28)

And of course for Spinoza (whose view of freedom Macherey is summarizing here), the "collective system" in which all human action takes place is comprised not of human society alone, but of the biosphere as a whole.

A Spinozan-Marxist politics would, for another thing, eschew mediation, in the sense of a dialectical synthesis/resolution of conflicts or differences on a higher plane -- such as the State or the Party, because they tend to re-impose the "higher plane" as self-interested domination over the parties in conflict or difference, as Power (*potestas*) over force (*potentia*). Instead, political organization would focus on "the multitude," working from the grass-roots outward (rather than "up"), making horizontal connections with other grass-roots groups rather than forming hierarchical pyramids; these are already the strategies of "autogestion" and "micropolitics" in France, "autonomia" in Italy (of which Negri was a prominent spokesperson and theoretician), "direct," "radical," or participatory democracy and coalition politics in the United States -- all of which are profoundly suspicious and critical of "representative" politics in both its institutional and theoretical forms, and construe the State as itself a terrain of immanent struggle among, rather than the transcendent, synthetic mediation of, conflicting social forces.

Finally and most importantly, a Spinozan-Marxist politics would reject all forms of teleologism. For there can be no guarantee -- Hegelian or Hegelian-Marxist -- that "history" is "on our side," that the development of Spirit or of marketable productive

forces will necessarily (or even probably) lead to the realization of human freedom. Instead, political struggle would have to assume the -- far greater -- burden of realizing freedom immediately, everywhere and for everybody, with whatever level of productivity is in force (a stance that does not, of course, preclude augmenting human-natural productive force as *part* of the struggle, as long as such augmentation remained subordinate to the realization of freedom). We would have to do away with the complacent, even mystical, Hegelian faith that "history always progresses, even if on its bad side," that is, by means of disasters rather than accomplishments -- disasters which by dialectical sleight of hand (negation of the negation, ruse of reason) will someday turn out to have been beneficial in the long run. (At the rate we are going, humanity simply *doesn't have* a "long run" in which to redeem the disasters spawned by capitalism's exclusive focus on marketable productive force: in such a long run, which is becoming shorter by the day, *we would all be dead*.) In the final analysis, Hegel-inspired "dialectical" philosophy of history applied to capitalism may amount to nothing more than the 19th-century myth of progress with the naive optimism replaced by a lofty, tragic sensibility willing to sacrifice the present to its eventual redemption in an indefinite (and increasingly unlikely) future.

History thus shorn of Hegelian-dialectical teleologism would not, however, be bereft of any shape or direction whatsoever. Some of the "laws" of capitalist development diagnosed by Marx still apply: the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, but with counter-tendencies so significant that a "final" profit crisis may never arrive; the tendency of the gap between wealth and poverty to increase continually, but with immiseration relegated to regions of the globe which remain largely outside the scope of effective political organization; the tendency of capital to accumulate and concentrate, of the market to expand geographically (as well as intensify psychologically), of commodity-production (and -consumption) to subsume greater and greater expanses of social life, of economic growth to entail periodic crises of over-production/under-consumption, and so on. Capitalism as a mode of production, that is to say, remains profoundly *contradictory*, in these and other ways.³² And these contradictions (or at least some of them) may indeed constitute the *motor of history*. But they are no longer to be construed as *dialectical* contradictions in the teleological sense understood by Hegelian Marxism, i.e. as destined for synthesis/resolution at some shining moment in the future. Capitalism develops contradictorily, to be sure, but without any negativity: both its tendencies and its counter-tendencies are actual forces, locked in an antagonism of which only the entirely positive relations of force, and not some negation of the negation, will determine the outcome. History in this light is *not* the "history of class struggle" (as Marx once suggested); nor is it the dialectic of forces and relations of production (as he is also known to have suggested) -- because nothing except the magical thinking of teleologism can assure us that either of these two will ever come into decisive (i.e. revolutionary) contradiction leading dialectically to resolution. For a Spinoza-inspired Marxism, the only universal history is the history of capitalism as a mode of production; and its motor, for better and for worse, is the on-going (and contradictory) self-expansion of capital itself: history *without* a subject, whether a class subject (the proletariat) or a transcendental one (species-being).

In addition to contributing to the intellectual viability of Marxism, abandoning the last vestiges of teleologism might well make Marxists seem less remote from other activists, for we would no longer be able to justify tolerating non-capitalist crimes against humanity in the name of some inevitable progress toward world communism as the *eventual* negation of capitalism's negation of all humanity. For Spinozan Marxists, the only certifiable historical tendency is for capital to expand and capitalism to intensify (with all the contradictions that entails). And it is up to us, the multitude -- without the confident crutch of "inevitable," much less the complacent, tragic sense of "dialectical," historical progress -- to see that it doesn't go unchallenged, by insisting first and foremost on the goal of realizing for everyone whatever degree of freedom the already-given level of productive forces makes possible. We would become less forgiving of any and all iniquity... and thereby belie any appearance of complicity.

Notes

[1](#) On the possible influence of Spinoza on Marx see the articles by Maximilien Rubel ("*Marx a la rencontre de Spinoza*" 7-28), Alexandre Matheron ("*Le Traite Theologico-Politique vu par le jeune Marx*" 159-212), and Albert Igoin ("*De l'ellipse de la theorie politique de Spinoza chez le jeune Marx*" 213-28) in *Cahiers Spinoza* 1 (Summer 1977), which also reprints the hand-copied passages (translated into French) in their entirety.

[2](#) Some of the other philosophical mavericks of interest to Deleuze are Bergson and Nietzsche; Spinoza, however, is the only figure to which he explicitly devoted two books. It would be interesting to examine the contribution of Spinoza to what is arguably Deleuze's most Marxist work, *Anti-Oedipus*; for some hints in this direction, see my *Introduction to Schizoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1999), especially Chapter 4.

[3](#) See Fredric Jameson, "The Re-invention of Marx," *Times Literary Supplement*, 22 August 1975, 942-43.

[4](#) The central difference between Nietzsche and Hegel may be that the latter bases his phenomenology on a relation between unequals (master/slave), whereas the former starts his genealogy with a relation among equals (see Nietzsche's *The Genealogy of Morals*, especially the First Essay).

[5](#) For a more general review and discussion of reasons for the reevaluation of Marxism, see Stanley Aronowitz, *The Crisis in Historical Materialism: Class, Politics, and Culture in Marxist Theory*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Macmillan, 1990).

[6](#) On revisionist interpretations of 1789, see Francois Furet, *Marx and the French Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); and George Comminel,

Rethinking the French Revolution: Marxism and the Revisionist Challenge (London: Verso, 1987).

⁷ For Althusser's discussion of his use of Spinoza, see *Essays in self-criticism* (London: NLB; Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1976).

⁸ See *Essays in self-criticism*, especially chapter 2.

⁹ *A Theory of Literary Production* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

¹⁰ *Hegel ou Spinoza* (Paris: Francois Maspero, 1979); page references follow citations in the text. It is fair to say that Macherey here poses rather than answers the question of what Spinoza might contribute to Marxism as a replacement for Hegel.

¹¹ In a similar vein, Stephen J. Gould argues against teleologism in evolutionary theory in his *Wonderful Life: the Burgess Shale and the Nature of History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989).

¹² This is certainly not the only philosophy of history present, explicitly or implicitly, in Marx. The concrete historical studies are certainly far more complex. Yet even as complicated an account as *The Eighteenth Brumaire* arguably retains the notion of dialectical historical progress, in the figure of the "mole" of history working underground to prepare the conditions for inevitable revolution. For a survey of philosophies of history in Marx, see Walter Adamson, "Marx's Four Histories: an approach to his intellectual development," *History and Theory* 20:4 (1982) 379-402.

¹³ Hegel took Spinoza to be a monist whose philosophy lacked the dynamic of negativity necessary to comprehend matter in all its complexity; Macherey, by contrast, reads complexity as immediately realized in Spinozan substance rather than being subsequent to interaction with Mind; Deleuze, in a similar vein, sees substance as itself productive of difference. See his *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* (New York: Zone Books, 1990); and Michael Hardt, *Gilles Deleuze: an Apprenticeship in Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

¹⁴ On "conatus," see G. Deleuze, *Spinoza, practical philosophy* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988); and M. Hardt, *Gilles Deleuze*; on the expansion of human-natural powers in a Spinozan vein, see Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (New York: Viking, 1977).

¹⁵ On Spinoza and environmentalism, see Arne Ness, "Spinoza and ecology," in *Speculum Spinozanum, 1677-1977*, Siegfried Hessing, ed. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977) 418-425, who asserts that "No great philosopher has so much to offer in the way of clarification and articulation of basic ecological attitudes as Baruch Spinoza" (423); and his *Freedom, Emotion and Self-subsistence* (Oslo: Universitets-forlaget, 1975); see also Andrew Collier, "The Inorganic Body and the Ambiguity of Freedom," *Radical Philosophy* 57 (Spring 1991) 3-9.

[16](#) See Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* [Gebhardt edition, 1925] (Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill, 1989).

[17](#) There are several philosophies of history in Marx (see note 12 above). Rather than search for a definitive "break" separating distinct positions in Marx (as Althusser does), it may be more rigorous and fruitful to recognize tensions within the corpus among different or "competing" views.

[18](#) Forces of production include the labor-power of the proletariat, to be sure, but also the knowledge, technology and organization provided by the capitalist; relations of production include the relations between the classes, clearly, but also cultural or ideological elements (such as possessive individualism or asceticism) which may be common to both workers and capitalists yet serve neither's interests. For attempts to construe class in other than transcendental-subjective terms, see Nicos Poulantzas, *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* (London: New Left Books, 1975) and Guillermo Carchedi, *On the Economic Identification of Social Classes* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978)

[19](#) This model appears in the *Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels, *Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*, Lewis Feuer, ed. [Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1959]): "At a certain stage of the development of [the] means of production and of exchange, the conditions under which feudal society produced and exchanged... became no longer compatible with the already developed productive forces; they became so many fetters. They had to be burst asunder; they were burst asunder" (84) -- where history as class struggle nevertheless also appears, in one of its most striking formulations: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (81). One of Marx's strokes of genius was to have replaced Hegel's subject-object dialectic of Spirit and Matter with a dialectic between transformative human labor and the natural environment. But such a "materialist" reversal of Hegel may end up merely producing a Marxian "metaphysics of production" (as per Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production* [St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975]; and/or merely reproducing a subject-object dialectic in which the fate of the human species is irrevocably tied to the domination of nature. In any case, the presumption that the development of productive force would in and of itself produce human freedom appears increasingly dubious: already in the 1950s, Marcuse (in *Eros and Civilization* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1974) coined the important term "surplus-repression" to designate the lag between the development of productive forces and the realization of freedom; more recently, Regis Debray (in *Critique of Political Reason* [London: Verso, 1983] has gone so far as to deny any link whatsoever between the development of productive forces and the prospects for political advancement and the realization of freedom.

[20](#) Most notably in his *Critique of the Gotha Program*, where Marx insists right from the start that value derives from nature as well as from human labor; see also the passages on alienation in the *1844 Manuscripts*, where he asserts that man is a part of nature (e.g. Marx, *Early Writings*, Q. Hoare, ed. [New York: Vintage, 1975] 327-28).

[21](#) Deleuze and Guattari make the inseparability of humanity and nature a key feature of their Marxism in *Anti-Oedipus*) see especially p.25: "Nature = Industry, Nature = History."

[22](#) This is the case made by Negri and by Paul Virilio, who see 1917/1929 as a crucial turning-point where capitalist crisis leads not to the overthrow of capital liberating its productive potential but to the self-destruction of that potential, ultimately in the form of permanent war instead of human leisure and social luxury; see Antonio Negri, *Revolution Retrieved: Writings on Marx, Keynes, Capitalist Crisis, and New Social Subjects* (London: Red Notes, 1988) and Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1985), esp. Part IV, "The State of Emergency".

[23](#) Milan: Feltrinelli, 1981; translated as *The Savage Anomaly: the Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

[24](#) Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1982.

[25](#) In *Cahiers Spinoza* no.4 (Winter 1982-83) 9-37; page references to this article (designated "CS") henceforth follow citations in the text.

[26](#) Negri's reading of Spinoza thus mirrors Althusser's reading of Marx: both strive to establish a "break" within their respective corpi, despite considerable philological difficulty.

[27](#) Deleuze will propose a very different reason for the differences between the earlier and later portions of the *Ethics*, having to do with the move from speculative to practical considerations; see his *Expressionism in Philosophy*.

[28](#) See Pierre Macherey, "Spinoza, la fin de l'histoire et la ruse de la raison," in *Spinoza: Issues and Directions* (Leiden, The Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1990) 327-46; page references to this article (designated "SID") henceforth follow citations in the text. For Macherey's review of Deleuze's reading of Spinoza, see his "Penser dans Spinoza" in *Magazine Littéraire* 257 (September 1988) 40-43.

[29](#) See Hardt's "Translator's Preface" to his English translation of *Savage Anomaly* (note 26); and the two-volume study of Martial Gueroult (*Spinoza* [Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1968/1974]), who is usually credited with first demonstrating the importance of the distinction (*potentia/potestas*) in Spinoza when most translators and commentators denied it. It must be said at the same time, however, that Negri and Hardt tend to make Spinoza more of an anarchist than he actually was, by privileging *potentia* over *potestas* and neglecting his considerable investment in and justifications for *potestas*. On Negri's view, however, it was the relative under-development of society at Spinoza's time that necessitated such justifications; *potestas* is no longer necessary now that society has developed materially and socially.

[30](#) To get a sense of the distinction between *potentia* and *potestas*, think of the differences between soccer and football, or between improvisational jazz and a symphony orchestra (respectively); see also my "'Introduction to the Non-Fascist Life': Deleuze and Guattari's 'Revolutionary' Semiotics," *Esprit Createur* XXVII:2 (Summer 1987) 19-29; and the Preface to my *Introduction to Schizoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1999).

[31](#) It might remain "dialectical" in several other important respects, as well, none of them however attributing the dialectic to historical process itself: especially in allowing balanced rather than blanket judgments of historical events or tendencies, and in relating political and intellectual positions to historical circumstances and projects.

[32](#) Some of the other ways include the contradiction between the instrumental rationality of restricted capitalist economic calculation and the irrationality of the system as a whole; the contradiction between the tendency to suppress wages and/or eliminate jobs and the need for increased purchasing power to realize profit on the goods produced, and so forth. In this connection, it is worth recalling Althusser's lament, that for all his materialism, Spinoza lacked what Marx got from Hegel: the notion of contradiction (see *Elements d'autocritique*, 81). For Macherey, one of the tasks remaining for Marxist philosophy is to develop a concept of historical contradiction free from dialectical negativity (which inevitably entails subjectivity and idealism).