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Introduction

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Introduction: Spinoza Today

**Frank Ruda &
Agon Hamza**

In his 1964/1965 lecture series entitled *History and Freedom*, Theodor W. Adorno credits Spinoza with being the first modern thinker who in the seventeenth century raised “the problem of freedom and determinism.”¹ This is the case because for Spinoza - and therein Adorno identifies in him a predecessor of Kantian rationalism - to act properly and thus to act freely meant to act “*in accordance with reason*.”² But if acting freely is to act in accordance with reason - this is the argument Adorno is aiming at - and in this sense with what cannot but appear to be a structure already established, how can we effectively still call such action free? If we act according to reason, is it not reason which determines our actions and not us? Does this not mean that when we supposedly act freely, we are just following the causality of reason and hence are determined? Adorno identifies Spinoza with this problem – the problem of how to bring together freedom and reason without losing either –, a problem that he further locates as being in the very heart of all properly modern philosophy. The problem is: either we emphasize reason and lose freedom, or we rescue freedom and sever it from rationality. But the problem’s mode of appearance is worse: since it looks as if following the path of rationality will bring freedom, but it ultimately and this means practically does not. Adorno, as is well-known, will therefore identify Spinoza as one thinker in the long series of thinkers who in the last instance attempted to dominate, master and control everything in (our free) nature that is not rational; Spinoza’s philosophy in this sense, is a philosophy of domination; a philosophy whose “axioms... already contain the total rationalism he would go on to extract from them so productively through the process of deduction,... the insanity of systems as such.”³ Spinoza’s rationalism paradigmatically brings forth the insanity of (rational and rationalist) systems as such, because his rationalism, and thereby prefiguring modern thought *tout court*, is one of the paradigmatic forms in which philosophical madness appears, namely in the form of endorsing rationality even if one has to pay the prize of freedom for it. Spinoza’s madness and endorsement of rationality are thus the two sides of his rationalism.

This very abbreviated reconstruction of Adorno’s critique is just one of many possible examples of how Spinoza was for a long time identified with a rationalism that was so rational that it basically turned into madness, that ended in determinism and thus did ultimately not only abolish freedom but worse – and was in this sense paradigmatic for all the abysses of enlightenment thought – thereby ultimately abolished rationality itself. In a similar sense, F.H. Jacobi, the great

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1 Adorno 2006, p. 193.

2 Ibid., p. 213.

3 Adorno 2008, p. 128.

classical German philosopher, famously opposed Spinoza's system, whose ontology he equaled with anti-freedom, determinism and with the ultimate realization of the principle of "a nihilo nihil fit", which is ultimately the principle of sufficient reason that grounds almost any knowledge-based rationalism. Spinoza's fully rational pantheism (relying on the identification of God with nature), in the last instance, turns in this reading out to be atheist – as not even God is able to escape the power of causal relation. Spinoza, for Jacobi, brings forth the truth of the Enlightenment, or more precisely: of the idea of philosophy as science. This truth is that scientific thinking in its philosophical form ultimately explains away freedom – but therefore, it is essential to read Spinoza, as you shall know thy enemy.

Another classical German philosopher, G.W.F Hegel, despite all his criticisms of Spinoza's philosophical system, loudly declared that in order to be a philosopher, one has to (first be or) be or become a Spinozist. Spinoza is the river one not only has to cross, but the medium in which one first has to think, in order to start thinking at all. All thought is determined and one does not know what a determination (of thought) is if one has not read Spinoza – even though he is ultimately not enough to grasp thought properly.

These are just some of almost endless examples that one can find in the history of philosophy, where Spinoza is assigned a crucial, absolutely essential, but often also only constitutively intermediary role. In this spirit, Spinoza's philosophy became also an object of poetry or literary writing: in Jose Luis Borges, Zbigniew Herbert, and others.

So, and maybe surprisingly, the conjuncture changed. Spinoza was no longer the object of harsh critique, but rather the subject of immense adoration. Recently, Slavoj Žižek even noted that academia today is organized under the injunction to love Spinoza:

Everyone loves him, from the Althusserian strict "scientific materialists" to Deleuzian schizo-anarchists, from rationalist critics of religion to the partisans of liberal freedoms and tolerances, not to mention feminists like Genevieve Lloyd who propose to decipher the mysterious third type of knowledge in *Ethics* as feminine intuitive knowledge surpassing the male analytic understanding...⁴

It seems to have become almost impossible today to be critical of Spinoza. His reputation was fundamentally and universally transformed. From the freedom-mortifying peak of 17th century rationalism to a thinker who has become compatible with a variety of different discourses

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4 Žižek 2007

and positions. But, if this is more than just the symptom of universal compatibility, how can we assert and understand Spinoza's importance and influence in academia and contemporary philosophy, for theory broadly speaking and even for psychoanalysis? One way of doing so would be to identify him as one of the if not the most significant predecessor of German Idealism, a philosophical conjuncture wherein he without any doubt played a crucial role, and consequently, he might be understood as the forebearer of the philosophy that followed him. Does something similar hold for (critical) theory, too? For psychoanalysis?

In his texts on self-criticism, Louis Althusser rejected the readings of his work that depicted it as structuralist. Against such an interpretation, he openly declared himself to be a Spinozist. This is certainly because Spinoza is clearly the thinker whose presence permeates Althusser's entire opus. One could even consider Spinoza to be a conditioning instance, a constant determining point of reference for his thought. For Althusser, Spinozist thought potentially entails the greatest lesson in heresy the world has ever seen and heresy is the only way of genuine thinking - taking the risk of losing it all, being expelled, having no natural community to belong to.

In the very same text, Althusser adds a long remark that is worth quoting in its entirety:

Hegel *begins* with Logic, "God before the creation of the world". But as Logic is alienated in Nature, which is alienated in the Spirit, which reaches its end in Logic, there is a circle which turns within itself, without end and without beginning. The first words of the beginning of the *Logic* tell us: Being is Nothingness. The posited beginning is negated: there is no beginning, therefore no origin. Spinoza for his part begins with God, but in order to deny Him as a Being (Subject) in the universality of His *only* infinite power (*Deus = Natura*). Thus Spinoza, like Hegel, rejects every thesis of Origin, Transcendence or an Unknowable World, even disguised within the absolute interiority of the Essence. But with this difference (for the Spinozist negation is not the Hegelian negation), that within the void of the Hegelian Being there exists, through the negation of the negation, the contemplation of the dialectic of a *Telos* (Telos = Goal), a dialectic which reaches its Goals in history: those of the Spirit, subjective, objective and absolute, Absolute Presence in transparency. But Spinoza, because he "begins with God", never gets involved with any Goal, which, even when it "makes its way forward" in immanence, is still figure and thesis of transcendence. The detour *via* Spinoza thus allowed us to make out, by contrast, a radical quality lacking

in Hegel. In the negation of the negation, in the *Aufhebung* (= transcendence which conserves what it transcends), it allowed us to discover the Goal: the special form and site of the "mystification" of the Hegelian dialectic.⁵

In other words, according to Althusser, Spinoza rejected the notion of the goal or end and by doing so he rejected every element of teleology in his position. In Althusser's view, Spinoza was *the* critic of ideology of his time, during which ideology predominantly appeared in the form of religion. He refused to see ideology as an error or as ignorance, but located ideology on the level of the *imaginary* (on the first level of knowledge). In his radical criticism of

the central category of imaginary illusion, *the Subject*, it reached into the very heart of bourgeois philosophy, which since the fourteenth century had been built on the foundation of the legal ideology of the Subject. Spinoza's resolute anti-Cartesianism consciously directs itself to this point, and the famous "critical" tradition made no mistake here. On this point too Spinoza anticipated Hegel, but he went further.⁶

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For Hegel, substance does not exist; it is only a retroactive presupposition of the subject. Substance comes into its incomplete existence only as a result of the subject, and it is for this conceptual reason that it is enunciated as predecessor of the subject. In this regard, the idea that the substance is an organic whole is an illusion, precisely because when the subject presupposes the substance, it also presupposes it as a split, a cut. When substance would ontologically precede the subject, then we get a substance endowed with Spinozist attributes, but thereby we would ultimately not be able to account for the emergence or existence of a subject. What to make thus of this line of argumentation *à propos* the Althusserian concept of the process without a subject within a Spinozist-Hegelian framing? If we hold this position, then we are in a pre-Kantian universe. The Hegelian approach assumes that this understanding of substance is dogmatic religious metaphysics, because being/substance is posited as a totality, as indivisible One. This totality can be accounted for, as such, only in a kind of fantasy (this is precisely what leads Kant to elaborate on the antinomies of reason). In this regard, for Hegel, it is impossible to think that the substance will become a subject, because it always-already entails the indication that it has itself been posited by a subject ("*not only* as a Substance, but *also* as a Subject"): as it exists only

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5 Althusser 1976, p.135

6 Ibid., p,136

through a positing act of the subject and without the former substance is simply a nothing. Here, precision is paramount: when Hegel talks about substance and subject, he is here talking about the absolute: it is the absolute which is not *only* a substance, but *also* a Subject, that the “absolute is essentially its result.”⁷ As Hegel himself put it in his critique to Spinoza, “substance is not determined as self-differentiating,” which is to say, not as a subject.⁸

Given these complications, wherein might we detect or locate Spinoza’s heresy - that Althusser identified - then precisely? At his time, Spinoza’s positions generated endless problems and much hatred, not only within the Jewish community, but also among the Protestant clergy. We might say he is *the* excommunicated philosopher in an even twofold sense: he was excommunicated from the community of believers and for a long time he also became something like the outcast of, a sign of the worst in Western thought). The radicality of thought that manifests in this fact seems to turn him (again) into a true and quite different philosophical paradigm: any philosopher should orient herself and see with Spinozist eyes, as Spinozism exploding all traditions thereby is a practice of subjective liberation that is needed to do philosophy in the first place.

How are we then to understand Spinoza’s significance and influence? Is there - and how would we answer this - a Spinozist account of Spinoza’s effects on the history of philosophy? How does this vary since early modern thought and, in particular, how does it differ from contemporary philosophy and theory? Contemporary French philosophy, from Althusser through Deleuze, Macherey, Balibar to Negri, works, broadly speaking under the banner of Spinozism, regardless of its different guises and orientations. It is thus interesting to note: Spinozism allows for an astounding multiplicity of variations. And the same is true for the history of Marxism: Georgi Plekhanov’s declaration that Marxism is a “modern Spinozism”, Althusser’s Spinozist-Marxism (that rejects Plekhanov’s all-encompassing characterization of Marxism as a world-view), Negri’s and Hardt’s Spinozist Multitude against Empire, Deleuze’s Spinoza of affects, etc. Even one of the more recent influential books in the cognitive sciences was Antonio Damasio’s *Looking for Spinoza*, which argues that Spinoza foresaw the discoveries in neuroscience and biology, whereby Spinoza seems to become even more a thinker of our present and maybe even our contemporary than one might have assumed. It is difficult to imagine a philosopher who is a constitutive reference for so many opposed philosophical orientations. But is this diversity and multitude of Spinozism just contingent (and if so, how can the great

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7 Hegel 1969, p.537

8 Ibid., p.373

thinker of necessity create such a contingency) or ultimately necessary (from a Spinozist or, meta-Spinozist perspective)? What precisely is the inherent potential of Spinozist thought for such creative multiplication? Is Spinoza a figure of contradiction or inconsistency, or can such multiplicity only spring from a uniform system)? What would Spinoza himself make of the reception of his thought?

It might be that precisely because of the multiform and divergent, often conflictual, interpretations that it is nearly impossible to search for the 'real' or 'true' Spinoza. But must there not be a substance of Spinozism? The present issue of *Crisis and Critique* is not an attempt to simply map the recent and traditional scholarship on Spinoza, it is therefore also not an attempt to produce an issue of 'Spinoza studies'. It is rather an attempt to think *with* Spinoza, to think through substance and to detect the potentials and limitations that have made and make Spinoza so productive. This will hopefully allow us to see through his eyes into the present.

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