



The intellectual decline caused by ideological analyses: limits of Marxist readings of Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677)

El declivi intelectual causat per les anàlisis ideològiques: els límits de les lectures marxistes de Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677)

La decadencia intelectual provocada por los análisis ideológicos: límites de las lecturas marxistas de Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677)

A decadência intelectual causada por análises ideológicas: limites das leituras marxistas de Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677)

Rodrigo Jungmann de CASTRO¹

Abstract: This article re-examines the alleged philosophical affinity between Spinoza and Marx, an association popularized in contemporary theory by authors such as Althusser, Balibar, and Negri. Against the prevailing “materialist Spinoza” reading, it argues that the resemblance between the two thinkers is largely rhetorical. Spinoza’s immanence is ontological, not historical; his materialism excludes the dialectic of production that defines Marx’s thought. Their anthropologies diverge likewise: for Spinoza, bondage arises from passion and ignorance; for Marx, from alienation and exploitation. The state, which for Spinoza is reason’s instrument, becomes for Marx the embodiment of domination. Even their critiques of illusion – superstition and ideology – belong to different explanatory orders, cognitive and structural respectively. What unites them is not shared materialism but shared hostility to transcendence. The result is a comparison in contrast: Spinoza’s politics of endurance against Marx’s politics of rupture.

Keywords: Spinoza – Marx – Negri – *Immanence* – *Materialism* – Political Anthropology.

Resumo: Este artigo reexamina a suposta afinidade filosófica entre Espinosa e Marx, associação difundida na teoria contemporânea por autores como Althusser, Balibar e Negri. Contra a leitura dominante de um “Espinosa materialista”, sustenta-se que a semelhança entre os dois pensadores é, em grande medida, retórica. A imanência espinosana é ontológica, não histórica; seu materialismo exclui a dialética da produção que define o pensamento marxiano. Suas antropologias também divergem: para Espinosa, a servidão decorre das paixões e da ignorância; para Marx, da alienação e da exploração. O

¹ Holds a Bachelor’s and Master’s degree in *Literature* from [Universidade Federal de Pernambuco \(UFPE\)](#) and a PhD in *Philosophy* from the [University of California, Riverside](#); *Associate Professor I* in Departamento de Filosofia at [Universidade Federal de Pernambuco \(UFPE\)](#). *E-mail:* rjungmann9@gmail.com.



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Estado, que em Espinosa funciona como instrumento da razão, aparece em Marx como encarnação da dominação. Mesmo suas críticas à ilusão – superstição e ideologia – pertencem a ordens explicativas distintas, cognitiva e estrutural, respectivamente. O que os aproxima não é um materialismo compartilhado, mas uma rejeição comum da transcendência. O resultado é uma comparação por contraste: a política da perseverança em Espinosa frente à política da ruptura em Marx.

Palavras-chave: Espinosa – Marx – Negri – *Imanência* – *Materialismo* – Antropologia Política.

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Introduction: Ideological Reductionism and Cultural Decline

Excessive adherence to materialist modes of interpretation has invariably impoverished cultural analysis. By reducing works, styles, genres, and artistic movements to their social conditions of production, it is bound to turn symbolic creation into a mere symptom of class, ideology, or economic infrastructure. The result is a criticism that explains much and understands little: it knows how to place the work in its context but inevitably loses what in the work exceeds that context — form, imagination, ambiguity, beauty, internal freedom of creation. Culture then comes to be read less as condensed human experience than as an involuntary sociological document.

Arnold Hauser, despite his erudition and importance, presents a classic example of this risk. His most distinctive scholarly endeavor reduces the formal autonomy of works to the scheme of their social determinations.² Something similar occurs, in a philosophical key, with certain Marxist appropriations of modern authors. Lucien Goldmann, for example, offers a powerful but also risky interpretation: Pascal becomes almost inseparable from the spiritual situation of a declining class, as though the religious and metaphysical tension of his work could be traced back, in the last instance, to a

² HAUSER, Arnold. *The Social History of Art*. 4 v. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951.



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historically determined social position. The problem is not contextualizing Pascal, nor recognizing that all philosophy is born within a concrete historical world. The problem begins when context starts functioning as a sovereign key, absorbing the singularity of the thought it was meant to explain.³

It is at this point that the lesson becomes relevant to Spinoza. He too has very often been appropriated as a convenient precursor of later philosophical projects: a materialist before modern materialism, a radical before contemporary radicalism, a thinker “on our side” before being read as what he in fact was — a seventeenth-century metaphysician formed at the intersection of Cartesianism, biblical criticism, Dutch republicanism, modern science, and religious heterodoxy. Althusserian and post-Althusserian readings of Spinoza can be philosophically imaginative; but they become problematic, or maybe quite useless, when they make him less a singular author than a legitimate ancestor for these already desired in advance. Contextualizing Spinoza is necessary. Absorbing him into a materialist genealogy is something else.

Cultural and philosophical criticism worthy of the name must know the social matter of works. It must know that art, literature, and philosophy do not float above history. But it must also resist the temptation to make social history the single key to spiritual creation. Some works illuminate the world precisely because they do not entirely fit within its economic and material contours. Some thoughts are born in determinate circumstances but are not exhausted by them. When everything becomes a reflection, the work disappears. And when every philosopher becomes a precursor, thought ceases to surprise us.

The degeneracy now in full display in so many recent studies of Spinoza exemplify that trend. For it may be said in all fairness that few alliances in the history of ideas have been more eagerly asserted and less philosophically earned than that between Spinoza and Marx. From Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar to more recent materialist reinterpretations, Spinoza has been recast as an unacknowledged precursor of historical

³ GOLDMANN, Lucien. *The Hidden God: A Study of Tragic Vision in the Pensées of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964.



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materialism – a philosopher of immanence whose metaphysics is said to anticipate revolutionary praxis.⁴ The result has been a “materialist Spinoza” whose elegance is proportional to its anachronism: an ontology pressed into the service of rupture.

The attraction is understandable. Both philosophers rejected transcendence and theocracy; and both were condemned by the powers of their time. Yet persecution makes for poor genealogy. To read Marx back into Spinoza is to measure seventeenth-century rationalism by nineteenth-century hopes. Antonio Negri authored the most systematic contemporary attempt to fuse the two traditions as he treats Spinoza’s metaphysics as the foundation of constituent power, his theory of affects as an anticipation of collective praxis, and his concept of the multitude as a proto-revolutionary subject.⁵ In this line of interpretation, Spinoza’s immanent God is reinterpreted as productive force, while desire is elevated from a passive affect to a generative principle of historical transformation. Elements drawn from Marx’s theory of production⁶ and from post-Spinozist conceptions of desire – most notably those associated with Deleuze⁷ – are projected back onto Spinoza’s system, reshaping it into a philosophy of political becoming.

This general approach has also found influential expression in Brazilian scholarship, most notably in the work of Marilena Chauí, who likewise emphasizes the political productivity of the *multitudo* and the critical role of imagination within an immanent framework. Her contribution belongs to the same broader interpretive current, even where its emphases and conclusions diverge.⁸

⁴ ALTHUSSER, Louis. *Essays in Self-criticism*. London: New Left Books, 1976, and BALIBAR, Étienne. *Spinoza and Politics*. London: Verso, 1998, for their respective contributions.

⁵ NEGRI, Antonio. *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza’s Metaphysics and Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

⁶ MARX, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Volume 1*. New York: Vintage Books, 1977.

⁷ DELEUZE, Gilles. *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988.

⁸ Although often cited together, contemporary attempts to link Spinoza and Marx display significant differences of method, scope, and ambition, reflecting the heterogeneity of the recent secondary literature rather than a unified interpretive program. Louis Althusser treats Spinoza primarily as a philosophical condition of possibility for Marx’s anti-teleological materialism, emphasizing structural causality and the rejection of expressive totality rather than political genealogy (*Essays in Self-Criticism*,



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The project is intellectually ambitious and politically appealing, but philosophically untenable. Once Spinoza's key categories – substance, mode, *conatus*, *civitas* – are restored to their proper setting, the supposed continuity evaporates.⁹ His immanentism is metaphysical, not historical; his materialism ontological, not economic; and his politics institutional, not revolutionary. The *Marxianized Spinoza* is thus less an extension of Spinoza's thought than a projection of later concerns onto a radically different philosophical architecture.

This essay aims to dismantle that projection. Beyond a shared revulsion toward theocracy, Marx and Spinoza diverge at every decisive point – ontology, anthropology, and political teleology. Marx conceives the world as a field of production to be transformed through praxis:¹⁰

pp. 112-118). Étienne Balibar adopts a more cautious and selective strategy, invoking Marx to clarify questions of conflict, citizenship, and collective subjectivity while explicitly resisting genealogical assimilation (*Spinoza and Politics*, pp. 3-6, 68-72). Antonio Negri advances the most programmatic synthesis, repeatedly mobilizing Marxian categories such as production, constituent power, and collective praxis to reconstruct Spinoza as a thinker of revolutionary immanence (*The Savage Anomaly*, pp. 20-5, 70-75, 107-115, 162-170). Gilles Deleuze, by contrast, does not frame Spinoza in relation to Marx at all; his interpretation is ethical and ontological rather than historical, though its vocabulary of immanence and productive desire later proved influential for Marxist appropriations (*Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, pp. 97–103, 122–128). Finally, Marilena Chauí explicitly examines Marx as a reader of Spinoza in her essay “Marx e a democracia (o jovem Marx, leitor de Espinosa),” arguing for a limited but genuine Spinozist influence on Marx's early reflections on democracy (*Por que Marx?*, pp. 257-292). Later, she brought Marx closer to Spinoza by drawing on the latter thinker's notion of *multitudo* (*Política em Espinosa*, pp. 234-254). This brief mapping is intended as a preliminary orientation within a diverse body of scholarship rather than as a comprehensive review; the present critique is directed chiefly at those readings that move from structural resonance to genealogical or revolutionary identification.

⁹ SPINOZA, Benedictus de. *The Collected Works of Spinoza. v. 1*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.

¹⁰ MARX, Karl. “Theses on Feuerbach”. In: *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Selected Works, v. 1*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977, pp. 13-15.



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XI. Die Philosophen haben die Welt nur verschieden *interpretiert*; es kommt drauf an, sie zu *verändern*.¹¹

XI. The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it.¹²

Spinoza conceives it as a field of necessity to be understood through reason.¹³ Marx explains consciousness through class; Spinoza explains superstition through cognition. Marx looks to the dissolution of political institutions; Spinoza treats them as reason's precondition. To call both "materialists" is therefore to confuse the immanence of being with the immanence of history – a confusion this article sets out to correct.

II. The Alleged Continuities

The attempt to align Spinoza and Marx typically rests on three alleged continuities: materialism, praxis, and the critique of illusion. Each appears plausible at first glance, yet each dissolve upon closer inspection.

II.1. Materialism

Both Spinoza and Marx are commonly described as materialists, and it is on this shared label that much of the proposed affinity depends. Spinoza rejects Cartesian dualism by affirming a single substance with multiple attributes, of which thought and extension are known to us. Marx, in turn, rejects idealism by grounding consciousness in material

¹¹ MARX, Karl. "Theses on Feuerbach". In: *Marx Engels Werke*. Bd. 3. Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1990, p. 7.

¹² MARX, Karl. "Theses on Feuerbach". In: *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Selected Works*, v. 1. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977, p. 15.

¹³ SPINOZA, Benedictus de. *The Collected Works of Spinoza*. v. 1. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.



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conditions of production. On this basis, Spinoza's ontology is said to anticipate Marx's historical materialism.¹⁴

The resemblance, however, is largely verbal. Spinoza's materialism is ontological: everything that exists follows from the necessity of divine nature and is determined by immanent causation. There is no genesis, no historical emergence, and no transformation of substance through time. Marx's materialism, by contrast, is historical and relational. What is "material" for Marx is not inert matter but social production, continually reshaped through labor, conflict, and changing relations of power.¹⁵

Spinoza's necessity is eternal; Marx's necessity is dialectical. Spinoza abolishes contingency by denying creation; Marx introduces contingency through historical struggle. To conflate these positions is to collapse the distinction between being and becoming. Spinoza's immanence excludes transcendence but also excludes historical development; Marx's immanence, by contrast, is inseparable from historical transformation.

II.2. Praxis and Immanence

A second continuity is drawn between Marxian praxis and Spinoza's theory of action. On this reading, Spinoza's doctrine of adequate ideas and his emphasis on activity over passivity are taken to prefigure a theory of collective praxis oriented toward transformation¹⁶. The *conatus* of individuals is said to accumulate into a productive force of the multitude, thereby generating political change.

¹⁴ ALTHUSSER, Louis. *Essays in Self-criticism*. London: New Left Books, 1976 and NEGRI, Antonio. *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

¹⁵ MARX, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. v. 1*. New York: Vintage Books, 1977.

¹⁶ NEGRI, Antonio. *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.



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Yet Spinoza's *conatus* is not productive in the Marxian sense. It is the effort by which each thing perseveres in its being, not a principle of world-making or historical mediation:

Unaqueque res, quantum in se est, in suo esse perseverare conatur.
Conatus, quo unaqueque res in suo esse perseverare conatur,
nihil est praeter ipsius rei actualem essentiam.¹⁷

Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being.
The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being
is nothing but the actual essence of the thing.¹⁸

Spinoza lacks any concept analogous to labor such as the transformation of nature, any account of alienation, or any dialectic of forces and relations. His distinction between action and passion is epistemic and ethical, not socio-economic.

The contrast is evident in their respective philosophical aims. Spinoza's *Ethics* culminates in the intellectual love of God, understood as adequate knowledge of necessity; Marx's early writings culminate in the demand to change the world through praxis. The verbs are decisive: Spinoza seeks understanding, Marx seeks transformation. Even Spinoza's commitment to democracy remains administrative and institutional. Political arrangements are to be rationally designed to minimize conflict, not overturned in the name of emancipation.

II.3. Ideology and Superstition

A third parallel aligns Marx's critique of ideology with Spinoza's analysis of superstition. Both philosophers expose the ways in which false beliefs sustain domination and inhibit

¹⁷ SPINOZA, Benedictus de. *Ética*. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 2007, *Propositiones* VI and VII, *Pars Tertia*, p. 172 and p. 174.

¹⁸ SPINOZA, Benedictus de. *The Collected Works of Spinoza*. v. 1. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985. Propositions VI and VII, Part 3, p. 498 and p. 499.



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freedom. Spinoza famously links superstition to fear and ignorance of causes, while Marx explains ideology through the inversion of social relations under capitalism.¹⁹

Here again, the similarity is superficial. Spinoza views superstition as a cognitive phenomenon: it arises from inadequate ideas and the imagination's tendency to project purpose where there is only necessity. Its remedy is education and the gradual acquisition of adequate ideas. Marx's ideology, by contrast, is structural. It is not simply false belief but a necessary expression of material relations under capitalism. Spinoza's philosopher persuades, Marx's proletariat overthrows. Spinoza's critique of illusion belongs to epistemology; Marx's belongs to political economy. To assimilate one to the other is to mistake an account of cognition for an account of domination.

Taken together, these alleged continuities dissolve into category errors. Materialism, praxis, and critique function differently in each system because they are embedded in radically different ontologies. What unites Spinoza and Marx is not a shared theory of history or action, but a common rejection of transcendence. Beyond that negative agreement, their philosophies diverge in aim, method, and political implication.

II.4. Ontology: Substance versus Production

At the deepest level, the divergence between Spinoza and Marx is ontological. The attempt to align them ultimately rests on a confusion about what it means for something to exist. Spinoza's ontology is a theory of substance; Marx's is a theory of production. The former describes a complete order of being the latter an unfinished process of becoming.

For Spinoza, there exists only one substance, infinite and self-caused, whose essence involves existence. Finite things are modes determined by the necessity of the divine

¹⁹ SPINOZA, Benedictus de. *The Collected Works of Spinoza. v. 1*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985; MARX, Karl; ENGELS, Frederick. *The German Ideology*. In: *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Selected Works. v. 1*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977.



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nature and by the immanent causal order of *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*.²⁰ Nothing comes into being through historical genesis, and nothing is created *ex nihilo*. Time has no ontological function: the order of causes is logical and eternal, not temporal or developmental. Consider:

Deus est omnium rerum causa immanens, non vero transiens.

Demonstratio. Omnia quae sunt in Deo sunt et per Deum concipi debent, adeoque Deus rerum, quae in ipso sunt, est causa; quod est primum. Deinde extra Deum nulla post dari substantia, hoc est res, quae extra Deum in se sit; quod erat secundum. Deus ergo est omnium rerum causa immanens, non vero transiens. Q. E. D.²¹

God is the immanent, not the transitive cause, of all things.

Dem. Everything that is, is in God, and must be conceived through God, and so God is the the cause of all things, which are in him. That is the first [thing to be proven]. And then outside God there can be no substance, i. e., thing which is in itself outside God. That was the second. God, therefore, is the immanent, not the transitive, cause of all things. Q. E. D.²²

And no less importantly:

Res particulares nihil sunt nisi Dei attributorum affectiones, sive modi,

²⁰ SPINOZA, Benedictus de. *The Collected Works of Spinoza. v. 1.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.

²¹ SPINOZA, Benedictus de. *Ética.* Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 2007, *Propositio XVIII* and the corresponding *Demonstratio*, p. 42, *Pars Prima*. (Internal cross-references have been removed).

²² SPINOZA, Benedictus de. *The Collected Works of Spinoza. v. 1.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985. Proposition 18 and the corresponding Demonstration, p. 428, Part 1. (Internal cross-references have been removed).



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quibus Dei attributa certo et determinato modo exprimuntur.²³

Particular things are nothing but affections of God's attributes, or modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way.²⁴

Marx's ontology, by contrast, is inseparable from history. To exist, for Marx, is to produce and reproduce the material conditions of life. Social reality is constituted through labor, and its forms are contingent upon historically specific relations of production. His sixth thesis on Feuerbach makes the point unmistakably clear in connection with religion, which appears to Marx as a by-product of socially effective conditions:

VI. Feuerbach löst das religiöse Wesen in das *menschliche* Wesen auf. Das menschliche Wesen ist kein dem einzelnen Individuum inwohnendes Abstraktum. In seiner Wirklichkeit ist es das ensemble der gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisse.²⁵

VI. Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the *human* essence. But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations.²⁶

The world is not a closed system of necessity but a field of conflict in which new social forms emerge through contradiction. Attempts to assimilate Marx's "relations of production" to Spinoza's modes mistake structural immanence for historical mediation.

²³ SPINOZA, Benedictus de. *Ética*. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 2007, *Propositio* XXV, *Collarium*, p. 48, *Pars Prima*. (Internal cross-references have been removed).

²⁴ SPINOZA, Benedictus de. *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, v. 1. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985. Proposition 25, *Corollary*, p. 431, Part 1. (Internal cross-references have been removed).

²⁵ MARX, Karl. "Thesen über Feuerbach". In: *Marx Engels Werke*. Bd. 3. Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1990, p. 6.

²⁶ MARX, Karl. "Thesen über Feuerbach". In: *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Selected Works*, v. 1. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977, p. 14.



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Spinoza's modes do not transform substance; they express it. Marx's productive relations, by contrast, are constitutive of social reality itself. In Spinoza, causation is complete; in Marx, it is ongoing. Spinoza's God produces without intention; Marx's humanity produces through intention and struggle.

The contrast extends to epistemology. Spinoza famously affirms that the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things. Knowledge mirrors being because both follow from the same necessity.²⁷ Marx, by contrast, insists that consciousness reflects material reality in distorted form under conditions of domination:

Die Moral, Religion, Metaphysik und sonstige Ideologie und die ihnen entsprechenden Bewußtseinsformen behalten hiermit nicht länger den Schein der Selbständigkeit. Sie haben keine Geschichte, sie haben keine Entwicklung, sondern die ihre materielle Produktion und ihren materiellen Verkehr entwickelnden Menschen ändern mit dieser ihrer Wirklichkeit auch ihr Denken und die Produkte ihres Denkens. Nicht das Bewußtsein bestimmt das Leben, sondern das Leben bestimmt das Bewußtsein.²⁸

Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retains the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the product of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.²⁹

Where Spinoza affirms correspondence, Marx diagnoses inversion. What Spinoza calls adequate knowledge, Marx treats as ideological mystification until the material basis of

²⁷ SPINOZA, Benedictus de. *The Collected Works of Spinoza*. v. 1. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.

²⁸ MARX, Karl; ENGELS, Friedrich. "Die deutsche Ideologie". In: *Marx Engels Werke*. Bd. 3. Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1990, pp. 26-27.

²⁹ MARX, Karl; ENGELS, Frederick. "The German Ideology". In: *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Selected Works*, v. 1. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977, p. 25.



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society is transformed.³⁰ For this reason, the language of “materialism” obscures more than it clarifies. Spinoza’s matter is an attribute of being Marx’s “material” is the ensemble of social relations. Spinoza’s ontology admits neither progress nor regression – it can only be understood. Marx’s ontology is intelligible only as movement. Spinoza renders politics possible by stabilizing nature; Marx renders revolution necessary by destabilizing society.

To read Marx into Spinoza at this level is not merely anachronistic but destructive. It replaces metaphysics of necessity with a philosophy of historical production and turns Spinoza’s rationalism into a proto dialectic. In doing so, it erases what is most distinctive about Spinoza’s system: the conviction that freedom lies not in transforming the world, but in understanding the structure that governs it.

II.5. Anthropology: the passions and their government

If ontology marks the deepest divergence between Spinoza and Marx, anthropology reveals how that divergence plays out in concrete accounts of human bondage and freedom. Both thinkers diagnosed conditions under which human beings fail to be free, yet they locate the source of this failure in radically different domains and propose incompatible remedies.

In Part IV of the *Ethics*, Spinoza defines servitude as *impotentia agendi*: the condition in which human conduct is governed by passions rather than by reason. Passions are not merely emotions but inadequate ideas, arising from partial and confused knowledge of causes. And, as he noted earlier in Part III, human affects follow natural laws:

Plerique, qui de affectibus et hominum vivendi ratione scripserunt, videntur non de rebus naturalibus, quae communes naturae leges sequuntur, sed de rebus, quae extra naturam sunt, agere. Imo hominem in natura, veluti imperium in imperio, concipere videntur. Nam

³⁰ MARX, Karl; ENGELS, Frederick. “The German Ideology”. In: *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Selected Works, v. 1*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977.



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hominem naturae ordinem magis perturbare, quam sequi, ipsumque in suas actiones absolutam habere potentiam, nec aliunde, quam a se ipso determinari credunt.³¹

Most of those who have written about the Affects, and men's way of living, seem to treat, not of natural things, which follow the common laws of nature, but of things which are outside nature. Indeed, they seem to conceive man in nature as a dominion within a dominion. For they believe that man disturbs rather than follows, the order of nature, that he has absolute power over his actions, and that he is determined only by himself.³²

Liberation, therefore, consists in the acquisition of adequate ideas and the gradual transformation of passive affects into active ones:

Humanam impotentiam in moderandis et coercendis affectibus servitutem voco; homo enim affectibus obnoxius sui iuris non est, sed fortunae; in cuius potestate ita est, ut saepe coactus sit, quamquam meliora sibi videat, deteriora tamen sequi. Huius rei causam, et quid praeterea affectus boni vel mali habent, in hac parte demonstrare proposui.³³

Men's lack of power to moderate and restrain the affects I call Bondage. For the man who is subject to affects is under the control, not of himself, but of fortune, in whose power he so greatly is that often, though he sees the better for himself, he is still forced to follow the worse. In this Part, I have undertaken to demonstrate the cause of this, and what there are good and evil in the affects.³⁴

This anthropology is universal and non-conflictual. All human beings share the same nature; differences among them are differences of degree in understanding, not of social position or historical role. Power (*potentia*) is not domination over others but coherence

³¹ SPINOZA, Benedictus de. *Ética*. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 2007. *Praefatio, Pars Tertia*, p. 160.

³² SPINOZA, Benedictus de. *The Collected Works of Spinoza. v. 1*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985, *Ethics*, Preface, Part 3, p. 491.

³³ SPINOZA, Benedictus de. *Ética*. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 2007, *Praefatio, Pars Quarta*, p. 262

³⁴ SPINOZA, Benedictus de. *The Collected Works of Spinoza. v. 1*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985, *Ethics*, Preface, Part 4, p. 543.



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within oneself – the capacity to persevere in one's being. Politics, in this view, does not presuppose antagonistic classes or structural injustice but the permanent fragility of human rationality in the face of passions.

Marx's anthropology begins from an entirely different premise. Human bondage is not primarily epistemic but social. Under capitalism, labor becomes alienated: the worker's activity, its product, and ultimately the worker's own essence confronts him as an external power. This condition cannot be overcome through knowledge alone, because it is generated by objective relations of production.³⁵ Freedom therefore requires not education but transformation – specifically, the abolition of the social conditions that produce alienation.

The contrast between passion and alienation is decisive. Spinoza's passions arise from ignorance of necessity; Marx's alienation arises from exploitation. Spinoza's remedy is understanding; Marx's is revolution. Spinoza perfects individuals within a stable order; Marx seeks to change the order itself. Even their moral vocabularies diverge: Spinoza's *virtus* is rational self-preservation, whereas Marx's emancipatory ideal is collective self-liberation through praxis. It is sometimes suggested that Spinoza anticipates Marx's notion of false consciousness through his analysis of superstition and the imagination.

Yet this resemblance is superficial. For Spinoza, superstition is a defect of cognition, sustained by fear and ignorance, and curable through education and prudent legislation.³⁶ For Marx, ideological distortion is not merely a mental error but a necessary expression of material relations under capitalism.³⁷ No amount of enlightenment can dissolve ideology so long as its social basis remains intact.

This difference explains their divergent attitudes toward political authority. Because passion cannot be eliminated, Spinoza regards institutions as indispensable. Law

³⁵ MARX, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. v. 1. New York: Vintage Books, 1977.

³⁶ SPINOZA, Benedictus de. *The Collected Works of Spinoza*. v. 2. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.

³⁷ MARX, Karl; ENGELS, Frederick. "The German Ideology". In: *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Selected Works*, v. 1. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977.



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channels fear and ambition into predictable forms, making peaceful coexistence possible. The *Tractatus Politicus* does not culminate in a call to abolish power but in reflection on its rational design. The state is a natural instrument, not a class conspiracy, and its legitimacy arises from necessity itself.³⁸

Marx, by contrast, treats the state as an apparatus of domination whose apparent neutrality conceals class interest. Political authority is not a remedy for alienation but one of its expressions, destined to disappear with the abolition of class society. Where Spinoza sees the normalization of politics as the condition of freedom, Marx sees the end of politics as freedom's realization.

Anthropology thus mirrors ontology. Spinoza's subject must learn to understand power; Marx's must learn to seize it. One seeks endurance through reason, the other emancipation through conflict. To merge these perspectives is not to enrich either but to obscure the distinct philosophical problems each was designed to address.

II.6. Politics: institutional rationality versus historical praxis

The political divergence between Spinoza and Marx follows directly from their respective ontologies and anthropologies. For Spinoza, politics is a rational art: the institutional regulation of passions in accordance with human nature. For Marx, politics is the arena of historical struggle through which classes transform material relations. Both speak of liberation, but they locate it on opposite sides of the institutional order. In the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Spinoza identifies the highest aim of the state as freedom (*libertas*) not moral perfection or salvation:

Non, inquam, finis Reipublicae est homines ex rationalibus bestas vel automata facere, sed contra ut eorum mens et corpus tuto suis functionibus fungantur, et ipsi libera ratione

³⁸ SPINOZA, Benedictus de. *The Collected Works of Spinoza*. v. 2. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.



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utantur, et ne odio, ira, vel dolo certent, nec animo iniquo invicem ferantur. Finis ergo Reipublicae revera libertas est.³⁹

The end of the Republic, I say, is not to change men from rational beings into beasts or automata, but to enable their minds and bodies to perform their functions safely, to enable them to use their reason freely, and not to clash with one another in hatred, anger or deception, or deal inequitably with one another. So, the end of the Republic is really freedom.⁴⁰

Because human beings are governed by passions as much as by reason, they cannot safely live without the coercive structure of law. Political institutions are therefore not obstacles to freedom but their precondition. By channeling fear and ambition into stable forms, the state creates the conditions under which rational life becomes possible.⁴¹ Spinoza's preference for democracy must be understood within this framework. Democracy is not valued as an arena of permanent contestation or popular self-assertion, but as the regime least contrary to human nature. It is the most stable form of government because it distributes power broadly while preserving legal authority. The power of the multitude (*potentia multitudinis*) must be institutionalized if it is not to dissolve into violence. Peace, for Spinoza, is not the absence of conflict but a virtue arising from the strength and rational organization of the state.

Marx reverses this logic. The state, rather than securing rational freedom, secures domination. Its apparent universality conceals the interests of the ruling class, and its legal order stabilizes relations of exploitation. Law is ideology rendered durable. As a result, genuine emancipation cannot be achieved through institutional reform alone but requires the abolition of the political form itself. Freedom begins, for Marx, where the

³⁹ SPINOZA, Benedictus de. *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus and Tractatus Politicus*. Latin Edition, Kirk Watson. New York: Transactions Publishers, 2021, p. 271.

⁴⁰ SPINOZA, Benedictus de. *The Collected Works of Spinoza*. v. 2. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, p. 346.

⁴¹ SPINOZA, Benedictus de. *The Collected Works of Spinoza*. v. 2. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.



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state ends.⁴² This contrast extends to their attitudes toward revolution. Spinoza admires founders and legislators – figures such as Moses or Lycurgus – not because they destroy existing orders, but because they establish durable ones. Resistance is legitimate only as a remedial response to tyranny, never as a redemptive act. His realism is constitutional: reason reforms institutions; it does not annihilate them. Stability is not a sign of oppression but of successful political design.⁴³

Marx's realism is dialectical. Political continuity itself is a symptom of domination, and rupture becomes the condition of justice. Historical development proceeds through contradiction, and revolution is not an unfortunate necessity but the very mechanism of emancipation. Where Spinoza sees disorder as a threat to freedom, Marx sees order as its negation.

These opposing conceptions make clear why attempts to reinterpret Spinoza as a philosopher of insurgent praxis are strained. Spinoza's multitude does not become rational by transcending law but by submitting to it. Political freedom consists not in the abolition of authority but in its rationalization. To read Spinoza's political theory as anticipation of Marxian praxis is therefore to invert its fundamental purpose.

Ultimately, Spinoza and Marx disagree not merely on political strategy but on the nature of politics itself. For Spinoza, politics is the science of coexistence among finite beings governed by passion. For Marx, it is the process through which humanity abolishes the conditions of its own domination. The confusion of institutional rationality with historical praxis lies at the heart of their forced rapprochement.

⁴² MARX, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. v. 1. New York: Vintage Books, 1977 and MARX, Karl; ENGELS, Frederick. *The German Ideology*. In: *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Selected Works*, v. 1. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977.

⁴³ SPINOZA, Benedictus de. *The Collected Works of Spinoza*. v. 2. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.



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II.7. False consciousness and its limits

One of the most persistent strategies for aligning Spinoza with Marx consists in assimilating Spinoza's critique of superstition to Marx's critique of ideology. On this view, Spinoza is said to anticipate the concept of false consciousness by exposing the mechanisms through which illusion sustains domination. While the parallel is rhetorically attractive, it fails upon closer examination.

In the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, superstition arises from fear combined with ignorance of causes. When individuals are unable to understand the necessity governing natural events, they project intentions, purposes, and moral meanings onto what is in fact determined by causal laws. This imaginative distortion is then exploited by religious authorities, who claim privileged access to divine will and thereby secure obedience.⁴⁴ The mechanism is cognitive: error arises from inadequate ideas and the affective instability they generate.

The remedy Spinoza proposes is correspondingly intellectual and institutional. By cultivating knowledge of natural necessity and by subordinating religious authority to civil law, superstition loses its grip. Enlightenment, education, and legal regulation dissolve the conditions under which fear can be manipulated. The philosopher's task is pedagogical rather than agitational: to show that what appears contingent or providential is in fact intelligible.

Marx's concept of ideology belongs to a different explanatory order. In *The German Ideology* and *Capital*, distorted consciousness does not arise primarily from ignorance but from the structure of social relations themselves. Under capitalism, social relations appear in inverted form because they are in fact inverted: relations between people assume the form of relations between things, and commodities acquire an apparent

⁴⁴ SPINOZA, Benedictus de. *The Collected Works of Spinoza*. v. 2. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.



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autonomy over their producers.⁴⁵ Ideology is not an accidental error but a functional necessity of a given mode of production.

Because ideology is structurally generated, it cannot be overcome by education alone. Critical awareness does not abolish exploitation, nor does enlightenment dissolve the commodity form. For Marx, false consciousness can be eliminated only by transforming the material conditions that sustain it. The critique of ideology is therefore inseparable from revolutionary praxis. Spinoza's framework admits no such structural inversion. His distinction between adequate and inadequate ideas applies universally and symmetrically. Every mind, insofar as it is rational, participates in the same order of thought. There is no epistemic privilege tied to social position and no class monopoly on truth. The philosopher's authority derives from method, not from historical role. Knowledge spreads through example and persuasion, not through collective struggle.

This difference has direct political implications. For Spinoza, the multitude's susceptibility to superstition is a permanent feature of human psychology, not a stage in historical development. The task of politics is therefore to manage imagination through stable institutions, not to awaken it for revolutionary ends. Marx's proletariat is a redemptive subject destined to abolish domination; Spinoza's multitude is a volatile force that must be contained if rational life is to endure.

II.8. The problem of expropriation

The incompatibility between Spinoza and Marx becomes unmistakable when the question of property is brought into view. Nothing in Spinoza's political philosophy anticipates Marx's demand to expropriate the expropriators, nor could such a demand be reconciled with Spinoza's understanding of political rationality.

For Spinoza, property is not a moral absolute but a juridical necessity. Secure possession is a condition of civic peace, because fear of dispossession is among the most powerful

⁴⁵ MARX, Karl. *Capital: a Critique of Political Economy. v. 1.*, esp. Chapter 1 on commodity fetishism. New York: Vintage Books, 1977 and MARX, Karl; ENGELS, Frederick. "The German Ideology". In: *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Selected Works, v. 1*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977.



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sources of resentment and instability. In the *Tractatus Politicus*, Spinoza repeatedly emphasizes that political institutions must aim at predictability and security if rational life is to flourish.⁴⁶ Inequality, in this view, is a matter of prudence rather than justice in the distributive sense. Extreme disparities may weaken the commonwealth by fostering envy and dependence, and they may therefore call for moderation through taxation or regulation. Yet the abolition of property as such would undermine the very conditions of social trust. Equality before the law, not equality of goods, constitutes the core of Spinoza's political ideal.

Marx transforms property into the central category of domination. Private ownership of the means of production alienates human beings from their own activity and concentrates power in the hands of a ruling class. Emancipation therefore requires not the regulation of property but its negation. Expropriation is not a contingent policy choice, but a historical necessity dictated by the logic of capitalism itself.⁴⁷ This divergence reflects a deeper metaphysical difference. Spinoza's political theory is oriented toward stabilization. Democracy is valuable insofar as it reduces conflict by aligning institutional power with the natural tendencies of multitude. His remedies for inequality – education, civic participation, legal constraint – aim at equilibrium rather than rupture. He fears the volatility of the masses more than the concentration of wealth, because uncontrolled passion poses a direct threat to collective endurance.

Spinoza also lacks anything resembling Marx's views on labor. Work is not the essence of humanity but one natural activity among others. Production has no redemptive role and no historical destiny. Concepts such as alienated labor are unintelligible within a system in which nothing can be alienated from the substance that expresses itself in every mode.

⁴⁶ SPINOZA, Benedictus de. *The Collected Works of Spinoza*. v. 2. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.

⁴⁷ MARX, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. v. 1. New York: Vintage Books, 1977.



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Conclusion: two revolts, two philosophies

The persistent effort to align Spinoza and Marx reflects a broader modern desire to supply radical politics with a philosophical pedigree. Yet their apparent proximity dissolves once their projects are examined in their own terms. What they share is not a doctrine but a refusal: both reject transcendence as an explanatory principle. Beyond that negative agreement, their revolts proceed in opposite directions.

Spinoza's revolt is metaphysical. His target is superstition – the appeal to divine intention, final causes, and moralized nature. By identifying God with nature and subordinating theology to reason, Spinoza removes every external source of authority. The consequence is not political upheaval but politics of endurance.

Marx's revolt is historical. His target is exploitation – the domination embedded in capitalist relations of production. By dissolving the apparent naturalness of property, labor, and law, Marx restores contingency to social life. History becomes the domain of contradiction, revolution, its logic, and emancipation of the abolition of the very political structures Spinoza sought to rationalize.

Each thinker embodies a distinct form of philosophical courage. Spinoza's is intellectual: the serenity to accept necessity without illusion. Marx's is political: the resolve to defy necessity in the name of justice. One build shelter for reason within the world as it is; the other seeks to remake the world so that reason needs no shelter at all.

This contrast clarifies what each means by liberation. For Spinoza, *libertas* is the life of reason – obedience to rational law and harmony with necessity. For Marx, liberation is collective self-possession through praxis – the end of alienation and the reconciliation of production with human essence. They are not stages of a single path but rival definitions of what it means to be free.

Spinoza cannot be what Marxist readings want him to be without ceasing to be Spinoza. His liberalism – quiet, exacting, and unsentimental – rests on the conviction that freedom is achieved not through rupture but through understanding. Releasing Spinoza



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from his conscription into Marxist genealogies allows his philosophy to recover its true radicalism: the courage to affirm reason without promise of redemption.

In this sense, the Marxist appropriation of Spinoza has not merely produced a series of questionable genealogies but has contributed to a broader decline within Spinoza studies themselves. As Spinoza came to be read increasingly through the conceptual vocabulary of production, praxis, and constituent power, the internal architecture of his metaphysics—its theory of substance, its rejection of teleology, and its account of freedom as understanding—was gradually subordinated to concerns foreign to its original philosophical aims. The result has been a tendency to treat Spinoza less as a systematic thinker of necessity than as a precursor to modern projects of historical transformation.

This shift has had interpretive costs. Where earlier scholarship approached Spinoza primarily as a rationalist concerned with the conditions of knowledge and civic stability, later Marxist-inflected readings have recast his thought in terms of political becoming and collective agency. In doing so, they obscured the distinctive character of Spinoza's project: politics grounded not in the transformation of social relations through labor, but in the rational organization of passions within an already given order of nature. To the extent that such readings have come to dominate recent discussions, they may be said to have narrowed the range of philosophical questions posed to Spinoza's text, privileging its possible relevance to revolutionary praxis over its enduring inquiry into the nature of freedom.

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