

## SPINOZA IN SOVIET THOUGHT

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### What if Ilyenkov had known Marx's Notes on Spinoza?

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#### Introduction

In the Name Index of the Collected Works of Marx, Engels and Lenin published in English, Baruch (Benedict) Spinoza (1632-1677) is always referred to as “outstanding Dutch materialist philosopher, rationalist, atheist”.<sup>1</sup> The word “outstanding” denotes a special commendation – the highest honour bestowed is “great”. For Moses Hess, Spinoza was the prophet of the French Revolution.<sup>2</sup>

My own interest in Spinoza was sparked by reading, in the early 1980s one of the later works of E. V. Ilyenkov (1924-1979), *Dialectical Logic* (DL), especially Essay Two, “Thought as an Attribute of Extension”.<sup>3</sup> Ilyenkov also made extensive reference to Spinoza<sup>4</sup> in the first two sections of Chapter One of the revised version, for translation into German in 1979, of *The Dialectics of the Abstract and Concrete in Marx's Capital* (DAC), first published in Russian in 1960.<sup>5</sup>

Ilyenkov was as far as I know not aware of the fact that in March to April 1841, at the age of 22, Karl Marx made extensive transcriptions from Spinoza.<sup>6</sup> These notebooks were published by Dietz Verlag in the GDR in 1976, a year before Ilyenkov's death, in two volumes. Volume

<sup>1</sup> See for example V. I. Lenin (1963) *Collected Works* Vol.38 Philosophical Notebooks (London: Lawrence & Wishart), p.623

<sup>2</sup> Stathis Kouvelakis (2003) *Philosophy and Revolution: From Kant to Marx* (London: Verso), p.126

<sup>3</sup> E. V. Ilyenkov (1977) *Dialectical Logic* (Moscow: Progress) – published in Russian by *Politicheskaya Literatura* in 1974

<sup>4</sup> Ilyenkov's engagement with Spinoza was through the Collected Works in two very handsome volumes, with a variety of translations, published in 1957 (Moscow: Politicheskaya Literatura), in a large edition of 30,000. Vol 1 contained: an introduction by V. V. Sokolov; *A Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being* (translated by A. I. Rubin); *The Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* (translated by V. V. Sokolov); *Appendix on Metaphysical Thought* (translated by V. V. Sokolov); *On the Improvement of the Understanding* (translated by Ya. M. Vorovskiy); *Ethics* (translated by N. A. Ivantsov). Volume 2 contained: *A Theologico-Political Treatise* (translated by M. Lopatkina); *Political Treatise* (translated by S. M. Rogovin and V. V. Chredin); *Correspondence* (translated by V. K. Brushlinskiy)

<sup>5</sup> E. V. Ilyenkov (1982) *The Dialectics of the Abstract and Concrete in Marx's Capital* (Moscow: Progress Publishers) revised edition for translation into German 1979, first published in Russia in 1960

<sup>6</sup> Karl Marx (1976) *Marx/Engels Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA), IV Vierte Abteilung : Exzerpte Notizen Marginalien Band 1 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag)

1 contains Marx' transcriptions in Latin and German; Volume II contains translations from Latin into German, and notes, the "Apparat".

It is a curious fact, to which I will return, that all Ilyenkov's references in DL but one are to Spinoza's *Ethics*, with one reference to *On the Improvement of the Understanding* (OIU), while all the references in DAC are to Spinoza's OIU. I wonder whether Spinoza only had Volume 1 of the two volume *Selected Works*, though this seems unlikely.

Marx on the other hand transcribed at length in Latin, using the 1802 edition of Spinoza's works published in Jena, from the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, and from the *Correspondence*, but not at all from *On the Improvement of the Understanding* or *Ethics*.<sup>7</sup>

The following questions arise for consideration in this paper. Were Marx and Ilyenkov reading, in effect, two quite different Spinozas? Or was each of them reading Spinoza instrumentally, in order further to develop their own ideas?

### **E. V. Ilyenkov and Spinoza**

However, as Sergei Mareev points out<sup>8</sup>, although Ilyenkov's views were formed under the influence of Marx and German classical philosophy, both he and L. S. Vygotsky gave tremendous significance to Spinoza's ideas. Mareev continues that Ilyenkov did not simply continue the "line" of Spinoza in Soviet philosophy, he for the first time "opened" Spinoza to Mareev and his generation. Before Ilyenkov the Soviet philosophical public knew Spinoza as a mechanical determinist or as Spinoza the atheist. The last Soviet and first post-Soviet textbooks on Spinoza interpreted him in the spirit of Stalin's "diamat", as a Cartesian dualist.

Nevertheless, in the collection *Evald Ilyenkov's Philosophy Revisited*, published in 2000 following a Symposium in 1999<sup>9</sup>, Spinoza did not make much of an appearance. An exception was the section "Iljenkov und das zweite Buch der "Ethik"", in Wolfgang Jantzen's chapter "Leontjew, Iljenkov und die Meschetscherjakow-Debatte – Methodologische Bemerkungen".<sup>10</sup> Nikolai Veresov, in his chapter "Vygotsky, Ilyenkov and Mamardashvili" discussed Ilyenkov's attitude to A. N. Leontyev's "psychological theory of activity". He wrote:

<sup>7</sup> Marx used the edition edited by Henr[icus] Eberh[ard] Gottlob Paulus (1802) *Benedictus de Spinoza: Opera quae supersunt omnia. Iterum dedenda curavit...* Vol 1. Ienae

<sup>8</sup> Sergei Mareev (2007) "Spinoza v sovetskoi filosofii (Spinoza in Soviet philosophy)" 2 (59) *Logos* 187-200, at <http://www.ruthenia.ru/logos/number/59/11.pdf>, p.198,

<sup>9</sup> Vesa Oittinen (ed) (2000) *Evald Ilyenkov's Philosophy Revisited* (Helsinki: Kikimora Publications)

<sup>10</sup> Oittinen (2000) p.85-88

“The main role of such a theory comprised the concept of activity (*Tätigkeit, deiatelnost*). Activity for Ilyenkov was not a super-category or explanatory principle. On the contrary, and following Spinoza and Marx, activity was treated as a substance from which both subject and object derive.”<sup>11</sup>

A. G. Novokhatko, of the Spinoza Archive, however, had a whole chapter *Ilyenkov i Spinoza* (Ilyenkov and Spinoza)<sup>12</sup>. Although much of the chapter concerned Ilyenkov’s relations with Vygotsky and Leontiev, and his critique of Fichte, the author selected the following passage from DL:

Only by proceeding from the idea of substance could the thinking body understand both itself and the reality with and within which it operated and about which it thought... having once understood the mode of its action (i.e. thought), the thinking body just so comprehended substance as the absolutely necessary condition of interaction with the external world.<sup>13</sup>

The collection ended with the publication for the first time of Ilyenkov’s 1970 “The Science of Logic”<sup>14</sup>. This does not refer to Spinoza. However, the passage cited by Novokhatko correctly identified Ilyenkov’s main innovation, and his main point of departure from Spinoza, his concept of the “thinking body”.

According to Mareev, for Ilyenkov Spinoza was first and foremost a *monist*. He cites a famous passage from DL

The brilliance of the solution of the problem of the relation of thinking to the world of bodies in space outside thought (i.e. outside the head of man), which Spinoza formulated in the form of the thesis that thought and extension are not two substances, but only two attributes of one and the same substance, can hardly be exaggerated. This solution immediately rejected every possible kind of interpretation and investigation of thought by the logic of spiritualist and dualist constructions...<sup>15</sup>

Ilyenkov’s special contribution was his assertion that

There are not two different and originally contrary objects of investigation – body and thought – but only *one single* object, which is the *thinking body* of living, real, man (or other analogous being, if such exists anywhere in the Universe), only considered from two different and even opposing aspects or points of view.<sup>16</sup>

For Ilyenkov, this “simple and profoundly true idea”, that *thought* is a property, a mode of existence of the body, the same as its *extension*, was expressed by Spinoza in the language of his time, as the insistence that thought and extension are two attributes of one and the same

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<sup>11</sup> Oittinen (2000) p.137

<sup>12</sup> Oittinen (2000) p.293-306

<sup>13</sup> Ilyenkov 1977 p.60-61

<sup>14</sup> Oittinen (2000) p.331-372

<sup>15</sup> Ilyenkov (1977) p.43

<sup>16</sup> Ilyenkov (1977) p.31

substance “real infinite Nature”. Ilyenkov’s original contribution is that “It is *in man* that Nature really performs, in a self-evident way, that very activity that we are accustomed to call ‘thinking’.”<sup>17</sup>

Later, in the revised edition of DAC, Ilyenkov pointed out what was wrong with Spinoza:

It would hardly be appropriate to discuss here the short-comings of Spinoza’s conception, as they are well known: Spinoza failed to understand the connection between thinking and practical activity with objects, between theory and practice, the role of practice as the only objective criterion of the truth of a concrete concept.<sup>18</sup>

In other words, Spinoza failed to grasp the concept of the “thinking body”, as well as the fact that, according to Ilyenkov, the human intellect comes into being through the co-activity of the hand and the mind.

### **Ilyenkov in the Marxist context**

In his approach to Spinoza, Ilyenkov most certainly departed from Diamat. But he followed an approach to Spinoza which can be traced through Hegel to Marx , Engels, Plekhanov, Lenin and Bukharin.

G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) was a close reader and critic of Spinoza, but insisted in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* that “It is therefore worthy of note that thought must begin by placing itself at the standpoint of Spinozism; to be a follower of Spinoza is the essential commencement of all Philosophy.”<sup>19</sup> In his *The Science of Logic* (1812) , in his “Remark; The Philosophy of Spinoza and Leibniz”<sup>20</sup> he wrote : “*Determinateness is negation* – is the absolute principle of Spinoza’s philosophy; this true and simple insight establishes the absolute unity of substance.”<sup>21</sup> In the chapter on “The Notion in General” he wrote “Besides, a standpoint so lofty and so intrinsically rich as the relation of substance, far from ignoring those assumptions even contains them: one of the attributes of Spinoza’s substance is *thinking*.”<sup>22</sup>

Ilyenkov was most certainly aware of these passages.

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<sup>17</sup> Ilyenkov (1977) p.32

<sup>18</sup> Ilyenkov (1982) p.22

<sup>19</sup> G.W. F.Hegel (1995) *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: Medieval and Modern Philosophy* Volume 3 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), Spinoza 252-289, at p.257

<sup>20</sup> *Hegel’s Science of Logic* (1969) Translated by A. V. Miller (London: George Allen & Unwin) p.536-40)

<sup>21</sup> Hegel (1969) p.536

<sup>22</sup> Hegel (1969) pp.580-581

I will return to Marx below; but Plekhanov relayed the following, often-cited conversation between himself and Engels:

“Thus, according to you” I asked “old Spinoza was right when he said that thought and extension are nothing other than two attributes of one and the same substance?”  
 “Of course” answered Engels “old Spinoza was completely right.”<sup>23</sup>

Engels himself very rarely referred to Spinoza directly, but the following passage from the Introduction to his *Dialectics of Nature* is thoroughly Spinozist in tone and content:

“... we have the certainty that matter remains eternally the same in all its transformations, that none of its attributes can ever be lost, and therefore, also, that with the same iron necessity that it will exterminate on the earth its highest creation, the thinking mind, it must somewhere else and at another time again produce it.”<sup>24</sup>

Plekhanov in turn considered that that “contemporary materialism... is more or less based on Spinozism”.<sup>25</sup> And in his 1908 *Materialismus Militans (Reply to Mr Bogdanov)*<sup>26</sup> he wrote in a footnote:

According to Spinoza, the thing (res) is the body (corpus) and at the same time the idea of the body (idea corporis). But since he who perceives himself, also has a perception of his own perception, the thing is a body (corpus), the idea of a body (idea corporis) and finally the idea of the idea of the body (idea ideae corporis). It can be seen from this how close Feuerbach’s materialism is to Spinoza’s teaching.

Lenin followed Hegel’s lead. In his “Conspectus of Hegel’s Science of Logic” he wrote: “Determinateness is negation...” (Spinoza) *Omnis determinatio est negatio*, “this statement is of immeasurable importance...”<sup>27</sup>

Nikolai Bukharin was, after Lenin, the most philosophically-minded Bolshevik leader.<sup>28</sup> In his *Philosophical Arabesques*, written in prison following his arrest on 27 February 1937, he showed his deep sympathy with Spinoza.<sup>29</sup> He referred to “... the totality of everything concrete... All the storms of becoming are played out in it, and it itself “flows” in infinite time and space, which exist merely as forms of its being. This is the great substance of Spinoza’s *causu sui*; it is *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* simultaneously, stripped of

<sup>23</sup> Conversation Plekhanov and Engels – G. V. Plekhanov *Sochineniya* Vol.20 p.363; or G. V. Plekhanov “Bernstein and Materialism”. In *Sochineniya* Vol.XI (Moscow-Petrograd, 1923) p.22

<sup>24</sup> F. Engels (1964) *Dialectics of Nature* (1883) Third Revised Edition (Moscow: Progress Publishers) p.40

<sup>25</sup> G. V. Plekhanov (1956) *Izbranniye filosofskiyе proizvedeniya* (Collected philosophical works) Moscow Vol.2, p.339

<sup>26</sup> G. V. Plekhanov (1973) *Voinstvuyushchii Materializm* (Materialismus Militans (Reply to Mr Bogdanov) (Moscow: Progress Publishers)

<sup>27</sup> V. I. Lenin (1963) *Collected Works* Vol.38 Philosophical Notebooks (London: Lawrence & Wishart), p.108

<sup>28</sup> He should be compared with A. V. Lunacharskiy, who in 1932 wrote *Barukh Spinoza i Burzhuaziya* (Baruch Spinoza and the Bourgeoisie) Bibliotek “Ogonyok” Zhurnalno-gazetnoye obyedineniye, Moscow 1933 at [http://www.situation.ru/app/j\\_art\\_1114.htm](http://www.situation.ru/app/j_art_1114.htm) – a thoroughly superficial account.

<sup>29</sup> Nikolai Bukharin (2005) *Philosophical Arabesques* (London: Pluto Press)

their theological baggage.”<sup>30</sup> Answering critics of Bolshevik “idealism”, he wrote: “In the first place our worthy opponents are no doubt aware that Plekhanov defined Marxism (of course with a grain of salt) as a type of Spinozism. And we all know what Spinozism is.”<sup>31</sup> In a section on “Freedom and Necessity”, Bukharin wrote the following in relation to Lenin’s *Conspectus of Hegel’s Science of Logic*:

This is precisely the same view that Spinoza presented in his renowned *Ethics*, a view he “demonstrated” *more geometrico*, or in an exact “geometric manner”.

Spinoza protested in every possible way against the widespread view that “human beings have unlimited strength and depend on nothing apart from themselves.” Spinoza seized brilliantly on this fundamental, this abstract vacuity of “pure will” taken “in itself”, that is, outside of all relationships. Pure will is in fact a myth, although the sensation associated with an act of will may be one of complete freedom. “A child thus imagines that it freely wants the milk that feeds it; it gets angry, it thinks it freely seeks revenge; if it gets scared, that it freely wants to run away.”<sup>32</sup> But here, as we see, what is always involved is necessity in Aristotle’s third sense, and it is only about this necessity that we are talking in the present instance. This necessity is the main object, the center of the whole problem; in no way is it the “constraint” mentioned by Aristotle.”

Ilyenkov would not have known of these writings; but Bukharin would not have been alone among the Bolsheviks in his enthusiastic interest in Spinoza.

### **Ilyenkov’s instrumental engagement with Spinoza – *Dialectical Logic***

I have already indicated that Ilyenkov quoted from two texts of Spinoza only. His use of them was entirely instrumental.

H. Campbell Creighton, the translator of DL, did not seek to translate the Russian of the translation by N. A. Ivantsov which Ilyenkov relied on, but instead used that of W. H. White from *Great Books of the Western World*. A much better translation is that of the Spinoza scholar Edwin Curley in the Penguin edition (Penguin).<sup>33</sup>

In DL, in only the second essay out of eleven, Ilyenkov’s aim was to establish his concept of the “thinking body”. In order to do so, his citation from *Ethics* was selective and far from Spinoza’s own teaching. Not that Ilyenkov should necessarily be criticised for this. He was not writing an exposition of Spinoza.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Bukharin (2005) p.90-91

<sup>31</sup> Bukharin (2005) p.175

<sup>32</sup> Penguin (1996) p.73

<sup>33</sup> Benedict de Spinoza (1996) *Ethics* translated by Edwin Curley (London: Penguin Books)

<sup>34</sup> This point is made by Vesa Oittinen (2005) “Evald Il’enkov as an Interpreter of Spinoza” v.57 n.3 *Studies in East European Thought* pp.319-338

Andrey Maidanskiy analysed precisely this substantial difference between Ilyenkov and Spinoza in 2002. He wrote<sup>35</sup>:

In the texts of Spinoza the expression “thinking body” (*corpus cogitans*) is nowhere to be found. Moreover, Spinoza directly states that *the thinking thing is the mind*, and not the body: “Part II Definition 3: By idea I understand a concept of the mind which the mind forms because it is a thinking thing.”<sup>36</sup>

In Spinoza’s *Metaphysical Thoughts* the term *res cogitans* is specially defined:

We have said that the human mind is a thinking thing. From this it follows that, merely from its own nature and considered only in itself (*ex sola sua natura, in se sola spectata*), it can do something, to wit, think, that is, affirm and deny.<sup>37</sup>

Thus it is not the body, but the mind which thinks. Ilyenkov without any basis sees in Spinoza’s philosophy a directly contradictory truth: “It is not a special “soul” that thinks... but the body of man itself.”<sup>38</sup> However, according to Spinoza, the body does not think, it is only the *object* of some ideas (and by no means all). Maidansky cites Spinoza’s Letter IV, addressed to Henry Oldenberg, a passage transcribed by Marx as I show below: “... you say: perhaps thought is a corporeal action... I by no means grant it...”<sup>39</sup> In an article published in English a year later<sup>40</sup>, Maidansky observed that for Ilyenkov, while Spinoza had rightly defined the relation of the ideal to the real in general, he could not solve the riddle of the birth of the human intellect. Ilyenkov’s advance on Spinoza was to hold that the ideal arises from real action, the co-action of a hand with an external thing.<sup>41</sup>

Having correctly cited several propositions of Spinoza on pages 61 to 68, footnotes 10, 14 and 15, Ilyenkov has the following:

In other words, an adequate idea is only the conscious state of our body *identical in form with the thing outside the body*. This can be represented quite clearly. When I describe a circle with my hand on a piece of paper (in real space), my body, according to Spinoza, comes into a state fully identical with the form of the circle outside my body, into a state of real *action* in the form of a circle. My body (my hand) really describes a circle, and the awareness of this state (i.e. of the form of my own action in the form of the thing) is also the idea, which is, moreover, ‘adequate’.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Andrey Maidansky (2002) “Ponyatiye myshleniya u Ilyenkova i Spinozy (The concept of thinking in Ilyenkov and Spinoza)” 8 *Voprosy filosofii* (Problems of Philosophy) pp.163-173, at <http://caute.ru/am/text/cogitatio.html>

<sup>36</sup> Penguin (1996) p.32

<sup>37</sup> Spinoza (2002) *Complete Works* (translations by Samuel Shirley) (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company) Appendix Containing Metaphysical Thoughts, Part II, Chapter 12, p.209

<sup>38</sup> Ilyenkov (1977) p.32

<sup>39</sup> Elwes Corr (1951) p.283

<sup>40</sup> Andrey Maidansky (2003) “The Russian Spinozists” 55 *Studies in East European Thought* pp.199-216

<sup>41</sup> Maidansky (2003) pp.209-210

<sup>42</sup> Ilyenkov (1977) p.69

Ilyenkov gives no reference for this, and, indeed, there is none. This passage appears nowhere in Spinoza. Ilyenkov is putting his own philosophy into Spinoza's mouth. As will be seen, Ilyenkov may well have had in mind a passage from the OIU, but this is not Spinoza. In fact, in Ilyenkov's hands, Spinoza has been transmuted into "action philosophy".

Immediately after this passage, Ilyenkov cites Postulates IV and VI in Part II "Of the Mind" of *Ethics*<sup>43</sup>, and the White translation is perfectly good. He then cites the last sentence of the proof (demonstration) of Proposition 14, out of context. The passage as a whole reads, in Penguin<sup>44</sup>:

*P14: The human mind is capable of perceiving a great many things, and is the more capable, the more its body can be disposed in a great many ways.*

Dem: For the human body is affected in a great many ways by external bodies, and is disposed to affect external bodies in a great many ways. But the human mind must perceive everything which happens in the human body. Therefore, the human mind is capable of perceiving a great many things, and is the more capable [-,NS: as the human body is more capable], q.e.d.

Ilyenkov continues<sup>45</sup>:

In other words, the more numerous and varied the means it has to 'move and arrange external bodies', the more it has 'in common' with other bodies.

But this is not Spinoza's position at all; Ilyenkov is not simply paraphrasing Spinoza. He is developing his own activity theory.

A page or so later<sup>46</sup>, Ilyenkov cites Proposition 39 of Spinoza. In Penguin it is as follows:

*P.39: If something is common to, and peculiar to, the human body and certain external bodies by which the human body is usually affected, and is equally in the part and in the whole of each of them, its idea will also be adequate to the mind.*

Ilyenkov does not cite the demonstration.

Cor (corollary): From this it follows that the mind is the more capable of perceiving many things adequately as its body has many things in common with other bodies.

In the text of DL this is completely garbled. Ilyenkov returns to Proposition 38, and the following, in the Penguin translation:

From this it follows that there are certain ideas, or notions, common to all men. For all bodies agree in certain things, which must be perceived adequately, *or* clearly and distinctly, by all

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<sup>43</sup> Penguin (1996) p.44

<sup>44</sup> Penguin (1996) p.44

<sup>45</sup> Ilyenkov (1977) p.69

<sup>46</sup> Ilyenkov (1977) p.71



And then on the same page right back to Proposition 26

The human mind does not perceive any external body as actually existing, except through the ideas of the affections of its own body.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, Ilyenkov reverses Spinoza's logical sequence; and then jumps almost to the end of the *Ethics* to Part V "Of Human Freedom", Proposition 39:

*P.39: He who has a body capable of a great many things has a mind whose greatest part is eternal.*<sup>48</sup>

Ilyenkov states<sup>49</sup> that there follows from this Proposition something which in Spinoza's text precedes it by several pages, and again takes a line (shown underlined) out of context, which is part of the proof of Proposition 25 in Part V.

*P.25: The greatest striving of the mind, and its greatest virtue is understanding things by the third kind of knowledge.*

Dem: The third kind of knowledge proceeds from an adequate idea of certain attributes of God to an adequate knowledge of the essence of things, and the more we understand things in this way, the more we understand God. Therefore, the greatest virtue of the mind, that is, the mind's power, *or* nature, *or* its greatest striving, is to understand things by the third kind of knowledge.<sup>50</sup>

From this rather unprincipled mixture Ilyenkov extracts the following:

Therefore the real composition of psychic activity (including the logical component of thought) is not in the least determined by the structure and arrangement of the parts of the human body and brain, but by the external conditions of universally human activity in the world of other bodies.<sup>51</sup>

But this again is Ilyenkov's "activity philosophy" and nothing to do with Spinoza.

There is one further citation from Spinoza in DL, although the English translation omits the footnote which is to be found in Ilyenkov's Russian text. In Essay 8 "The Materialist Conception of Thought as the Subject Matter of Logic", Ilyenkov elaborates on his central concept of the ideal:

Determination of the ideal is thus especially dialectical. It is that which is not, together with that which is, that which does not exist in the form of an external, sensuously perceived thing but at the same time does exist *as an active faculty of man*.<sup>52</sup>

For this he quotes not from the *Ethics*, but from OIU, as follows:

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<sup>47</sup> Penguin (1996) p.50

<sup>48</sup> Penguin (1996) p.178

<sup>49</sup> Ilyenkov (1977) p.72

<sup>50</sup> Penguin (1996) p.173

<sup>51</sup> Ilyenkov (1977) p.72

<sup>52</sup> Ilyenkov (1977) p.264

A definition, if it is to be called perfect, must explain the inmost essence of a thing, and must take care not to substitute for this any of its properties... If a circle is defined as a figure, such that all straight lines drawn from the centre to the circumference are equal, every one can see that such a definition does not in the least explain the essence of a circle, but solely one of its properties.

...

I. If the thing in question be created, the definition must (as we have said) comprehend the proximate cause. For instance, a circle should, according to this rule, be defined as follows: the figure described by any line whereof one end is fixed and the other free. This definition clearly comprehends the proximate cause.<sup>53</sup>

### **Ilyenkov's instrumental engagement with Spinoza - *The Dialectics of the Abstract and Concrete in Marx's Capital***

It would appear that Ilyenkov added to DAC a passage referring to Spinoza in the very last years of his life; DAC was first published in Russia in 1960, but without that passage. The translator of the English version, Sergei Syrovatkin, used the standard Elwes translation of OIU.

Ilyenkov starts<sup>54</sup> with the following:

Consistent materialists realised the weakness of the nominalistic view of the concept, its vulnerability to idealist speculations and errors. Spinoza stressed that the concept of substance, expressing the “first principle of nature”, “cannot be conceived abstractedly or universally, and cannot extend further in the understanding than it does in reality”.

In fact the passage in question is:

But since the first principle of nature cannot (as we shall see hereafter) be conceived abstractly or universally, and cannot extend further in the understanding than it does in reality, and has no likeness to mutable things, no confusion need be feared in respect to the idea of it, provided (as before shown) that we possess a standard of truth. That is, in fact, a being single and infinite; in other words, it is the sum total of being, beyond which there is no being found.

Ilyenkov leaves out the heart of Spinoza's idea of substance.

On the following page, Ilyenkov attributes to Spinoza a reference to “the mode of ‘chaotic experience’ uncontrolled by reason”.<sup>55</sup> This is not to be found in Spinoza, and the passage cited, jumping back several pages in OIU, is:

The second mode of perception cannot be said to give us the idea of the proportion of which we are in search. Moreover its results are very uncertain and indefinite, for we

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<sup>53</sup> Spinoza “On the improvement of the understanding” Dover Edition 1955 Volume 2, translated by R. H. M. Elwes, p.35 - Elwes

<sup>54</sup> Ilyenkov (1982) p.17

<sup>55</sup> Ilyenkov (1982) p.18

shall never discover anything in natural phenomena by its means, except accidental properties, which are never clearly understood, unless the essence of the things in question be known first.<sup>56</sup>

For a critique of Spinoza, Ilyenkov cites a long passage:

Now that we know what kind of knowledge is necessary for us, we must indicate the way and the method whereby we may gain the said knowledge concerning the things needful to be known. In order to accomplish this, we must first take care not to commit ourselves to a search going back to infinity – that is, in order to discover the best method for finding out the truth, there is no need of another method to discover such a method; nor of a third method for discovering the second, and so on to infinity. By such proceedings, we should never arrive at the knowledge of the truth, or, indeed any knowledge at all. The matter stands on the same footing as the making of material tools, which might be argued about in a similar way. For, in order to work iron, a hammer is needed, and the hammer cannot be forthcoming unless it has been made; but, in order to make it, there was need of another hammer and other tools, and so on to infinity. We might thus vainly endeavour to prove that men have no power of working iron. But as men at first made use of the instruments supplied by nature to accomplish very easy pieces of workmanship, laboriously and imperfectly, and then, when these were finished, wrought other things more difficult with less labour and greater perfection; and so gradually mounted from the simplest operations to the making of tools, and from the making of tools to the making of more complex tools and fresh feats of workmanship, till they arrived at making, with small expenditure of labour, the vast number of complicated mechanisms which they now possess. So, in like manner, the intellect, by its native strength, makes for itself intellectual instruments, whereby it acquires strength for performing other intellectual operations, and from these operations gets again fresh instruments or the power of pushing its investigations further, and thus gradually proceeds until it reaches the summit of wisdom.<sup>57</sup>

Ilyenkov's gloss is as follows:

Here Spinoza attempts a fundamentally materialist interpretation of the innateness of 'intellectual instruments', deducing it from man's natural organisation rather than from the 'God' of Descartes or Leibniz.

What Spinoza failed to understand was the fact that the originally imperfect 'intellectual instruments' are products of material labour rather than of nature... that is merely an organic shortcoming of the entire old materialism.<sup>58</sup>

Finally, Ilyenkov cited the passage concerning the definition of a circle, also cited in Essay 8 of DL.

Spinoza is therefore not, for Ilyenkov, "Marx without the beard"; rather, Spinoza in his hands is a weapon, suitably adapted, in the war against Diamat, carrying the seal of approval of the Marxist and Bolshevik tradition.

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<sup>56</sup> Elwes (1955) p.11

<sup>57</sup> Ilyenkov (1982) p.19; Elwes (1955) pp.11-12

<sup>58</sup> Ilyenkov (1982) pp.19-20

## Marx and Spinoza

Marx began his philosophical notebooks in 1839, with materials for his doctoral dissertation *The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*, which he submitted in 1841.<sup>59</sup> He made 141 pages of transcripts of Epicurean Philosophy – Diogenes, Epicurus, Sextus Empiricus, Democritus, Epikurus and others, and Seneca to the beginning of 1840. In 1840 he made 27 pages of transcripts from Aristotle's *De Anima* (On the Soul); in March 1841 29 pages of transcripts from Leibniz in Latin and French; from January to March 1841 19 pages of transcripts from David Hume in German translation; from March to April 1841 43 pages of transcripts in Latin from Spinoza; during the same period 11 pages of transcripts from Rozencranz *History of Kantian Philosophy*; and from the beginning of April to the end of May 1842 87 pages of transcripts on the History of Art and Religion – the Bonn notebook. The transcriptions from Spinoza were the most substantial.

It will be recalled that in the first half of 1842 Marx was engaged in polemical journalism, his “Comments on the Latest Prussian Censorship Instruction”<sup>60</sup> and, in the *Rheinische Zeitung*, “Debates on Freedom of the Press and Publication of the Proceedings of the Assembly of the Estates”.<sup>61</sup> In September-November 1844 he and Friedrich Engels wrote *The Holy Family or Critique of Critical Criticism. Against Bruno Bauer and Company*.<sup>62</sup>

Marx's Notebook was headed “Spinoza's Theologisch-politischer Tractat Von Karl Heinrich Marx. Berlin. 1841.” – “Spinoza's Theologico-political Treatise by Karl Heinrich Marx.”<sup>63</sup>

Marx did not start at the beginning. The first transcript was from Chapter 6 of the Theologico-Political Treatise (TPT), “Of miracles”.<sup>64</sup> In particular, Marx transcribed the following passage:

Further, as nothing happens in nature which does not follow from her laws, and as her laws embrace everything conceived by the Divine intellect, and lastly, as nature follows a fixed and immutable order; it most clearly follows that miracles are only intelligible as in relation to human opinions, and merely mean events of which the

<sup>59</sup> Karl Marx (1975) *Marx Engels Collected Works* (MECW) Vol.1 (London: Lawrence & Wishart) pp.32-105

<sup>60</sup> Karl Marx (1975) MECW Vol 1 pp.109-131 written between 15 January and 10 February 1842

<sup>61</sup> Karl Marx (1975) first article *Rheinische Zeitung* No.125 5 May 1842 MECW Vol 1 pp.132-181

<sup>62</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1975). The book was first published in February 1845, Frankfurt am Main. The work was never translated into English in either man's lifetime; 1956 English translation by Richard Dixon and Clement Dutt and is taken from the 1845 German edition; *MECW* Volume 4, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, Moscow)

<sup>63</sup> Benedict de Spinoza *A Theologico-political Treatise* Unabridged Elwes Translation Dover Publications Inc, New York 1951. For a recent fascinating historical contextualisation of this work, see Susan James (2012) *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion and Politics: The Theologico-Political Treatise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

<sup>64</sup> Elwes TPT (1951) pp. 81-97

natural cause cannot be explained by a reference to any ordinary occurrence, either by us, or at any rate, by the writer and narrator of the miracle.<sup>65</sup>

Marx next turned to Chapter 14, “Definitions of faith”<sup>66</sup>, especially the following:

...philosophy has no end in view save truth: faith, as we have abundantly proved, looks for nothing but obedience and piety. Again, philosophy is based on axioms which must be sought from nature alone: faith is based on history and language, and must be sought for only in Scripture and revelation...<sup>67</sup>

followed by Chapter 15 “Theology not subservient to reason”<sup>68</sup>.

At this point Marx made an abrupt shift to a later chapter focusing on more political issues: Chapter 20, “Freedom of thought and speech”<sup>69</sup>, “that in a free state every man may think whatever he likes, and say what he thinks”<sup>70</sup>, including

If men's minds were as easily controlled as their tongues, every king would sit safely on his throne, and government by compulsion would cease... However, we have shown already that no man's mind can possibly lie wholly at the disposition of another, for no one can willingly transfer his natural right of free reason and judgment, or be compelled to do so

And

the true aim of government is liberty

Next, Marx went back one chapter, to Chapter 19, “Of the outward forms of religion” – “It is shown that the right over matters spiritual lies wholly with the sovereign. And that the outward forms of religion should be in accordance with public peace, if we would obey God aright”; to Chapter 18, “Of certain political doctrines” – “From the commonwealth of the Hebrews, and their history, certain political doctrines are deduced.”, to Chapter 17 “Of the Hebrew theocracy” – “It is shown that no one can, or need, transfer all his rights to the sovereign power.”, and to Chapter 16, “Of the foundations of a state” – “Of the natural and civil rights of individuals; and of the rights of the sovereign power”.

Marx then jumped to Chapters 7 to 13, on the interpretation of scripture; and finally Chapters 1 to 5, on prophecy, prophets, divine law and ceremonial law.

Once again, Marx did not take the Correspondence in Order. He went straight to Letter XXXII (XIX) from Spinoza to William de Blyenburgh, December 1664, in which he explains why “I cannot admit that sin and evil have any positive existence, far less that anything can

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<sup>65</sup> Elwes TPT (1951) p.84

<sup>66</sup> Elwes TPT (1951) pp. 182-189

<sup>67</sup> Elwes TPT (1951) p.189

<sup>68</sup> Elwes TPT (1951) pp.190-199

<sup>69</sup> Elwes TPT (1951) pp. 257-259

<sup>70</sup> Elwes TPT (1951) p.257

exist, or come to pass, contrary to the will of God.”<sup>71</sup> From that letter he returned to Letter II (II) of August 1661 to Henry Oldenburg, in which he wrote:

I will begin then by speaking briefly of God, Whom I define as a Being consisting in infinite attributes, whereof each is infinite or supremely perfect after its kind. You must observe that by attribute I mean everything which is conceived through itself and in itself, so that the conception of it does not involve the conception of anything else. For instance, extension is conceived through itself, but motion is not.<sup>72</sup>

Letter IV (IV) from Spinoza to Oldenburg, with the following highly significant passage, already referred to by Maidansky, as noted above:

But you say: perhaps thought is a corporeal action: be it so, though I by no means grant it: you, at any rate, will not deny that extension, in so far as it is extension, is not thought, and this is all that is required for explaining my definition...<sup>73</sup>

Marx transcribes from letters V, VII, VIII, IX, X, XI, XIII, XIV and to Letter XV, from Spinoza to Henry Oldenburg, which includes:

... I will premise that I do not attribute to nature either beauty or deformity, order or confusion. Only in relation to our imagination can things be called beautiful or deformed, ordered or confused.<sup>74</sup>

Letters XVI, XVII, XVIII, XIX are followed by Letter XXI, and XXIII. This contains:

... I should like briefly to explain here, in what sense I assert that a fatal necessity presides over all things and actions. God is in no wise subject to fate: I conceive that all things follow with inevitable necessity from the nature of God, in the same way as everyone conceives that it follows from God’s nature that God understands himself.<sup>75</sup>

Letter XXIV is followed by Letter XXV of 7 February 1676, Spinoza to Oldenburg:

When I said in my former letter that we are inexcusable, because we are in the power of God, like clay in the hands of a potter, I meant to be understood in the sense, that no one can bring a complaint against God for having given him a weak nature or infirm spirit.<sup>76</sup>

Letter XXVI, XXVII, XXVIII (Spinoza to Simon de Vries), XXIX, XXX, and finally LXXIV, a magnificent retort to Albert Burgh, his former pupil, who had recently become a Catholic, and condemned his former friends:

You cannot possibly deny, unless you have lost your memory as well as your reason, that in every Church there are thoroughly honourable men, who worship God with justice and charity.

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<sup>71</sup> Elwes Corr (1951) p.332

<sup>72</sup> Elwes Corr (1951) p.277

<sup>73</sup> Elwes Corr (1951) p.283

<sup>74</sup> Elwes Corr (1951) p.290

<sup>75</sup> Elwes Corr (1951) p.301

<sup>76</sup> Elwes Corr (1951) p.305

... what distinguishes the Romish Church from others must be something entirely superfluous, and therefore founded solely on superstition.

For I do not presume that I have found the best philosophy, I know that I understand the true philosophy. If you ask in what way I know it, I answer: In the same way as you know that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles...

... and also examine the history of the Church (of which I see you are completely ignorant), in order to see how false, in many respects, is Papal tradition, and by what course of events and with what cunning the Pope of Rome six hundred years after Christ obtained supremacy over the Church...<sup>77</sup>

Although Marx made no transcription from *Ethics* or from *On the Improvement of the Understanding*, his close attention to the Correspondence would have given him more than a competent understanding of Spinoza's philosophy. However it is highly likely, in my view, that his motivation in selecting these passages was to equip himself for his left-Hegelian critique of religion, and for his pursuit of radical democracy and freedom of expression as against the Prussian authorities.

### Spinoza in Marx's works

It has been pointed out that Marx seldom referred directly to Spinoza in his writings, and commentators such as Perry Anderson regard his few citations as "of the most banal sort".<sup>78</sup> Nevertheless, certain citations are of great interest, in showing precisely how Marx deployed Spinoza explicitly. In his 1842 "Comments on the Latest Prussian Censorship Instruction", referred to above, Marx wrote the following:

"*Verum index sui et falsi.*" (Truth is the touchstone of itself and of falsehood (Spinoza, *Ethics* Part II, Prop 43)<sup>79</sup> "As the light makes both itself and the darkness plain, so truth is the standard both of itself and of the false."<sup>80</sup>

and a few pages later he referred to Kant, Fichte and Spinoza.

In 1844, in *The Holy Family*, he wrote:

The dispute between *Strauss* and *Bauer* over *Substance* and *Self-Consciousness* is a dispute *within Hegelian* speculation. In *Hegel* there are *three* elements, *Spinoza's Substance*, *Fichte's Self-Consciousness* and *Hegel's necessarily antagonistic unity* of the two, the *Absolute Spirit*. The first element is metaphysically disguised *nature separated* from man; the second is metaphysically disguised *spirit separated* from nature; the third is the metaphysically disguised *unity* of both, *real man* and the *real human species*.

<sup>77</sup> Elwes Corr(1951) p.414-419

<sup>78</sup> Perry Anderson (1976) *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: New Left Books) p.64 fn. 30

<sup>79</sup> Penguin (1996) p.58

<sup>80</sup> "Comments on the Latest Prussian Censorship Instruction" MECW Vol 1 pp.109-131 written between 15 January and 10 February 1842, at p.112

Within the domain of theology, *Strauss* expounds *Hegel* from *Spinoza's point of view*, and *Bauer* does so from *Fichte's point of view*, both quite consistently. They both criticised *Hegel* insofar as with him each of the two elements was falsified by the other, whereas they carried each of these elements to its *one-sided* and hence consistent development. — Both of them therefore go *beyond* *Hegel* in their criticism, but both also remain *within* his speculation and each represents only *one* side of his system. *Feuerbach*, who completed and criticised *Hegel* from *Hegel's point of view* by resolving the metaphysical *Absolute Spirit* into “*real man on the basis of nature*”, was the first to complete the *criticism of religion* by sketching in a grand and masterly manner the *basic features* of the *criticism of Hegel's speculation* and hence of *all metaphysics*.<sup>81</sup>

Finally, in 1858, in the *Grundrisse*, unpublished until 1939, Marx wrote:

The act of production is therefore in all its moments also an act of consumption. But the economists admit this. Production as directly identical with consumption, and consumption as directly coincident with production, is termed by them *productive consumption*. This identity of production and consumption amounts to *Spinoza's thesis: determinatio est negatio*. – note 11. ‘Determination is negation’, i.e. given the undifferentiated self-identity of the universal world substance, to attempt to introduce particular determinations is to negate this self-identity. (*Spinoza, Letters*, No.50, to J. Jelles, 2 June 1674.)<sup>82</sup>

Marx never wrote a text dealing specifically with philosophy, and instead turned his attention from very early to a critique of political economy.

But strong claims have been made for Marx's Spinozism. Yirmiyahu Yovel, in his *Spinoza and Other Heretics*,<sup>83</sup> asserted that

Marx used *Spinoza's* thought far more than he admitted. *Spinoza* was above all a counterbalance and corrective to *Hegel*, restoring the concept of nature and man as a concrete, natural being from what seemed to Marx his immersion in the lofty and semireligious heights of the Hegelian *Geist*... Marx's new philosophy of immanence, though strongly influenced by *Hegel* and his milieu, goes back to *Spinoza* in more ways than one. Indeed, *Spinoza* is almost always present in Marx's thought. But, we may add, the actual presence of *Spinoza* in Marx far surpasses his direct mention by name.

Yovel also confirmed my sense that Marx turned to *Spinoza* especially for the critique of religion:

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<sup>81</sup> Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels *The Holy Family or Critique of Critical Criticism. Against Bruno Bauer and Company* Chapter VI 3) f) The Speculative Cycle of Absolute Criticism and the Philosophy of Self-Consciousness at [http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/holy-family/ch06\\_3\\_f.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/holy-family/ch06_3_f.htm) MECW Volume 4, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1975.

<sup>82</sup> Karl Marx (1973) *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (Rough Draft). (London: Penguin Books) p.90

<sup>83</sup> Yirmiyahu Yovel (1992) *Spinoza and other heretics. The adventures of immanence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press) Chapter 4: “*Spinoza and Marx: Man-in-Nature and the Science of Redemption*” pp.78-103, pp.78-79



Just as the young Marx was ploughing his way through Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise* and affixing his own name to the excerpts he diligently copied from it, Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* (1841) was bringing Spinoza's critique of religion up-to-date. The link between the two books was too timely and apparent for Marx to overlook.<sup>84</sup>

Yovel also confirmed the manner in which Marx read in order to equip himself for the struggle with the Prussians:

But Marx, diligent student of the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, could not fail to see the link it established between theory and practice on the one hand, and between political and religious emancipation on the other.<sup>85</sup>

Finally, Yovel, without referring to Ilyenkov, identified precisely the manner in which Ilyenkov would, without knowing about Marx's transcriptions, discover a rich source of inspiration in (his own) Spinoza:

The entity which Marx considers ontologically self-sufficient is not "nature" in the homogenous sense of Spinoza, but a dialectical interaction of nature and man, whereby each affects the other in a practical mode (work, shaping, reproduction). The hyphenated term *man-in-nature* seems more adequate to express this idea than Marx's *man and nature*, since Marx clearly does not have a simple conjunction in mind but a dialectical reciprocity.

This is Ilyenkov's "thinking body", in the context of his "activity philosophy".

## Conclusion

Eugene Holland has summarised<sup>86</sup> the extraordinary impact of Spinoza on Marxist and critical thinkers in recent years:

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.<sup>87</sup> 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.<sup>88</sup> 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.<sup>89</sup> Gilles Deleuze, finally, has mined the

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<sup>84</sup> Yovel (1992) p.80

<sup>85</sup> Yovel (1992) p.83

<sup>86</sup> Eugene Holland (1998) "Spinoza and Marx" *Cultural Logic*, v.2, n.1, at <http://clogic.eserver.org/2-1/holland.html>

<sup>87</sup> See Louis Althusser (1997) "The Only Materialist Tradition" in Warren Montag and Ted Stolze (eds) *The New Spinoza* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), pp.3-20

<sup>88</sup> Antonio Negri (1999) *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press)

<sup>89</sup> Pierre Macherey (2012) *Hegel or Spinoza* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press)

western philosophical tradition for alternatives to Hegel, among which Spinoza must be counted as one of the most important.<sup>90</sup>

Just as with Marx and Ilyenkov, Spinoza has been deployed in order to serve as a foundation for systems of ideas which Spinoza would never have countenanced. But Spinoza is in no way diminished.

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<sup>90</sup> Gilles Deleuze (1992) *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* (New York: Zone Books); and Gilles Deleuze (1988) *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (San Francisco: City of Lights Books)