



The European Legacy

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ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cele20>

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To cite this article: Kaan Kangal (10 Oct 2023): From Affective Ethics to Deep Ecology: Spinoza's Many Disciples, *The European Legacy*, DOI: [10.1080/10848770.2023.2265713](https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2023.2265713)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2023.2265713>



Published online: 10 Oct 2023.



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From Affective Ethics to Deep Ecology: Spinoza's Many Disciples

When Spinoza Met Marx: Experiments in Nonhumanist Activity, by Tracie Matysik, Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 2022, 368 pp., \$40.00 (cloth)

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This is a book of superlatives: the most comprehensive, most detailed, most ambitious, simply the best thing ever written in any language on the Marx–Spinoza connection in the long nineteenth century. Masterfully composed and brilliantly researched, the volume accomplishes a herculean task in surveying the historical, philosophical and political reception of Spinoza in that time period. Tracie Matysik's work is not constrained to Marx's limited preoccupation with Spinoza in the first half of the 1840s. Rather, it fully documents Spinoza's multiple returns in broadly democratic, progressive, socialist or specifically Marxist political philosophies.

Much of our current imagery of Spinoza is shaped by contemporary scholarly, political and philosophical accounts of Spinoza in the past and present century. We have had the early (i.e., Abram Deborin) and late Soviet (i.e., Evald Ilyenkov) Spinozist Marxisms, the French (semi)Marxist streams (i.e., Louis Althusser, Gilles Deleuze), the Italian workerist tradition (i.e., Antonio Negri), the more recent literature of the Marxian Spinozists (i.e., Vittorio Morfino, Franck Fischbach), but also the classical sort of Spinoza scholarship (i.e., Yirmiyahu Yovel, Yitzhak Melamed). What is of significance is also that the late 1970s witnessed a minor, if important, Marxological interest in Spinoza, when such prominent figures as Maximilien Rubel, Alexandre Matheron and Pierre-François Moreau came together in *Cahiers Spinoza* (vol. 1, 1977) to closely look into Marx's Spinoza notebooks from 1841.

If Deborin celebrated the Spinozist heritage as an intellectual precursor of the newly fashioned Soviet Marxism in the 1920s, it became an integral part of Soviet dissident Marxism in Ilyenkov's hands afterwards. In the French context, Althusser treated the man as one of the pillars of Marxist materialism that bridged the divide between Epicurus and Hegel. While Spinoza received anti-teleological and subjectless colorings in Althusser, Negri brought forward the principle of subjectivity and multidirectional movements that he believed to have rediscovered in Spinoza. Rubel, on the other hand, suspected a democratic ethics, lurking in the background of young Marx's republicanism and perfectionism that accompanied him also in his later work.

Matysik's main research clusters around the more distant past of the Marx–Spinoza connection and she relatedly focuses on the progressive intellectuals in the German political-philosophical context. She covers a wide array of thinkers, including Heinrich Heine, Berthold Auerbach, Ludwig Feuerbach, Bruno Bauer, Moses Hess, Karl Marx (obviously), Johann Jacoby, Jakob Stern, Ferdinand Tönnies, Martin Berendt, Julius Friedländer, Conrad Schmidt and finally “the father of Russian Marxism,” Georgi Plekhanov.

Matysik argues that the general political attraction toward Spinoza stems from his conception of democratic freedom and people's sovereignty as the true basis of all social organization. This stance is informed by Spinoza's issue with the rather philosophically abstract question as to how a political and social transformation is possible. It goes without saying that social change requires self-agency of human individuals, but the difficulty that Spinoza tackles is the conditions of possibility of human subjectivity in a world of causal laws of necessity. If humans are fundamentally determined by natural laws or governed by transcendent powers, then how to explain and expand the force field within which human freedom is exercised in rationally desired ways? Given the radical revolutionary waves witnessed both in continental Europe and the Americas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, one could not afford to neglect the transformative potential of human actions, expressive of both individual and collective wills. It was this tension that was at the heart of the nineteenth-century German reception of Spinoza.

Heine's contribution, according to Matysik, was to have made Spinoza a cornerstone of revolutionary political philosophies of his time. He did so by turning to the Judaic heritage embodied in Spinoza's writings, while also delving into the Spinozist concerns with the progressive nature and explosive potentials of human activity. Spinoza's legacy figures in Heine's narrative as a welcome challenge both to philosophical dogmas and religious authorities, the two pinnacles of the established political order that attempted to set various constraints on what was considered alternative yet deviant interpretations of the world. The pantheism controversy that stands and falls with Spinoza's name famously gave rise to multiple atheistic and materialist trends in Germany and France. Drawing on the classical German philosophical interpretations, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel in particular, Heine worked out a repoliticization of Spinoza's monist worldview.

Auerbach and Hess, both of Jewish descent just like Heine, were taken by Spinoza's grasping of such specific mental phenomena as understanding and affection (love and happiness). These do not simply constitute cognitive features but also structure human action and consequently social order. In 1837, Auerbach published the first novel on Spinoza (*Spinoza: A Historical Novel*), and Hess published *The Holy History of Mankind*, signed “by a Young Disciple of Spinoza.” Auerbach, like Hess, believed that Jewish cultural heritage had much to offer to German contemporaries, but contra Hess's early communism and later socialist Zionism, he was inclined towards liberal constitutionalism and reformism. Culturally and intellectually, Auerbach continued his Spinozist pursuit by translating all of Spinoza's work into German and began writing a series of novellas, propagating Spinozist ethical and political ideals. Hess, unlike Auerbach, retained close ties to Hegel and the Young Hegelians especially in the early 1840s when working both as a journalist in the *Rhenish Newspaper* where Marx was the informal editor in chief, and as a philosopher, theorizing on property, labor, money and alienation, some conceptual sources of inspiration for Marx's *1844 Manuscripts*.

Matysik suggests that Feuerbach had an impact on Hess's and Marx's reception of Spinoza. Unlike Hess, however, Marx had an additional interlocutor in that regard: Bauer, with whom Marx collaborated for a two-volume project in 1841–1842 (*The Trumpet of the Last Judgement* and *Hegel's Doctrine of Religion and Art*). When Feuerbach declared in his 1841 book *The Essence of Christianity* that religion is largely a matter of human projection, he was voicing Spinozist insights. He also made Spinozist points similar to those of Auerbach that the infinite capacities of species-beings constitute the ethically perfectionist nature of human individuals. But contra Auerbach, Feuerbach distanced himself from the Jewish heritage in that he depicted it as an “egoistic” religion. Matysik draws attention to a similar if unidentical tendency in Bauer, implicitly present most remarkably in *The Trumpet* but rather explicitly articulated in *The Jewish Question* (1843). What distinguishes Bauer from Feuerbach is the former's Hegelian ideal of subjective and infinite self-consciousness, which Bauer counterposed to Spinoza's conception of (passive) substance.

Bauer was an important factor in Marx's turn to Spinoza, as he informed Marx in 1840 about the content of Marx's upcoming dissertation exams. He wrote to Marx that he should prepare himself for questions on Aristotle, Spinoza, and Leibniz (the pluralist opponent of Spinoza's substance monism). Indeed, Marx studied and made excerpts from these three philosophers as documented in his *Berlin Notebooks*. While Michael Heinrich claims in his recent Marx biography that the exams were possibly the only reason behind Marx's preoccupation with Spinoza, Matysik counters this from a contextualist angle. Given that “Spinoza was in the air” at the time, so the argument goes, it appears as no surprise that Marx was taken by Spinoza's radiant blaze. In other words, Marx's readings were expressive of and responsive to the intellectual and cultural climate in Germany. As previously mentioned, Rubel believed to have found an ethics of democracy in young Marx's Spinoza, though other prominent readers such as Matheron cautiously avoided projecting too much Spinoza into Marx. Similar to Alexandros Chrysis, a prominent Marx researcher, Matysik tries to strike a balance between these two poles and admits the open-ended, incomplete and vague character of Marx's excerpts, without denying the significance of Spinoza's place in Marx's political-philosophical setting. In *The Holy Family* and *The German Ideology*, co-written with Friedrich Engels, Marx repeatedly attacked Bauer and famously ridiculed the latter's metaphysical inclinations, calling it a fusion of Spinoza's substance and Fichte's I (*Ich*). Matysik suggests, however, that Marx's business with Spinoza was far from over, as he returned to Spinozist themes in his economic works in the coming decades. Drawing on a minor Marxological debate from the mid-1980s between Fred Schrader and André Tosel, Matysik proposes to read Marx's talk of substance of value in Spinozist (rather than Aristotelian) terms.

Following the chapter on Marx, Matysik goes into the work of Johann Jacoby. After Auerbach's Spinoza novel, Jacoby published in 1866 what Matysik considers to be “the second major German work on Spinoza.” With this work, Jacoby attempted to translate what Jonathan Israel would call “democratic republicanism” into the political language of the Bismarckian era. Spinoza figured in Jacoby's book as a springboard to attack the military machine, anti-democratic policies and economic miseries of the time. It was also his preoccupation with Spinoza that prompted Jacoby to lean towards a socialist monism, an intellectual and political trajectory not to be confused with the Ernst Haeckel's reactionary Monist League. Originally a fellow traveler of Jacob Moleschott's natural

materialism, he came to realize the intrinsic limitations of this worldview as well as what it ambiguously considered to be its irreconcilable opposite, namely Idealism. That Jacoby was drawn to monism, according to Matysik, has to do with his shifting political concerns, especially with his increasing admiration for popular self-governance against state authoritarianism. However appealing this vision may seem, it was received with mixed feelings even within the circles of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). In the midst of the famous revisionism controversy, Franz Mehring, one of the leading SPD intellectuals, charged Jacoby with falling prey to Kantian idealism and thus with being ignorant of the materialist grounds of the historical conditions for revolutionary and progressive change.

Reviving Auerbach's spirited endeavor, Jakob Stern, the Spinozist theorist of SPD, issued new translations of Spinoza's works and composed accompanying introductions and articles on the great master. In his Marxist phase, Stern was largely invested in establishing a non-Kantian Spinozist ethics in line with Marxist materialism, while in his earlier intellectual journeys, he was mainly devoted to a sort of ethical Spinozism as an alternative to revealed religion. Significantly, Stern actively worked on a Spinozist affective ethics, though he was less drawn to love and happiness as were Auerbach and Hess. Stern thought of affective ethics not as a private contemplative matter but as a general guide in political affairs. His views caught attention in the SPD circles not simply because the Kantian ethical legacy was hotly debated but also because they had broader implications for the contemporary metaphysical interpretations of the whole and parts, or universal and individual as discussed by Tönnies, Berendt, and Friedländer within the philosophies of science. In the following years, Stern was fondly remembered by prominent socialists such as Karl Kautsky and Clara Zetkin for his intellectual contributions to Marxist theory, though he was also less generously received by thinkers like Plekhanov.

Plekhanov's critique of Stern was originally part and parcel of his larger assault on the ongoing controversy around ethical socialism (Kant vs. Hegel). What seems to have disturbed Plekhanov the most was perhaps Stern's conception of Spinoza as an idealist monist. Plekhanov, by contrast, presented Spinoza as a monument of materialism. What eventually turned into a heritage war was initially a matter of debate on Spinoza's place in socialist ethics. Possibly, Plekhanov was primarily alerted by Eduard Bernstein's approving opinion of Stern's Spinozism and relatedly waged a full-scale battle against both thinkers. Plekhanov was at pains to establish the Spinozist legacy as a precursor of Marxist materialism and dialectics, and he repeatedly returned to these themes from the 1890s in a group of articles and books such as "Materialism and Kantianism," "On Hegel's Sixtieth Death Anniversary," "Conrad Schmidt against Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels," "Bernstein and Materialism," *Contributions to the History of Materialism and Fundamental Problems of Marxism*.

What awaits the reader in the concluding chapter is a group of surprises, as Matysik turns to the twenty-first-century reception of Spinoza, not that distanced from its socialist past but certainly unorthodox and left-leaning of sorts. Matysik reminds the reader that Spinoza found a new place for himself in current ecological thinking. Arne Naess, a Norwegian pioneer of "deep ecology," famously argues for a nonhumanist, nonanthropocentric and nonteleological philosophy of nature in a body of theoretical work that is explicitly Spinozist. Naess's Spinozism, Matysik suggests, points to a renewed

understanding of the natural environment and the place of humans in it. This stance is usually considered “anti-Promethean,” that is, critical of technocratic efforts of domination of nature by society. The eco-Spinozist challenge to social philosophy is intimately tied to our (re)vision of society, and Matysik refers in this regard to degrowth theories, one (communist) version of which was recently explored by the Japanese Marxologist Kohei Saito.