

# **Preemptive Strike (of a Philosophical Variety): Marx and Spinoza**

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the intersection of Spinoza and Marx by looking at their practice of philosophy, arguing that despite the apparent differences of their methods Spinoza and Marx both engage in a preemptive critique of the their readers' objections. This can be seen in their most famous passages, the Appendix to Part One of the *Ethics* and the Chapter on Commodity Fetishism. In these sections Spinoza and Marx engage in a critical engagement with oppositions to their argument that gets ahead of the argument of the text. This preemptive critique reflects Spinoza and Marx's materialism, where materialism is understood as the priority of action, of habits and relations, over thought.

**Keywords:** Spinoza, Marx, Critique, Commodity Fetishism, Ideology

The relation of Spinoza and Marx which has become so productive to contemporary philosophy and theory cannot be reduced to the standard relations of influence or opposition that dominate scholarship in philosophy. Spinoza's influence on Marx is too diffuse, mediated through Hegel and the general philosophical atmosphere to merit study; and Marx and Spinoza's philosophies are apparently too different, in terms of object and articulation, to be drawn into an argument or opposition. Without such lines of descent or difference any such relation has to be invented, not ex nihilo, but from points of contiguity and overlap. One such point of articulation is their shared materialism, materialism understood as the primacy of action to thought, of the order of bodies and relations to consciousness.<sup>1</sup> This perhaps seems obvious in the case of Marx, whose formulation "Life determines consciousness, consciousness does not determine life" can be understood as one fundamental articulation of materialism.<sup>2</sup> Matter, practical activity, is prior to and constitutive of consciousness, even if, as Marx goes on to argue with respect to ideology, consciousness, thought or philosophy, fails to recognize this, positing itself to be autonomous from its social conditions. This autonomy is nothing other than a distorted reflection of the division of mental and manual labor. As Marx goes onto write, "From this moment onwards consciousness *can* really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice, that it *really* represents something without representing something real." Such a primacy is perhaps less obvious in the case of Spinoza, given that he asserts the identity of the order and connection of thought and extension, of ideas and things, as two expressions of the infinite power of substance. However, Spinoza's materialism is not just to be found in his understanding of the ultimate

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1 Fishbach 2005, p.29.

2 Marx and Engels 1970, p. 47.

constitutive order of the universe, but in the secondary status he ascribes to consciousness with respect to grasping our material conditions. We are, as Spinoza, argues, “born ignorant of the causes of things...and conscious of our appetite” (EIApp). Moreover, as Spinoza argues the causes of our appetite is one of the first things that we are ignorant of, we think that we desire something because it is good, unable to grasp the experiences, the relations that cause us to call one thing good and another evil. As Spinoza writes, “...the drunk believes it is from a free decision of the mind that he says those things which afterward, when sober, he wishes he had not said” (EIIP2schol). There is in both Spinoza and Marx, a priority of activity to consciousness, thought is not the act of subject mastering a world, but a secondary and derived effect of practices and relations, originally unaware of its conditions. Knowledge, true knowledge will then have to be actively produced through a practice.

This basic materialist principle, “the priority of action to consciousness,” can be found not just at the level of their specific formulations, their ontologies and politics, but at the level of their particular practice of philosophy. While Spinoza's and Marx's philosophical practice, their particular way of doing philosophy could not be more disparate on the surface: Spinoza's *Ethics* proceeds *more geometrico* unfolding in a rigorous and timeless order of propositions, contemplating the nature of the universe *Sub specie aeternitatis*, while Marx's writing, even his magnum opus, *Capital*, is constantly shifting and responding to the exigencies of politics and economics, crisscrossing history with economics to grasp the conjuncture. Despite this difference their philosophical practice converges or at least overlaps, in the attempt to confront the biases, prejudices and ideologies, to use the words Spinoza and Marx coined, that their thinking confronts. This confrontation shapes two of their most famous passages; namely, the end of the first chapter of *Capital*, the famous passage on the “Fetishism of Commodities and its Secret” and the Appendix to Part One of the *Ethics*. These texts are well known. The first has given us the concept of commodity fetishism, reification, and various criticisms that extend far beyond its specific engagement. The latter has been described by Louis Althusser as the matrix of every possible theory of ideology, offering a critical perspective not just on an anthropomorphic god, but on an anthropocentric concept of the universe and the fiction of the subject.<sup>3</sup> Their influence cannot be ignored, separately and together they have formed the backdrop of much of the intersecting concepts of reification, the imaginary, and ideology. Beyond the influence of these two passages, or rather prior to it, there is the specific role that they play not just in the articulation of their specific arguments, but in each texts particular practice of philosophy, its way of making claims and countering opposing arguments.

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3 Althusser 1997, p. 6.

Both texts can both be described as preemptive, preemptive in the sense that as much as they are situated within their particular arguments, discussing the particular problems of the commodity form and of the anthropological-theological imaginary, they necessarily come before the necessary philosophical conditions to address these problems. Spinoza's text begins to expound something of the human tendency to see ourselves as a kingdom within a kingdom, before developing the fundamental propositions detailing knowledge, affects, and desire, which make up Parts III and IV of the *Ethics*. It introduces Spinoza's anthropology before the conditions of that anthropology are developed. Marx text presents Robinson Crusoe, the medieval world, and the famous (but cryptic) free association of producers before developing the very idea of a mode of production, the concept that connects economic activity to social relations. This preemptive strike is in each case necessary: both Spinoza and Marx recognize that what they have asserted in the opening sections of the *Ethics* and *Capital* goes against the prevailing common sense, the prevailing sense of God and man, in the case of Spinoza, or the economy in the case of Marx. They also recognize that the causes or conditions of this "spontaneous philosophy" are not ideas and propositions, not argument but life, at least life in its current articulation and organization, understood as causes and conditions for viewing a world in a determinate way. They are the point where each philosophy confronts its absolute opposition, its absolute outside, whether it be in the form of the entire anthro-po-theological imaginary of a free subject and a teleologically oriented God or in the reified and ahistorical acceptance of the value form. They are the point where the concept intersects with polemic, where an argument confronts the world and world view which is opposed to it. They are preemptive strikes in two senses: they are the point where the criticism, perhaps even the polemic, exceeds the philosophical articulation, getting ahead of it; they are also an attempt to anticipate and interrupt objections before they form. They are the priority of practice to thought within philosophy itself.

### **Subjects and Objects: The Genealogy of Value**

What is confronted by each of these texts is less a specific philosophical position, or a figure from the history of philosophy, than an entire common sense or way of thinking. Spinoza's target is not a specific theological or even anthropological concept as articulated by a philosopher, despite the fact that many have written about God's end or man's freedom, but the more or less spontaneous tendency to believe oneself to be free, and the way that such a freedom is reflected in a understanding of God as acting as we do, freely and pursuing or aiding our ends. In a similar manner the fetishism of commodities is less something a specific economic theory, than what economic theories fail to see, the specific form that value takes or appears. In each case the critical target is less a philosophical doctrine

or position, but the way in which a particular way of thinking has become a common sense.

Despite this convergence it is possible to see a strong divergence in terms of their objects of criticism in two senses of the term. First, the objects refer to their different critical targets not just in the sense that religion and political economy are different imaginaries or ideologies, to use terms associated with either Spinoza or Marx, but relate to different practices and activities. Spinoza's critical target is less religion than the two theoretical objects that sustain religion, free will and God. These two objects are understood to be mutually constitutive, the supposed freedom of the individual is the basis of the image of god, an image that reinforces the individual. As Warren Montag writes, "The God who lies beyond the (material) world and is free to direct it according to his unconditioned will is thus the mirror image of the man who transcends the physical world and governs his own body with absolute mastery, itself a mirror image of God: a vicious theological anthropological circle."<sup>4</sup> The mutual constitutive relation between man and god is also sustained by two different figures of belief, what Spinoza refers to as prejudice (*praejudicia*) and superstition (*supersitio*). The first of which defines this initial ignorance of the causes of things, while the second refers to this ignorance as it is reinforced by its social dimension, by a doctrine of ignorance and a practice of belief.<sup>5</sup> Prejudice is transformed into superstition once the social dimension enters this horizon of ignorance and desire, once this belief in final causes becomes something that people try to exploit and develop, convincing others of their interpretation. The relation between these two is less a chronological one, positing a kind of natural prejudice prior to superstition, than a logical one. Superstition presupposes and sustains the ignorance of the causes of things that defines prejudice. What connects the two is the not just ignorance, a fundamental misunderstanding of the causes and connections of the world, but also the striving to survive and thrive that animates them. Prejudice is an attempt to make sense of the world with the only thing that we know, our own desires, superstition is an attempt to organize the striving of individuals in order to gain power. In the first case, that of prejudice, this striving is defined primarily in terms of natural conditions, a striving to survive in the world, while in the second it is a striving in and among others, among relations of domination and subordination. It is with respect to the second that we get the political role of superstition, that will play such an important role in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* as the basis of political power.

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4 Montag 1999, p. 39.

5 As Pierre Macherey argues, The Appendix can be understood as something of a practical demonstration of the implications of EIP36 'Inadequate and confused ideas follow with the same necessity as adequate or clear and distinct ideas.' Macherey 1998, p.206.

Marx's target is political economy, but as with Spinoza's criticism of religion the object extends beyond the confines of a specific doctrine or discipline. The fundamental error of political economy, seeing value as an attribute of objects rather than a product of relations is already present in everyday consciousness under capitalism. What classical political economy fails to grasp is the indifference of this error to theoretical articulation or rectification. Commodities appear to have value whatever theoretical perspective one takes on the matter. In fact the understanding that labor is the source of value does nothing to dispense with this illusion. Just as the chemical analysis of the properties of air has done nothing to change its appearance, the discovery of labor as the source of value does not alter how commodities appear. As Marx writes, "The belated scientific discovery of the parts of labor, insofar as their values, are merely the material expressions of the human labor expended to produce them, marks an epoch in the history of mankind's development, but by no means banishes the semblance of objectivity possessed by the social characteristics of labor."<sup>6</sup> As with Spinoza's criticism there is an interplay between what could be considered a spontaneous ideology and its explicit formulation. The fetishism of commodities is not a natural condition, it is the way that commodities cannot but appear under the isolation and separation of labor under capital. Political economy extends this spontaneous philosophy by making these distortions a doctrine. As Marx writes of political economy "they are forms of thought expressing with social validity the conditions and relations of a definite, historically determined mode of production."<sup>7</sup>

The objects differ not just in the sense that Spinoza is a critic of religion and Marx is a critic of political economy, but in the sense that Spinoza is examining the spontaneous philosophy of the subject and Marx is examining the spontaneous illusion attached to the commodity, to the object. In Spinoza's text the first illusion is that of individual autonomy. We are born ignorant of the causes of things and conscious of our desires. From that original ignorance it follows "that men think themselves free, because they are conscious of their volitions and do not think, even in their dreams of the causes by which they are disposed to wanting and willing, because they are ignorant of [those causes]." (EIApp). In Marx's text the constitutive illusion is that of a world of objects, the way value appears as an attribute of things, rather than as the product of a social relation. As Marx writes of commodity,

A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an

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6 Marx 1977, p. 167.

7 Marx 1977, p. 169.

objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour. This is the reason why the products of labour become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible.<sup>8</sup>

Or, to put it in Spinoza's terms, for Marx we are ignorant of the production of things, but conscious of their value. What we perceive or are aware of, is the value of the commodity, what is effaced or obscured is the process of production. Value is an inadequate idea, an idea that obscures rather than reveals its causal connections. The effect becomes a cause as value shapes and determines how we act and relate to commodities, including the commodity of labor power that is integral to our very survival and existence. The critical and polemics texts have different objects of criticism: for Spinoza we are ignorant of ourselves, of the subject, while for Marx it is the world of objects that mystify us.

Such a distinction between subject and object certainly captures the polemic focus of Marx and Spinoza's argument, but overlooks the more general materialist dimension of their specific philosophies in which subjects and objects are situated in the practices and relations that affect and determine them. What Spinoza refers to as "consciousness of our desires and ignorance of the causes of things" might begin with a subject that sees itself as free, but this free subject becomes the basis through which an entire sensibility is imposed on the world. As Spinoza argues the consciousness of our desires becomes an entire imaginary, which situates and filters everything according to how it affects us. What serves our interests and desires is good and what is easy to remember is called order; while what harms us is called evil and what is difficult to remember is called disorder. Our desires, our affects, and our imagination become a way to misrecognize the world. As André Tsel argues, "Before the fetishism of the commodity that Marx has analyzed, and which corresponds to an industrial capitalist society, Spinoza criticized the fetishism of the object of utility, which corresponds to a society dominated by simple instrumental activities."<sup>9</sup> Tsel's assertion draws a direct connection to Marx. In each case what is in some sense a relation is misrecognized as a quality of the thing in question. Only in this case the relation is not the social relations of production but the more idiosyncratic relation that shapes our perception or encounter of a thing. What pleased us, or was perceived to please us, is seen to

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8 Marx 1977, p. 164.

9 Tsel, 1984, p. 33.

be good and what is perceived to harm us is seen as bad. The relations that shape and form our encounters are misrecognized as qualities of the object. What begins is an awareness our desires and ignorance of the cause of things becomes the basis for an entire imaginary made of attributes and qualities attributed to things as essential characteristics rather than the product of encounters and relations.

The centrifugal movement from the subject out into the world is coupled with a centripetal movement from the world to the subject. The imaginary qualities that we attribute to things becomes the basis for an entire misunderstanding of our own desires. The imaginary significations by which grasp the world, fetishizing the relations into supposed qualities, leads to the supposition that those qualities are the cause rather than the effect of our desires. This is the fundamental error of the imagination according to the Appendix, it transforms effects into causes and vice versa. The imagined qualities of objects, the things that make them good or bad, are seen as causes of our desires and appetites rather than as effects of our encounters and relations. As Spinoza writes, "From all this, then, it is clear that we neither strive for, nor will, neither want, nor desire anything because we judge it to be good; on the contrary we judge something to be good because we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it" (EIIIP9Schol). Conscious of our desires, we see them as something freely chosen, as stemming from our will, or we understand them to reflect the actual qualities of the objects. Caught between the illusion of the free subject and a meaningful world we overlook the relations, the causal conditions, that shape both our desires and sense of the world. Alexandre Matheron describes this as a "double alienation." As Matheron describes this alienation,

The progress of consciousness is subject to a double alienation. On the one hand there is an 'social alienation' [aliénation mondaine], that can be called economic, provided that we give this word the largest possible sense: by which we unconditionally attach value to particular objects that surround us, valuing them as positive or negative, which we consider to be 'goods' (worldly goods) or as 'bad,' and which we will now devote our lives to pursuing and fleeing. On the other hand an ideological alienation, both cause and effect of the first: that by which we transpose our passions and beliefs into an ontology, developing an inverted vision of the world, a vision outlined by the traditional view of the cosmos: a universal teleology and hierarchy of goods, which gives a privileged to man, and, as the keystone of the system, an undefined God. It is this double alienation, which will control the whole course of our emotional life.<sup>10</sup>

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10 Matheron 1969, p. 112. [My translation]

An imaginary, or an ideology, that begins with the subject as free, as conscious of its desires, ends with a world imbued with value, with objects seen as good or bad, ordered or disordered, a world which itself is ordered by a hidden cause, or God.

While Spinoza's Appendix indicates in its own provisional and partial way how a particular constitution of subjectivity, a particular way of acting and comprehending the individual, becomes a particular constitution of objectivity, a particular way of understanding the world. A similar but opposed trajectory can be traced in Marx, as qualities of the world understood as made up of commodities possessing bearing value turns back on the subject as bearer of labor power. The lynchpin for such a transformation is the fact that labor power is a commodity, so that the perception of commodities as possessing value, necessarily falls back on how the individual begins to perceive their own qualities and activities. To some extent part of the fetish nature of commodities is not to recognize labor as the source of value, but to constantly see it displaced onto commodities. As Marx writes,

The private producer's brain reflects this twofold social character of his labour only in the forms which appear in practical intercourse or in the exchange of products. Hence the socially useful character of his private labour is reflected in the form that the product of labour has to be useful to others, and the social character of the equality of the various kinds of labour is reflected in the form of the common character, as values, possessed by these materially different things, the products of labour.<sup>11</sup>

Labor, whether concrete or abstract does not occupy the minds of people, it only appears in the form of commodities, it is the commodities that possess value. However, there is still a sense in which individuals cannot but adapt themselves to the dictates and demands of the labor market. Labor power is a commodity, and like all other commodities its value appears to be set, to be a fact of life rather than an effect of relations. Every worker in some sense adapts to these demands of the labor market, as Marx writes, "They do this without being aware of it." Individuals selling their labor conform to the demands of capital, making themselves into useful and exchangeable commodities, but this adaption is to some extent disavowed. To acknowledge it would in some sense be puncture the illusion of commodity fetishism, would be a matter of recognizing that it is labor, and the relations of labor, the determines the appearance of commodities. As Georg Lukács describes this process of the constitution of a different kind of estrangement, "*Subjectively* - where the market economy has been fully developed - a man's activity becomes

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11 Marx, 1977, p. 166.

estranged from himself, it turns into a commodity which, subject to the non-human objectivity of the natural laws of society, must go its own way independently of man just like any consumer article.”<sup>12</sup>The social constitution of objectivity becomes a social constitution of subjectivity.<sup>13</sup>

Spinoza's and Marx's preemptive and partial critiques, are thus surprisingly thorough, perhaps even total in their implications. In Spinoza's case it is a matter of demonstrating how a particular constitution of subjectivity, individuals conscious of their desires but ignorant of causes, kingdoms within a kingdom, also leads to the constitution of a world made up of values and meaning, values that stem from an invisible creator. While in Marx's it is a matter of demonstrating how a constitution of the world, objects seen as bearers of value, also leads to a transformation of subjectivity, to an individual who adapts his or her existence to the selling of labor power. It is a picture, however, partial and provisional, of the constitution of a totality or world. Framed in such a way, more or less abstracted from the specific histories of seventeenth century religious sensibilities or nineteenth century political economy, it is possible to ask again to what extent Spinoza and Marx's particular visions are compatible. Such a question returns us to what extent the image or the idea of the free subject, the isolated individual, is not only consistent with a world constituted by the fetishization of commodities, but a necessary condition of it. Marx's own writing returns to this theme again and again in various forms, criticizing the Robinsonades of political economy, or the isolated individual, but while this is a theme it is, like so many of Marx's philosophical arguments, more of a recurring set of ideas than an developed argument.<sup>14</sup> It is perhaps for this reason that Althusser in his famous essay on ideology more or less turns to a Spinozist theory of the individual subject, as a necessary supplement to the ideological reproduction of the relations of production.<sup>15</sup> The subject, agency and individuality, what Spinoza calls a kingdom within a kingdom, is a not the opposite to subjection, but is its necessary precondition. As Dimitris Vardoulakis writes, “There is no more effective tool for the implementation of obedience than the illusion of the free will.”<sup>16</sup> The free subject and the world of reified values reinforce and augment each other.

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12 Lukács 1971, p. 87.

13 Balibar 2017a, p. 199.

14 Read 2016, p. 80.

15 Balibar 2020, p. 37.

16 Vardoulakis 2020, p. 275.

## Hidden Abodes for All Eternity

Despite its preemptive status, the sketch that Spinoza and Marx each offer, in which world and subject constitute and reflect each other, gestures towards a kind of totality. No one is outside of the anthropomorphic/anthropocentric world view and no one is free of the fetish character of commodities. This raises a new question, not why do people believe in the free subject or the world of values, but how is it possible to think otherwise to escape these illusions. How is it possible to puncture the distortions, or, more specifically how is it possible to do so without asserting the primacy of consciousness above its material conditions, to lapse back into the idea of individual genius. Spinoza and Marx's preemptive criticisms are not just materialist in how they understand the limits of knowledge, but also in how they understand the transformation and liberation of knowledge. One does not break out of these illusions through the simple act of will, or through some kind of individual genius, there are necessary conditions for the transformation of knowledge just as there are necessary conditions for its limitation. In each case there is a practical dimension that is irreducible to thought or intentions. The transformation of knowledge requires causes and conditions, provocations and conducive environments. Spinoza and Marx are both in some sense effects of transformations in knowledge even as they endeavor to become causes, to transform existing knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

In the Appendix Spinoza offers a brief reference to the conditions that have in some sense made the writing of the Ethics possible. As Spinoza writes regarding the way in which final causes dominate individual and collective life,

This alone, of course, would have caused the truth to be hidden from the human race to eternity, if mathematics, which is concerned not with ends, but only with the essences and properties of figures, had not shown men another standard of truth. And besides mathematics, we can assign other causes also (which it is unnecessary to enumerate here), which were able to bring it about that men would notice these common prejudices and be led to the true knowledge of things (EIApp).

The role and centrality of mathematics, specifically geometry, in creating another standard of knowledge is fairly clear. It is the basis for thinking causality and relations outside of the final causes that dominate human existence and theological imaginaries. Mathematics is an event in thought that extends far beyond calculation in figures to open a space of liberation

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17 Sharp 2011, p. 73.

from the imaginaries of anthropology and theology.<sup>18</sup> It is unclear from a reading of the Appendix what these other unnamed causes might be, however, it is possible to speculate by cross referencing the *Ethics* with the critique of superstition in *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. Superstition is not just an inadequate idea of nature, human striving, and god, but one that ultimately maintains and reproduces political domination. One of the central aspects of superstition, is not just that god acts towards an end in view, towards final causes, but these ends can be known by the priests who interpret his wills and actions. It is precisely this anthropomorphic image of God that Spinoza undermines, first through an ontological argument regarding power and substance in the axioms and propositions and then in the appendix through an ontological argument. As Gilles Deleuze writes, "One of the basic points of the *Ethics* consists in denying that God has any power (*potestas*) analogous to that of a tyrant, or even an enlightened prince."<sup>19</sup> Thus it is possible to argue that these unnamed other causes are to be found in the political contestation of the specular reflection; it is not a matter of God and man that defines the epistemological anthropocentric-anthropomorphic doublet but of God and king that defines its political manifestation. The causal conditions that lead to the true knowledge of things, that break with prejudice, are mathematics and the political contestation of monarchy.<sup>20</sup>

To the extent that Marx reflects on the causal condition of his knowledge in the section on commodity fetishism it is only in the assertion that the very notion of the fetish points to a limit in classical political economy. This limit refers to a question that political economy does not ask, "why this content has assumed that particular form...why labor is expressed in value.." Part of the reason that this question is not asked is because its answer goes beyond the confines of political economy. It requires a fundamental historicization of the categories and concepts of political economy. As Marx writes, "[the concepts of political economy] are forms of thought expressing with social validity the conditions and relations of a definite, historically determined mode of production."<sup>21</sup> Moving beyond these concepts means moving beyond

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18 Macherey, 1998 p. 234.

19 Deleuze 1988, p. 97.

20 Such an assertion is speculative and contestable as an interpretation of Spinoza, but it is less dubious that Spinoza has been read this way. Louis Althusser argues that philosophy is situated between transformations in science and politics. As Althusser writes, "This 'overdetermination' of philosophy by these two events obeys the following law: the determination in the last instance of philosophical events by ideological events (the *ideological revolutions* of the class struggle), determination by scientific events (the breaks) only in the second instance." [Althusser 1995, p. 308. My translation] For more on this history of philosophy, and its relation to Spinoza see Jason Read "The Althusser Effect: Philosophy, History, Temporality. Forthcoming in Jason Read, *The Production of Subjectivity: Between Marx and Poststructuralism*, Forthcoming.

21 Marx 1977, p. 169.

the historical horizon of capitalism. Marx gives three sketches of the conditions of production outside of capitalism: Robinson Crusoe on his island; the medieval world, and “an association of free men working with the means of production held in common.” This are in some sense preemptive sketches of different modes of production. Aside from the quasi-communist aspect of the “free association of producers” these modes are not utopian, not ideals, but different articulations of relations and forces of production; there is nothing to long for in medieval society nor is there much to miss in Crusoe’s island, but in these social relations there is no confusion between the domination of people and relation between things. Their primary point is to underscore that commodity fetishism is neither a deception perpetuated by a group of people nor is it some kind of transcendental illusion, it is how social relations appear under the separation and isolation of production under capitalism.<sup>22</sup>

Spinoza and Marx both break with the image of isolated thinker, the lone genius that is capable of seeing through the illusions of society by giving the conditions of their own discoveries. These conditions are different, primarily mathematics for Spinoza and history for Marx, but in some sense they converge with respect to political conflict as the ground of not only transforming social relations but the conditions of knowledge as well. These radical transformations alter the conditions of thought, but beyond, or rather before them, inadequate knowledge and the distortions of fetishism contain the seeds of their own dissolution. These false ideas or distortions are products of this world, and thus necessarily reflect it even in their distortions. There is truth in the false. When Spinoza states that we are born “conscious of their appetite” this is in some sense an inadequate idea, especially as that consciousness takes itself as a cause, as free will. Later in the *Ethics*, however, Spinoza will argue that desire, that is to say consciousness of appetite is “man’s very essence”(EIIIAFFD1). Desire, striving, or conatus is mankind’s very essence. The inadequate idea, the consciousness of appetite is in some sense the precursor to the adequate idea. The difference is one of understanding the causal conditions underlying desire. In a similar manner the commodity can be considered an inadequate idea especially as it is seen as expressing value. However, even this “social hieroglyphic,” as Marx describes it, can be decoded to reveal something of the nature of value. This can be seen in the section preceding “commodity fetishism” in which Marx goes to great, even absurd pains, to show us that the value of any commodity can only be expressed in terms of other commodities, coats into yards of linen and vice versa. Commodity fetishism may be the social characteristics of labor reflected as the objective characteristics of the products of labor, but even in this distortion has a rational, which is to say relational kernel. This kernel

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22 Balibar 2017, p. 64.

is not internal to the commodity, but external; the fact that the value of every commodity can only be expressed in terms of the value of other commodities. This reification of value is undermined by the relational nature of its expression. The relations of commodities as expressions of value is the precursor of grasping value as itself a particular appearance of social relations. False ideas, ideas of human beings as kingdom within a kingdom or objective values embodied in commodities, are, by the very fact that they are produced by actual social relations, not entirely false. The alluded to the conditions that produce them even in obscuring them.

For Spinoza and Marx both false ideas and true knowledge have material conditions is produced not just by minds and ideas, but by practices and transformations of social knowledge. This assertion is given in a preemptive and provisional manner. The full extent of how practices and relations shape and transform knowledge is not developed here, expanding beyond it to extend even beyond the *Ethics* and *Capital*. However, that such an idea is included in such a preemptive sketch underscores one important and shared point, any fundamental transformation of knowledge will require a transformation of social relations (and vice versa).

**Conclusion: Rerum Concatenationem**

Given that Spinoza and Marx's critique is directed alternately at anthropocentrism as much as teleology, the objectivity of value as much as its subjectivity, to what extent could even their materialism be considered similar not at the level of what it critiques, but what it proposes? To what extent can Spinoza's common notions, and a society founded upon the idea that nothing is more useful to man than man be the precursors of communism. Conversely to what extent can Marx's communism, the free association of producers, be considered a realization of Spinoza's project of ethical transformation of becoming more active.<sup>23</sup> Cesare Casarino has offered something of a response to this question by focusing on a not inconsequential terminological similarity between Spinoza and Marx regarding the connection of all things.<sup>24</sup> In the Appendix, Spinoza writes of the way in which the prejudices of anthropocentrism and teleology present an obstacle to men's understanding of the "concatenation of all things [rerum concatenationem]." Casarino argues that this idea of immanence, or immanent causality, as the connection of all things, a connection without a privileged subject, object, or God at its center, matches both the spirit and the letter of Marx's thought. To the letter, Casarino indicates Marx's use of the phrase nexus of all things [nexus rerum] to describe exchange

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23 Tosel 1994, p. 28.

24 Casarino 2011, p. 180.

value in the *Grundrisse*. As Marx writes, “In antiquity, exchange value was not the *nexus rerum*.”<sup>25</sup> Beyond this invocation of the letter, of the same phrase, *Capital* tends towards a description of capitalism as not just an economy acting on society, but as the concatenation of various transformations at the level of politics, culture, and technology. The most striking assertion of this concatenation can be found not in the section on “commodity fetishism” in the opening sections of *Capital*, but in the end, in the description of capitalism’s emergence through primitive accumulation. As Marx writes,

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of indigenous population of a that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins, are all things which characterize the dawn of early capitalist production... These different moments are systematically combined together [*systematisch zusammengeßt*] at the end of the seventeenth century in England; the combination embraces the colonies the national debt, the modern tax system, and the system of protection.<sup>26</sup>

This combination of multiple elements, of multiple effects becoming causes is not limited to the conjuncture in which capitalism is formed, but is integral to its existence and reproduction. This is why Althusser argued that only Spinoza’s concept of an immanent cause was the necessary precondition for understanding *Capital*. The connection of all things can only be thought as an immanent cause, as a cause which exists only in and through its effects. As Althusser writes, “...it implies that the structure is immanent in its effects in the Spinozist sense of the term, that the whole existence of the structure consists in its effects, in short that the structure, which is merely a specific combination of its peculiar elements, is nothing outside its effects.”<sup>27</sup> Spinoza and Marx are able to critique the seemingly disparate philosophies of anthropocentrism, teleology, and reification, because all of these fail to think the *nexus rerum*, the connection of things, in other words, immanence, by positing the subject, God, or the law like functioning of the economy as a transcendental cause, as a cause which stands above our outside of social relations because it is not also an effect.

The “connection of all things,” the immanent order of the world is precisely what the seemingly opposed philosophical positions of

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25 Marx, 1973, p.223

26 Marx, 1977, p.915.

27 Althusser 2015, p. 344

subjective volition, theological transcendence, or economic necessity, cannot grasp. Thus, the connection of all things appears negatively, as the dark spot overlooked by these various philosophical perspectives. That is not its only appearance, however: in the opening section of *Capital* Marx's meditations on the expanded form of value in *Capital* argue that value has to be thought of as nothing other than the relation of every commodity with every other commodity, of everything with everything. In a similar way Spinoza ends the first part of the *Ethics* with the proposition, "Nothing exists from whose nature some effect does not follow" (EIP36) a proposition that offers one of the multiple implications of immanent causality. These assertions are only glimpses, only a figuration of the connections of everything with everything. In the first case, that of Marx, value even in its expanded form does not yet get us to the fully developed thought of the interconnections of everything, of immanent causality, a concept which only appears symptomatically as it were in those passages where Marx discusses capitalism as a product of the entire history of mankind down to the present. Similarly we could argue that the full effects, for lack of a better world of Spinoza's assertion that there is nothing that does not produce effects, that everything is a cause as much as it is an effect, does not fully work its difficult logic out until we get to the affects and vicissitudes of the striving a finite conatus. An immanent ontology cannot just be uttered as a concept, but must be produced. *Capital* and the *Ethics* are two instances of this of this production.

To answer the question posed at the beginning of this section: we could argue that what we are offered by both Spinoza and Marx is a gesture towards what we could call a communist ontology, an ontology of immanence and relations. However, this ontology is not yet a politics, or is not immediately given as such. What these two texts underscore is that the immanent ontology must be thought of as not only the condition of our thought and action, but as a condition which as cause is transformed, masked through its effects. The connection of things that is the capitalist mode of production, in its global origin and everyday effects, appears not as social relation, or as a relation at all, but as the value of things. Or, as Spinoza argues, God as nature, God as the immanent cause must be understood as itself the necessary cause of the image of God as a transcendent cause, standing above the world. The immanent relations of causality must themselves be understood as the cause of the human tendency to view oneself as a "kingdom within a kingdom." There is no surer guarantee of capital's functioning than its appearance as something necessary and timeless. Capitalism reproduces itself not just at the level of the economy and politics but also and most importantly at the level of subjectivity.

Despite the differences we can see that Spinoza and Marx's respective critiques are not only similar in their preemptive form, but in their object as well. The object of their critique may be fundamentally

different in its structure and history, from theology to the economy, but it is fundamentally the same in its function. The object of the preemptive critique is not this or that idea, or even ideology, but it is the point where the existing division of powers becomes not just an idea but also an entire subjective comportment, a way of life. If these texts get ahead of themselves, expounding a critique that demands concepts and relations that have been not yet developed, they do so only because the ideas, concepts, and world views that they critique are precisely that which blocks thought and action. Such a preemptive strike is necessary in order to be understood at all.

Beyond this overlap, this similarity of the method and object of critique, what might this conjunction of Marx and Spinoza offer for thinking about philosophy about the world and the present? First, we can isolate in the two elements of the critique a general problematic that cuts through several critical terms. First, we have what is referred to as the “connection of all things,” nature, capital, or the entire profane history of the world, an object that exceeds any attempt to represent it, to bring it under the concepts of subjective intention, transcendent order, or necessary laws. This is in different cases what both Marx and Spinoza are trying to think. We could call this “the common” only in that it exists only in and through its constitutive relations. The objects of Spinoza and Marx’s critique are not entirely misguided: God and Capital posit the absent totality as the necessary condition of thought and action, but they do so by representing it within the existing imaginary, subordinating it to subjectivity, transcendence, and law. It is not something that can be immediately given or celebrated. Grasping this connection of all things, or absent cause, means taking on the way in which it is represented, as God or the fetish of value, recognizing that these representations or ideas are nothing other than effects of the structures, its modes or necessary appearances, effects that are also simultaneously causes, necessary conditions of its reproduction. Finally, all of this, the connection of things, its representations in Gods and fetishes, and the relation between the two, as cause and effect, can only be developed through a practice of philosophy that I have awkwardly identified as “preemptive.” This practice does not see a critique of the existing ideas and representations as something secondary, as a subordinate activity best left to popularizers and pedagogy, but as a constitutive condition of philosophy itself. Philosophy only exists through its engagement with what could be called, for lack of a better word, ideology, the collection of thoughts, representations, and affects that reproduce the world and its structures of domination.

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Volume 8  
Issue 1