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ILLUMINATING FREEDOM AND KNOWLEDGE IN *DAS KAPITAL*: ARISTOTLE,
LEIBNIZ, AND SPINOZA (2015, 4,500 words)

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To the memory of Daniel Bensaïd

How may we understand some central presuppositions of *Das Kapital*, such as knowledge and freedom? For sure, they are not to be understood within “positive” science. However, there existed in its formative time a philosophical cognitive tradition opposed to Positivist atomism and mechanicism. It is clearest in 19th-Century Germany, culminating in Hegel (Marx calls it *eine Wissenschaft im deutschen Sinn*, what is in Germany called science — Marx, Letter 355)^{1/}, but it was not only German. Its anti-Cartesian, anti-scientistic, and anti-bourgeois horizon comes from “a detotalised, negative and unsatisfied, totality” and combats the vision of an inert material world (Bensaïd 234). It starts in the 17th and 18th Century by updating and applying Aristotle’s startling discussions of *potentiality*(*dynamis potentia*, in Hobbes and Locke translated as *power*), an inner tendency in any type of thing to strive toward or — in a stronger sense of the term — to fulfil its innate potential (*Metaphysics* 1019a-1019b). The nature of a thing bears within itself a tendency or straining toward oriented change, so that things show what they are more fully when they become actuality, when they are “fully worked out” (*Physics* 193b). Each “thinghood” or *haecceitas* is a working-itself-out process, a specific way of being in motion: a thing is what it can do to dynamically — as Leibniz will say — grow into itself, or in Mallarmé’s variant about the poet, “tel qu’en lui-même l’éternité le change” (as eternity changes him into himself). The opposition between this potential/ity and *actuality* (*energeia*, *entelekheia*) is the means by which Aristotle analyzes motion, causality, ethics, and physiology, bridging living and “dead” matter. The actuality that results presupposes that all types of things bear coiled within themselves a specific kind of activity, motion or work which, if achieved, would be their proper end (*telos*, the formal cause).

Within this tradition, I shall discuss here Leibniz from the Right and Spinoza from the Left, both of whom Marx in 1841 excerpted in his notebooks (“Auszüge“ and “Exzerpte”). This story is by now known (cf. Matheron “*Traité*,” Rubel, Yovel) and I do not propose to retrace it but to use it for understanding better *Das Kapital* and its central meaning. Further, I find it impossible to talk meaningfully about Marx without bearing in mind — as Lenin rightly concluded (180) — that he was steeped in Hegel, who will be briefly adjoined. Naturally, I do not propose to present the predecessors’ stance in any fullness but focus only on aspects needful for my theme in a brief scope. Even less do I think Leibniz and Spinoza are the central interlocutors in *Das Kapital*. These notes are simply compressed attempts at teasing out a few central knots for further considerations, nothing more — nor less.

Leibniz

I consider here aspects of a general topology of Leibniz’s system, and then in particular his monadology. His most important concept of *vis viva* (cf. Wiener ed. 12, 181-84, 432-33) will be resorted to in my conclusion.

First, Leibniz opposes a dynamic reality of forces, multiple possibles, and a kind of contingency of events to Cartesian extension of inert matter (and will therefore be noted as Marx’s precursor by Lenin, who however rightly demurs at Leibniz’s Christian *Deus ex machina* — 378 and 381). As Vadée noted about the great influence of Aristotle, Marx worked for his dissertation primarily upon him,

Spinoza, and Leibniz — who was himself probably the philosopher most imbued by Aristotle between the Middle Ages of Ockham and Scotus and the epoch of Marx, melding Scholasticism with mechanical motion and desperately trying to square this with the overriding Baroque need for domination and teleology (cf. Elster).

Because of his overriding care to justify a perfect and all-powerful will which yet permits evil, Leibniz's cosmology is not always topologically clear, but its basis is that human imaginary possibilities or knowledges are possibilities of action for God (cf. Wiener ed. 290-91). Therefore space is always full (there is no vacuum), the graduated order of being is also full — there is no *vacuum formarum* (*Theodicy* point 14), and there are no leaps (Wiener ed. 71, 157). Lovejoy well summarised his universe as founded on “plenitude, continuity, and linear gradation” and his metaphysics as panpsychist Idealism (144). Logically, there is also an infinity of possible worlds — a concept he also pioneered — each with different laws: in Leibniz's splendid formulation, “the quantity of existence must be as great as possible” (Wiener ed. 348, cf. also 484-85), though he also persuaded himself that ours was the best realistically possible one (*Theodicy* points 7-8, 19, 42, and 414).

A Leibnizian opposition between necessity and possibility appears already in Marx's dissertation as the historical choices by respectively Democritus and Epicurus, and to trace its avatars in his opus might reserve some surprises for us. What remains to be investigated may to begin with be presented here by wrenching scattered indications from Leibniz through Bensaïd's already laicizing interpretation (240; cf. also Vadée) into a schematic summary. This can issue in a Lévi-Straussian square of cognitions or knowledges — Leibniz calls them in French *sciences* (*Theodicy* point 363) — consubstantial to the power of creating possible worlds:

Table 1. KNOWLEDGES FOR/AS DIFFERENT WORLDS

<u>WORLDS</u>	CONTINGENT	NECESSARY
ONLY POSSIBLE	<i>science moyenne</i>	<i>science de simple intelligence</i>
ACTUAL	<i>science de vision</i>	“black anti-hole” = God

For each category of possible worlds there is an appropriate truth or cognition. Proceeding counterclockwise: for possible and necessary worlds, it is an everyday cognitive approach of “simple intelligence” (in line with what we already know). For possible but contingent worlds (that is, not necessary but simply happening) worlds, it is a “medium” knowledge, already not positivistic but adapted to the contingency. For not only theoretically possible but also actual contingent worlds, it is a “visionary” knowledge. There are no actual and simultaneously necessary worlds for they would be perfect, which is an attribute only of God and not necessarily of his Creation. However, this perfect possibility is a kind of reverse black hole that undergirds, and out of which proceeds, the whole casuistic series: it is the topological founding necessity of God as, so to speak, the Platonic Guardian of the whole system of worlds as/and knowledges in Heavens. Finally, science or cognition stops in face of perfection, which can only be adored but does not humanly exist even as possibility. This reintroduces a way of allowing both for determinist necessity and hypothetical freedom, with a horizon of fusing science (reason, cognition) and value.

Second, on the monad: as I mentioned, Marx came to Leibniz from his doctoral studies in Greek philosophy, but the kinship he felt for some of his carefully isolated aspects stems from Leibniz's great influence on German Idealism — culminating for this aspect in Hegel — within which entelechy may denote an ingrained force propelling a thing to self-fulfillment. Marx uses from Leibniz's definitions in *Monadology* only no. 10-12, that it possesses “an internal principle”, and “a variety which changes,”

as well as no. 18, the idea that it is an Aristotelian *entelechy*, that is, an energetic knot with purposive activity. However, he totally steps out of Leibniz's framework, Baroque Christianity with God as King and guarantor of monads, and retains only the elements of unity, internal consistency, and the Aristotelian straining to work itself out towards a potential completion.

Spinoza, Added To by Hegel

The exemplarity of mechanics, from Galileo and Descartes to Newton, supplanted Aristotle's four causes by one, his *causa efficiens*: something that pragmatically produces an effect, so that if the cause is removed the effect does not come about. This seemingly matter-of-fact concept hides however some huge presuppositions: first, that between what comes first and what follows there is a direct, continuous, and homogenous temporality (lending itself to bourgeois progress); second, that the matter within which it happens is otherwise inert (no other factors complicate the relationship); and third, that the magnitude of cause and effect are commensurable, that is purely quantitative (no qualities interfere). Therefore they can be mathematised and measured: so far so good. But this clear advantage, leading to great practical uses, was most intolerant, relegating all other ways of causality to benighted theorising about qualities, as in Newton's contemptuous "I do not invent fictional hypotheses (*non fingo*).” To the contrary, the dissident Spinoza proposed a knowledge he will finally call *amor intellectualis Dei* — where God means the totality of all that exists, Nature: we might today call it Being. Where in his pantheism there is only one "substance consisting of infinite attributes" (*Ethics* II. Def 6), we would today prefer a fluid relationship between such a totalizing whole and singular units — things or substances — isolated for various needs and uses (cf. Ollman chap.s 2-5). Their causes are logical and immanent rather than mechanical and transitive (coming from outside and passing through them). Formally similar to Leibniz but politically in diametrical opposition to him — though chronologically it was the other way round — Spinoza also identified three forms of knowledge: empirical opinion tied to immediate but unreliable experience, formal reason, and intuitive (or better introspectively intelligent^{2/}) cognition or science *sub specie aeternitatis* as wisdom.

Substance is its own cause (*causa sui*), existence is synonymous with acting (IV. Preface), which means that in this infinite productivity the possible and the imaginary are no longer opposed to the real. Such a rich vitality holds in spades for humans, whose cognitive production centres upon self-knowledge attained through knowledge of the world and leading from servitude to freedom (cf. Tosel, *Spinoza*). No doubt, there is — as Spinoza knew well. cf. letter to Boxel — an unresolved contradiction between the illusion of freedom at a low level and the necessity that flows from participation in God (I.39). Yet centrally, intellectual knowledge is of a piece with omnipresent passionate human striving (*conatus*), whose highest form is *amor* or delight in the things themselves and in their collective connectedness, which is as human creation fully understandable (Matheron, *Individu* 9-10). In this "utopia of a force of production that is the indestructible legacy of the humanist revolution [in the Renaissance]" (Negri 254), time is no longer subordinated to eternity, it is — as in Vico — a possible long duration advance from barbarism and superstition to a civility that offers better chances to individuals and for understanding.

Spinoza's is a vision of the centrality of *conatus*, a universal axiom and force within humans, a desire (*cupiditas*) as fundamental as Galileo's and then Newton's inertia (III.4 and 6). However, it is opposed to inertia as an immanent activity that may lead to self-realisation and freedom from political and religious thralldom (cf. Bodei 78-80). Such a truth or knowledge is a sovereign capacity of human self-production, rendered possible in the politics of a tolerant State based on freedom of opinion, as in *TP* 7-8; though this unfinished and perhaps dead-end tractate lacks a fuller discussion of democracy,^{3/} it posits clearly that the people's weal or salvation is the supreme law (*populis salus suprema lex*, *TP* 7.5; also *TTP* 19.2). This also means the people has, in proper situations, the capacity for self-government: from the communal or common will of all (*TP* 2.15-16 and 19, 3.5, 4.1 and passim; cf. Matheron, *Individu* 321-27) a road can lead to revolutionary plebeian democracy from the 1789 revolutionaries to Marx and beyond; it shares with the latter the presupposition of individual freedom within the popular collectivity.^{4/}

No doubt, “the end of the State is freedom” (TTP 20.1). However, in Spinoza’s second masterpiece, the great prose poem of *Ethics* — especially in Part V.20ff. (for me, in and around Propositions 32 to 34) — his stress on life’s passionate effort to persist and comprehend culminates in the mind’s cognitive beatitude beyond the State. His Supreme Good is dynamic intellectuality as pleasure within a kind of ecstatic philosophical religion or mystique of mutual induction between the mind and the universal community as communion.^{5/} I would hold there was a defining limit to this rhapsodic beatitude, and call it *disincarnation* (see for background of this terminology the two titles by Gendlin). True, in Spinoza’s concentration on understanding or intellect this is driven by desire and appetite, and it is collective. He comes nearest to focusing on the body in the remarks on passions in III. 11 and IV.38-41 that amount to a laudation of pleasure (*laetitia*). one of his three primary emotions together with pain (*tristitia*) and desire; and he knew well that these mental entities are “dispos[itions of] the human body” (IV. 38). Yet the sensualism of his impressive productive machine (cf. Negri 69-72 and 258-65) seems to grow strangely Idealist. Finally, in the Preface to his concluding Part V, where he wishes to deal with the *telos* of *Ethics*, human freedom, mind is again sundered from body, for what unites them seems only to be a “mind or reason” insofar it can check or control the emotions. The body itself is left to medicine and left out of the mind’s beatitude, bodily affections or indeed existence being brusquely referred to “the idea of God” (V.14 and 21-23).^{7/} Spinoza is an anti- Descartes (cf. Macherey 68-71), yet his serious, and seriously illuminating, attempt to fuse Descartes’ *res extensa* and *res cogitans* sees, in the final supreme wisdom, all extension as a pantheist divine cogitation, participating in eternity rather than in material history. His dearly beloved freedom comes thus perilously close to “free thought,” *Gedankenfreiheit*. On the one hand this abolishes the banal religious difference between Heaven and Earth. On the other, its political equivalent is, at the very end of *Ethics*, Spinoza’s unsolved antinomy between the Wise and the Ignorant, so static that it must arise from an existential impasse. In *TP* the *multitudo* (masses) seeking security easily becomes a degraded *vulgus* (populace — cf. Balibar, “Spinoza: la crainte”), plus some misogyny at the end.

What did Hegel add to these philosophies of a slower time, which nonetheless had arrived at a worldwide mercantilism and the differential calculus? Holding that Spinoza’s “any determination is a negation” was “infinitely important” (*Wissenschaft* 1: 121), he richly developed sweeping consequences from the shock of a much speedier turnover and more invasive history after the steam engine, the French Revolution, and Napoleonic mass artillery wars (cf. Macherey). His far-reaching dialectics introduce the contradictory fluctuations of a history bearing huge social earthquakes, with its unavoidable and unforeseeable negative turns and positive returns, knots and jumps (which Lenin loved, see 123), into a no longer Aristotelian logic. Positive science, even when based on mathematics, can for Hegel only amount to a knowledge defective both by its horizons and by its matter, to rigid dead propositions. What would positivistically be false is here included as the negative vivifying the otherwise inert or dead positive.

Thus, Hegel’s *Science of Logic* agrees with some Leibniz and much of Spinoza: characteristically, he discusses causality in a chapter headed “Teleology.” In it he defines immanent purpose (*Zweck*) as presupposing self-determination and analogous to freedom (2: 437-39): it can also be defined as cause and force, though these do not exhaust its meaning that also includes “more honourable” means and mediations (2: 445 and 448-53). Nonetheless, his *Logic* recuperates an outside and transitive justification of all those movements, positing instead of Leibniz’s God as Perfection or Spinoza’s beatific extension of desire a *historically immanent* Absolute Idea. Within history, causality can be complex, mediated (thus also at a distance, as Newton had to assume for gravity but could not explain), and, generally, part of a complex condition of possibility. This is especially clear in the case of knowledges dealing with what Vico memorably classified as products of human history, that is to say all the not fully mathematisable *sciences humaines*, not composed only of commensurable units but infested by pesky qualities.

Conclusion

I conclude that for Marx *the capital is an anti-Leibnizian monad*, “chang[ing] from an *internal principle*” (*Monadology* pt. 11), and open to coursing between contingency and necessity as well as between actuality and ideal possibility; while *Das Kapital* — all three books — is, no doubt, woven through with the filigree of Hegelian thought figurations (*Denkfiguren*) because it is immersed in history, but it is undergirded by *a Spinozist value-political treatise*: different declinations of value, mostly arrested as a negative, are the Hegelian essence of capital. Value is posited centrally within the sensual human activity of (exploited) labour, the vivifying fire of Marx’s fusion of Heraclites’s cosmic living fire and Leibniz’s living force, which latter Vico transferred to humanity creating itself. Marx must have also delighted in Leibniz reviving and bringing into modern use the terms of energy and dynamics (*Specimen Dynamicum*, Wiener ed. 119–37), and in particular latched on to his definition of what is today in physics called kinetic energy but Leibniz referred to as an *entelechy* or *vis viva* (see Bellinazzi 73, 116–17, 136–37, 257–59, and *passim*). This used but modified Aristotle’s *energeia*, a concept of the potential for movement which exists in each type of physical thing (including people). The modification was in line with an already international capitalism: Aristotle’s specific tendency to move or change in a given way becomes in Leibniz force, power, or motion that could be transferred between things of different types, leading to a general conservation of this energy.

In the case of Spinoza, I think we should differentiate between Marx’s structural analogies to him and what Marx consciously took over from him. In the first point, Spinoza is perhaps the most important modern affirmer both of *the world’s being there* (so to speak a Lukácsian totality-as-becoming) for humanity and of *its intimate correspondence to human cognition*. There is a continuity between his theology, politics, and ethics (though it remains significant that his central work is *Ethics*). Thence we can get to new rhythmical forms of dialectical, multi-dimensional history: “irregular sequences, aperiodic forms, unforeseeable recurrences, fractal motifs, ... a marvellous galaxy of ‘topologies, choreographies, and genealogies’...” (Bensaïd 304, inner quote from Bhaskar 53), as well as of modern arts and Einsteinian sciences. In all of them situation-bound and differential causalities obtain, and events, Aristotle’s *pragmata* (*Poetics* 1450a), constantly modify tendencies and rules. On the whole, the lay transcendence of Spinoza’s “communism of minds” (Matheron, *Individu* 612) is of a piece with Marx’s advance from “[p]olitical emancipation... of course, a big step forward” to “human emancipation in general” (*On the Jewish I*; cf. more in Suvin); the political equivalent of both is a communism of goods without Mine and Thine (Deborin 115–16).^{7/}

As to the second point, Marx’s long passages from Spinoza’s *TTP* in 1841 (cf. Matheron *Traité*, Rubel, and González Varela) testify that he was most interested in claiming for philosophy the terrain wrested from theology — though in Spinoza taken to be pantheism — and in problems of freedom and democracy as against necessity. Here actuality is no longer the crown of abstract possibility but the search for a human causality or teleology. Most significantly, the horizon or inbuilt teleology making sense and conferring value on human history is Spinoza’s immanent and not Hegel’s transcendent *self-determination* — *people’s collective freedom*, based on needs and desires, so that the realm of necessity will have to be intimately scrutinised in order to understand how it blocks the realm of freedom. The “associated producers” with both individual and collective freedom in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* seem to me descended from Spinoza’s “democracy, as the gathering of all people who have the full associative right to what is in its power” (*coetus universus hominum, qui collegialiter summum jus ad omnia, quae potest, habet*, *TTP* 16.3). Thus for Marx Spinoza counterbalanced and corrected Hegel’s reliance on the Absolute Idea (Bensaïd 235, cf. Yovel).

The monadic essence of capital is in Marx subject to feedback with a dizzying series of capital existences as phenomena and figurations (see Jameson). However, *Das Kapital* is not organised as a monograph but as a critique, which is a negative, denying science: it sketches in a powerful theory but as an antithesis.^{8/} When he transcribed Spinoza’s explosive statement quoted above that “the end of the State, therefore, is truly freedom” (*TTP* 20.1), he marked out a keynote and horizon for all his work to come. The far-off Hegelian synthesis (the classless society) can realistically appear only as implied or shining through the developed negations, as freedom swerving from iron necessities, as value

measuring exploitative and fetishist alienation, as potentiality or possibility (*potentia*) opposed to status quo power (*potestas*). In the terms of Emily Dickinson, it is a tension between Possibility and Prose, where the former judges the latter:

I dwell in Possibility —
A fairer House than Prose —
More numerous for Windows —
Superior — for Doors —

Notes

1/ See Bensaïd 230-31. I have been much stimulated by his rich and vivacious book, as well as by Vadée's, to reflect further on the relations of Leibniz and Spinoza to Marx. This holds also for Negri and Lordon, even where I largely disagreed. As to the well-known views of Aristotle about potential/ity, I have applied them in another work and simply recapitulate them here.

This essay was sparked by the masterly work of Jameson cited. My thanks to the critiques of my old companion in utopia, Giuseppina Saccaro del Buffa, and of Jan Rehmann.

2/ Cf. Saccaro Del Buffa's detailed survey of narrative argumentation in *Ethics*, 457 and passim. She has also most usefully elucidated (on 369-96 and in other places) and edited Spinoza's Neoplatonic-cum-Cabbalistic Amsterdam precursor Abraham Cohen De Herrera's work *Puerta del Cielo*. This ought to be integrated with Yovel's thesis on Spinoza's *marrano* tradition.

On Spinoza and knowledge cf. *Treatise*; *TTP* 5; *Ethics* I.25 Proof and 40 Scholium; also see Tosel, *Matérialisme* 82-87.

3/ Cf. Tosel, *Matérialisme* 11, 80, 86-87, 117-19, and passim, also Matheron *Individu* and Balibar *Spinoza*.

4/ I suspect a second intermediary would be the Diderot of *Rameau's Nephew* but cannot enter into this here.

I add that I am aware into what huge problems I rush here. One, which I avoid by focusing on *Ethics*, is the difference between Spinoza's phases. Another, which is unavoidable, is his enforcedly equivocal language (Yovel), where many key terms oscillate in meaning, when they do not jell in apun—for example, *perfectus* = perfect and finished, or *corpus* = body human and body physical if not geometrical. And a proper narratological account of Spinoza would proceed by chords and rhythms, as in Rolland, and by rhetorical devices, as in Saccaro Del Buffa, which I cannot do in a compressed scope.

5/ Cf. Tosel, *Matérialisme* 66 and 79, also Yovel passim. I cannot forbear pointing out that Spinoza is, because of the pure intensity of his figure and striving, the only philosopher I know of who has had four poems written about him, two by masters (Borges and Jack Lindsay) and two by famous people, if bad poets (Bukharin and Einstein)!

6/ I do not think *Ethics* II.13 or III.2 argue against disincarnation — always bearing in mind note 4 above.

7/ Thus I disagree with the *forzatura* of Deborin, Althusser, and Negri of promoting an impoverished Spinoza to the main ancestor of Marx.

8/ Labriola wrote about *Anti-Dühring* that it was “not a thesis but an antithesis” (*Ma quel libro non è tetrico, anzi è antitetrico* — 211-12); cf. Tosel 167-84 and *passim*.

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