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978-1-107-09491-8 - Spinoza's Critique of Religion and Its Heirs:
Marx, Benjamin, Adorno
Idit Dobbs-Weinstein
Excerpt
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Introduction

Of this alone, you see, is god deprived,
To make undone whatever has been done
– Euripidian Fragments, 5¹

I. Whose History, Which Politics?

My aim in this book is quite literally to undo the past, both its pastness and its necessity. By undoing the past I do not intend to violate Aristotelian modal logic about the relation between necessity and possibility,² as distinct from its Modern inversion, nor to deny that the dead are really dead. On the contrary, it is on behalf of the dead, in the attempt to fight against their second obliteration or consignment to oblivion, that I seek to undo the necessity of the past, a necessity whose mythical spell not only casts its shadow over philosophy and its history but also, and more important, petrifies our gaze, undermining our capacity for experience and thereby our ability to discern concrete, material possibility as the only real possibility to which we can appeal.

¹ As cited in Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1039b10.

² As will become evident in Chapter 1, for Aristotle, there is a significant difference between logical possibility, on one hand, natural possibility, on the other. Only the latter is real and determines the freedom and constraint on human action.

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The title question motivating this brief introduction, the question “whose history, which politics?” formulated as a single question, is a question of possibility as the possibility of human freedom, let alone flourishing.

Although history and its distortions haunt this book, and although it is steeped in history, it is not a book of history, not even the history of philosophy, as the book title may initially seem to indicate, especially since it is written by one trained in the history of philosophy. Indeed, it is intended as an intervention, but one strictly situated in the project of Critical Theory rather than in the reception history of Spinoza.³ The insistence on the concrete, material, that is historical, specificity of possibility is at the same time a unifying thread of the book and the form of intervention in Critical Theory; for, “to brush history against the grain,” to transgress against the philosophical canon, with Benjamin and against Hegel, is *simultaneously* to undo the necessity of the past and to possess a “weak messianic power”⁴ capable of rescuing the dead from oblivion and thereby also, perhaps, of discerning concrete revolutionary possibility now. Since undoing the necessity of the past is the undoing of teleology, and insofar as it is not oriented to the future, “messianic power” must be understood as orientation to the redemption of the dead. I cannot overemphasize, however, that this is a very remote possibility indeed, if it is still a possibility at all, as will become amply evident.

Reluctant as I am to deploy the language of timeliness, a language already caught up in a given notion of history that is challenged throughout the book, nonetheless, I am compelled to say that this book is timely in several ways, one of which is also deeply troubling as well as alarming. Let me briefly explain. First, the transgression that takes the form of brushing history against the grain in this sense is not a destruction of the given as much as it is

³ As will become evident in Chapter 1, there are several good recent historical interventions of the latter kind. An exemplary one in English by a philosopher is Goetschel's *Spinoza's Modernity*. In this light it is important to emphasize the fact that my philosophical interlocutors in this book are strictly determined by its concerns with Marx and Critical Theory rather than addressing the broader literature on Spinoza's philosophy that shares my concerns with Spinoza's works.

⁴ Benjamin, “Theses on the Concept of History,” in *Selected Writings*, 4:254.

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a challenge to the givenness of the given.⁵ An important dimension of the givenness of the given is the curious acquiescence of philosophers in a stock of commonplace knowledge shared by followers as well as critics of their philosophical forebear. For the purpose of the present introduction and in anticipation of the following chapters, two brief examples must suffice. (1) Spinoza was a metaphysician, a certainty that requires either dismissing or circumscribing not only Spinoza's political writings but also the major part of the *Ethics*.⁶ (2) In turning Hegel upside down, Marx materialized teleology rather than rejected it, privileging a future oriented praxis severed from theory. All these readings of Marx implicitly or explicitly assume that (1) the very early critique of religion can suffice to overcome religion, (2) the critique of religion is distinct from and superseded by the critique of ideology, and (3) the critique of political economy is distinct from and supersedes the critique of ideology. In short, not only are there three distinct phases to the development of Marx's thought but also there is a progression from the young to the old Marx, from the young left-Hegelian to the mature Marxist. Were these the only possible or decisive readings of Spinoza and Marx, then this book is a quixotic undertaking. And yet I claim that the book is timely, and sometimes in deeply troubling ways.

First, as the title anticipates, a central premise of the book, and in a manner attentive to Marx rather than Marxism, is that the critique of religion is the exemplary form of critique, be it of ideology or of political economy, and hence it is also the basis for a materialist political philosophy.⁷ In the light of the

⁵ This is one aspect in which the form of Critical Theory that I seek to outline here and whose importance I emphasize in this book, exemplified in the writings of Benjamin and Adorno, is significantly distinct from deconstruction.

⁶ All references to the Latin text will be to the Gebhart edition. Unless otherwise noted, English references to the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* and the *Ethica* will be to volume 1 of *The Collected Work of Spinoza*, translated by Edwin Curley. All other references will be to Samuel Shirley's translations.

⁷ Thus, "the criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism." Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*," in *Marx-Engels Reader*, 53. Note that this claim is not at all philosophically revolutionary if, as Kant will have it, critique is an awakening from a dogmatic (metaphysical) slumber.

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progressive usurpation of politics by religion in the past few years, let alone the philosophers' acquiescence to its return to political discourse, I hope that this book will serve as sobering reminder. If indeed, as I argue throughout the book, the critique of religion has no power to overthrow religion, and if, as I also argue, religion will remain a psychic human need so long as oppressive institutions prevail, then the better we understand the theologico-political complex, the better we shall be able to understand the necessity for the separation of powers for the very possibility of democracy and freedom, even if we are otherwise highly critical of Modernity or the "Enlightenment." It is not surprising, therefore, that exiled Jewish thinkers as distinct in their political commitments as were Adorno and Leo Strauss, both of whom were certainly critics of the Enlightenment, shared a commitment to its uncompromising insistence on the separation of powers. Second, and most troubling, is the recent rise, widespread virulence, and often violent expression of anti-Judaism throughout the Western, "enlightened" world, an anti-Judaism whose monstrous form not only makes evident the blindness constituent of religion and ideology but also, ironically, *should* have but has not made amply evident the difference(s) between anti-Judaism and antisemitism, thereby bringing into relief the specificity of the "Jewish Question," if only we, the philosophers and "liberals," did not "refuse to listen."⁸ This is a strange specificity, one that can be transformed and translated as ideologically needed but, hence, can bring to light that "the Jews" of the "Jewish Question," who represent the previous and current object of fear and hate (a species of fear)⁹ nowhere exist as such but are rather Europe's perennially hated tribe, the other within,¹⁰ whereas the

⁸ Allusion to Plato's *Republic* 1 and, as will become evident in Chapter 1, Kant's rejection of vulgar experience.

⁹ As Spinoza argues in E 3&4, hate is a species of fear, one of the two primary theologico-political passions; the other is hope.

¹⁰ For an excellent extensive study of the variegated history of anti-Judaism, see Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism*. This study alone makes evident the highly problematic ideological deployment of "le mot juif" in Alain Badiou's polemical "arguments" in *Circonstances* 3. The refrain of Badiou *et idem alii* on the

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“semitic” is the other from without, the “product” of European imperialism and colonialism. Seventy years after the liberation of Auschwitz, we witness mass demonstrations throughout Europe provoked and attended jointly by extremists from Left and Right political parties (including intellectuals) together with Moslems from former colonies, chanting “death to the Jews,” vandalizing Jewish businesses, and firebombing synagogues. What is exceptional about this monstrous mass is that, were it not for hatred for “the Jews,” they would turn against one another – Left against Right, Right against Moslems, Left against claims for religion by right-wing Christians and Moslems alike. Most remarkable in twenty-first-century Europe is that current-anti-Judaism is now not only respectable but also increasingly the yardstick for Marxist commitments.¹¹

As I argue elsewhere, the emergence of the monstrous “fraternity” between right-wing extremists and European Moslems is both ironic and deeply troubling precisely because both the identity and rhetoric of these groups are specifically racialized in opposition to one another, “*rightly* opposed because of the materially concrete historical *experience* of colonial violence, *wrongly* united into a monstrous, unified entity whose existence depends upon the erasure of history.”¹² Succinctly stated, this is a pure form of the return to mythical violence. Moreover, insofar as this erasure requires either the outright denial of the contradictory experience(s) constitutive of this unity or the violent suppression of the contradiction between triumph and suffering, victor and vanquished, it makes manifest both a conscious gap and a

academic Left is, “I am not an anti-semitic but rather anti-zionist, anti-Israel, etc.” Badiou’s claim that there can be no radical Left antisemitism is spurious. I shall refrain from considering these polemics, which I find to be philosophically unhelpful.

¹¹ That the policies of the current Israeli government must be criticized, that the possible violations of human rights by the IDF must be investigated, there is no doubt. That it is manipulatively deployed in order to foment anti-Judaism there is also little doubt. Furthermore, that no distinction is made between Gaza Palestinians and Hamas is not only an insult to Palestinians but also a cynical exploitation of the suffering of Palestinians.

¹² Dobbs-Weinstein, “Possibility of Praxis in the Age of Sham Revolutions.”

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gap in consciousness that undermine or even eliminate the very possibility of self-consciousness, a possibility that can come about only through a concrete contrary experience that will render this monstrosity impossible.

Paradoxically, precisely because, historically, that is concretely understood, the current monstrous form of mythical violence – the concrete manifestation of the barbarism at the heart of culture that is the focus of Freud's, Marx's, Benjamin's, and especially Adorno's work – is new, and precisely because it brings into sharp relief, *for the first time*, the radical difference between antisemitism and anti-Judaism, whose insidious nature was previously latent, I shall deploy the language of antisemitism in the body of the book until the afterword at the end of Chapter 5. I shall do so for two reasons: first because I abhor anachronism, and the thinkers whose critical affinity I explore in the book never explicitly recognized such a difference, deploying only the term "antisemitism"; second, insofar as it is a new form of barbarism, it is the mythical expression of concrete socioeconomic conditions whose relation to the culture industry requires a new excursus to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (DE), one which must begin with a consideration of the significant differences between antisemitism and anti-Judaism.¹³

II. What or How Is Critical Theory?

Until relatively recently on a philosophical rather than electronic time line, Adorno was an émigré not only from Nazi Germany but ironically also from philosophy, outside Germany most visibly but far from exclusively in the United States. No philosophy department offered courses on Adorno or "first-generation"

¹³ Just as Adorno's *Philosophy of New Music* was a third excursus to DE in response to changed concrete conditions that the earlier analyses could not adequately address, so now the new form of mythic violence, a form far more extreme than that which Schoenberg's and Stravinski's works expressed, requires a fourth excursus. The afterword at the end of Chapter 5 of this book will begin to sketch some elements of such an excursus in the light of current events.

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Frankfurt School, nor could articles on Adorno be found in philosophical journals. This historical phenomenon is true in an uncanny and far from innocent way about other Jewish émigrés the focus of whose work was political philosophy, especially those to whom history mattered – even if and when their politics diverged significantly: for example, Adorno and Strauss and, to a lesser extent, Arendt. The latter is not at all surprising; rather, it is a reflection of the theologico- or ideologico-political determination of philosophy. Likewise, and for similar historical reasons specific to the American academy, Marx and Freud were equally absent from the philosophical curriculum.¹⁴ The contours of this determination are numerous and diverse and its details beyond the concern of this book. For the present inquiry, suffice it to point out that “classical” European political philosophy and history of philosophy were expelled from philosophy departments and were exiled in political science, French, and German departments.¹⁵

It should come as no surprise that this political destiny determined to a great extent the form that first-generation Critical Theory, especially the thought of Benjamin and Adorno, assumed in the United States, namely, a literary and aesthetic form divorced from history and politics. Moreover, since “pedantic” philosophical or epistemological considerations were not primary, Critical Theory was often conflated with post-structuralism, deconstruction, post-modernism, and other forms of rejection of Modernity and Enlightenment, whose aim was the overcoming of metaphysics and the subject. Lost in this

¹⁴ On the influence of McCarthyism on American philosophy, see McCumber, *Time in the Ditch*.

¹⁵ Classical European political philosophy was inseparable from history and always preceded by philology. In contrast, with the ascent and predominance of positivism in the American academy, knowledge of original languages was not required in many philosophy departments. And although courses on certain figures in the history of philosophy were offered, most often Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, and Kant, they were read in a decidedly ahistorical way. With the exception of Catholic universities, medieval philosophy was almost entirely absent from the curriculum.

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“democratic” translation was, *inter alia*, the significant distinction between the “metaphysical subject” and the “subject of knowledge,” and hence between ontology and phenomenology, on one hand, political philosophy and politics, on the other.¹⁶ When the subject of knowledge disappears into the metaphysical subject that is to be rejected, lost is also the dialectic between subject and object, and hence theory and praxis, as will become evident in the following chapters.

Ironically, the revival of interest in Adorno in the past few years and his increasing “respectability” in philosophical circles have not abetted the “assimilationist” models of Critical Theory, they simply changed them. On the Anglo-American side there are claims to the proximity between Dewey and Adorno or alternatively the compatibility between Rawls and Critical Theory. On the “Continental” side, everything is Critical Theory, and Adorno’s thought can and must be reconciled with some very unlikely bedfellows, for example, Levinas and Arendt. Despite the extensive comparative literature on Levinas or Arendt and Adorno, I do not consider either to be a critical theorist or to be engaged in a critical commitment that can be generatively compared to Adorno’s. On the contrary, all attempts to reconcile their differences are forms of domestication, which forms can be translated into the question, why such a fear of negative dialectics, or why prefer narrative description to concrete aporia? In the case of Levinas I shall forgo a consideration of the futility of the attempt to forge affinities between his and Adorno’s thought not only because I wish to avoid unnecessary polemics but also, and more important, because Levinas is not presented as a critical theorist and his disdain for politics is writ large. The case of Arendt as a critical theorist is different, and I must address it briefly although reluctantly precisely because it will shed light upon the nature of, and reason for my critical engagement throughout the book with Habermas but not Arendt. Briefly stated, my disagreements with

¹⁶ Of course, there are exceptions to the complete conflation of the metaphysical subject. Husserl is one such example, which is why he was of a “positive” philosophical interest to Adorno, e.g., *Against Epistemology*.

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Habermas (and for that matter Honneth and other second and third generation critical theorists) are disagreements *intrinsic* to the nature of the practice(s) of Critical Theory, a disagreement about the nature of critique, of dialectics, and of historical materialism. My analyses seek to make evident the reasons for my insistence upon the current importance of Benjamin's and Adorno's thought or their critique of society as a critique of the barbarism at the heart of culture, in the face of the violent, virulent and extensive return of anti-Judaism seventy years after the liberation of Auschwitz.¹⁷ Moreover, second- and third-generation critical theorists, like Habermas, engage Adorno's thought critically and substantially. Arendt, in contrast, does not, though there have been valiant attempts to present Arendt as a critical theorist.¹⁸ First and foremost, with the exception of shamelessly vitriolic, unsubstantiated *ad hominem* attacks on Adorno in print and correspondence with Blücher and Jaspers, Arendt never addressed Adorno's work except, perhaps, indirectly in her clumsy and racist defense of Heidegger, especially on "authenticity." It is profoundly ironic that her defense of Heideggerian "authenticity" would take a highly racialized form. As she writes, Adorno is "only a half-Jew and one of the most disgusting people that I know."¹⁹ Her accusations that Adorno and Horkheimer held responsibility for Benjamin's death or claims that they attempted to suppress his work are merely empty and at best an expression

¹⁷ If this is a form of the return of the repressed, it is a hydra form of it, because the "regressive" forms of "psychic" repression of European anti-Judaism have now joined forces with purportedly "progressive" forms. As pointed out earlier, anti-Judaism is now a, if not the, requirement of radical Left membership. Benjamin's "Theses on the Concept of History" and Adorno's "The Meaning of Working through the Past," as well as "Education after Auschwitz," in Adorno, *Critical Models*, are uncannily current, especially in the face of accommodationist claims.

¹⁸ Most notable among these in book form is *Adorno and Arendt: Political and Philosophical Investigations*, edited by Lars Rensmann and Samir Ganesha.

¹⁹ Arendt to Jaspers, April 18, 1966. Arendt's deployment of National Socialist terms of racial classification in defense of Heidegger is, to say the least, deplorable. There is a profound historical irony to this date that I am compelled to mention. On this precise date Adorno delivered his radio address "Education after Auschwitz."

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of envy. Although she may have been Benjamin's personal friend, Arendt was neither his philosophical friend nor his interlocutor, which is made amply evident by her outright denial that Benjamin was a Marxist, despite his friendship with Brecht or works such as "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility." These examples of Arendt's thoroughgoing personal animus toward Adorno are but the tip of the iceberg, though all are devoid of any philosophical or genuinely critical content.

Still, it may be argued as Rensmann and Ganesha do, that, despite the spite, there are significant affinities worth exploring between Adorno's and Arendt's thought, even in the absence of direct engagement. I do not agree with this assessment nor with the arguments presented on its behalf in *Adorno & Arendt*, even though they are presented by friends, to paraphrase Aristotle.²⁰ Since a proper, critical engagement with these arguments is far beyond the scope of this introduction, I shall very briefly point out why I do not consider Arendt's work to be philosophically or historically sound and why for this reason I do not consider her to be a critical theorist of any generation.²¹ In my judgment, the most succinct statements about Arendt's magnum opus, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, by a thinker who is far from hostile to the purpose of her work, are those of Shlomo Avineri in his review of the book upon the release of its Hebrew translation. As he states:

It is difficult to classify Arendt's volume on totalitarianism as a book on philosophy, history, political science or mass psychology. In fact, it is a treatise about the history of culture that is tremendous in its scope, and in this respect it is in the tradition of all-embracing works like Oswald

²⁰ As Aristotle points out in *Nicomachean Ethics* I 1098a 12–17, while both friendship and truth are dear, as philosophers, "it is sacred to honor truth above friendship."

²¹ That Arendt is not a dialectical thinker does not per se disqualify her from being a critical theorist. One of the central differences in my view between first and subsequent generations of critical theorists is the relation between critique and dialectics. But, as I pointed out previously, this is a debate internal to Critical Theory.