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Spinoza's Critique of Religion and Its Heirs

Marx, Benjamin, Adorno

Spinoza's heritage has been occluded by his incorporation into the single, Western, philosophical canon formed and enforced by theologico-political condemnation, and his heritage is further occluded by controversies whose secular garb shields their religious origins. By situating Spinoza's thought in a materialist Aristotelian tradition, this book sheds new light on those who inherit Spinoza's thought and its consequences materially and historically rather than metaphysically. By focusing on Marx, Benjamin, and Adorno, Idit Dobbs-Weinstein explores the manner in which Spinoza's radical critique of religion shapes materialist critiques of the philosophy of history. Dobbs-Weinstein argues that two radically opposed notions of temporality and history are at stake for these thinkers, an onto-theological future-oriented one, and a political one oriented to the past for the sake of the present or, more precisely, for the sake of actively resisting the persistent barbarism at the heart of culture.

Idit Dobbs-Weinstein is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt University. She is the author of *Maimonides and St. Thomas on the Limits of Reason* and coeditor of *Maimonides and His Heritage* (with Lenn E. Goodman and James A. Grady). Her work has appeared in such journals as *Epoché* and *Idealistic Studies*.

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In memory of the family I never had and of my mother,
Bella (Bilhah Shifrah) Weinstein
(1913–2002)

(The author's mother on her father's knee. Poland, 1916.)

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Preface

> There must be a human estate that demands no sacrifice.
>
> – Adorno

> Living is a leaving of traces.
>
> – Benjamin

This book has its remote intellectual origins in a 1978 seminar on Critical Theory taught by Christian Lenhardt at York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, in which I first encountered the thought of Benjamin, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Habermas. Although Christian urged me to continue graduate work in Critical Theory, for several reasons, prominent among which was the "unification" of the medieval philosophical canon by its reduction to Christo-platonism, I decided to pursue graduate work in medieval philosophy, focusing on the almost entirely occluded influence of Jewish and Arabic philosophers on major Christian ones in the Latin west. Although it may have appeared that I abandoned my interest in political philosophy in general, Critical Theory in particular, my project remained thoroughly political both in theory and in practice, as I hope that this book amply demonstrates.

The personal origins of this book are simultaneously simple and complex. They are marked by an abysmal absence and a loss: the absence of grandparents, cousins, aunts, and uncles, the loss

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of a young, illiterate Arab girl, named Vera, to whom I was deeply attached as a young child growing up in Jaffa. They perished in the Shoah. She perished in Beirut, having been summoned there by her older brother during family reunification following the Sinai War, and after her aged father's death. They left no visible traces either after the Shoah or after the Lebanese civil war. Nonetheless, their psychic traces are inscribed in this book, whose only acknowledged, universal imperative is "Never Again Auschwitz," when Auschwitz, and the conditions that rendered it possible, persist.

Although I was not aware of this consistency between my personal and intellectual commitments for many years, these dual origins provide the unifying thread of my writings in, and commitment to, the history of philosophy, political philosophy, and politics and the way in which they flout tradition, albeit in a different way than *Negative Dialectics* "flouts tradition," a difference that marks quite precisely a commitment to historical materialism, to dialectics understood concretely and historically, and to a rejection of false clarity as another name for myth.

In the light of the dual and long history that gave rise to this book it should come as no surprise that the list of individuals to whom I owe a debt of gratitude is too large to enumerate, as are the invaluable critical exchanges in conferences, colloquia, and other academic gatherings. Among the academic conferences of specific importance to the evolution of this book, I must single out two. First, I thank Yirmiyahu Yovel and Elhanan Yakira for inviting me to participate in several of the meetings of the colloquia "Spinoza by 2000" in Jerusalem (the last of which was held in December 2011). Second, I am especially grateful to Stefano Ludovici Giachetti both for convening the outstanding Annual International Critical Theory Conference in Rome and for inviting me in the past few years to present plenary papers. Several of these papers became drafts of the chapters in this book. Among the individuals to whom I owe a debt of gratitude is James Grady for his technical and editorial assistance. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewers of this manuscript, from whose critical comments it benefited.

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Finally, no words can adequately express my gratitude to three close friends and colleagues *sine quibus non* personally and intellectually. To Ellen Levy, whose critical ingenuity has opened for me many ways of seeing the relation between word and image, in conversations, visits to museums and galleries, and crisply brilliant writing, for her unfailing support over the years. To Gregg Horowitz in more ways than I can count, ranging from conversations in our offices, planned and unplanned, to cooking dinners together while sipping wine. In between, inter alia, are Gregg's graduate seminars, which I often attended and from which I greatly benefited, long telephone conversations moving effortlessly between the personal and the philosophical, and above all his generous ability to turn half-cooked thoughts into ones that are clear, critical, and insightful. To Jennifer Holt for teaching me how to read literature philosophically, and vice versa, during many late afternoons of reading together stretched into evenings of conversation sustained by good food and good wine. Most important, every chapter in this book has greatly benefited from Jennifer's careful, critical editorial comments from early drafts of conference papers to its final version; within the stubborn limits of my commitment to demystification, which commitment eschews false clarity, it is a much better written book owing to her extensive input.

A short version of Chapter 2 was first published in *Between Hegel and Spinoza*: *A Volume of Critical Essays* (ed. Hasana Sharp and Jason E. Smith, 2012); a significantly shorter version of Chapter 6 was first published in *Epoché,* vol. 16, no. 2 (Spring 2012). I am grateful to the editors for permission to reprint them.

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