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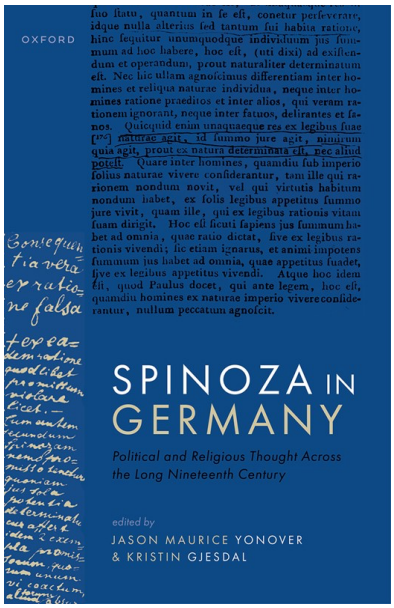
Jason Maurice YONOVER & Kristin GJESDAL (eds.), *Spinoza in Germany. Political and Religious Thought Across the Long Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 331 pp. ISBN 9780192862884



"Spinoza was never in Germany," the book's editors Jason M. Yonover and Kristin Gjesdal state in the first line of the Introduction. Indeed, there is no record that the philosopher born in Amsterdam in 1632 ever set foot on German soil, despite having had a concrete opportunity to do so: in February 1673, Karl Ludwig, Prince Elector of the Palatinate sent Spinoza, through Professor Johan L. Fabritius, a formal invitation to take up a professorship at the University of Heidelberg. In his letter, Fabritius assures Spinoza that in Heidelberg he will have the broadest freedom to philosophize although, he

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adds, the Prince trusts that he will not abuse it to disturb the publicly established religion. The invitation, as is clear, came with its own conditions and the warning was, to some extent, justified. The suspicion of atheism that surrounded Spinoza for having been expelled from the Jewish community and not having adopted any other religion, had been reinforced after the publication in 1670 of his *Theological-Political Treatise*, just three years before he received the invitation to Heidelberg. The book, as is well known, defends the freedom to philosophize, argues in favor of the separation between religion and philosophy, denounces the existence of a secret pact between despots and superstitious religion in order to keep the people under control, and presents democracy as the best system of government. Immediately condemned by the Calvinist church authorities and then banned by the political authorities, the book confirmed the bad reputation of its author, widely considered a danger to order and an enemy of religion. Of course, Spinoza politely declined the invitation to Germany. He preferred to remain on the margins of educational institutions and to safeguard his intellectual independence, even if this meant continuing to live austerely thanks to the favor of his friends.

But even though Spinoza was never in Germany, Yonover and Gjesdal immediately point out, "modern German philosophy would have had a very different development without the influence of Spinoza's writings, whose importance for this tradition is significantly pronounced" (p. 1). This is most certainly true, and I believe it would be possible to further extend the scope of this counterfactual judgment and claim that modern philosophy as a whole would have looked very different if Spinoza's writings had not been read, translated, discussed, refuted and vindicated by German thinkers of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries. Indeed, the Spinoza renaissance that took place in Germany as the main consequence of the so-called Pantheism Controversy, triggered by F.H. Jacobi with the publication of his correspondence with M. Mendelssohn in 1785, completely transformed the course of philosophy.

It is not surprising, then, that the history of Spinoza's reception in Germany and the influence of his ideas on German thinkers has long been a topic of interest to scholars. However, there is still much to be discovered and explored about this fascinating aspect of the history of philosophy. And while in German the bibliography is abundant, in the English-speaking world the interest in this subject seems to have awakened more recently, to the point that there is only one noteworthy antecedent to this book: the collection of essays by E. Förster and Y. Melamed, published in 2012 under the title *Spinoza and German Idealism* by Cambridge University Press.

It is, therefore, undeniable that Yonover and Gjesdal's book represents a highly significant addition to studies of Spinoza's influence and reception in Germany in English. However, this is far from being its only merit. Throughout its fifteen chapters, specially written for the volume, the book undertakes an exploration of entirely novel aspects of this history of Spinozism. This is because the book proposes a completely original approach to the subject. Instead of concentrating on the importance of Spinozism for German philosophy in its metaphysical, epistemological and ethical dimensions—as scholars have mostly done so far—the editors propose to attend to the impact of Spinoza's political philosophy and philosophy of religion on German thinkers of the late Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries, concentrating mainly on the reception of the theses contained in the *Theological-Political Treatise.*

The chosen approach is sufficiently justified. In fact, as Yonover and Gjesdal point out, the *Theological-Political Treatise* was read and discussed in German territory since its appearance, before the publication of the *Ethics* and the rest of Spinoza's works. However, the reception of the former work is nonetheless produced through neglected, or not so well known, figures of the German intellectual sphere of the time. Thus, the viewpoint adopted by the book is innovative in another respect, which makes the work a significant contribution. I refer to the fact that it deals with the importance of Spinozism in thinkers considered minor or marginal, including certain women thinkers such as Madame de Staël and Lou Andreas-Salomé.

The book is composed of fifteen chapters and an Introduction, which provides an overview of the proposed itinerary. The first seven chapters reconstruct the reception of a series of ideas and values of Spinozian origin in a group of German thinkers of the late eighteenth century. The book begins with Michael N. Forster's contribution, "Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* and the German Romantic Tradition," primarily concerned with tracing Herder's Spinozism. It shows, through the analysis of a set of documents, that he is first concerned with the *Theological-Political Treatise* (and not with the *Ethics*) and argues that this proves decisive for the shaping of his own view of politics, hermeneutics, and philosophy of mind. These developments, in turn, are of vital importance for understanding some aspects of the thought of two great representatives of Romanticism, F. Schlegel and Schleiermacher. Michael A. Rosenthal also deals with the Romantic reception of Spinoza, studying the way in which F. Schlegel reinterprets the figure of the prophet, with and against Spinoza, to place him between the philosopher and the poet. Kristin Gjesdal investigates which dimensions of Spinozian hermeneutics are used productively in the field of

politics by Herder, Schleiermacher, and de Staël. She shows that, creatively utilized by these thinkers, Spinoza's hermeneutic principles go hand in hand with his emancipatory potency. Yoav Schaefer, in his article "Kant's Anti-Judaism and Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*" proposes to trace Spinoza's influence on the critique of Judaism present in *Religion within the Limits of Mere Reason* to show that, while there is reason to claim that Kant knew the text, it does not merely repeat Spinozian assertions but radicalizes many of its theses and goes beyond the Dutch thinker. Michah Gottlieb also deals with the Spinozist heritage to critically rethink religion and shows how, through the enlightened Jewish thinker Friedländer and other thinkers of the same orientation, it contributed to the birth of the new Reform Judaism. Yitzhak Melamed uncovers and analyzes the concept of "political theology" as used by Salomon Maimon and, for this purpose, traces the possible influence of Spinoza in some of his most provocative statements about the philosophical and political character of Judaism. Finally, Martin Bollacher is concerned with illuminating Goethe's relationship with Spinoza, showing that in addition to the *Ethics*, the German was also acquainted with the *Theological-Political Treatise.* By analyzing a passage in which Goethe refers to this latter text, the author aims to highlight the importance of Spinoza in Goethe's vision of freedom of thought and the Old Testament.

The remaining eight articles deal with the German reception of Spinoza during the Nineteenth Century. This second section of the book begins with a chapter by Jonathan Israel, who addresses the link of Börne, Heine and Hess with Spinoza on the one hand, and with socialism on the other, taking as a broad horizon of analysis the category of radical enlightenment, developed by the author in his renowned books. In his text "David Friedrich Strauß and Spinoza," Frederick Beiser examines how the German writer—who has gone down in history as one of the most notable freethinkers of the 19th century—opposes some of Spinoza's theological theses by making use, paradoxically, of Spinozian hermeneutic principles. Sandra Shapshay and Dennis Vanden Auweele also deal with Spinoza's philosophy of religion by reconstructing the dialogue between Spinoza and Schopenhauer on the link between faith and philosophy in order to examine the ethical character of their metaphysical theories. In her chapter, entitled "Marx, Spinoza, and 'True Democracy,'" Sandra L. Field traces the possible impact of Spinoza on Marx's position on democracy in his writings on Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* to highlight the differences between them, and the importance of Rousseau as an alternative source for understanding that concept. Tracie Matysik also examines the link between Marxism and Spinoza, focusing on some thinkers who reject certain Spinozist positions, such as his critique of

teleology and the possibility of historical progress, but who recover the value of others, such as his conception of the human being as part of nature. In his article entitled "Spinoza, Mendelssohn, and Hess on Zion," Warren Zev Harvey retraces the different positions adopted by Mendelssohn and Hess on the possibility of the existence of a Jewish state and how Spinoza's statements were understood differently by his successors. Continuing with topics that have strong current resonances, Shira Billet deals with Hermann Cohen's position in relation to Spinoza in order to emphasize certain methodological affinities between them, which emerge when investigating the link that each one admits between philosophy and history. The last article included in the volume, by Katharina Kraus, deals with Lou Salomé's reading of Spinoza's philosophy and how Spinoza's ideas play a role in the intellectual development of the thinker.

The route proposed by the book through the different chapters, which I have briefly commented on, is in itself a fundamental contribution to a better understanding of the process of reception of Spinozism in Germany and the impact that his thought had on the development of philosophy in that territory. As I said, this contribution lies not only in the fact that it traces the influence of Spinoza's political philosophy and philosophy of religion on German thinkers, but also in the fact that, in order to achieve this, it deals with figures who are usually neglected in the histories of the philosophy of the period.

But the book also presents another virtue for those interested in the phenomenon of the reception of ideas. Indeed, the collective character of the book and the fact that each chapter deals with a specific episode of Spinoza's reception throughout the long nineteenth century, which poses different theoretical challenges and requires different approaches, allows each author to adopt his or her own original perspective. As a small sample of this rich and enriching coexistence of multiple scholarly approaches, I would like to draw attention to some concepts with which the authors make their point of view explicit and which constitute, as I have just said, at least in my opinion, the other great achievement of this book.

At the beginning of her article Sandra Field mentions three possible methodological approaches to the study of the reception of one thinker by another: historical influence, theoretical affinity, and theoretical transformation (212). The *first* approach, which aims to reconstruct the link that actually existed between the two figures to be studied on the basis of documents—books, letters, notes, etc.—in order to establish whether there was indeed an influence of the ideas of one on the other, is adopted by most of the authors of the chapters of the book. The chapter by Martin Bollacher is an excellent

example of this approach, carried out rigorously and exhaus-tively. However, the notion of historical influence also has its nuances. Michael Forster, for example, distinguishes between direct and indirect influence. Thus, he establishes that while Spinoza exerted a direct impact on Herder that can be verified from the textual record, it was above all through Herder that Spinoza influenced F. Schlegel and Schleiermacher. This distinction renders the historical mode of studying influences more complex, since it allows us to think of the function of the direct receivers of a doctrine as capable of prolonging that reception in other thinkers, becoming an intermediate but fundamental piece of the puzzle when deciphering the sources of the thought of the author under study.

To approach reception from the *second* perspective of theoretical affinity, on the other hand, no longer aims at following the traces of the readings that one thinker made of another in his texts. Explicit mentions become secondary in order to allow ideas to take center stage. The aim is precisely to find agreements, coincidences and similarities between the thinkers. In her chapter, Sandra Field combines the two aforementioned methodological paths to reexamine Spinoza's impact on Marx's concept of true democracy. Katharina Kraus adopts this same double approach in her study of Lou Salomé and Spinoza. First, she shows that it is possible to establish from her texts a sustained influence of Spinozism on her thought. Secondly, she examines three themes in Salomé's thought to show their affinity with Spinoza's positions: his conception of the original foundation of life as *All-Einheit*, his psychosomatic parallelism and his explanation of the ethical dimension of human life. Frederick Beiser also provides a good example of the combination of these first two ways of studying reception, by setting out to trace the reception of Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* in a work by Strauβ that does not mention it at all, the scandalous *Das Leben Jesu*. After establishing from other documents—his correspondence, his doctoral dissertation, and an early work on Christianity—that Strauβ read and studied Spinoza, and that he explicitly acknowledges him as the father of biblical criticism, Beiser reconstructs a number of affinities between the methodology adopted in *Das Leben Jesu* and that of the *Theological-Political Treatise*. Also Sandra Shapshay and Dennis Vanden Auweele find an "implicit dialogue" that Schopenhauer conducts with Spinoza in a section of the second volume of his *World as Will and Representation*. Moreover, as many specialists admit, this approach is essential in the case of the history of the reception of Spinozism, a doctrine that had been, since its first appearance, combated and denounced from the most traditional sectors. Many German thinkers who read and studied Spinoza were not willing to admit it publicly,

knowing the cost that this could bring them. Thus, finding conceptual affinities is a way to reconstruct a subterranean influence, a silenced presence of this source in their texts.

The *third* methodological approach, which Field calls "theoretical transformation" and which, according to her brief note, can be seen in the attempt of French thinkers of the late 1920s who try to refound Marxism on a Spinozian metaphysical basis, is also brought into play in this book. This is what, we may think, Michael Rosenthal does in connecting the phenomenon of reception with creative philosophical thought. In studying F. Schlegel's understanding of the figure of the prophet in connection with Spinoza's ideas, Rosenthal argues that the German is using Spinozistic ideas to produce an entirely new philosophical model (35). Thus, he points out that if Schlegel is interested in certain Spinozian ideas, this interest is in the service of a new Romantic project. Spinoza is thus transformed into an "inspiration" (37) that allows him to explain his positions, but not completely. In the same vein, Kristen Gjesdal warns that "Philosophical positions sometimes take on a life of their own—one that could not have been anticipated by their authors or immediate followers" (50), and proposes to leave aside the question of whether Spinoza exerted an influence on German Romanticism to discuss, instead, how Herder, Schleiermacher and Staël "made creative use of the systematic space disclosed by Spinoza's hermeneutics" (50-51). Tracie Matysik, too, in studying the way in which Dietzgen, Engels and Plekhanov transformed Spinoza into a dialectical materialist, points out that all three appealed to Spinoza's thought mainly as an instrument of critique; that is, that they tried to find in Spinoza an anti-foundationalist metaphysics that would serve them to attack bourgeois philosophy.

However, whatever the methodological approach chosen to study the reception of Spinoza in the different German thinkers, each of the chapters of the book shows to what extent this type of research not only allows a better understanding of the thought of these recipients by making explicit their sources and theoretical background, but also opens up the possibility of seeing the received texts in a new light, of identifying new problematic aspects of their proposals. To put it briefly, reconstructing the history of the reception of Spinozism allows us to discover a new Spinoza, a Spinoza with more faces, more nuances, and more philosophical depth.

If it is true that Spinoza, during his lifetime, never set foot on German soil, his presence in Germany is indisputable. The effects of the highly complex process of reception of his ideas by German thinkers, poets and writers was extremely powerful and its echoes continue to resonate today. Knowing this history is, indeed, fundamental to understanding not only the

shaping of German enlightenment and romanticism, but also, as this book shows, the unfolding of so much contemporary philosophy. The emphasis placed on the reception and discussion of political philosophy and philosophy of religion additionally transforms this book into a highly topical collection that interrogates issues such as freedom of expression, democracy, and the link between philosophy and religion—issues that have not lost their relevance and that continue to challenge us.