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Spinoza, Marx and Ilyenkov – who did not know Marx’s Transcription of Spinoza<sup>1</sup>

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### *Introduction*

Ilyenkov was, as far as I know, not aware of the fact that in March to April 1841, at the age of 22, Karl Marx made extensive transcriptions in Latin from Spinoza, together with other philosophers as I outline below, as part of his reading for his doctoral thesis *The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*. These notebooks were published by *Dietz Verlag* in the GDR in 1976, a year before Ilyenkov’s death, in two volumes (Marx, 1976). Volume 1 contains Marx’s transcriptions in Latin and German; Volume II contains translations from Latin into German, and notes, the “Apparat”. A translation into French, by Maximilien Rubel, with an Introduction by Rubel, appeared in 1977 (Rubel 1977).

My own interest in Spinoza was sparked by reading, in the early 1980s, one of the later works of E. V. Ilyenkov (1924-1979), for me the most interesting of the philosophers working in the USSR, namely his *Dialectical Logic*, especially Essay Two, “Thought as an Attribute of Extension” (Ilyenkov 1977). Ilyenkov also made extensive reference to Spinoza<sup>3</sup> in the first two sections of Chapter One of the revised version, for translation into German in 1979, of *The Dialectics of the Abstract and Concrete in Marx’s Capital (Abstract and Concrete)*, first published in Russian in 1960, and in English in 1982. It is a curious fact, to which I will return, that all Ilyenkov’s references in *Dialectical Logic* but one, are to Spinoza’s *Ethics*, with one reference to *On the Improvement of the Understanding (Improvement)*, while all the references in *Abstract and Concrete* are to Spinoza’s *Improvement*. I wonder whether Ilyenkov only had Volume 1 of the two volume *Selected Works* of Spinoza.

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I am very grateful to the participants in the Helsinki seminar, and to Andrey Maidansky and Vesa Oittinen for their acute and insightful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter. All errors are, of course, my own.

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<sup>3</sup> Ilyenkov’s engagement with Spinoza was through the Collected Works in two very handsome volumes, with a variety of translations, published in 1957 (Moscow: Politicheskaya Literatura), in a large edition of 30,000. Vol 1 contained: an introduction by V. V. Sokolov; *A Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being* (translated by A. I. Rubin); *The Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* (translated by V. V. Sokolov); *Appendix on Metaphysical Thought* (translated by V. V. Sokolov); *On the Improvement of the Understanding* (translated by Ya. M. Vorovskiy); *Ethics* (translated by N. A. Ivantsov). Volume 2 contained: *A Theologico-Political Treatise* (translated by M. Lopatkina); *Political Treatise* (translated by S. M. Rogovin and V. V. Chredin); *Correspondence* (translated by V. K. Brushlinskiy)

In 1841 Marx employed a calligrapher to transcribe at length in Latin from the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, and from the *Correspondence*, using the 1802 edition of Spinoza's works published in Jena. But he made no transcription from the *Improvement* or the *Ethics*.<sup>4</sup>

In this article I start with Marx's transcriptions of Spinoza, and the deep significance of what he transcribed, from the TTP and the Correspondence, and in what order. I contend that this demonstrates what was of particular interest and importance to him at that time. Second, I examine the presence, even if not explicit, of Spinoza in Marx's works, and to the question whether Marx was a Spinozist. I think he was. Third, I turn to Ilyenkov and his engagement with Spinoza, and fourth, to Ilyenkov's place in the Marxist tradition of Spinozism. Fifth and sixth, I present an analysis of Ilyenkov's instrumental deployment of Spinoza first in his *Dialectical Logic* (Ilyenkov 1977), and then in his *The Dialectic of the Abstract and Concrete in Marx's Capital* (Ilyenkov 1982).

The following questions arise for consideration. Were Marx and Ilyenkov reading, in effect, two quite different Spinozas? Or was each of them reading Spinoza instrumentally, in order further to develop their own ideas? I prefer the latter, and it is what Spinoza himself would have wanted.

And what if Ilyenkov had encountered Marx's own appropriation of Spinoza? This chapter contends that he would have been delighted, and his own understanding both of Spinoza and of Marx would have been enriched.

### *Marx and Spinoza*

Marx began his philosophical notebooks in 1839, with materials for his doctoral dissertation *The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*, which he submitted in 1841. (Marx 1975, 32-105) He made 141 pages of transcripts of Epicurean Philosophy – Diogenes, Epicurus, Sextus Empiricus, Democritus, Epicurus and others, and Seneca to the beginning of 1840. In 1840 he made 27 pages of transcripts from Aristotle's *De Anima* (On the Soul); in March 1841, 29 pages of transcripts from Leibniz in Latin and French; from January to March 1841, 19 pages of transcripts from David Hume in German translation; from March to April 1841, 43 pages of transcripts in Latin from Spinoza. During the same period Marx made 11 pages of transcripts from Rozencranz's *History of Kantian Philosophy*; and from the beginning of April to the end of May 1842 he made 87 pages of

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<sup>4</sup> Marx used the edition edited by Henr[-icus] Eberh[ard] Gottlob Paulus (1802) *Benedictus de Spinoza: Opera quae supersunt omnia. Iterum dedenda curavit....* Vol 1. Ienae

transcripts on the History of Art and Religion – the Bonn notebook. The transcriptions from Spinoza were the most substantial in his philosophical notebooks.

It will be recalled that in the first half of 1842 Marx was engaged in polemical journalism, in defence of freedom of expression, writing his “Comments on the Latest Prussian Censorship Instruction”<sup>5</sup> and, in the *Rheinische Zeitung*, his “Debates on Freedom of the Press and Publication of the Proceedings of the Assembly of the Estates”. (Marx 1975 vol 1, 132-181) In September-November 1844 he and Friedrich Engels wrote *The Holy Family or Critique of Critical Criticism. Against Bruno Bauer and Company*. (Marx 1975 <sup>6</sup>

Marx’s Notebook was headed “Spinoza's Theologisch-politischer Tractat (written in hand by the calligrapher) von Karl Heinrich Marx (in Marx’s own handwriting). Berlin. 1841”–, that is “Spinoza’s Theologico-political Treatise by Karl Heinrich Marx”. (TTP - Spinoza 1951, and see James 2012) This could be taken as an unusual claim to authorship, but in my view Marx was simply signalling that this was his own, selection, in the order in which he was most interested in Spinoza at that time, rather than Spinoza’s own order of chapters. Indeed, Marx did not start at the beginning of the Treatise. The first transcription was from Chapter 6 of the Treatise, “Of miracles”. (Spinoza 1951, 81-97) In particular, Marx transcribed the following passage:

Further, as nothing happens in nature which does not follow from her laws, and as her laws embrace everything conceived by the Divine intellect, and lastly, as nature follows a fixed and immutable order; it most clearly follows that miracles are only intelligible as in relation to human opinions, and merely mean events of which the natural cause cannot be explained by a reference to any ordinary occurrence, either by us, or at any rate, by the writer and narrator of the miracle. (Spinoza 1951, 84)

Marx next turned to Chapter 14, “Definitions of faith” (Spinoza 1951, 182-189), especially the following:

...philosophy has no end in view save truth: faith, as we have abundantly proved, looks for nothing but obedience and piety. Again, philosophy is based on axioms which must be sought from nature alone: faith is based on history and language, and must be sought for only in Scripture and revelation... (Spinoza 1951, 189)

followed by Chapter 15 “Theology not subservient to reason” (Spinoza 1951, 190-199).

At this point Marx made an abrupt shift to a later chapter focusing on more political issues: Chapter 20, “Freedom of thought and speech” (Spinoza 1951, 257-259), “that in a free state every man may think whatever he likes, and say what he thinks” (Spinoza 1951, 257), including

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<sup>5</sup> written between 15 January and 10 February 1842

<sup>6</sup> The book was first published in February 1845, Frankfurt am Main. The work was never translated into English in either man's lifetime; 1956 English translation by Richard Dixon and Clement Dutt and is taken from the 1845 German edition; *MECW* Volume 4, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, Moscow)

If men's minds were as easily controlled as their tongues, every king would sit safely on his throne, and government by compulsion would cease... However, we have shown already that no man's mind can possibly lie wholly at the disposition of another, for no one can willingly transfer his natural right of free reason and judgment, or be compelled to do so

And

the true aim of government is liberty.

Next, Marx went back one chapter, to Chapter 19, “Of the outward forms of religion” – “It is shown that the right over matters spiritual lies wholly with the sovereign. And that the outward forms of religion should be in accordance with public peace, if we would obey God aright”; to Chapter 18, “Of certain political doctrines” – “From the commonwealth of the Hebrews, and their history, certain political doctrines are deduced.”, to Chapter 17 “Of the Hebrew theocracy” – “It is shown that no one can, or need, transfer all his rights to the sovereign power.”, and to Chapter 16, “Of the foundations of a state” – “Of the natural and civil rights of individuals; and of the rights of the sovereign power”.

Marx then jumped to Chapters 7 to 13, on the interpretation of scripture; and finally Chapters 1 to 5, on prophecy, prophets, divine law and ceremonial law.

What can we conclude? We have no evidence other than the choices Marx made in his transcription – the directions he gave to his calligrapher. First, therefore, it would appear that he was grappling with religion and sorting out for himself the materialism and indeed substance monism which were the foundation for his and Engels’s work. Second, we know that issues of censorship and freedom of expression were the subject matter of Marx’s first public writings. So those were the sections of the Treatise to which Marx turned first.

Maximilian Rubel asks:

Comment expliquer ce curieux regroupement de chapitres?... Tout au plus pourrait-on presumer que l’étudiant Marx a voulu retenir les enseignements du *Traité* dans l’ordre qu’il jugeait plus conforme à l’esprit et aux necessities de l’époque où il vivait, d’où l’inversion des deux grands thèmes qui font l’objet du *Traité*, la religion et la politique. (Rubel 1977, 13)

### *Marx and Spinoza’s Correspondence*

As with the Treatise (TTP), Marx did not take the Correspondence in order. He went straight to Letter XXXII (XIX) from Spinoza to William de Blyenburgh, December 1664, in which Spinoza explained why “I cannot admit that sin and evil have any positive existence, far less that anything can exist, or come to pass, contrary to the will of God.” (Spinoza 1952, 332) It

would appear that Marx was attracted by Spinoza's strict materialist determinism. From that letter Marx returned to Letter II (II) of August 1661 to Henry Oldenburg, in which Spinoza wrote:

I will begin then by speaking briefly of God, Whom I define as a Being consisting in infinite attributes, whereof each is infinite or supremely perfect after its kind. You must observe that by attribute I mean everything which is conceived through itself and in itself, so that the conception of it does not involve the conception of anything else. For instance, extension is conceived through itself, but motion is not. (Spinoza 1955, 277)

That was followed in his transcription by Letter IV (IV) from Spinoza to Oldenburg, with the following highly significant passage, already referred to by Maidansky, as noted above:

But you say: perhaps thought is a corporeal action: be it so, though I by no means grant it: you, at any rate, will not deny that extension, in so far as it is extension, is not thought, and this is all that is required for explaining my definition... (Spinoza 1955, 283)

Marx transcribed from letters V, VII, VIII, IX, X, XI, XIII, XIV and referred to Letter XV, from Spinoza to Henry Oldenburg, which includes:

... I will premise that I do not attribute to nature either beauty or deformity, order or confusion. Only in relation to our imagination can things be called beautiful or deformed, ordered or confused. (Spinoza 1955, 290)

Letters XVI, XVII, XVIII, XIX are followed by Letter XXI, and XXIII. This contains Spinoza's careful explanation:

... I should like briefly to explain here, in what sense I assert that a fatal necessity presides over all things and actions. God is in no wise subject to fate: I conceive that all things follow with inevitable necessity from the nature of God, in the same way as everyone conceives that it follows from God's nature that God understands himself. (Spinoza 1955, 301)

Letter XXIV is followed by Letter XXV of 7 February 1676, Spinoza to Oldenburg:

When I said in my former letter that we are inexcusable, because we are in the power of God, like clay in the hands of a potter, I meant to be understood in the sense, that no one can bring a complaint against God for having given him a weak nature or infirm spirit. (Spinoza 1955, 305)

Marx transcribed Letters XXVI, XXVII, XXVIII (Spinoza to Simon de Vries), XXIX, XXX, and finally LXXIV, Spinoza's magnificent retort to Albert Burgh, his former pupil, who had recently become a Catholic, and had condemned his former friends:

You cannot possibly deny, unless you have lost your memory as well as your reason, that in every Church there are thoroughly honourable men, who worship God with justice and charity.

... what distinguishes the Romish Church from others must be something entirely superfluous, and therefore founded solely on superstition.

For I do not presume that I have found the best philosophy, I know that I understand the true philosophy. If you ask in what way I know it, I answer: In the same way as you know that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles...

... and also examine the history of the Church (of which I see you are completely ignorant), in order to see how false, in many respects, is Papal tradition, and by what course of events and with what cunning the Pope of Rome six hundred years after Christ obtained supremacy over the Church... (Spinoza 1955, 414-419)

Although Marx made no transcription from *Ethics* or from *On the Improvement of the Understanding*, his close attention to the Correspondence would have given him a more than competent understanding of Spinoza's philosophy. However it is highly likely, in my view, that his primary motivation in selecting these passages was to equip himself for his left-Hegelian critique of religion, and for his pursuit of the causes of radical democracy and freedom of expression as against the Prussian authorities.

It has been noted above that Marx entitled his transcription "Spinoza's Theologico-political Treatise by Karl Heinrich Marx". Like Ilyenkov, he, in effect, constructed his own Spinoza. Alexandre Matheron put it this way:

Ayant éliminé ce qui, du texte de Spinoza, ne l'intéressait pas ou ne pouvait servir à son eventual projet, Marx reconstitue un *autre texte*, qui a sa coherence proper, et dont il semble avoir tenu à faire ressortir toutes les articulations. (Matheron 1977, 161)

Matheron provided a detailed analysis of Marx's selections, and the way that Marx through his selection really did produce a Marxian Spinoza. In his view two extreme hypotheses were possible: "... peut-être Marx projette-t-il sur Spinoza ses propres idées, peut-être s'en sert-il au contraire comme d'un repoussoir...". (Matheron 1977, 212) Matheron's conclusion was that despite Marx's radical re-working, Spinoza's fundamental theses (*les theses maîtresses*) had not been falsified by him. One thing is certain: the young Marx was a particularly attentive reader.

### *Spinoza in Marx's works*

It has been pointed out that Marx seldom referred directly to Spinoza in his writings, and commentators such as Perry Anderson regard his few citations as "of the most banal sort". That for me shows a lack of attention by Anderson. (Anderson 1976, 64, fn 30) Indeed, certain citations are of great interest, in showing precisely how Marx deployed Spinoza explicitly.

In his 1842 “Comments on the Latest Prussian Censorship Instruction”, referred to above, Marx wrote the following (also indicating that despite the absence of transcription in 1841 he was familiar with the *Ethics*):

“*Verum index sui et falsi.*” (Truth is the touchstone of itself and of falsehood (Spinoza, *Ethics* Part II, Prop 43) (Spinoza 1996, 58) “As the light makes both itself and the darkness plain, so truth is the standard both of itself and of the false.” (Marx 1975 Vol 1, 112)<sup>7</sup>

and a few pages later he referred to Kant, Fichte and Spinoza.

In 1844, in *The Holy Family*, he wrote:

The dispute between *Strauss* and *Bauer* over *Substance* and *Self-Consciousness* is a dispute *within Hegelian* speculation. In *Hegel* there are *three* elements, *Spinoza's Substance*, *Fichte's Self-Consciousness* and *Hegel's* necessarily antagonistic *unity* of the two, the *Absolute Spirit*. The first element is metaphysically disguised *nature separated* from man; the second is metaphysically disguised *spirit separated* from nature; the third is the metaphysically disguised *unity* of both, *real man* and the *real human species*.

Within the domain of theology, *Strauss* expounds *Hegel* from *Spinoza's point of view*, and *Bauer* does so from *Fichte's point of view*, both quite consistently. They both *criticised* *Hegel* insofar as with him each of the two elements was *falsified* by the other, whereas they carried each of these elements to its *one-sided* and hence consistent development. — Both of them therefore go *beyond* *Hegel* in their criticism, but both also remain *within* his speculation and each represents only *one* side of his system. *Feuerbach*, who completed and criticised *Hegel from Hegel's point of view* by resolving the metaphysical *Absolute Spirit* into “*real man on the basis of nature*”, was the first to complete the *criticism of religion* by sketching in a grand and masterly manner the *basic features* of the *criticism of Hegel's speculation* and hence of *all metaphysics*. (Marx 1975, Vol 4, 139)

In this passage we see Marx's characteristic pithy playfulness, and his profound understanding of the great philosophers. Although it must be said that Spinoza never considered nature to be separated from man, but rather insisted that man is fully part of nature, and that this is the root of his determinism.

Finally, in 1858, in the *Grundrisse*, unpublished until 1939, Marx wrote:

The act of production is therefore in all its moments also an act of consumption. But the economists admit this. Production as directly identical with consumption, and consumption as directly coincident with production, is termed by them *productive consumption*. This identity of production and consumption amounts to Spinoza's thesis: *determinatio est negatio*. Note 11 on that page explains. ‘Determination is negation’, i.e. given the undifferentiated self-identity of the universal world substance,

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<sup>7</sup> “Comments on the Latest Prussian Censorship Instruction” MECW Vol 1 pp.109-131 written between 15 January and 10 February 1842

to attempt to introduce particular determinations is to negate this self-identity. (Spinoza, *Letters*, No.50, to J. Jelles, 2 June 1674.) (Marx 1973, 90)

This incidentally shows that Marx was familiar with letters of Spinoza which he had not transcribed. We have every reason to believe that Marx returned to a reading of Spinoza after 1841, for example in 1858, and this is strong evidence.

Although he intended to do so, Marx never wrote a text dealing specifically with philosophy, and instead turned his attention from very early in his career to a critique of political economy.

But strong claims, with which I agree, have been made for Marx's Spinozism. Yirmiyahu Yovel, in his *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, (Yovel 1992, 78-79) asserted that

Marx used Spinoza's thought far more than he admitted. Spinoza was above all a counterbalance and corrective to Hegel, restoring the concept of nature and man as a concrete, natural being from what seemed to Marx his immersion in the lofty and semireligious heights of the Hegelian *Geist*... Marx's new philosophy of immanence, though strongly influenced by Hegel and his milieu, goes back to Spinoza in more ways than one. Indeed, Spinoza is almost always present in Marx's thought. But, we may add, the actual presence of Spinoza in Marx far surpasses his direct mention by name.

In the view of Maximilien Rubel, "Les traces 'spinoziennes' dans la correspondance de Marx, sans être fréquentes, témoignent de l'intensité de cette rencontre." (Rubel 1977, 24)

Yovel also confirmed my sense that Marx turned to Spinoza especially for the critique of religion:

Just as the young Marx was ploughing his way through Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise* and affixing his own name to the excerpts he diligently copied from it, Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* (1841) was bringing Spinoza's critique of religion up-to-date. The link between the two books was too timely and apparent for Marx to overlook. (Yovel, 1992, 80)

Yovel further identified correctly the manner in which Marx read in order to equip himself for the struggle with the Prussians:

But Marx, diligent student of the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, could not fail to see the link it established between theory and practice on the one hand, and between political and religious emancipation on the other. (Yovel 1992, 83)

Finally, Yovel, without referring to Ilyenkov, identified precisely the manner in which Ilyenkov would, without knowing about Marx's transcriptions, discover a rich source of inspiration in Spinoza as he adapted and developed Spinoza's thought for his own purposes, just as Marx did so:

The entity which Marx considers ontologically self-sufficient is not “nature” in the homogenous sense of Spinoza, but a dialectical interaction of nature and man, whereby each affects the other in a practical mode (work, shaping, reproduction). The hyphenated term *man-in-nature* seems more adequate to express this idea than Marx’s *man and nature*, since Marx clearly does not have a simple conjunction in mind but a dialectical reciprocity. (Yovel 1992, 82)

This is indeed Ilyenkov’s “thinking body”, in the context of his “activity philosophy”.

We may be quite sure that if Ilyenkov had had the opportunity to study Marx’s transcriptions of Spinoza, he would not only have been delighted to discover Marx’s close reading, but would also have deepened his own appropriation of Marx as well as Spinoza. (See also Bowring 2015, arguing that Marx’s fundamental conception of the Law of Value was a profoundly Spinozan conception of a Law of Nature).

### *Ilyenkov and Spinoza*

As Sergei Mareev points out, although Ilyenkov’s views were formed under the influence of Marx and German classical philosophy, both he and L. S. Vygotsky gave prime significance to Spinoza’s ideas. Mareev argues that Ilyenkov did not simply continue the “line” of Spinoza in Soviet philosophy; for the first time he “opened” Spinoza to Mareev and his generation. Before Ilyenkov, the Soviet philosophical public knew Spinoza as a mechanical determinist, or as Spinoza the atheist. According to Mareev, the last Soviet and first post-Soviet textbooks on Spinoza interpreted him in the spirit of Stalin’s “diamat”, as a Cartesian dualist. (Mareev 2007, 198)

Nevertheless, in the collection *Evald Ilyenkov’s Philosophy Revisited*, published in 2000 following a Symposium in 1999 (Oittinen, 2000), Spinoza did not make much of an appearance. An exception was the section “Iljenkow und das zweite Buch der “Ethik””, in Wolfgang Jantzen’s chapter “Leontjew, Iljenkow und die Meschetscherjakow-Debatte – Methodologische Bemerkungen”. (Oittinen, 2000, 85-88) Nikolai Veresov, in his chapter “Vygotsky, Ilyenkov and Mamardashvili” discussed Ilyenkov’s attitude to A. N. Leontiev’s “psychological theory of activity”. He wrote:

“The main role of such a theory comprised the concept of activity (*Tätigkeit, deiatelnost*). Activity for Ilyenkov was not a super-category or explanatory principle. On the contrary, and following Spinoza and Marx, activity was treated as a substance from which both subject and object derive.” (Oittinen 2000, 137)

A. G. Novokhatko, of the Spinoza Archive, however, contributed a whole chapter, *Ilyenkov i Spinoza* (Ilyenkov and Spinoza) (Oittinen 2000, 293-306). Although much of the chapter

concerned Ilyenkov's relations with Vygotsky and Leontiev, and his critique of Fichte, the author selected the following passage from *Dialectical Logic*:

Only by proceeding from the idea of substance could the thinking body understand both itself and the reality with and within which it operated and about which it thought... having once understood the mode of its action (i.e. thought), the thinking body just so comprehended substance as the absolutely necessary condition of interaction with the external world. (Ilyenkov 1977, 60-61)

The collection ended with the publication for the first time of Ilyenkov's 1970 "The Science of Logic" (Oittinen 2000, 331-372). This did not refer to Spinoza. However, the passage cited by Novokhatko correctly identified Ilyenkov's main innovation, and his main point of departure from Spinoza, his concept of the "thinking body" (in Russian мыслящее тело, *myslyashcheye telo*).

According to Mareev, Spinoza was for Ilyenkov first and foremost a *monist*. Mareev cites a famous passage from *Dialectical Logic*:

The brilliance of the solution of the problem of the relation of thinking to the world of bodies in space outside thought (i.e. outside the head of man), which Spinoza formulated in the form of the thesis that thought and extension are not two substances, but only two attributes of one and the same substance, can hardly be exaggerated. This solution immediately rejected every possible kind of interpretation and investigation of thought by the logic of spiritualist and dualist constructions..." (Ilyenkov 1977, 43)

Ilyenkov's special contribution was his assertion that

There are not two different and originally contrary objects of investigation – body and thought – but only *one single* object, which is the *thinking body* of living, real, man (or other analogous being, if such exists anywhere in the Universe), only considered from two different and even opposing aspects or points of view. (Ilyenkov 1977, 31)

According to Ilyenkov, this "simple and profoundly true idea", that *thought* is a property, a mode of existence of the body, the same as its *extension*, was expressed by Spinoza in the language of his time, as the insistence that thought and extension are two attributes of one and the same substance "real infinite Nature". Ilyenkov's original assertion was that "It is *in man* that Nature really performs, in a self-evident way, that very activity that we are accustomed to call 'thinking'." (Ilyenkov 1977, 32)

Later, in the revised edition of *Abstract and Concrete*, Ilyenkov pointed out what in his view was wrong with Spinoza:

It would hardly be appropriate to discuss here the short-comings of Spinoza's conception, as they are well known: Spinoza failed to understand the connection between thinking and practical activity with objects, between theory and practice, the

role of practice as the only objective criterion of the truth of a concrete concept.  
(Ilyenkov 1982, 22)

In other words, Spinoza failed to grasp the concept of the “thinking body”, as well as the fact that, according to Ilyenkov, the human intellect comes into being through the co-activity of the hand and the mind.

### *Ilyenkov in the Marxist context*

In his approach to Spinoza, Ilyenkov most certainly departed from Diamat. But he followed an approach to Spinoza which can be traced through Hegel to Marx , Engels, Plekhanov, Lenin and Bukharin.

G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) was a close reader and critic of Spinoza, but insisted in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* that “It is therefore worthy of note that thought must begin by placing itself at the standpoint of Spinozism; to be a follower of Spinoza is the essential commencement of all Philosophy.” (Hegel 1995, 257) In his *The Science of Logic* (1812) , in his “Remark; The Philosophy of Spinoza and Leibniz” (Hegel 1969, 536-540) he wrote : “*Determinateness is negation* – is the absolute principle of Spinoza’s philosophy; this true and simple insight establishes the absolute unity of substance.” (Hegel 1969, 536) In the chapter on The Notion in General” he wrote

Besides, a standpoint so lofty and so intrinsically rich as the relation of substance, far from ignoring those assumptions even contains them: one of the attributes of Spinoza’s substance is *thinking*. (Hegel 1969, 580-1)

Ilyenkov was most certainly aware of these passages.

I will return to Marx below; but Plekhanov relayed the following, often-cited conversation between himself and Engels:

“Thus, according to you” I asked “old Spinoza was right when he said that thought and extension are nothing other than two attributes of one and the same substance?”  
“Of course “answered Engels “old Spinoza was completely right.”<sup>8</sup>

Engels himself very rarely referred to Spinoza directly, but the following passage from the Introduction to his *Dialectics of Nature* is thoroughly Spinozist in tone and content:

“... we have the certainty that matter remains eternally the same in all its transformations, that none of its attributes can ever be lost, and therefore, also, that with the same iron necessity that it will exterminate on the earth its highest creation, the thinking mind, it must somewhere else and at another time again produce it.”  
(Engels 1964, 40)

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<sup>8</sup> Conversation Plekhanov and Engels – G. V. Plekhanov *Sochineniya* Vol.20 p.363; or G. V. Plekhanov “Bernstein and Materialism”. In *Sochineniya* Vol.XI (Moscow-Petrograd, 1923) p.22

Plekhanov in turn considered that that “contemporary materialism... is more or less based on Spinozism”. (Plekhanov 1956, 339) And in his 1908 *Materialismus Militans (Reply to Mr Bogdanov)* (Plekhanov 1973) he wrote in a footnote:

According to Spinoza, the thing (*res*) is the body (*corpus*) and at the same time the idea of the body (*idea corporis*). But since he who perceives himself, also has a perception of his own perception, the thing is a body (*corpus*), the idea of a body (*idea corporis*) and finally the idea of the idea of the body (*idea ideae corporis*). It can be seen from this how close Feuerbach’s materialism is to Spinoza’s teaching.

Lenin followed Hegel’s lead. In his “Conspectus of Hegel’s Science of Logic” he wrote: “Determinateness is negation...” (Spinoza) *Omnis determinatio est negatio*, “this statement is of immeasurable importance...” (Lenin 1963, 108)

Nikolai Bukharin was, after Lenin, the most philosophically-minded Bolshevik leader.<sup>9</sup> In his *Philosophical Arabesques*, written in prison following his arrest on 27 February 1937, he showed his deep sympathy with Spinoza. (Bukharin 2005) He referred to

“... the totality of everything concrete... All the storms of becoming are played out in it, and it itself “flows” in infinite time and space, which exist merely as forms of its being. This is the great substance of Spinoza’s *causu sui*; it is *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* simultaneously, stripped of their theological baggage. (Bukharin 2005, 90-91)

Answering critics of Bolshevik “idealism”, he wrote: “In the first place our worthy opponents are no doubt aware that Plekhanov defined Marxism (of course with a grain of salt) as a type of Spinozism. And we all know what Spinozism is.” (Bukharin 2005, 175) In a section on “Freedom and Necessity” (Bukharin 2005, 186-192), Bukharin wrote the following in relation to Lenin’s Conspectus of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*:

This is precisely the same view that Spinoza presented in his renowned *Ethics*, a view he “demonstrated” *more geometrico*, or in an exact “geometric manner”.

Spinoza protested in every possible way against the widespread view that “human beings have unlimited strength and depend on nothing apart from themselves.” Spinoza seized brilliantly on this fundamental, this abstract vacuity of “pure will” taken “in itself”, that is, outside of all relationships. Pure will is in fact a myth, although the sensation associated with an act of will may be one of complete freedom. “A child thus imagines that it freely wants the milk that feeds it; it gets angry, it thinks it freely seeks revenge; if it gets scared, that it freely wants to run away.” (Spinoza 1996, 73) But here, as we see, what is always involved is necessity in Aristotle’s third sense, and it is only about this necessity that we are talking in the present

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<sup>9</sup> He should be compared with A. V. Lunacharskiy, who in 1932 wrote *Barukh Spinoza i Burzhuaziya* (Baruch Spinoza and the Bourgeoisie) Bibliotek “Ogonyok” Zhurnalno-gazetnoye obyedineniye, Moscow 1933 at [http://www.situation.ru/app/j\\_art\\_1114.htm](http://www.situation.ru/app/j_art_1114.htm) – a sadly superficial account.

instance. This necessity is the main object, the center of the whole problem; in no way is it the “constraint” mentioned by Aristotle. (Bukharin 2005, 187)

Ilyenkov would not have known of these writings; but Bukharin would not have been alone among the Bolsheviks in his enthusiastic interest in Spinoza.

*Ilyenkov’s instrumental engagement with Spinoza – Dialectical Logic*

I have already indicated that Ilyenkov quoted from two texts of Spinoza only. His use of them was in my view entirely instrumental, in the sense that he took Spinoza as assisting him in working out his own philosophy.

H. Campbell Creighton, the translator of *Dialectical Logic*, did not seek to translate the Russian of the translation from Latin by N. A. Ivantsov from which Ilyenkov drew, but instead used that of W. H. White from *Great Books of the Western World*. A much better translation into English in my view is that of the Spinoza scholar Edwin Curley in the Penguin edition (Spinoza 1996).

In *Dialectical Logic*, in only the second essay out of eleven, Ilyenkov’s aim was to establish his concept of the “thinking body”. In order to do so, his citations from *Ethics* were selective and in some respects contrary to Spinoza’s own teaching. Not that Ilyenkov should be criticised for this. He was not writing an exposition of Spinoza.<sup>10</sup>

Andrey Maidanskiy analysed precisely this substantial difference between Ilyenkov and Spinoza in 2002. He wrote (Maidansky 2002):

In the texts of Spinoza the expression “thinking body” (*corpus cogitans*) is nowhere to be found. Moreover, Spinoza directly states that *the thinking thing is the mind*, and not the body: “Part II Definition 3: By idea I understand a concept of the mind which the mind forms because it is a thinking thing.” (Spinoza 1996, 32)

In Spinoza’s *Metaphysical Thoughts* the term *res cogitans* is defined precisely:

We have said that the human mind is a thinking thing. From this it follows that, merely from its own nature and considered only in itself (*ex sola sua natura, in se sola spectata*), it can do something, to wit, think, that is, affirm and deny. (Spinoza 2002, 209)

Thus it is not the body, but the mind which thinks. Ilyenkov without any basis saw in Spinoza’s philosophy a directly contradictory truth: “It is not a special “soul” that thinks... but the body of man itself.” (Ilyenkov 1977, 32) However, according to Spinoza, the body does not think, it is only the *object* of some ideas (and by no means all). Maidansky cites

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<sup>10</sup> This point is made by Vesa Oittinen (2005)

Spinoza's Letter IV, addressed to Henry Oldenburg, a passage transcribed by Marx as I show below: "... you say: perhaps thought is a corporeal action... I by no means grant it..." (Elwes Correspondence, 283) In an article published in English two years after the article referred to above Maidansky observed that for Ilyenkov, while Spinoza had rightly defined the relation of the ideal to the real in general, he could not solve the riddle of the birth of the human intellect. Ilyenkov's advance on Spinoza was to hold that the ideal arises from real action, the co-action of a hand with an external thing (Maidansky 2003, 209-210).

Having correctly cited several propositions of Spinoza on pages 61 to 68, footnotes 10, 14 and 15, Ilyenkov argued the following:

In other words, an adequate idea is only the conscious state of our body *identical in form with the thing outside the body*. This can be represented quite clearly. When I describe a circle with my hand on a piece of paper (in real space), my body, according to Spinoza, comes into a state fully identical with the form of the circle outside my body, into a state of real *action* in the form of a circle. My body (my hand) really describes a circle, and the awareness of this state (i.e. of the form of my own action in the form of the thing) is also the idea, which is, moreover, 'adequate'. (Ilyenkov 1997, 69)

Ilyenkov gave no reference for this, and, indeed, there is none. This passage appears nowhere in Spinoza. Ilyenkov was putting his own philosophy into Spinoza's mouth. As will be seen, Ilyenkov may well have had in mind a passage from the OIU, but this is not Spinoza. In fact, in Ilyenkov's thought, Spinoza's teaching had been transmuted into "action philosophy".

Immediately after this passage, Ilyenkov cited Postulates IV and VI in Part II "Of the Mind" of *Ethics* (Spinoza 1996, 44), and the White translation is good enough. He then cited the last sentence of the proof (demonstration) of Proposition 14, out of context. The passage as a whole reads, in the Penguin translation (Spinoza 1996, 44):

P14: *The human mind is capable of perceiving a great many things, and is the more capable, the more its body can be disposed in a great many ways.*

Dem: For the human body is affected in a great many ways by external bodies, and is disposed to affect external bodies in a great many ways. But the human mind must perceive everything which happens in the human body. Therefore, the human mind is capable of perceiving a great many things, and is the more capable [-,NS: as the human body is more capable], q.e.d.

Ilyenkov continued (Ilyenkov 1977, 69):

In other words, the more numerous and varied the means it has to 'move and arrange external bodies', the more it has 'in common' with other bodies.

But this is not Spinoza's position at all; Ilyenkov was not simply paraphrasing Spinoza. He was developing his own activity theory.

A page or so later, (Ilyenkov 1977, 71) Ilyenkov cited Proposition 39 of Spinoza. In the Penguin translation it is as follows:

*P.39: If something is common to, and peculiar to, the human body and certain external bodies by which the human body is usually affected, and is equally in the part and in the whole of each of them, its idea will also be adequate to the mind. (Spinoza 1996, 50)*

Ilyenkov did not cite the demonstration.

Cor (corollary): From this it follows that the mind is the more capable of perceiving many things adequately as its body has many things in common with other bodies.

In the text of *Dialectical Logic*, this was completely garbled. Ilyenkov returned to Proposition 38, and the following, in the Penguin translation:

From this it follows that there are certain ideas, or notions, common to all men. For all bodies agree in certain things, which must be perceived adequately, *or* clearly and distinctly, by all

And then on the same page Ilyenkov went right back to Proposition 26:

*P.26: The human mind does not perceive any external body as actually existing, except through the ideas of the affections of its own body. (Spinoza 1996, 50)*

Thus, Ilyenkov reversed Spinoza's logical sequence; and then jumped almost to the end of the *Ethics* to Part V, "Of Human Freedom", Proposition 39:

*P.39: He who has a body capable of a great many things has a mind whose greatest part is eternal. (Spinoza 1996, 178)*

Ilyenkov stated (Ilyenkov 1977, 72) that there follows from this Proposition something which in Spinoza's text precedes it by several pages, and again took a line (shown underlined) out of context, which is part of the proof of Proposition 25 in Part V.

*P.25: The greatest striving of the mind, and its greatest virtue is understanding things by the third kind of knowledge.*

Dem: The third kind of knowledge proceeds from an adequate idea of certain attributes of God to an adequate knowledge of the essence of things, and the more we understand things in this way, the more we understand God. Therefore, the greatest virtue of the mind, that is, the mind's power, *or* nature, *or* its greatest striving, is to understand things by the third kind of knowledge. (Spinoza 1996, 173)

From this selective arrangement Ilyenkov extracted the following:

Therefore the real composition of psychic activity (including the logical component of thought) is not in the least determined by the structure and arrangement of the parts of the human body and brain, but by the external conditions of universally human activity in the world of other bodies. (Ilyenkov 1977, 72)

But this again is Ilyenkov's "activity philosophy" and has nothing to do with Spinoza's own teaching.

There is one further citation from Spinoza in *Dialectical Logic*, although the English translation omits the footnote which is to be found in Ilyenkov's Russian text. In Essay 8, "The Materialist Conception of Thought as the Subject Matter of Logic", Ilyenkov elaborated on his central concept of the ideal:

Determination of the ideal is thus especially dialectical. It is that which is not, together with that which is, that which does not exist in the form of an external, sensuously perceived thing but at the same time does exist *as an active faculty of man*. (Ilyenkov 1977, 264)

For this he quoted not from the *Ethics*, but from *Improvement*, as follows:

A definition, if it is to be called perfect, must explain the inmost essence of a thing, and must take care not to substitute for this any of its properties... If a circle is defined as a figure, such that all straight lines drawn from the centre to the circumference are equal, everyone can see that such a definition does not in the least explain the essence of a circle, but solely one of its properties.

...

I. If the thing in question be created, the definition must (as we have said) comprehend the proximate cause. For instance, a circle should, according to this rule, be defined as follows: the figure described by any line whereof one end is fixed and the other free. This definition clearly comprehends the proximate cause. (Spinoza 1955, 35)

Once again, it can be seen that Ilyenkov's appropriation of Spinoza was undertaken not in order to explain Spinoza, but to advance his own philosophical position - which is, of course, not a criticism. Ilyenkov created his own Spinoza, the better to express his original ideas.

*Ilyenkov's instrumental engagement with Spinoza - The Dialectics of the Abstract and Concrete in Marx's Capital*

It would appear that Ilyenkov added to *Abstract and Concrete* a passage referring to Spinoza in the very last years of his life; *Abstract and Concrete* was first published in Russia in 1960, but without that passage. The translator of the English version, Sergei Syrovatkin, used the standard Elwes translation of *Improvement*.

Ilyenkov started (Ilyenkov 1982, 17) with the following:

Consistent materialists realised the weakness of the nominalistic view of the concept, its vulnerability to idealist speculations and errors. Spinoza stressed that the concept of substance, expressing the "first principle of nature", "cannot be conceived abstractedly or universally, and cannot extend further in the understanding than it does in reality".

In fact the passage in question is:

But since the first principle of nature cannot (as we shall see hereafter) be conceived abstractly or universally, and cannot extend further in the understanding than it does in reality, and has no likeness to mutable things, no confusion need be feared in respect to the idea of it, provided (as before shown) that we possess a standard of truth. That is, in fact, a being single and infinite; in other words, it is the sum total of being, beyond which there is no being found.

Ilyenkov therefore omitted the heart of Spinoza's notion of substance.

On the following page, Ilyenkov attributed to Spinoza a reference to "the mode of 'chaotic experience' uncontrolled by reason". (Ilyenkov 1982, 18) This is not to be found in Spinoza, and the passage cited, jumping back several pages in *Improvement*, is:

The second mode of perception cannot be said to give us the idea of the proportion of which we are in search. Moreover its results are very uncertain and indefinite, for we shall never discover anything in natural phenomena by its means, except accidental properties, which are never clearly understood, unless the essence of the things in question be known first. (Ilyenkov 1955, 11)

For a critique of Spinoza, Ilyenkov cited a long passage:

Now that we know what kind of knowledge is necessary for us, we must indicate the way and the method whereby we may gain the said knowledge concerning the things needful to be known. In order to accomplish this, we must first take care not to commit ourselves to a search going back to infinity – that is, in order to discover the best method for finding out the truth, there is no need of another method to discover such a method; nor of a third method for discovering the second, and so on to infinity. By such proceedings, we should never arrive at the knowledge of the truth, or, indeed any knowledge at all. The matter stands on the same footing as the making of material tools, which might be argued about in a similar way. For, in order to work iron, a hammer is needed, and the hammer cannot be forthcoming unless it has been made; but, in order to make it, there was need of another hammer and other tools, and so on to infinity. We might thus vainly endeavour to prove that men have no power of working iron. But as men at first made use of the instruments supplied by nature to accomplish very easy pieces of workmanship, laboriously and imperfectly, and then, when these were finished, wrought other things more difficult with less labour and greater perfection; and so gradually mounted from the simplest operations to the making of tools, and from the making of tools to the making of more complex tools and fresh feats of workmanship, till they arrived at making, with small expenditure of labour, the vast number of complicated mechanisms which they now possess. So, in like manner, the intellect, by its native strength, makes for itself intellectual instruments, whereby it acquires strength for performing other intellectual operations, and from these operations gets again fresh instruments or the power of pushing its investigations further, and thus gradually proceeds until it reaches the summit of wisdom. (Ilyenkov 1982, 19; Spinoza 1955, 11-12)

Ilyenkov's gloss was as follows:

Here Spinoza attempts a fundamentally materialist interpretation of the innateness of ‘intellectual instruments’, deducing it from man’s natural organisation rather than from the ‘God’ of Descartes or Leibniz.

What Spinoza failed to understand was the fact that the originally imperfect ‘intellectual instruments’ are products of material labour rather than of nature... that is merely an organic shortcoming of the entire old materialism. (Ilyenkov 1982, 19-20)

Finally, Ilyenkov cited the passage we have already seen, concerning the definition of a circle, also cited in Essay 8 of *Dialectical Logic*.

Spinoza was therefore not, for Ilyenkov, “Marx without the beard”; rather, Spinoza in his hands was an effective weapon, suitably adapted, in the war against Diamat, all the better for carrying the seal of approval of the Marxist and Bolshevik tradition.

### *Conclusion*

Eugene Holland has summarised (Holland 1998) the return of Spinoza in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and his impact on Marxist and critical thinkers in the post-WWII period:

Althusser's efforts to expunge Hegelianism from Marx's work involved replacing Hegel with Spinoza in many respects, although the extent of Althusser's reliance on and confidence in Spinoza remains unclear. (Althusser 1997) More dramatically, Antonio Negri has argued in favor of Spinoza's materialism, suggesting it is an important, early-modern precursor of Marx's fully modern materialism. (Negri 1999) Pierre Macherey has staged a direct confrontation between Spinoza and Hegel, stressing the degree to which the former eludes the grasp of the latter's history of philosophy, and therefore represents an important alternative to Hegelian views. (Macherey 2012) Gilles Deleuze, finally, has mined the western philosophical tradition for alternatives to Hegel, among which Spinoza must be counted as one of the most important. (Deleuze 1992 and 1988)

To these should be added Althusser’s co-worker Etienne Balibar, whose *Spinoza and Politics* is in my view and perhaps his, one of his best works. (Balibar 2008) And Vesa Oittinen has analysed Althusser’s “left-voluntarist” reading of Spinoza (Oittinen 1994), especially in *Reading Capital*. (Althusser and Balibar 2009)

Recently, the intellectual historian Jonathan Israel has written a series of books seeking to reinstate Spinoza as a philosopher in his own time, and as a key figure of the enlightenment and its intellectual and political explosions. (Israel 2002, 2008, 2011a, 2011b) Israel has been joined by the almost equally prolific philosopher Steven Nadler. (Nadler 2001, 2006, 2011) I mentioned in my Introduction Moses Hess and the remark attributed to him that Spinoza was the prophet of the French Revolution. The religion-inclined historian Samuel Moyn, a scholar of Emanuel Levinas, who regards the Enlightenment and especially the French Revolution as

diversions in human history and the history of ideas (Moyn 2012), reprimanded Israel for suggesting, in effect, that Spinoza caused the French Revolution (Moyn 2010). There followed an acerbic exchange in which Israel described Moyn's review as nonsense, and asked Moyn whether he should be described as a gnat or a vulture. (Israel 2010) Connoisseurs of academic sword-play should consult these articles. The more serious point is that Spinoza arouses the same degree of controversy and passion as he did in his own time, in Marx's time, and in the USSR.

Just as with Marx and Ilyenkov, Spinoza has been deployed in order to serve as a foundation for systems of ideas which Spinoza would never have countenanced. Both Marx and Ilyenkov read Spinoza very closely indeed, and were profoundly influenced by a variety of his works. They both (re)constructed their own Spinozas, for their own purposes. I am sure Ilyenkov would have been delighted to find that Marx was, like him, excited and confirmed in his own distinctive outlook by Spinoza; I do not think he would in any way have changed his "action philosophy". In the final analysis, Spinoza is in no way diminished by these very different engagements: his continuing relevance and power are strikingly confirmed.

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