



MARX, ENGELS, AND MARXISMS

Marx, Spinoza and Darwin

Materialism, Subjectivity and
Critique of Religion

Mauricio Vieira Martins

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Marx, Engels, and Marxisms

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PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH-LANGUAGE EDITION

First published in Brazil in 2017 under the title *Marx, Espinosa e Darwin: pensadores da imanência* (*Marx, Spinoza and Darwin: thinkers of immanence*), this book has been extensively revised and updated for its English-language edition.¹ A general presentation of the work can be found in the Introduction, which seeks to clarify its main objectives. To summarize, I highlight three of them here. The first is to investigate the contribution of these aforementioned thinkers—with all due respect to their differences—to the category of *immanence*, particularly fruitful in each of the authors, with consequences for the understanding even of our contemporary moment. Spinoza, Marx and Darwin appear here as thinkers who were able to affirm the human world as an immanent reality, opposing various types of religious transcendence at the time of

¹ The book was published as volume III of the *Coleção Niep/Marx*—a series edited by the *Núcleo Interdisciplinar de Estudos e Pesquisas sobre Marx e o Marxismo* [Interdisciplinary Center for Studies and Research on Marx and Marxism] at the Universidade Federal Fluminense—of which I am a member (<https://www.niepmarx.blog.br/>). In Brazil, the publisher Editora Consequência was responsible for the first edition, which is out of print. The second Brazilian edition was published by Usina Editorial. I take this opportunity to mention that, as regards the secondary literature, quotations from books and articles not published in English have been translated for the present volume. An example of this—but not the only one—was György Lukács's extensive work entitled *The ontology of social being*, since the three volumes currently published in English correspond only to a part of that work.

their writing. A second aim of the book is to investigate the role that *human subjectivity* plays in an immanent, materialist approach, given the frequent criticisms claiming that this approach weakens the importance of subjects in mundane life. Thus, this book seeks to make transparent the relevance of *human action* in an immanent approach, thereby dispelling the misconception that, for instance, Marxism is a form of philosophical objectivism. Finally, this conceptual debate provides the conditions to examine in the last two chapters the reasons why *the expected decline of religion with the development of science did not in fact occur* (a forecast found in prominent authors of the early twentieth century, such as Sigmund Freud and Max Weber). For this, it was necessary to analyze some of the characteristics of neoliberal globalization, intensified since the final third of the twentieth century. The deterioration of living conditions for vast segments of the population, together with the predominance of a particularly intimidating reality, constitute the background that is responsible, in my understanding, for the contemporary strengthening of religious discourse. This strengthening materializes not only in the more ostensive fundamentalisms, but also runs through the ideological superstructures of various societies (with evident national differences, some of them described throughout the book).

* * *

For this 2022 English-language edition of the book, nearly five years after its first release, a retrospective look shows that it is worth pointing out, albeit briefly, at least two aspects that deserve attention.

The first concerns the fact that since 2017 there has unfortunately been an increase in the deterioration of living conditions on the planet as a whole, a deterioration that preceded the COVID-19 pandemic, to be sure, but that was undoubtedly aggravated by it. Environmental devastation—identified by various researchers as a probable cause of the pandemic²—has become so evident that it now justly occupies a prominent place on any emancipatory political agenda, and particularly in the debate of the Marxist left. Regarding the theoretical debate, it must be said that there has been an increase in studies that, based on indications found in Marx's writings, construct a solid articulation between

² Rob Wallace, *Dead Epidemiologists: On the Origins of COVID* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020).

Marxism and the ecological cause. To the names of John Bellamy Foster, Paul Burkett and Michael Löwy—researchers of the environmental issue for many years—are added authors such as Kohei Saito, who has buried once and for all the image that Marx was blind to the environmental destruction caused by capitalist accumulation.

There is no doubt that this accumulation intensifies its voracious course, causing, in addition to environmental devastation, greater concentration of wealth and capital. In the first six months of the health crisis in 2020, the planet's billionaires became nearly 30% wealthier.³ With regard to the themes examined in this book, this scenario has strengthened extremely regressive religious movements that, as I tried to demonstrate in 2017, are better understood when viewed within this context of social crisis and a narrow limitation of political projects. In Brazil, my country of origin, the growth of religious movements is such that it is expanding through the country's political and legal institutions and representatives. In 2019, President Jair Bolsonaro famously declared that he would name a “terribly evangelical” minister to the Supreme Federal Court, the highest in the country (a statement that is an affront to the secular character of the Court). In 2021, he kept his promise: the Presbyterian pastor André Mendonça became the newest Supreme Court judge. On the day he was approved by the Senate, First Lady Michelle Bolsonaro commemorated by entering into a supposed religious trance. In a farcical scene, she publicly displayed her alleged gift of glossolalia, the ability to speak the “tongue of angels.”⁴

Having said that, I reiterate that it is necessary to go beyond the space of religious discourse to understand the deeper causes that generate it. *And these causes can be considerably different from the perceived phenomenon.* The economist Andrew Kliman once affirmed that “What controls the world economy is not the IMF or the WB or the US Treasury or Wall Street. What controls the capitalist world economy is rather an

³ Americans for tax fairness, ‘Billionaire Wealth Grew by \$845 Billion, or 29%, as America Struggled Through First Six Months of Pandemic’, 17 September 2020, <https://americansfortaxfairness.org/issue/billionaire-wealth-grew-845-billion-29-america-struggled-first-six-months-pandemic/>.

⁴ Kiko Nogueira, ‘Glossolalia: São Paulo Dizía que Era Preciso Tradutor para quem “Fala em Línguas,” como Michelle Bolsonaro’, *Diário Do Centro do Mundo*, 4 December 2021, <https://www.diariodocentrodomundo.com.br/777300-2/>.

impersonal law, the *law of value*.”⁵ A productive statement, as it directs our attention beyond visible institutions (no doubt relevant, such as the World Bank and the IMF) towards the underlying trends responsible for the development of the situation in which we live. However, a reading of recent analyses in the social sciences reveals that they are often tied to the more immediate appearance of phenomena, indeed truly dramatic. But this should not limit us to a merely photographic record of the situation, so to speak. On this unilateral attachment to the appearance of phenomena, the contribution of classic thinkers remains precious. In an extremely suggestive passage of his *Ethics* that refers to the active role of human thought, Spinoza warns:

that our thought does not fall into pictures. For by ideas I understand, not the images that are formed at the back of the eye (and, if you like, in the middle of the brain), but concepts of Thought⁶

It is precisely these concepts of thought—categories, if we prefer the Marxian formulation—that I am interested in developing here, especially when it is known that they have a close relationship with reality itself (unlike what Kantianism supposed). Instead of paintings, understood by Spinoza as the sensorial register of a given reality, it is necessary to encourage the activity of thought that manages to *surpass the immediate appearance towards its most internal structures*. In the present case, capitalist accumulation under the imperatives of self-expanding value shows its deadliest face, promoting greater concentration of capital and more devastation of nature: emancipatory struggles must be waged against this logic. Simply claiming greater access to secular education—a classic demand of

⁵ Andrew Kliman, ‘The Crisis, the Debt and the Law of Value’, *The Hobgoblin* 3 (Winter 2000/2001), http://www.thehobgoblin.co.uk/journal/h32002_AK_Debt.htm.

⁶ Baruch Spinoza, ‘Ethics’, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), II, P. 48, Sch., 484. References to Spinoza’s *Ethics* follow the standard pattern of citations to that text in specialized literature. The Part number is indicated by a Roman numeral. The other conventions are: A = Axiom; P = Proposition; D = Definition; C = Corollary; Sch = Scholium; L = Lemma; Post = Postulate. Thus, *Ethics*, II, P. 48, Sch, means: *Ethics*, Part II, Proposition 48, Scholium. Throughout this book, quotations of Spinoza’s writings have been drawn from the translations of Samuel Shirley in *Spinoza: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002) and Edwin Curley in *The Collected Works of Spinoza* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

some progressive sectors in response to religious fundamentalisms—is an insufficient proposal given the magnitude of what is at stake here.

* * *

The second question to be updated in this Preface is more theoretical; it concerns a question posed to me by some colleagues about the fact that I have not included G. W. F. Hegel as a thinker of immanence. In the Excursus found at the end of the second chapter, there are some reasons for this; but I can provide some supplementary indications here.

It is undeniable that Hegel, distancing himself from the naïve theodicies of his time, contributed with considerable advances to the internal development of the categories he investigated. In the Introduction to the *Philosophy of Right*—one example among many—we read that it is the task of this knowledge to “look on at the proper immanent development of the thing itself.”⁷ The task of the work was to investigate the knowledge in focus—the Philosophy of Right—on its own terms, instead of imposing an external parameter of analysis.⁸

However, an examination of the more general framework of Hegelianism reveals that the philosopher was still committed to a particular creationist doctrine. Hegel had no problems in admitting this, making an explicit defense of Christian metaphysics, which affirms the creation of the world from nothing. This is what his *Science of Logic* tells us in very direct terms:

...logic is to be understood as the system of pure reason, as the realm of pure thought. *This realm is truth unveiled, truth as it is in and for itself.* It can therefore be said that this content is *the exposition of God as he is in his eternal essence before the creation of nature and of a finite spirit.*⁹

⁷ G. W. F. Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 18.

⁸ On the other hand, it must be noted that Marx rejected in this Hegelian text the fact that “the logic of the matter” was subordinated to “the matter of logic,” which would indicate a failure by Hegel with regard to his intention announced in the book’s Introduction. Cf. Karl Marx, ‘Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law’, in *Marx & Engels Collected Works* (hereafter referred to as *MECW*), vol. 3 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 18.

⁹ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 29.

For a twenty-first-century reader, this very open defense of a doctrine of creation may come as a surprise, as conceptions that pointed to a different mode of investigation were already circulating in Hegel's time. Spinoza's affirmation of an *uncreated* substance was precisely one of them. But this surprise diminishes when one considers that Hegel's thought was rooted, as he himself acknowledged, in the Lutheranism of his early years as a seminarian. Thus, in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, he states with conviction: "This comprehension has been called Faith, but it is not an historical faith; we Lutherans—I am a Lutheran and will remain the same—have only this original faith."¹⁰

This proud assumption of Lutheranism is also what explains the need for *religious cult* Hegel considered to be indispensable to the full exercise of faith.¹¹ Once again, the difference with Spinoza is almost palpable. Indeed, the Spinozan God is a non-anthropomorphic *cause of itself*—this is what shocked his contemporaries—completely alien to the forms of religious cult offered to him. Incidentally, we recall that Marx himself pointed firmly to the mystical character of the Hegelian dialectic, which did not prevent him from productively absorbing its rational core (as can be read in the Posface to the second edition of *Capital*).¹²

Having clarified the criteria that define the choice of the thinkers analyzed in this book—a choice that gave priority to those committed to a strong immanentism—it is necessary to add the following. Hegel's limits on the subject in focus here do not lead me to adopt a hostile posture toward this great thinker. This posture is frequent among some contemporary Spinoza experts, such as Antonio Negri, who refers to Hegel as "that great functionary of the bourgeoisie," who had ceded "to the sordid game of mediation."¹³ Unlike Negri, I understand that Hegel's

¹⁰ G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy 1: Greek Philosophy to Plato* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 73.

¹¹ In the words of Charles Taylor: "This is why Hegel defends [...] the Lutheran view of the Eucharist not only against the Catholic interpretation but also against the conception of the Reformed Church." Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 489.

¹² "[The Hegelian dialectic] must be inverted, in order to discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell." Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1982), Posface to the second edition, 103.

¹³ Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics* (Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 140–41.

contribution was and remains fundamental not only to Marxism, but to philosophy in general. Thus, if the topic chosen here for discussion were, just as a hypothesis, the importance of *contradictions* in the historical process, the name of Hegel would certainly appear with the prominence that is his due. Well known is his seminal effort to disclose—against the philosophies of identity—internal contradiction as the unavoidable driving force of historical processes.¹⁴ This fact also allows us to emphasize, now moving beyond Hegel, that the effects of organized human action on certain contradictions can function as a solvent that corrodes even apparently impregnable structures. Here, philosophy is intertwined with political action.

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¹⁴ For readers interested on the importance of Hegel for Marxian thinking, I address this in greater detail in my essay, 'Hegel, Espinosa e o Marxismo: Para Além de Dicotomias', *Revista Novos Rumos* 57, no. 1 (2020): 29–46.

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PRAISE FOR MARX, SPINOZA AND DARWIN

“All of a sudden, while reading about Spinoza and Marx, the reader is surprised by passages on fiscal adjustments, precarious labor and Japanese robots; or while reading about Darwin and religious thought, is surprised by passages on the social stigmas of HIV/AIDS and Pope Benedict XVI’s declarations—all of it contextualized. As the reading progresses, recognition grows stronger: a patient and firm construction of a powerful project of science affirmation and political transformation on solid philosophical grounds.”

—João Abreu, *PhD in Theory of Law at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and author of* The problem of private property in Spinoza

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PART I

Spinoza and Marx



CHAPTER 1

Introduction

It is not immediately clear why immanence is so dangerous, but it is. It engulfs sages and gods. The part of immanence, or the part of fire, that is how the philosopher is recognized.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari¹

Deleuze and Guattari's words sound especially current in light of the exponential growth of religious movements across the globe that appeal to transcendent causes as a guarantee of the veracity of their claims. While the phenomenon's more explicit dimension is expressed in the proliferation of various types of fundamentalisms, the religious return is also making its presence felt in more learned segments of the population. Intellectuals with sophisticated theoretical backgrounds publicly announce the need for a return to older religious traditions. Within the scope of Marxist debate, we find the example of Slavoj Žižek proposing to redeem the truth of Christianity: "yes, there is a direct lineage from Christianity to Marxism; yes, Christianity and Marxism should fight on the same side of the barricade against the onslaught of new spiritualisms."²

¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 45 (translation revised according to the French original: "La part de l'immanence, ou la part du feu, c'est à cela qu'on reconnaît le philosophe").

² Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000), 2.