

**Idit Dobbs-Weinstein.** *Spinoza's Critique of Religion and its Heirs: Marx, Benjamin, Adorno.* Cambridge University Press 2015. 290 pp. \$103.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781107094918).

In this ambitious work, Idit Dobbs-Weinstein examines the philosophical roots of the Frankfurt School thinkers Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno in Jewish thought. Her basic claim is that their materialism has antecedents in the work of Karl Marx, and, behind him, Baruch Spinoza, and that these roots have been insufficiently examined. What these thinkers have in common is a materialism that can ultimately be traced back to the work of Aristotle.

'Materialism' is an especially ambiguous term, of course. Indeed, it often seems there are as many materialisms as there are materialists. In her introduction, Dobbs-Weinstein stipulates that for the purposes of her study, materialism indicates a specific philosophical approach concerned with freedom as *praxis* rather than freedom as a metaphysical attribute. Drawing on Spinoza's critique of religion, she shows how first Marx and subsequently Benjamin and Adorno are concerned with freedom as *praxis* and a concretely 'Jewish form of concrete, material, historical freedom, a political concern with praxis, in contradistinction to abstract metaphysical freedom even once it is garbed in purportedly secular dress' (12-13). In religious terms, the emphasis lies on the predominantly Judaic concern with right action (orthopraxis), rather than the predominantly Christian concern with right belief (orthodoxy). Dobbs-Weinstein's basic claim, then, is that we should read Marx, Benjamin, and Adorno as heirs of Spinoza, in particular the Spinoza of the *Theologico-Political Treatise*. Accordingly, Dobbs-Weinstein's first question concerns the forgetting of Spinoza in the historiography both of Marxism and the Frankfurt School.

The reception of Spinoza's thought is notoriously difficult to trace, and Dobbs-Weinstein's first task is to reconstruct the relevant aspects of this history so that we might better understand how Benjamin and Adorno could, with equal justification, be thought both Marxist and Spinozist. Dobbs-Weinstein is fully aware of the difficulties of such historical reconstruction. One of this book's tasks is to reassess Spinoza's political legacy. The remainder of the book makes the case for Spinoza as the neglected forbear of the early Frankfurt School (she sees Habermas as inheriting the legacy of the Enlightenment against Benjamin and Adorno).

Although this hidden tradition is exemplified by Spinoza's work, it is not coextensive with Jewish thought. Indeed, the book traces the roots of this tradition back even further, to the ancients, Aristotle in particular. Anathema to this tradition is the autonomous rational agent that provides the foundation for the modern philosophical project in thinkers from Descartes to Kant. Materialism entails metaphysical monism, or, if not monism, then at least a close affinity between subject and object. 'For, in the absence of dualism, there can be no determined, unified subject independent of sensible 'objects;' rather there is a fluid, aspectival relation between affection and action, the sense, sensation, and sensed, whereby the more an individual is affected, the more she comes to be in act and in turn can affect others in the same respect' (35).

The first chapter, 'The Theologico-Political Construction of the Philosophical Tradition', elaborates on this distinction between a materialist tradition extending back to a particular reading of Aristotle and a modern philosophical tradition that derives from another Aristotelian tradition that provides the basis for a politics of the autonomous, rational individual. The first, subterranean Aristotle is that of the Arabic and Judeo-Arabic tradition in which 'memory is an extension of imagination and thus does not pre-exist these, nor exist independently of them, in the Latin, Christian tradition, especially after Augustine, memory is part of the self-subsistent soul' (29-30). Spinoza's philosophical project derives from this Aristotelian tradition, and his political writings in particular provide a counterpoint to this modern hegemonic tradition of thought. A defining characteristic of

modernity is the attempt to render religion a private affair as a response to, among other things, the wars of religion that roiled Europe beginning in the sixteenth century. According to proponents of these various attempts to distinguish religion from politics, the polity would never be secure as long as religion provided the basis for legitimacy. Thinkers such as Hobbes, Locke, Descartes, and Kant were motivated by this concern, but they were more fundamentally concerned with freedom. Dobbs-Weinstein excavates a materialist counter-discourse to this dominant one centered around Spinoza and his heirs: Marx, Benjamin, and Adorno.

Spinoza contested both Cartesian dualism and the Latin Aristotle by drawing on the Averroist tradition that eschewed dualism. In addition to the conception of freedom as *praxis*, Spinoza highlights the power of the affects, such that simply banishing religion from politics won't be sufficient to undo their pernicious effects. If we cannot neatly distinguish reason and the will from affects, then undoing ideology requires much more than the formal separation of church from state. What ties Marx, Benjamin, and Adorno together is thus a way of doing political philosophy that draws both implicitly and explicitly on a Judaic tradition of philosophy that extends back to Maimonides, and further back to various non-Christian (Judaic and Islamic) readings of Aristotle. The second chapter reads this materialist tradition of political philosophy in its modern variation, from Spinoza to Marx. According to this reading, Marx is not a critical philosopher continuing the Enlightenment tradition by other means. Instead, his critique of Hegel entails a critique of Hegel's claim that the Hebrew commonwealth could not qualify as a state in the Hegelian sense, for the Jews are not part of the progress of reason becoming conscious of itself that Hegel terms world-history. Consequently, Hegel disregards the central roles of Islamic and Judaic political philosophy in the Middle Ages as he simultaneously disregards Spinoza's significance as a political thinker. Dobbs-Weinstein proposes a counter history in order to recover this tradition.

The third chapter proposes a reading of the intertwined themes of justice and history in the work of Marx, Benjamin, and Adorno. This chapter continues Dobbs-Weinstein's reading of these thinkers in terms of their philosophical *praxis* and takes as its inspiration Marx's claim that 'the first historical *act* is thus the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. *And indeed this is an historical act, a fundamental condition of all history*, which today as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life' (116-117). This is a materialist history that is fundamentally anti-Hegelian and therefore anti-idealist. The remainder of the chapter reads first Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and then Benjamin's writings on history in light of Marx's idea that one must first change oppressive institutions if one wants to change people's minds or forms of consciousness (131).

The fourth chapter, 'Destitute Life and the Overcoming of Idolatry: Dialectical Image, Archaic Fetish on Benjamin's and Adorno's Conversation,' focuses on the anti-utopian impulse central to both thinkers. This anti-utopian impulse is linked back to their attempts to demystify the spell of ideology that enthralls the masses of advanced industrial countries on the eve of World War Two as revealed in their epistolary exchange during the years 1935 until Benjamin's death in 1940. Both are convinced that efforts to demystify the ideological blinders of the masses must begin with a critique of modern forms of idolatry and messianic fervor. 'But, whereas the idolatry characteristic of pre-Enlightenment catastrophes led to the production of divine idols, to new relations to god/s, the modern expulsion of the divine from view was anything but a new form of the prohibition; rather, it led to the divinization of the human and to a new form of mastery over nature' (150-151). Benjamin remained convinced that art might provide a way of breaking the spell, for it was through the creation of useless things that humans would realize their thrall to useful things and their ceaseless production (154). Just as things can fall prey to idolatry by becoming merely useful objects (the commodity fetish), words can become idolatrous as well. One of the main ways this happens in philosophy is by

giving into the temptation of systematizing thought. Both Benjamin and Adorno avoid this in their published writing through the use of the fragment and privately through the act of letter writing (155). The final chapter, 'Untimely Timeliness: Historical Reversals, the Possibility of Experience, and Critical Praxis' returns to premodern philosophical traditions through a comparison of Aristotle and Augustine on the question of history. The main difference lies in where they place the human *telos*. The ends of the human are multiple for Aristotle, and they are embodied in concrete human practices. Aristotle claims that we flourish because of what we do (*eudaimonia* is essentially a political and ethical concept), while Augustine places the human end firmly outside history. Mainstream modern philosophy, beginning with Descartes, takes its cue from Augustine and posits a doubled subject, one that is both body and thought (194-195). Unlike this Augustinian tradition which seeks redemption in a future in which one's inessential material self is sloughed off like a snake shedding its skin, Adorno and Benjamin seek to redeem the past as a way of acknowledging 'the barbarism at the heart of civilization' (197). All systems of progress entail a forgetting of its costs. Benjamin and Adorno propose to salvage this memory in the face of progress' forgetfulness.

This review can only provide a sketch of the rich themes present in this book. It should obviously appeal to scholars interested in the Frankfurt School, but historians of European philosophy will find this book of interest as well.

**Corey McCall**, Elmira College