Specters of Spinoza in Iran: The Crisis of Theocracy and the Reception of Spinoza

Ali Ferdowsi*

Abstract
Although Spinoza and, for that matter, modern European philosophers were known among some Iranians for centuries, it was not until the final decades of the twentieth century that they were eventually received into the Iranian intellectual scene. Throughout the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries, whenever there came about a perception of a need, Iranians, the state as well as the civil society, actively and extensively borrowed from the European intellectual achievements. But not in philosophy. Except among radical fringe circles, a need for modern philosophy did not arise until the crisis of the theocratic state exposed the inadequacy of our native philosophical traditions for underwriting a modern state. The turn to modern philosophy reflects the dawning of this awareness, at least in civil society. In this turn Spinoza occupies a privileged place due to the exceptional potencies of his vision, and its pertinence to a theocratic situation that is in crisis both in its ethics and its metaphysics of power.

Keywords: modernity, theocracy, reception, Radical Enlightenment, translation, political crisis, religion, piety

0 Introduction
This paper has two parts, a historical part that briefly explains why Spinoza was not received into the Iranian scene until a few decades ago, and a data-driven part that shows when and how this happened.

Before proceeding, however, we need to qualify what we mean by “reception.” First, insofar as reception partakes not only of extent but also of effectivity, we distinguish between knowing and receiving. In Iran we knew of modern philosophy, and of Spinoza for centuries, but it was not until a few decades ago that we began to receive them as such. Second, we speak of reception in the plural. Spinoza is received through multiple chains. Finally, we define reception as any independent treatment

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of Spinoza in Persian in Iran and in print. Specifically, this means that while we do not exclude translated works, we do not include other media, such as videos, seminars, etc., from our analysis.

Let us start by a quotation that sets this report in its proper context. It is from a speech by Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution. There are those, he says, who insist on spreading this philosophy that has originated in the West throughout the non-Western societies, such that as soon as one says “philosophy,” they are reminded of the philosophy of Kant, Hegel, Descartes, Spinoza and others. I ask you, have the enemies of the cultural progress of Iran succeeded in this effort? The answer is, yes, regrettably they have succeeded to a large extent. Presently, if you go to a university and ask the department of philosophy […] what do you teach? Do they teach Mashā’ir, Asfār, Sharḥ-i Manzūma, and Shawāhid al-Rububia, etc.? Not at all.¹

Of these books, three are by Mulla Sadra, and one is a commentary on him. A contemporary of Descartes, Mulla Sadra (1572-1641) is one of the two Muslim thinkers who are most often compared with Spinoza. Sadra is the only speculative theologian with a line-item in Iran’s national budget for a dedicated foundation headed by the Supreme Leader’s brother.

“If one day, there come to exist thinkers in this country who care,” the Supreme Leader goes on to say ominously, “and the traitors in the university environments would allow it, they should bring this situation under control, one way or the other.” The Supreme Leader presides over a theocracy. His words make the question of philosophy a theological-political question and give us the context in which Spinoza’s receptions take place.

1    Crisis of Modernity and Turn to Modern Philosophy

Reception is dialectically related to perception. That is why although some Iranians knew of Spinoza at least since the middle of the nineteenth century, the time for his reception did not arrive until about the turn of the twenty-first century. From the Classical Age down to our time, Iran has been in contact, through multiple channels and entrepôts, with the Europeans. It is a little-known fact that Descartes was known to at least one circle headed by a prominent Persian-speaking person, Mohammad Shafi’ Khan Dānishmand, a native of Yazd, for whose benefit the French philosopher’s Discours de la méthode was translated in the 1660s by the French physician Francois Bernier.² Secretary to Pierre Gassendi until his death in 1655, Bernier, who was fluent in Persian, spent twelve years in the Persian-speaking court of Mughal India, and passed through Persia on his way back to Europe.³ This knowledge, however, did not inaugurate any known philosophical tradition.

² Not much has been written about Mohammad Shafi’ Khan Dānishmand. For a short notice see Thomas William Beale, The Oriental Biographical Dictionary (Calcutta: J.W. Thomas, Baptist Mission, 1881), 78.
³ In his account of the time he spent in India, published in Amsterdam in 1699, Bernier says that he often conversed with Shafi’ about Gassendi, and Descartes, as well as William Harvey and Jean Pecquet. François Bernier, Travels
Iran was expanding contact with Europe throughout the nineteenth century, which by then was stamped by a perception of need for learning from the Europeans in order to remain a competitive empire or at least a viable country. Thousands of books were imported by the government, and all kinds of books on a wide variety of subjects were translated, but virtually none in philosophy. It is not that Iranians, the state and some intellectuals, were ignorant of modern philosophy. Voltaire, for instance, was very well known yet when he was translated into Persian, he was not Voltaire the philosopher but Voltaire the historian.

Every time there was a perceived need for some learning, relevant books were sought out and translated usually with state-sponsorship. Regardless of how it was viewed, irrelevant or subversive, the only explanation for European philosophy as such not being included in this “translation movement” appears to be that as yet there was no perceived need for it either at the societal or the state levels. A powerful native tradition of philosophy, the one Supreme Leader summons in the above quotation, was, in my opinion, the main reason for the perception of this need remaining contained down to our time.

2 The Coming of Modern Philosophy

The above picture is true enough, but all along there were small fringe circles that had adequately perceived that modernity came bundled with a new kind of metaphysical disposition. It appears that the famous theorist of racial types Arthur de Gobineau, who served as the French top diplomat in Iran in the late 1850s and again in early 1860s, must have encountered one of these fringe circles who already knew of Descartes, Spinoza, Kant and Hegel. In his conversations with these circles,
de Gobineau recommended the translation of Descartes’ *Discourse*.\(^8\) It was translated into Persian and published in Tehran in 1863.\(^9\) But this new sequence of reception also proved stillbirth.\(^10\)

It is often said that the reason for its not getting the hoped-for traction was the poor quality of the translation.\(^11\) But this cannot be the only reason. If there was a perceived need for it, others with better qualifications would have tried their hands at it. Only this could explain why a second translation of the Discourse that was completed some four decades later (the sole copy is from 1903) by Afzal al-Mulk Kermānī did not garner sufficient interest to go from a manuscript to a print book. Afzal al-Mulk belonged to Aqa Khan Kermānī’s circle, at the most radical edges of the Constitutional movement, religiously and politically.

By the end of nineteenth century, however, those radical groups who were familiar with modern European philosophy had already begun to perceive it as a theological-political necessity. Afzal al-Mulk, for instance, writes in his introduction to his translation of the Discourse that “a country and a nation among whom the tree [of philosophy] does not grow and bear fruits, would verily be like a barren land in which some dead sticks are planted and on which artificial blossoms and fruits are hung.”\(^12\)

Nonetheless, it took most of the twentieth century for the need for a new metaphysical disposition to move closer to the center. The need for a philosophical encounter with modernity had to wait until (a) modernity itself cut closer to the bone of our lives, and (b) the native theological-philosophical tradition that forestalled it prove itself not only irrelevant to this ever-modernizing condition, but worse, show itself as the theological-political underpinning of a theocracy antagonistic to it.

With the loss of relevance of native philosophy, we now needed to look for a new ontology of power. This moment of denouement can be dated with some exactitude. It happened in the summer of 2009 at the height of the Green Movement which was brutally suppressed by the theocratic regime.\(^13\)

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\(^12\) Quoted in Mojtahedi, “Tarjuma wa Tajaddud.”

\(^13\) The same year that a translation of chapter xx of the TTP was published online, and the Supreme Leader renewed his call to Islamize humanities. See Mirzaei, “Reception”.

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3 Specters of Spinoza

We now come to the second part, the turn to European philosophy and the special place of Spinoza in it. Our data suggest that we have not one but four modalities of the reception of Spinoza. Let us call them the four specters, in homage to Marx and Derrida:

1. A traditional-theological-Spinoza who in one way or the other underwrites the knowledge-claims of the theocratic state.
2. A Spinoza as a subject of study in its own right—the Spinoza of the academy.
3. A Spinoza of the market street who invites individuals to live a fulfilling life—Spinoza the “new-age” guru.
4. A Spinoza that furthers the process of secularization and democratization and undermines the legitimacy of the theocracy and its knowledge-claims—the Radical Enlightenment Spinoza.

Since we do not have readership statistics, we have little choice but to look for our specters in the publication data. Obviously, our data does not provide us with four mutually exclusive categories.

We start with a historical sketch. Apart from Spinoza’s name and scattered references to him in print and academic lectures, the first substantive treatment of his thought appeared in 1938 in the second volume of Mohammad Ali Foroughi’s three-volume Sayr-i Hikmat dar Urūpa [Development of Philosophy in Europe]. A polymath of extraordinary erudition who assumed premiership of the country three times at perilous conjunctures, Foroughi’s intervention in philosophy was assuredly politically motivated.

André Cresson’s Spinoza, sa vie, son oeuvre, avec un exposé de sa philosophie, translated by Kāzim Emādī, is the first full-length book on Spinoza to come out in Persian. It came out in France in 1950 and the Persian translation was published sometime in the 1950s.

In 1956 Mohammad Taqi Burūmand authored a book titled ‘Elm-i Akhlāq: Epīkur, Lūkris wa Espinoza [Ethics: Epicure, Lucretius and Spinoza]. The part on Spinoza constitutes nearly half of the book. Burūmand relies not only on the Ethics but also on the TTP and TP. He criticizes those readers of Spinoza who wish to “distort his atheistic materialism” into an “expression of transcendental mysticism-mongering.” Spinoza, he concludes, “was an advocate of freedom of intellect, peace and progress,” and his “heritage belongs to those who today strive for the triumph of reason, and the happiness of all humankind.” This untimely meditation was all but forgotten.

14 University of Tehran that opened in 1934 included a department of philosophy, psychology and education. Yahya Mahdavi, a philosopher trained in France under André Lalande and Émile Bréhier, joined this department in 1941. Bréhier wrote a multivolume Histoire de la philosophie wherein (v. 4, ch. 6) he devoted a chapter to Spinoza. This book was later translated into Persian at Mahdavi’s initiative. He himself translated the volume that included Spinoza (see Bréhier in the References). Mahdavi was instrumental in hiring Ahmad Fardid who supervised Mohsen Jahāngīri’s dissertation on Spinoza (Jahāngīri was also a student of Mahdavi).

15 Mojtahedi, “Tarjuma va Tajaddud.”

Later, we shall go over all the Ph.D. dissertations on Spinoza. For the moment, we mention two dissertations written years before the Revolution of 1979. The first, surprisingly written in 1952, before any Ph.D. programs in philosophy in Iran, was authored by Hassan Ālamiyān under the supervision of Mohmmad Mishkāt, a famous cleric who taught in the theology program of the University of Tehran. The second was written in 1973 by Mohsen Jahāngīrī, who later became well-known for his translation of Spinoza’s *Ethics*. It was done under Ahmad Fardid, an influential anti-modern intellectual remembered for his gnomic utterances.

Continuing our historical sketch, we turn to translations of Spinoza’s own works. Once again we see that a real need for Spinoza was not perceived until after the Revolution of 1979.

1. *Ethics*—The first of Spinoza’s books to have been translated into Persian:
   a. *Etīk* (‘elm-i akhlāq), 1952, translated by Manuchehr Dāvari from Russian. Spinoza, Dāvari writes in his introduction, “is someone who has created one of the grandest philosophical systems in the world.” This book fell into total oblivion and was only rediscovered in 2016, but it has been republished at least four times since.
   b. “Mabāni-yi Zinda-gī-yi Akhlāqī” [‘Foundations of ethical life”], 1964, translation of E4p18s through the end of part four in a three-volume collection of translations titled *Falsafa-yi Nazari* [Speculative philosophy]. Spinoza’s selection is admirably translated by Abūtālib Sārami, but Sārami seems unaware of Dāvari’s translation, as is Jahāngīrī of both.
   c. *Akhlāq* [*Ethics*], 1985. Jahāngīrī’s translation, regarded by many as the standard translation, deservedly so, though not flawless or unbiased. Jahāngīrī renders Spinoza as the “last of the pre-moderns.” A revised edition came out in 1997, and it has been reprinted a few more times since.
   d. Two more recent translations of the *Ethics*, one by Kiyūmars Pārsā’ī (2020) and one by Layla Amānat Mullā’ī (2021). Both have already gone to second or third printings.


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5. *Risāla-yi Siyāsi [Political Treatise]*, 2014, translated by Paymān Gholāmi and Imān Ganji. It includes a post-script by Antonio Negri.\(^\text{23}\) It has gone through several reprints.

6. *Risāla-yi Ilāhi-Siyāsi [Theological-Political Treatise]*, 2017, my own translation, revised for the third printing.\(^\text{24}\) Its eighth printing came out in the fall of 2023.\(^\text{25}\)

By now we have serviceable translations of virtually all of Spinoza’s philosophical works except his letters and his treatise on Hebrew grammar. Regrettably, however, we do not yet have a standard critical edition of all of Spinoza’s work rendered from the original languages.

### 4 Spinoza’s Place in the Philosophical Turn

Where does Spinoza stand compared to other philosophers in Iran’s philosophical landscape? Table 1 presents data on periodical articles published since 2001 that mention the name of a select number of philosophers in their titles.\(^\text{26}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Philosopher</th>
<th>All Journals</th>
<th>Accredited Journals</th>
<th>News Papers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spinoza</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>858</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descartes</td>
<td>480</td>
<td>396</td>
<td>1938</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leibniz</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>417</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kant</td>
<td>1656</td>
<td>1352</td>
<td>4143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hegel</td>
<td>513</td>
<td>354</td>
<td>3506</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marx</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>5531</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plato</td>
<td>1177</td>
<td>938</td>
<td>4268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aristotle</td>
<td>1795</td>
<td>1495</td>
<td>5025</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avicenna</td>
<td>11751</td>
<td>8649</td>
<td>37361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadra</td>
<td>1924</td>
<td>1296</td>
<td>8244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foucault</td>
<td>723</td>
<td>578</td>
<td>2280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deleuze</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1. Frequency of Mentions on Periodical Articles Titles*

Spinoza’s status is compared with five groupings: a cohort with whom he is often associated, modern philosophers popular in Iran, Plato and Aristotle, two Muslim philosophers, and two contemporary thinkers. We see that by and large in every vector, Spinoza has a place comparable to modern philosophers other than Kant who towers above the rest.

Next, we attend to the trends for a more dynamic view (Table 2).


\(^{25}\) In addition to Sina Mirzæei’s “Reception” for the reception of TTP in Iran see Reza Najafzadeh, “Spinoza wa Risāla-yi Ilāhiyāt-Siyāsi dar Iran,” *Pazhūhishnāma-yi Intiqādi-yi Mütān, wa Barānāmah-yi Ulūm-i Insānī* 20, no. 9 (Azar 1399/2020).

\(^{26}\) Our primary source is magiran (Repository of information on the country’s periodicals), a website that archives the content of more than 3500 journals and 10 major newspapers since 2001. Its date, however, goes farther back. Data retrieved in 30 June 2022. The same source is used for Table 2 and 5 below.
Table 2. Title-Mentions in Humanities Journals

For every philosopher we see a pattern of growth with a rather sharp turn beginning with the late 1990s. We also see that Spinoza has been faring well in this recent turn to philosophy. Dividing the number of mentions for 2011-2020 by 1991-2000, we will see that the number of mentions of Spinoza increased by 8.2 times, above Kant by 6.2 and Descartes by 3.6.

Everything we just saw regarding the recency of Spinoza’s reception is reflected in the books written on him or translations of his works.

As of 30 June 2022, one finds a total of 36 first-edition separate books in Persian in the catalogue of the National Library of Iran with Spinoza’s name in the title (Table 3).

Table 3 Books on Spinoza by Authorship Origin

Two points immediately jump out. First, two-thirds of these books are translations. Second, there are many times more books written (12 times) and translated (7 times) in the past quarter century than as far back as our data goes.

5 Academic and Theological Specters of Spinoza

Philosophy in general or specializations in philosophy are widely taught in Iran. According to the data, from 1995 through 2022, a total of 72 MA theses were accepted with Spinoza’s name in their titles. We see an overall increase marked by a sharp upward turn starting with 2010. Whereas only 13 MA theses were written on Spinoza in the 1995-2009 period, the other 59 were written in the

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27 According to data provided by the ministry of higher education for 2020 for the institutions of higher education that participate in the annual entrance exam, 30 universities offer at least a baccalaureate degree in philosophy, plus about 50 in the philosophy of ethics, or religion.

28 Our primary source is IRANDOC (Iranian Research Institute for Scientific Information and Documentation), supplemented with NLI, Elmet, Noormag, etc. IRANDOC collects information on theses and dissertations from all the colleges and universities throughout Iran (I acknowledge with gratitude Dr. Sanaz Rajabian’s help for data extracted from the IRANDOC).
2010-2022 period. Data also shows that Spinoza is not uniformly present in all philosophy programs. Forty-four of the theses are accepted in only five institutions. Tabriz University with 13 comes first, followed, in order, by Azad University (Central Tehran Unit) with 10, Beheshti University with 8, University of Tehran with 8 and Allāmeh Tabātabā’i with 5.

The case of Tabriz University invites special attention, especially when compared with other major state-universities such as Isfahan, Ferdowsi of Mashhad and Shiraz. Isfahan University, for instance, admits the same number of students in its philosophy program as does Tabriz. The reason for this imbalance is undoubtedly the existence of professors and an atmosphere that encourages students to study Spinoza. Virtually all of the theses on Spinoza at Tabriz University are written under the supervision of two of its professors, Mustafa Shahr’āīni and Yūsuf Nawzuhūr.

About half of MA theses involve comparing Spinoza to another author, a big majority (by a factor of roughly 3 to 1), a Muslim author. The preferred Muslim thinkers are Mulla Sadra and Ibn Arabi. Reasons for this are not hard to see. Ibn Arabi was Jahāngīri’s favorite Sufi. In his dissertation, and subsequent writings, Jahāngīri, a devote Muslim, compared Spinoza’s thoughts to those of Ibn Arabi’s. Jahāngīri was the single most influential professor in training the next generation of academic Spinoza scholars. Of Mulla Sadra, suffice it to remember the Supreme Leader’s enjoinment.

Next, we turn to Ph.D. dissertations (Table 4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Name of the Author</th>
<th>Year Accepted</th>
<th>University and the Field</th>
<th>Title of the Dissertation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>‘Ālamiān, S. H.</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>U. Tn. / Theology</td>
<td>Life and thoughts of Spinoza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Jahāngīri, M.</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>U. Tn. / Philosophy</td>
<td>Comparison of unity of existence in Ibn Arabi and unity of substance in Spinoza’s philosophy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Nawzuhūr, Y.</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>U. Tn. / Philosophy</td>
<td>Relationship between Reason and Revelation, and Religion and State in Spinoza’s philosophy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Madadi, N.</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Azd.U., Tn Ctrl / Philosophy</td>
<td>Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz on substance and its place in their philosophies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Havā’ij, M.</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Azd. U., Tn. Ctrl / Philosophy</td>
<td>Translation of and commentary on H. G. Hubbling’s Spinoza’s Methodology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Taqipūrzadeh, M.</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Azd. U., Tn. Ctrl / Philosophy</td>
<td>The soul-body relation from the perspectives of Avicenna, Spinoza and Leibniz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Tavakkuli, M.</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Azd. U., Tn Ctrl / Philosophy</td>
<td>The eternity of soul from the point of view of Mulla Sadra and Spinoza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Safā’i, M.</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Azd.U., Tn. Ctrl / Literature</td>
<td>Views of Rumi on God, human beings and freedom in comparison with Spinoza’s thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Najafzādeh, R.</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>U. Tn. / Political Studies</td>
<td>Theological and metaphysical foundations of Spinoza’s political philosophy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Sāberi, H.</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>U. Tn. / Philosophy</td>
<td>Philosophical approaches to the concept of God in Spinoza’s thought</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Pāshaeva, ‘A.</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>U. Tn. / Philosophy</td>
<td>God in Spinoza’s philosophy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Bakhshi, M.</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Qom U. / Theology</td>
<td>Comparative study of the relation between religious and philosophical truths in Averroes and Spinoza</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

29 Data for a period before 1995 is hard to collect, but we can say with confidence that the number of MA theses on Spinoza before that date could hardly have been more than one can count on one hand’s fingers.

30 For details on Jahāngīri’s role in Spinoza studies, see Mirzaei, “Reception,” Section 2.

31 Data from the IRANDOC, supplemented by other sources, including resumes of professors, authors, and academic program sites.
The trends we have already seen emerge more clearly in Table 4: (a) of the 17 dissertations, 15 are written after 1995, majority since 2012; (b) 7 are of comparative kind, 5 with a Muslim thinker; (c) 12 are submitted to a program in philosophy, 3 in theology, one each in politics and literature; (d) allowing for certain overlaps, (excluding the earliest), 6 deal with metaphysical-theological topics, 6 with political, 3 with epistemology, and 1 with ethics.

This topical distribution is interesting. It suggests (a) that Spinoza’s TTP is not neglected in these dissertations, and (b) that the interest in Spinoza as the thinker of the theological-political is of more recent history than as the philosopher of the metaphysical-theological. This seems to express the global shift in the Iranian society’s theological-political concerns, as noted by Mirzaei.32

Like MA theses, Ph.D. dissertations on Spinoza are overwhelmingly (15 out of 17) from three universities. Moreover, only one of the politically oriented dissertations is submitted to the faculty of philosophy at the University of Tehran. It is in the philosophy program of Tabriz University that the Spinoza of the TTP spends most of his time.

These facts invite a number of interrelated questions. Two of them are particularly relevant. Why the philosophy program at the University of Tehran, the country’s oldest and pre-eminent program, is not wherein the author of the TTP and TP is most at home? The short answer is that this philosophy program is too closely implicated with the theocratic regime for the emancipatory-political specter of Spinoza to be welcomed there. This answer, I believe, also partly explains why some other major philosophy programs have not invited a single dissertation on Spinoza.

One should be careful not to impugn any department chair or member of the faculty for their religiosity, kinship with theocratic authorities, and positions in the state apparatuses. Suffice it to state the facts. One of the current members on the philosophy faculty of the University of Tehran is a brother in one of the most influential families in the regime. He is currently an advisor to the Supreme Leader, and has served as the speaker of the Islamic Assembly, and along with another of his brothers, who was the clerical head of the country’s judiciary, currently serves in the “Expediency Discernment Council for the System.” Another member of the faculty (retired in 2018) who also serves on this Council, too served as the speaker of the Islamic Assembly. He is a father-in-law to

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32 Mirzaei, “Reception.”
the Supreme Leader. As of June 2023, chair of the program is the son of one of the most influential founding fathers of the theocracy, etc.

The second point regards the intellectual and political functions of the tradition of comparative treatment of Spinoza and a Muslim thinker originated at this department. We saw a clear demarcation between the two traditions in the quotation from the Supreme Leader. The theocratic regime must reproduce itself as the other of modernity that in its imagination it equates with the West. The Islamic state needs this othering to remain in power. This matter of boundary maintenance is at work in demarcating two of the specters of Spinoza. The emancipatory Spinoza stands with integration into modernity, the traditional-theological Spinoza with resistance to it.

6 Spinoza of the Market and Protest Streets

In Table 5, once again, we see Spinoza in four comparative settings, this time specifically for sighting the specter of popular Spinoza.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Philosopher</th>
<th>Accredited Journals</th>
<th>Newspapers</th>
<th>News Papers/ Accredited Journals</th>
<th>No. Mentions by Etemad &amp; Sharq</th>
<th>% Mentions by Etemad &amp; Sharq</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spinoza</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>858</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>482</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descartes</td>
<td>396</td>
<td>1938</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>885</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leibniz</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>417</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kant</td>
<td>1352</td>
<td>4143</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hegel</td>
<td>354</td>
<td>3506</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>2057</td>
<td>59</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3062</td>
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<td>1934</td>
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<td>37361</td>
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<td>7074</td>
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<td>18</td>
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<td>5.7</td>
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</table>

*Table 5. Mentions of Philosophers on the Title by Type of Periodicals 2001-23*

Let us start by noting that (a) these data underestimate the prevalence of Spinoza and comparable modern European figures in the civil society as virtually all of the major periodicals published outside of the officialdom are excluded from such a formal recognition; (b) although all the newspapers published in Iran are heavily censored, not all are equally close to the inner core of the regime. Two of about a dozen newspapers covered in our source, namely Sharq and E’temād, are considered close to the moderate wing of the theocracy, and closer to the civil society.

In column 3, mentions of a given philosopher in newspapers is divided by his mentions in the accredited scholarly journals in order to get a sense of how much a thinker has spilled over into the public space such as it is reflected in the dailies. The higher this ratio, the higher the relative presence of a thinker in the public sphere. Marx, followed by Hegel, seem to be comparatively more of a public philosopher than others. Next to them Spinoza ranks above other European philosophers.

Next we turn to the ratios of mentions in the two newspapers generally regarded as more moderate, namely Sharq and E’temād, relative to all the newspapers covered in our source. Ratios
indicate that these two newspapers are more inclined to mention philosophers belonging to the Western tradition than the two most prominent Muslim thinkers. Whereas 19 percent of the mentions of Avicenna and 24 percent of the mentions of Sadra appear in these two newspapers, a significantly higher proportion of mentions of European philosophers are found in them (41 percent or more). Remarkably, here Spinoza is in the same league as Marx, Hegel and Foucault.

7 Spinoza in Books

We now return to the data on books, presented earlier in Table 3, this time for sighting two specters of Spinoza that we just saw spill over into the civil society, the one Jonathan Israel writes about, and the one that the modern consumer-citizen enjoys.

Of the 12 books originally authored in Persian, all but one, are published in the past quarter of a century (9 in the past ten years). Roughly speaking, 3 are general sketches. Four are comparative studies between Spinoza and a Muslim thinker. Two of these books involve Mulla Sadra. Ta‘āli va Hulūl dar Falsafa-yi Espinoza va Mulla Sadra [Transcendence and immanence in the philosophies of Spinoza and Mulla Sadra] by Shahnāz Shāyānfar (2014), attempts at an interpretation that would clear Spinoza of the charge of pantheism by showing that his God can be understood as a transcendental God as Mulla Sadra conceived it. Two are on ethics—we already spoke of Burūmand’s book. One is on epistemology. Three are on political philosophy. I have been unable to see Dihqānī’s book, Mardumsālārī, Farāyand-i ‘Aqlāniyat [Democracy, the process of becoming reasonable] (2013) but from what I have been able to gather about it and other publications by the author, it appears to be a straightforward argument, contending that Spinoza regards democracy as the most rational political regime and that rational democratic education is the means to achieve it. Nawzuhūr’s ‘Aql-u-Wahi wa Dīn-u-Dawlat [Reason and Revelation and Religion and State] (2000) is based on his Ph.D. dissertation written under the supervision of Mohsen Jahāngīri. It is a sympathetic reading of Spinoza’s political ideas.33 Najfzādeh’s Mitāfīzīk-i Qudrat: Darāmadi bar Falsafa-yi Siyāsī-yi Espinoza [Metaphysics of power: a prolegomenon to Spinoza’s political philosophy] (2018), also based on his dissertation, is an attempt to base Spinoza’s political theory on a reading of conatus as the foundation “that connects his metaphysics to his physics” and “political realism.”34

It appears to me that the books treating Spinoza’s political philosophy are by and large distinct from most of the others on two important grounds. They engage more directly with the Spinozist tradition and Spinoza studies according to recent interpretations. The Spinoza of the comparative studies, on the other hand, generally takes Spinoza out of the Spinozist tradition in order to more freely deploy him to hone and support its own tradition.

In the realm of book-length treatments, there are twice as many translations as original production. Here is where we see most clearly all the four specters of Spinoza represented, but mainly those of the protest and the market streets (Table 7).

33 For a brief history and a balanced review of Nawzuhūr’s book See Mirzaei, “Reception,” Section 3.
Our classification here can only be rough as its categories are not mutually exclusive. By “General”, I mean those books that provide a picture of Spinoza’s life, times, main philosophical ideas, etc. In this category, we have introductory monographs such as Roger Scruton’s Spinoza: A Very Short Introduction (1986 / tr. 2010) to Karl Jasper’s Spinoza (1974 / tr. 1996). Jasper’s book has by 2021 gone through 6 printings. Scruton’s book has also been republished a few times.

By “Academic” I mean those books that specifically treat Spinoza and his philosophy as a subject for research. Here we find books like George Henry Radcliffe Parkinson’s Spinoza’s Theory of Knowledge (1954 / tr. 2002) and Eroll E. Harris’s Spinoza’s Philosophy: An Outline (1993 / tr. 2010). This category apparently covers books that only serious students of Spinoza could find of interest.

We now arrive at the two categories that I find livelier, beginning with the specter in the market street. This specter arrived rather late, but it seems that it has a considerable public appeal. We have two translations of Antonio Damasio’s Looking for Spinoza (2003 / tr. 2011). Together they have been reprinted at least four times.35 The translation of David Ive’s play New Jerusalem; The Interrogation of Baruch de Spinoza at Talmud Torah Congregation: Amsterdam, July 27, 1656 (2008 / tr. 2017) is now in its sixth print. The most interesting story here is Irvin Yalom’s The Spinoza Problem: A Novel (2012 / tr. 2012). Yalom is extremely popular in Iran, and there are several translations of his Spinoza. By 2021, one of them has been printed seven and another eight times. Neal Grossman’s The Spirit of Spinoza: Healing the Mind (2014 / tr. 2021) has, by July 2023, been reprinted five times. Thanks to them, Spinoza is now a familiar figure for thousands upon thousands of people in the Iranian market street.

This popular Spinoza is a recent development. Based on my interviews with two publishers and a bookseller in Tehran, the readers of this Spinoza appear to be those segments of the middle classes who adopt a modern “liberal” lifestyle. In the past decade, judging by the popularity of books on Stoic philosophers, a segment of the middle class has opted for an attitude of self-help instead of religious piety. A translator of one of these popular books, himself a former “religious intellectual,” writes of Spinoza that he is someone “who by deploying the force of reason and ethical behavior step by step and ever so gently leads one to a very deep spirituality quite similar to […] the spirituality of Hindu, Taoist, and especially of Buddhist practices.” This Spinoza is a clear sign of the ethical and spiritual bankruptcy of the theocratic state.

Finally, we come to our Radical Enlightenment Spinoza. By far most of the translated books on Spinoza concern this Spinoza. He is more a continental philosopher than an Anglo-American one. He is the Spinoza of Althusser, Negri, Balibar, London, Montag, Del Lucchese, and Deleuze.
This is the critical, anti-establishment, atheist Spinoza. He hangs around the same watering holes that Hegel and Marx have their drinks. He has virtually nothing to do with Avicenna, let alone Mulla Sadra. He signals a radical break with the traditional theological-philosophical construct. He has been invited to Iran to carry it to a future that we now know by its slogan “women, life, freedom.”

This lively and energetic Spinoza is hugely popular with the intellectuals. A translation of *Spinoza: Philosophie pratique* by Deleuze has gone through multiple printings. A translation of a collection of essays by Warren Montag titled *Bodies, Masses, Power: Spinoza and His Contemporaries* published in 2019 went through five printings by the following year. A translation of Negri’s *Spinoza et nous* that came out in 2018 has already gone through three reprints.

This Spinoza too is of quite recent origin. This is the Spinoza about whom civil-society periodicals write the most. The readership for this Spinoza is relatively younger and comes from families that were not too religious to begin with or are born after the demise of the political Islam. Evidence seems to suggest a correlation between the increasing secularization of Iranian society and the growing readership for this Spinoza.

8 Conclusion

Let me conclude by summarizing what I hope I have established. Both the turn to modern European philosophy and to Spinoza are of recent origin in Iran. This turn came about only after a need for it began to be perceived, first by avant-garde intellectuals on the fringes of our native traditions, and then disseminated throughout the society when the need for it became apparent with the failure of the theological-political Islam. Because of this history, we have not one but four specters of Spinoza: a Spinoza of the market street, a Spinoza of the academy, a Spinoza of the seminary and a Spinoza of the protest street. This is as much a tribute to the range of potencies in the thought and example of Spinoza as to the complexity of contemporary Iran. The possibility for freedom to philosophize in Iran has never been so close at hand as it is today.

References


