The History of Reception as a Battlefield: French uses of “Spinoza” in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

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Abstract
The French reception of Spinoza during the nineteenth and twentieth century shows that what we call the “reception” of a corpus must be understood in a quite different way than the word suggests. The receiver must be disposed to make use of the corpus, and this attitude is determined by the receiver’s position within the structure of the academic or intellectual field. Spinoza was received in France in the early nineteenth century because it played a strategical role in the debate about pantheism as an atheism. But the “Spinoza” that was inherited was a corpus of works, while a certain reading of it had been elaborated in another context for other goals, namely, that of German idealism. Reception is not merely passive: the receivers impose their own structure to what affects them. At first, “Spinoza” was a figure or a label that played a role in a battlefield. This is still true for what we may call (albeit not in an ontological sense) the “materialist” reception in the 1960s. Yet, it was not doomed to give a purely imaginative knowledge of “Spinoza”: a better knowledge of the corpus, international exchanges between scholars of all over the world, and history of reception itself, made a rational knowledge of Spinozism, and even a singular understanding of Spinoza, possible.

Keywords: Spinozism, atheism, pantheism, materialism, history of reception

1 Using a figure of pantheism, and then processing the work

Talking about the French reception of Spinoza in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries presupposes that the “French reception” refers to something identifiable, that there is such a thing as a “reception”, and that the French receiving end is simply passive and receiving something whose identity is already given. More precisely, it implies that “Spinoza” is a well-defined object or idea, i.e. a philosophical system formulated by a well-defined individual, a unified and perennial work circulating throughout

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centuries and countries. “Spinoza” is a label or figure the meaning of which depends not only on a textual corpus—which is not something given but constituted in editions and translations—but also on a double context: the one from which it is received and the one receiving it. These contexts do not coincide, and the latter multiply; differences in national traditions and historical transformations of the academic, intellectual, even political fields play a role. Receptions thus obey varying positions in their respective fields. They each command a certain use of the label “Spinoza” which only works sometimes. No matter how “true” some interpretations may be, they are always marked by those receiving and using it. It may nonetheless be possible to think a common notion of “Spinozism,” a true idea of “Spinoza” and his works—the perspective offered by the French reception may reveal this.¹

A transformation of the figure of Spinoza took place in France during the first half of the nineteenth century.² I speak of “figure” because it did not coincide exactly, at least at the beginning, with the precise reading and study of the works of Spinoza, at least as a primary goal in itself.³ Neither did it coincide with the endorsement of his philosophy. In these readings, we often find words ending in -ism, partly because of the strategic or tactical use of Spinoza’s figure in the academic and intellectual fields: Spinozism as atheism, as pantheism, as mysticism, and so on.

Until the edition of Spinoza’s works by Saisset in 1842, only one old translation of the TTP by Saint-Glain was available.⁴ Spinoza was essentially known through Bayle’s critique of monism and pantheism and through Leibniz’s assimilation of Spinozism and fatalism in the Theodicy. A transformation occurred in the early nineteenth century, mainly due to Victor Cousin’s reception of German idealism and the pantheism controversy. The figure of Spinoza, after suffering the stigma of atheism as the author of the TTP, became more ambivalent: he appeared as a pantheist celebrated by German poets and philosophers who insisted on the unity of the finite and the infinite and who identified the divinity with everything in a nearly mystic way. Spinoza became respectable. Moreover, while Spinoza’s metaphysics and geometrical method in the eighteenth century was reputed as obscure and abstract by sensualist and materialist thinkers, he now benefited from the renewal of interest in metaphysical questions.⁵ Still, he was initially used in the early nineteenth century as he

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⁴ The translation of the Éthics by Boulainvilliers was a private manuscript made for his own usage. It was published as Baruch Spinoza, Éthique. Traduction inédite du comte Henri de Boulainvilliers, publié avec une introduction et des notes par F. Colonna d’Istria (Paris: A. Colin, 1907).

⁵ Such as Condillac or Diderot, who did not exclude a certain use of so-called “Spinozist” themes. See for instance, François Duchesneau, “Schèmes leibniziens et spinozistes en conflit : Diderot critique de Maupertuis,” Lumières
was used in the eighteenth: as a controversial label or figure much more than as the author of a philosophical corpus, even by those who later contributed to a better understanding of his thought and works. The transformation prompted editions, translations, and studies which came only after the reception of the figure.

The French reception of Spinoza at the beginning of the nineteenth century must be understood in the context of the forces structuring the philosophical field at that time. Cousin went to Germany for the first time in 1817. In Novalis, Herder, Schleiermacher, Goethe, Hegel (whom he met), combined with Maine de Biran’s spiritualism, he found the theoretical elements allowing him to elaborate an alternative to sensualism (supported by the heirs of Condillac and Helvetius, like Cabanis, Broussais, and some socialist thinkers) which was presumed to lead to or even be a materialism. It also allowed him to elaborate an alternative to the clerical philosophy, a traditional and conservative religious way of thinking. Cousin’s ambition was to develop a spiritualist philosophy, dubbed “spiritualist eclecticism,” which could resume and collect everything that was true in the history of philosophy. The idea was to base a metaphysics on consciousness, from which we could reach the absolute.

Because of his central—in every sense of the word—position in the field, Cousin was first accused of pantheism by his adversaries, notably among the clergy—and pantheism to them meant atheism. According to these opponents, claiming a union between the finite and the infinite leads to the identification of God and the world. The figure of Spinoza played a crucial role in this accusation. However, “Spinozism” did not refer to the same label as it did during the eighteenth century. It was not so much (or not only) associated with the critique of miracles, prophecy, and the Scriptures in the TTP that it was identified with atheism. Rather, Spinoza was identified with the “pantheism” German thinkers found in parts one and five of the Ethics. The meaning of “Spinoza” was different from the “receivers” and the “senders” (while German thinkers didn’t identify pantheism with atheism, the clergy identified the two).

In Cousin’s Cours de philosophie published in 1829, Spinoza appeared as the opposite of an atheist. In fact, we should reproach him for the contrary vice, namely, that he achieved what Descartes had begun when reducing the human being and its nature to a phenomenon without reality and autonomy. Cousin held that, in Spinoza’s thought, the relation between substance and attributes prevailed over the relation between cause and effect. God was not a cause, understood as a creative cause. To affirm such a thing, however, supposes that Cousin didn’t read or comment upon Spinoza’s texts, even if, in one footnote, he referred to Paulus’ edition. His main concern was linking Spinoza to pantheism and separating him from atheism.
Being accused of pantheism because of his connection to German philosophy, Cousin then turned to Descartes while trying to separate Descartes from Spinoza. He developed a metaphysics founded on consciousness. For this new Cousin, Spinozism represented one of the four fundamental possibilities of philosophical psychology: mysticism. He himself did not in any way adhere to such mysticism and denounced the confusion between the finite and the infinite that was implied. Formulating this critique of Spinoza, however, allowed him to save Cartesian philosophy and his spiritualist conception of conscience, presenting them as a way for the finite to connect with the infinite whilst remaining free from the suspicion of pantheism and atheism. The pantheist and mystic interpretation of Spinoza became very common at the time. For instance, this was how the novelists Flaubert and Hugo understood Spinoza—the latter probably without ever reading him.

The strategic importance of Spinoza prompted Émile Saisset, who was close to Cousin, to translate and publish the works by Spinoza in 1842. In his “Avant-propos,” Saisset noted that the name “Spinoza” was used in controversies even if no one read Spinoza’s works. The figure was received, but not his texts. We find the same remark in Jouffroy’s lectures on Spinoza published in 1834. These represented the first study based on the serious reading of Spinoza’s works, yet they offered only a sketch in comparison with Saisset’s introduction of 1842. Saisset announced that he would refute the system later but already offered some critiques about a God without personality and human beings without autonomy. For the moment, however, he essentially wanted people to know what a pantheist really was, hoping that Cousin’s adversaries would stop accusing him of being one and stop them from thinking about pantheism as the confusion between God and the world, which is in fact materialism—real pantheism conceives an infinite activity that develops itself in time and space. The second edition in 1861 was more complete (it included some letters and the DPP, the TP, and of course the KV, which the first edition lacked). This new edition was preceded by a very long introduction where Saisset’s aim had changed as accusations against Cousin’s pretended atheism had vanished. The aim now was to criticize Spinozism as a pantheism leading to immorality and irreligion, and whose denial of experience and consciousness in metaphysics had led to a reign

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14 Théodore Jouffroy, Cours sur le droit nature 1 (Paris: Prévost-Crocus, 1834), 217.


16 Saisset, Œuvres de Spinoza 1, cciv. See also “De la philosophie du clergé.”

17 Saisset, “De la philosophie du clergé.”
of necessitarianism. Cousin’s school saw now in Spinozism the dissolution of personality (divine and human).

Nevertheless, the use of Spinoza’s works served goals which were not as unified as it would seem. In his introduction, Saisset denounced Cousin’s (relative) indulgence in Spinoza and his “corrupted Cartesianism.” He made an ironical allusion to Cousin who had presented Spinoza as a Jewish philosopher with kabbalist roots and compared him to an “Indian Muni”, a “Persian Sufi,” and an “enthusiastic monk.” Saisset reminded him of his proximity to danger: Spinoza is very far from Judaism, and even if it is perhaps possible to find points of convergence with mysticism, there is nonetheless and always an atheist tendency.

In 1854, Foucher de Careil published what he (misleadingly) called a “Refutation of Spinoza” by Leibniz. He used the publication to highlight two tendencies contained in Descartes: one, naturalist, leading to Spinoza, and the other, spiritualist, leading to Leibniz. He aimed to show that Descartes might lead to Spinoza and that Leibniz was the only cure, “using philosophical historiography to the benefit of present philosophy.”

Others, like Vacherot, a dissident of Cousin’s school, developed a metaphysics quite close to Spinozist pantheism but which still rejected its consequences in the name of freedom, individuality, and the personality of men and God. “Spinoza” was a label whose meaning varied according to the controversies and the positions of commentators in the field.

Beyond all these strategic uses, we must acknowledge that the central and conservative sides of the academic and intellectual field in France did not seem at the time inclined to embrace all of Spinoza. France did not identify with Cousin’s circle, and the works issuing from that circle were not always received as one would expect. In 1924, the writer Romain Rolland published a brief text about the “fire words” of Spinoza that he had read as a pupil in the 1880s. He had discovered Spinoza in Saisset’s edition, which was hard to find at that time. Not fooled by the “honest and fearful” critical introduction and the “frightened arguments of that spiritualist,” he “jumped over the

21 Saisset, Œuvres de Spinoza 1, Introduction. Critique, 228, 304. See also “De la philosophie du clergé.”
22 Gottfried W. Leibniz, Réfutation inédite de Spinoza par Leibniz, précédée d’un mémoire ed. Louis-Alexandre Foucher de Careil (Paris: 1854). It was in fact Leibniz’s 1706 comments on Johann Georg Wachter’s Elucidarius Cabalisticus (1706). In a 1861 second edition, Foucher de Careil added to this text a translation of Leibniz’s 1678 comments on the first part of the Ethics.
25 Delbos, Le problème moral, 496, explains why the Ethics was so easily assimilated in Germany (the German way of thinking was inclined to treat the individual as part of a whole) and with such difficulty in France (the French way of thinking affirmed individuality as an end).
fire-screen into the flames against which [Saisset’s] labors were designed to defend [the reader].” He was nevertheless grateful to this “naïve opponent to whom we owe the knowledge and the love of the forbidden genius” that is not as much God-intoxicated than “Reality-intoxicated.” The story indicates that some underground reception existed outside, or on the margins, of the field. At the same time, alternative translations by the socialist Jules-Gustave Prat, recently rediscovered by Bernard Pautrat, remained confidential.27 Whereas Saisset did not translate the TP in his first edition in 1842, Prat, who was a lawyer and not part of academia, offered the first translation in 1860. He translated other works of the Dutch philosopher too but was ignored. Even those who were against Saisset and Cousin’s way of thinking and saw in Spinoza the precursor to modern science read Spinoza in Saisset’s edition. These included Romain Rolland and, as we will see, Hippolyte Taine, but also Jean-Marie Guyau who interpreted Spinoza in a materialist and utilitarian way. 28

2 The field and the underground

When producing an edition, what is at stake is not a passive reception, but a use, dissemination and construction of a work which serves goals relative to certain positions in the philosophical field.29 Still, the work may fall into the wrong hands, such as those of the enemies. Saisset’s first edition was therefore taken by some of Cousin’s adversaries to propagate the ideas of Spinoza. Taine, who was first enthusiastic about Spinoza’s pantheism and conception of science, heard about and read his works thanks to Saisset’s lectures and editions. His understanding of Spinoza’s philosophy and the critiques he offered partly came from Saisset.30 However, Taine’s conception of science and morality were directly opposed to Cousin’s and the spiritualist’s philosophy, and one accusation raised against Taine was that he was close to Spinoza on account of his immanence, scientism, necessitarianism and what we may call his materialism, including concerns about its moral consequences.31

The Spinoza we encounter in this reception is not the same as the one we met in the controversy of pantheism, or even before that. The field was no longer the same. Taine was searching for an alternative to Cousin’s spiritualism and to Comte’s positivism. He defended the unity of being and the immanence of reason in reality. He held that causes are intelligible and immanent to facts. Maybe it was the first time that someone might be called “Spinozist” in France based on the true reading of Spinoza’s works, and not so much because of his metaphysics. Taine did not even speak of substance, a notion he considered to be tied up with transcendence. He was close to Spinoza because of his necessitarianism and the claim that individuals have no self-consistency, which he was far

27 About Jules-Gustave Prat, see Moreau, “Publier Spinoza”. The translations by Prat are being republished in Alia Editions by Bernard Pautrat.
29 See Moreau, “Publier Spinoza.”
removed from interpreting in mystical ways. As Victor Delbos puts it, for Taine, the “human being is a walking theorem.” Later, Delbos considered Taine’s Spinozism to be the most important form of Spinozism in France in the nineteenth century and insisted on the common moral dimension it afforded to science.

Taine did not offer an exegesis of Spinoza. He did not explain what he had learned from Spinoza’s works except in some dissertations and notes from his youth which remained unpublished until recently. Still, the use he made of the name and of quotations “indicates directions, draws demarcation lines.” Their function was not to provide a correct reading of Spinoza. He was still making strategic use of a label, but this time grounded on a reading and a precise knowledge of Spinoza’s works, involving at least some support for Spinoza’s philosophy.

The fact that Taine became associated with Spinoza’s philosophy in the mind of other intellectuals and academics had a very important effect on Spinoza’s reception. In 1908, Raoul Lantzenberg published a new translation of the *Ethics* in a relatively cheap and popular edition. In his preface, he presented himself as a lawyer who had spent his free time translating Spinoza, because Saisset’s translation was difficult to find or too expensive (he did not mention Prat’s translation). Lantzenberg’s very short introduction was clearly designed to oppose Saisset: he claimed that Spinoza was the precursor of Darwinism and modern science. He quoted Taine to the effect that denying determinism had pernicious consequences for the notion of responsibility. He even imagined what a Spinozist judge would answer to a criminal pleading their lack of responsibility on Spinozist grounds: “I know, you are right, it’s not your fault, but you must understand that society defends itself. I don’t blame you, but I condemn you.” Lantzenberg also insisted on the modernity of the idea that intellectual and ethical progress relied on physical education and the development of the child’s body.

What emerged with Lantzenberg was a completely different Spinoza from Cousin’s or Saisset’s. Most importantly, he endorsed Spinoza. Certainly, Lantzenberg was an outsider, and his translation was quickly replaced by Charles Appuhn’s. Nonetheless, between Taine and Lantzenberg’s translation, something occurred outside or at the margins of academia.

### 3 Uses in Sciences and studies in History of philosophy

Two figures of Spinoza emerged by the end of the nineteenth century. The first was used by psychologists and philosophers who were turning to sociology and anthropology; the other was studied by historians of philosophy. Regarding the first figure, none of its proponents disseminated and studied Spinoza’s philosophy for itself. They did, however, make use of it, and not only of his name and figure, but of his arguments and ideas. Théodule Ribot developed a psychopathology opposed to spiritualist philosophers and introspective psychologists. In 1884, while criticizing the

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33 Moreau, “Taine,” 484.

primacy of conscience with reference to Leibniz, he quoted propositions thirteen and fifteen of part two of the *Ethics* (in Saisset’s edition) in order to defend the idea of a physical unconscious against Leibniz. In his 1896 *La Psychologie des sentiments*, he referred to Spinoza and his theory of affects and cited the scholium of proposition nine of part three of the *Ethics* as a summary of his whole book. Spinoza was mobilized as a strategic rather than an argumentative reference by such adversaries of Leibnizian tenets. Still, he represented more than a mere label.

In 1880, Lévy-Bruhl, later famous as a sociologist and anthropologist, wrote an article about the psychological method that Spinoza applied in his theory of the passions (it was not published until 2021). He declared in 1934 in a letter to Evans-Prichard that he came from “Hume and Spinoza rather than Bastian and Tylor.” Durkheim knew Spinoza’s works since the time of his *agrégation* in 1882—the prestigious exam to become a philosophy teacher in France had Spinoza on its program that year. Durkheim sometimes, but rarely, referred to Spinoza. Some have argued that Durkheim was a Spinozist while other have been more cautious. In any case, some passages in Durkheim are remarkably close to Spinoza’s, notably when he was writing about the unconscious, free will and constraint.

These various examples show that the reception of Spinoza’s philosophy and works was now part of the academic field. Spinoza had taken his place among the great philosophers that could be taught in academic curricula. The way he was received and used by these thinkers had changed profoundly: the problem was no longer about pantheism in parts one and five of the *Ethics*, but about free will, the passions, mind and body, and knowledge. As was the case in England with Henry Maudsley, parts two to four of the *Ethics* were being quoted and used in the sciences, even by positivists who abhorred metaphysics and the geometrical method. The use was varied: it was sometimes just a quotation, like an indication, a demarcation line, a polemic sign, or a crystallization of concepts and debates; sometimes, it was an argument, or a summary. In any case, Spinoza’s standing in academic fields outside philosophy as well as among the rationalists, scientists and anti-

43 See the thesis by Victor Collard, *D’une œuvre à l’autre: les modalités de la circulation des idées entre auteurs. Histoire sociale des idées “spinozistes” chez Pierre Bourdieu*, held on the 10 December 2021, directed by Frédéric Lordon, EHESS.
spiritualists in philosophy was no longer in doubt. This positioning was based on a certain understanding of Spinoza’s own works, even if this use was discrete and somewhat obscured.

This reception, which did not disseminate his works or take the philosophy of Spinoza directly as an object but used them tactically or strategically, took place at a time when philosophy and the human and social sciences more generally were not as independent as they are today. Most of those who became great sociologists, ethnologists or anthropologists were first philosophy students, which explains, as we have seen with Durkheim, the (more or less) discreet presence of Spinoza in their works. Durkheim’s nephew, the famous anthropologist, ethnologist and sociologist Marcel Mauss, who was studying Sanskrit at the same time, was interested in Spinoza and wanted to write a thesis about him and Leo the Hebrew.44

Concerning the reception of Spinoza in the history of philosophy proper, the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century saw increasing amounts of publication that took Spinoza’s philosophy as their principal object of study. I will not offer here a list, but I must at the very least mention the first book by Victor Delbos titled *Le Problème moral dans la philosophie de Spinoza* published in 1893. This book was remarkable for several reasons.45

(1) Whereas before him, those who admired Spinoza were admirers of his metaphysics but condemned its moral consequences, Delbos was one of the first, along with René Worms, to take Spinoza’s ethical project seriously.46 (2) He proposed a complete study of Spinoza’s philosophy, including his politics, without making any judgement about its acceptability even though he was himself a Catholic. This “immanent critique” explains the fact that the book failed to win an essay competition—the Académie des sciences morales et politiques criticized him for not denouncing Spinoza’s atheism.47 (3) The book was also remarkable for its second part which reconstructed Spinoza’s reception in Europe, especially in Germany. As Matheron has explained, Delbos’s analysis was accompanied by commentaries on the German idealist reception of Spinoza which tended to interpret Spinozism as an idealism, in particular by Hegel. Delbos’s Sorbonne lectures from 1912-1913 were published in 1916. Here, he rejected such idealism and embraced a rationalism, perhaps as a result of the First World War, as Matheron has suggested.48

In any case, Delbos inaugurated a series of studies that corresponded to what we may call today the “French history of philosophy,” where the reception was oriented by intellectual commitments, e.g. a preference for idealism, but still relied on a proper reading of the work in order to comprehend its internal structure, and an attention paid to the historical context of production and reception.49 Some stressed the first aspect more, like Léon Brunschvicg, who developed an idealist and spiritualist interpretation of Spinoza’s *Ethics* as part of a project of emancipation from the

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45 Alexandre Matheron, “Les deux Spinoza de Victor Delbos,” in *Spinoza au XIXe siècle*.
46 Worms, *Spinoza et la pensée contemporaine*.
49 See Lærke, “French historiographical Spinozism.”
particularity by thought. Others focused on the second aspect, like Paul Vernière, who published his *Spinoza and French Thought before the Revolution* in 1954, and Madeleine Francès, who, when writing her doctoral dissertation supervised by Brunschvicg, was close to Mauss who had assisted her. French scholars now appeared to be more interested in the structure of the system, its internal coherence, as was later the case with Gueroult and Matheron. Delbos, for his part, was interested in both.

It is sometimes said that there were few Spinozist studies in France in the first half of the twentieth century, that before Ferdinand Alquié, Gueroult, Sylvain Zac, Bernard Rousset, Deleuze, and Matheron, practically no Spinoza study existed. This is not exactly true. Other works demonstrated that Spinoza was present in the French history of philosophy: there were papers by Jules Lagneau and Victor Brochard, a book by Émile Chartier, later known as Alain, a chapter by Henri Bergson in his *Creative Evolution*, studies by Albert Rivaud, and later by Pierre Lachèze-Rey whose *Les origines cartésiennes du Dieu de Spinoza* was published in 1949. French Spinozist scholars were also active internationally through the publication of the *Chronicon Spinozanum* by the *Societatis Spinozanae* between 1921 and 1927. These volumes brought together scholars from France (Renan, Delbos, Rivaud, Brunschvicg), the Netherlands (Meijer, Vloemans), and other places.


like the U.S., Germany and England (Carl Gebhardt, Wolfson, Dunin-Borkowski, Alexander). An important symposium took place in 1932 in Spinoza’s house in The Hague for the 300th anniversary of his birth. It included international scholars including Gaston Bachelard and Léon Brunschvicg. Spinoza was among of the great philosophers commonly taught in French universities and high schools at the time. Also, we should not forget the translation of the complete works (except the Hebrew Grammar) by Charles Appuhn, published starting from 1913. Nevertheless, it is true that Spinoza studies slowed down in the 1930s and 1940s. They were contained within academic history of philosophy, and became increasingly separated from other fields of study. Most commentaries were about metaphysics, physics or epistemology, the first two parts of the Ethics, the TIE, but not so much on the TTP, TP or parts three and four of the Ethics. Spiritualist interpretations did not fit with the preoccupations of the 1960s.

4 Active studying of the works and activist use of the figure

Certainly, the revolution that took place in the 1960s and after was a revolution in reception and interest: numerous theses and papers were dedicated to Spinoza, making him one of the most studied philosophers. Yet, it was also a profound change in how his thought was read and made use of. Symptomatically, Matheron and Althusser, who played a significant role in the revival of interest for Spinoza, said that when they were working on Spinoza, there was practically nothing that could help them. This claim was not true literally speaking, but they were looking for something in Spinoza other than what former commentators had provided. Marxist and Nietzschean perspectives may have been the driving forces of the renewal of French Spinozist studies, as in Matheron and Deleuze’s Spinoza: Practical Philosophy. Althusser’s interest in Spinoza was crucial: he didn’t publish much on Spinoza, but his central position in the academic field and the support he gave to Spinoza studies was fundamental for understanding Spinoza in France today. Studies like Sylvain Zac’s and above all Gueroult’s were important, of course, but they cannot explain why Spinoza became the figure he is today in France. After Althusser, the French began to study Spinoza’s TTP

56 See Collard, D’une œuvre à l’autre.
57 One must mention the translation of the Ethics by André Guérinot (Paris: Editions d’art Edouard Pelletan, 1930), with a foreword by Léon Brunschvicg.
and TP seriously, as well as parts three and four of the *Ethics*, taking a completely new approach that was much more “materialist” or “empirical” than before. Part one of the *Ethics* acquired a new meaning that stressed immanent, intransitive, and structural causality. It emancipated Spinoza from any mystic, pantheist or emanative interpretations. Thanks to Pierre-François Moreau, the Spinoza who seemingly left no place for experience and individuality now became a Spinoza who paid particular attention to experience and individuals.\(^6^1\) For Cousin (and even Taine or Delbos) it was *Hegel and Spinoza*. For the new Spinoza, it was *Hegel or Spinoza*, as we can say it with the title of Machererey’s book first published in 1977.\(^6^2\) Pierre-François Moreau, André Tosel (with his *Spinoza ou le crépuscule de la servitude* published in 1992), Étienne Balibar, Pierre Macherey, were all Althusser’s students. Matheron was close to him. Their works, and especially those by Matheron, shaped contemporary French Spinozist studies, from Laurent Bove to Pascal Sévérac. This framework created a link between philosophy and the human sciences that still characterizes contemporary French research. This is exemplified by Frédéric Lordon’s use of Spinoza to produce an analysis of capitalism and the way it enrolls workers, or by Chantal Jaquet’s monograph on trans-classes among many other important works about Spinoza’s philosophy itself.\(^6^3\) The conjunction of a central position in the academic field, an inclination to receive and use Spinoza in a “materialist” way, and a specifically French political context shaped the “Spinoza” that mattered the most in France, even if other “Spinozas” were emerging.

What caused the transformations in the 1960s is hard to identify. Some have stressed a rationalist reaction to phenomenology, other an alternative to Marxism—which is not necessarily turned against Marx—or a complement to Marxism.\(^6^4\) In any case, we see that the history of philosophy began to converge with the social and human sciences. The use of Spinoza by sociologist and psychologist scholars and by intellectuals, artists, and activists (especially via Deleuze) is noteworthy. The convergence of close readings of the work, academic studies of its historical context, actualizations in anthropology and politics, combined with a vested interest in Spinoza, explains the dynamism of Spinozist studies in France today. The dynamism is easy to establish quantitatively: works on Spinoza are today more numerous than works on any other philosopher.\(^6^5\)

Still, the gap between the Spinoza in the early twentieth century and the Spinoza in the 1960s should not be exaggerated. Something ties Brunschvicg, Bachelard, Cavaillé and Desanti, all great Spinozists and great philosophers of science, to Althusser.\(^6^6\) Regardless of whether he was seen as

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\(^6^1\) Moreau, *Spinoza: l’expérience et l’éternité.*

\(^6^2\) Macherey, *Hegel ou Spinoza.*


\(^6^5\) See Collard, *D’une œuvre à l’autre.*

a spiritualist or a materialist, Spinoza has been used by what we traditionally call “philosophy of concept”, which insists on objective and structural necessity against the philosophy of conscience and subjectivity. Yet, this is not to deny the fact that there was a revolution in Spinozist studies in the 1960s. This French reception was unexpected. Paul Janet, in his famous paper “Le spinozisme en France” published in 1882, pretended that “the spirit of Spinoza is not fit for the French spirit” because “France is not mystical” and French authors tend to have a great consideration for individuals, their rights, and their autonomy. But Janet continued by hypothesizing that Spinozism would eventually adapt, provided that it modified itself drastically. This could be accomplished by a translation either in terms of affirming the reality of the mind or in terms of denying it. The first perspective, the “enlightenment of spiritualism”, would correspond to the “noble” and “truly superior” parts of Spinozism. The second would correspond to the contrary. Spinozism would then be divided into two parts: one, the noble one, would proceed from Descartes; the other, the vulgar one, would proceed from Diderot. This caricature of the philosophical landscape remains curiously relevant. It speaks to the academic field, intellectual, and political fields alike: the materialist side—the “vulgar” one—appropriated Spinoza who became the anti-idealist and anti-spiritualist figure, even an anti-capitalist, ecologist and “revolutionary figure”, as Olivier Bloch puts it, alongside and sometimes unfortunately instead of Marx. Janet’s caricature indicates a pattern that allows us to understand what Spinozism in France has become in these last decades.

Quite unexpectedly, France became very important for international Spinozist studies, in both academia and the broader intellectual world. We should not ignore the role played by the Association des Amis de Spinoza and the Cahiers Spinoza where scholars from all of Europe, and one from Japan, published their works from 1977 to 1991. The debate between Lee Rice and Steve Barbone and the French about the nature of the state contributed to the diffusion of Matheron’s works in the United States. In the late 1990s, the “new Spinoza” was seen as distinctly French. Nowadays, even if national specificities remain, one must recognize the international dimension of Spinozist research, where France plays a crucial role alongside other countries. This is reflected in the fact that the new edition of Spinoza’s works reunites Dutch, Italian and French scholars.

As Spinoza puts it in E3p51: “Different men can be affected differently by one and the same object [say “Spinoza”, his works, or his reputation]; and one and the same man [or Nation?] can be affected differently at different times by one and the same object.” “France” or “the French” have

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69 Olivier Bloch, “Présentation,” xiii.
neither substantial nor essential identity. Does that mean that they are not individuals? Nature doesn’t produce such a thing as nations, but nations are natural products of history. The name, the figure and the work of Spinoza is both the result and a driving force of that history. Nations—in their conflictual and historical identity—are at stake in building a figure, a work and its understanding, but this figure, work and understanding contributes to building an ingenium and crystallizing positions and debates. This is why it is unsatisfying to speak of mere “reception”: no one “receives” something “ready-made,” first because this thing has been made by someone before and, second, because there is no reception of a thing without making something of it, even if it is not a purely imaginary reception. Putting to one side the Hegelian inspiration that guided him, Delbos was fully Spinozist when he wrote that “the action doctrines exert is not similar to a mechanical impulse […]: one must safeguard the full rights of the free mind which only received what it feels capable of agreeing to.” In other words, those who receive Spinoza are always disposed to receive him, according to a certain manner of thinking. But Delbos also insists on the “flexible and strong unity” of Spinoza’s philosophy which has been capable “of adapting to the greatest differences in condition of existence,” but “without deteriorating itself.”

Maybe we should treat “Spinoza” (I mean his philosophy) as an individual whose parts vary and change disposition—new translations, the discovery of letters or entire works, like the KV—while still maintaining the same form, a certain relation between words and letters. The way it affects us affects it in return, without destroying it. Nevertheless “when the images are completely confused, the mind will imagine the bodies all confusedly,” and one will speak about “Spinozism” as “atheism,” “pantheism,” “materialism,” “mysticism” etc., or one will imagine “Spinoza” in accordance with “what the body has more often been affected by, and what the Mind imagines or recollects more easily”, if it is not only by “having heard or read certain words” (E1p40s1 and 2). Still, it is possible to have an adequate idea of “Spinozism” if we understand by this what is common among all its instantiations, namely, the works and the things people made of it. Moreover, maybe we can understand the singular essence of Spinoza’s own works.

References


74 I quote Curley’s translation.
76 Delbos, Le problème moral, ix.
Bell, Jeffrey A. “Nothing Matters: Skepticism, Spinoza, and Contemporary French Thought.” In Spinoza today, Crisis and Critique 8, no 1 (2021): 52–75.


