

SOCIOLOGICAL INSIGHTS OF GREAT THINKERS

Sociology through Literature,
Philosophy, and Science

Christofer Edling and Jens Rydgren, Editors

 PRAEGER

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CHAPTER 26

Baruch Spinoza: Monism and Complementarity

Ronald L. Breiger

As a sociologist who has been discovering for the past few years Spinoza's influence on the shaping of my discipline,¹ I have often felt the enchantment expressed in a different context by Friedrich Nietzsche in the summer of 1881 when he recognized in a flash of insight the kinship of his thought to Spinoza's and wrote breathlessly to a friend:

I am utterly amazed, utterly enchanted. I have a *precursor*, and what a precursor! I hardly knew Spinoza: that I should have turned to him just *now* was inspired by "instinct." . . . Even though the divergencies are admittedly tremendous, they are due more to the differences in time, culture, and science. *In summa*: my solitude, which, as on very high mountains, often made it hard for me to breathe and made my blood rush out, is at least a dualitude.

The translator of this exclamation of Nietzsche's (Yovel 1989b:105) maintains a pun between the final word, *Zweisamkeit* (literally, "two-someness"), and *Einsamkeit* (translated by Yovel in the passage quoted above as "solitude"). In this essay I indicate some important ways in which Spinoza was a precursor for two sociologists who brought the discipline into the twentieth century—Durkheim and Simmel—and in particular for their methods of grappling with the alignment between singularity (at both the individual level and that of the total society) and the complementarity of opposing attributes and forces such as mind and body (Spinoza), forms and contents (Simmel), and the dualism of human nature (Durkheim). The purpose of this exercise is to provide one means of striving for clarity as to the path sociology

has followed and, therefore, the possibilities for future twists and turns that we might choose to traverse.

SPINOZA'S LIFE

Spinoza descended from a family of Portuguese or Spanish-origin Sephardic Jews. The family name may derive from the town of Espinoza in northwestern Spain. By the beginning of the fifteenth century Spain had become a flourishing center of Jewish life, first under Moslem and then under Christian rule. A few months before Columbus set sail, however, an official edict expelled Jews from Spain or forced them to convert to Christianity on pain of death, and a similar law was soon passed in Portugal.

Many Jews maintained their religious identity in secret. Yovel (1989a:28–38) provides a compelling account of how the “crypto-Jewish” life of these Marranos resulted in a number of features associated with Spinoza’s mature thought, including a this-worldly disposition, a metaphysical skepticism, a quest for alternative salvation through methods that oppose official doctrine, dual life (living on two levels, enforcing an opposition between the inner and outer life, one concealed and one overt), and dual language (speaking to different audiences in different ways, masking one’s true intention to some while disclosing it to others).

In the early seventeenth century some of the former Marranos began to emigrate to the more tolerant clime of Holland. Spinoza was born in Amsterdam in 1632. His parents named him in Portuguese Bento, or “Blessed,” for which the Hebrew word is Baruch and a Latin version is Benedictus, as Spinoza came to be known subsequent to his expulsion from the Jewish community of Amsterdam. As a young man Spinoza knew the Bible by heart, found many contradictions in it, and was not shy about sharing his skepticism.

Spinoza maintained a conception of God as the embodiment of the eternal, the infinite, and the perfect. However, this deity was not in his view a unique and separate being or force existing above or outside the world or apart from the nature God created. God was rather the universe itself, insofar as it could be grasped as a single whole. *Deus sive Natura* (literally: God or Nature), as Spinoza was to write in his mature work: “God” is the name of the one and only substance, whose other name is “Nature” (MacIntyre 1967:533).

The distinction between God and the world, a contrast at the heart of both Judaism and Christianity, is obliterated in Spinoza’s philosophical system. For this and other unconventional thinking, the Jewish community of Amsterdam took the rare action of excommunicating him in 1656, when he was 24 years old, for his “horrible heresies” (Yovel 1989a:3).

Spinoza stayed four lonely years longer in Amsterdam, moving in 1660 to Rijnsburg and then Voorburg, earning a living by grinding and polishing lenses while discussing philosophical problems with friends. (My source for this paragraph, except where another citation is given, is MacIntyre 1967:531.) He corresponded with and met Leibniz (Stewart 2006) and corresponded with Huygens. Spinoza refused the chair of philosophy at Heidelberg in 1673 because he thought it would have compromised his independence. He died of consumption, aggravated by the dust from lens grinding, in 1677, at the age of 45.

Spinoza published an account of Descartes' philosophy in 1663 and his major work *Tractatus Theologico-politicus* in 1670, the latter anonymously due to his notoriety. His *magnum opus*, the *Ethics*, was published in 1677 immediately following his death.

SPINOZA RECEPTION BY DURKHEIM AND SIMMEL

Spinoza is largely ignored today by sociologists seeking to understand the history of our discipline and to shape its future. My goal is not to present Spinoza's thought directly or with philosophical adequacy (for this see Della Rocca 2008; Gatens and Lloyd 1999; MacIntyre 1967; among others). I focus instead on its refraction in the reception of Spinoza's thought as it informs and in important ways shapes the sociologies of Durkheim and Simmel.

DEUS SIVE NATURA

René Descartes was a dualist, distinguishing between the mind and the body as two separate entities organized hierarchically. "I think therefore I am." The mind, or in Christian theology the soul, can transcend the body.

Spinoza, by contrast, was a monist. As already mentioned, he believed that there is only one thing that could truly be said to exist in its own right, a Being or "Substance" known equally as God or as Nature. This substance has properties but is itself not a property of anything else. The one Substance in fact has an infinity of attributes, examples of just two attributes being minds ("thought") and bodies in motion ("extension"). Spinoza explained that "By God I understand a being absolutely infinite, that is, a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes" (quoted by Della Rocca 2008:51).

Spinoza's radical monism, however, does not give us (so to speak) the whole picture of his thought. There are also disjunctive forms of "complementarity" (Yovel 1989a:159–161), the second concept stated in the title of this chapter. Spinoza's "apparently extreme version" of philosophical

monism is tempered in that each totality (God and Nature), “precisely because each is a complete expression of Substance under one of its attributes,” is causally insulated from the other (Gatens and Lloyd 1999:2–3). Let us continue with the example of thought and extension. For Spinoza, “body and mind are not causally related at all; they are identical, because thought and extension are two attributes under which one substance is conceived” (MacIntyre 1967:534).

Substance considered under the attribute of Thought leads us to minds, ideas, and decisions, whereas the same Substance under the attribute of Extension connotes physical bodies in motion (Stewart 2006:168). Spinoza did not see mental events as the effect of bodily causes, nor did he postulate reciprocal causality between body and mind. Body and mind are not causally related at all; they are identical because thought and extension are two attributes under which the one substance is conceived.

In this sense, Spinoza reminds us of no one more than our sociological forebear, Georg Simmel. For Simmel, the individual does not “cause” society, nor is the converse true. Individuals and societies are *the same* contents, merely two different categories. As Simmel puts it, “the two—social and individual—are only two different categories under which the same content is subsumed.” Moreover, “the ‘within’ and the ‘without’ between individual and society are not two unrelated definitions but define together the fully homogeneous position of man as a social animal” (Simmel 1971a:17–18). In this sense, Simmel’s sociology draws upon Spinoza, and Simmel acknowledges the influence in many places.

The fundamental distinction upon which Simmel founds his conception of sociology—that between form and content—is very much related to Spinoza’s logic of complementary systems (to use the phrase of Yovel 1989a:159) distinguishing (while unifying) thought and extension, mind and body, and the order and connection of things and the order and connection of ideas.

Religion, for Simmel, is “a fundamental formal category” within which a wide variety of contents are subsumed (for example, the response of the pious soul to traditions and objects that the past has transmitted, and the response of a person of aesthetic disposition to that which is beautiful to look at; Simmel 1997:125). Simmel admits to the reader, “I am convinced that we will not understand religion in its strict and transcendent sense until we come to interpret it as the result of radicalizing, sublimating, and absolutizing these dispositions” (p. 126) which nonetheless constitute the formal category of religion. Concerning religiosity as a form and “the world views of reality” as contents:

[t]hose categories are related to one another as are *cogito* and *extenso* in Spinoza's philosophy: each expresses in its own language everything that exists, and precisely for that reason, neither of the two can invade the other. If religiosity is one of these categories—if it really is, when viewed from a particular perspective, the totality of being—then indeed it is bound to reject not only any testing against the worldviews of reality, of volition, and so on, but also any internal and factual association or connection with them . . . (Simmel 1997:124)

Just as Spinoza's postulation of a complementarity between God and Nature "allows science and theology their own territories" (MacIntyre 1967:533), so Simmel's duality of form (religiosity) and content (world views of reality) means that "neither of the two can invade the other" (as in the quotation above). It is as if Simmel has learned from Spinoza a playful attitude toward the relation of monism to its opposite quality, which is diversity or (more radically, as we are about to see) relativism.

Indeed, in *The Philosophy of Money* Simmel portrays money, with incisive irony, in this distinctive way: money is the universal substance that relativizes value. Moreover, this formulation is allowed by Simmel's reading of Spinoza (recall the "infinity of attributes" comprising Spinoza's single substance):

[O]nly through the continuous dissolution of any rigid separateness into interaction do we approach the functional unity of all elements in the universe, in which the significance of each element affects everything else. Consequently, relativism is closer than one is inclined to think to its extreme opposite—Spinoza's philosophy—with its all-embracing *substantia sive Deus*. . . . [A]ll the contents of the world view have become relativities in a monism such as Spinoza's. The all-embracing substance, the only absolute that remains, can now be disregarded without thereby affecting the content of reality—the expropriator will be expropriated, as Marx says of a process that is similar in form—and nothing remains but the relative dissolution of things into relations and processes. The interdependence of things, which relativism establishes as their essence, excludes the notion of infinity only on a superficial view, or if relativism is not conceived in a sufficiently radical way. (Simmel 1990:118)²

It is owing to the dual quality of money as both universal and relativizing that "the essential quality of money now becomes comprehensible. For the value of things, interpreted as their economic interaction, has its purest expression and embodiment in money" (p. 119).

SUB SPECIE AETERNITATIS

Writing in a different context, Simmel noted that “Spinoza demanded of the philosopher that he view things *sub specie aeternitatis*, that is, purely according to their inner necessity and significance, detached from the arbitrariness of their here and now” (quoted by Frisby 1992:105). Literally “under the aspect of eternity,” the phrase *sub specie aeternitatis* expresses Spinoza’s insistence on the durability of the one universal substance.

Continuing my suggestion of Simmel’s playful attitude (perhaps learned from Spinoza) toward monism, I mention (thanks to Frisby 1992:102–103) that Simmel authored seven contributions, between 1900 and 1903, to a German journal (*Jugend*) that promoted the *art nouveau* style of art and the applied arts (known in German as *Jugendstil*), these contributions appearing under the title “*Momentbilder sub specie aeternitatis*”—literally, snapshots viewed from the aspect of eternity.

Frisby explains that, in Simmel’s terminology, “the snapshot of social reality may capture a transitory content but the sociologist should be concerned with the more enduring social forms within which that content is embodied,” thus adeptly connecting Simmel’s playful reading of Spinoza with the sociologist’s central distinction between the forms and contents of social life.

A segue to Durkheim, Simmel’s contemporary, is now overdue. Writing in 1914 on the dualism of human nature, Durkheim (1964b) opposes body and soul, sensory appetites (egoistic and individualistic) versus conceptual thought and moral activity (impersonal, disinterested, and social). There is in us a being that represents everything in relation to itself and from its own point of view. “There is another being in us, however, which knows things *sub specie aeternitatis*, as if it were participating in some thought other than its own . . .”

In brief, “we possess both a faculty for thinking as individuals and a faculty for thinking in universal and impersonal terms.” Durkheim does not resolve this tension by the end of his essay; instead, “all evidence compels us to expect our effort in the struggle between the two beings within us to increase with the growth of civilization.”

Donald Nielsen’s (1999) book, to which I am indebted, elaborates an argument that Durkheim’s sociology bears a striking resemblance to Spinoza’s philosophy. He traces the Spinozan phrase *sub specie aeternitatis* to Durkheim’s mature theory of religion, society, and the categories. Nielsen suggests that Durkheim’s totalistic concept of “society” played a role for him analogous to that of the single eternal “substance” in Spinoza’s system, and Nielsen observes that in 1933 a historian of modern philosophy (J. Benrubi) referred provocatively to Durkheim’s work as a philosophy *sub specie societatis* (Nielsen 1999:33).

In the final footnote to the “Conclusion” of his last major work, Durkheim (1968) writes that totality, society, and deity are three different facets of one idea (“*Au fond, concept de totalité, concept de société, concept de divinité ne sont vraisemblablement que des aspects différents d’une seule et même notion*”). For Nielsen (1999:230), this one idea is “the notion of substance, perhaps more specifically, social substance” which in Durkheim’s theory “can be nothing but social life itself in its true reality as power, force, energy, and concentration of human social life.”

CONCLUSION

Any discussion of Spinoza’s thought necessarily omits an infinity of attributes. A more complete treatment would emphasize his purely relational approach to human reality and his rejection of the illusions of methodological individualism (Citton and Lordon 2008). It would review the origins of social network analysis and Heiderian’s balance theory in Spinoza’s propositions on the affects (Breiger 2003:19; Martin 2009:43; see also Bramsen 1999). It would recall Durkheim’s application of “Spinoza’s idea that things are good because we like them, rather than that we like them because they are good” to his theory of the social construction of crime (“we do not condemn it [an act that offends us] because it is a crime, but it is a crime because we condemn it”; Durkheim 1984:40).

A full treatment would give pride of place to Spinoza’s concept of *conatus* in providing a new prism for viewing Bourdieu’s sociology (Guillory 1997; Lordon 2006). A more adequate presentation would deconstruct the so-called Hobbesian problem of order from the point of view of his less well-known seventeenth-century contemporary rationalist philosopher, a project to which Simmel contributed by observing that “[m]odern competition is described as the fight of all against all, but at the same time it is the fight of all *for* all,” simultaneously a fight “*against* a fellowman *for* a third one” based on the “possibilities of gaining favor and connection” (Simmel 1955:62–63). There is indeed a Spinozan approach to the construction of sociological theory that needs to be more fully recognized so that it may be extended.

NOTES

1. Earlier expressions of this interest are my talk on “The Spinozan Problem of Order” at the Roger Gould Memorial Conference in New Haven, Connecticut, in October 2003, my keynote address on “Social Networks and the Spinozan Problem of Order,” at the International Network of Social Network Analysts Annual

Conference, in Redondo Beach, California, February 2005, and my brief discussion of Spinoza and social network theory (Breiger 2003:19, 31). I am indebted to participants at these conferences, to Omar Lizardo for many stimulating discussions early on in my thinking about Spinoza, to Lynette Spillman for pointing me in Durkheim's direction, to Emmanuel Lazega for telling me of Lordon's work, and to Horst Helle for sharing his interest in Spinoza and Simmel.

2. Simmel's reference to Marx concerns the latter's theorization of the increasing universality of capitalism, leading necessarily to "the monopoly of capital become [ing] a fetter upon the mode of production, which has sprung up and flourished along with it, and under it." The new contents—the socialization of labor and "the entanglement of all peoples in the net of the world-market"—can no longer be contained by the membrane ("integument") of the capitalist mode. "This integument is burst asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated" (Marx 1906, Part VIII, Ch. XXXII, Sect. 2).

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