Materialism and Politics, ed. by Bernardo Bianchi, Emilie Filion-Donato, Marlon Miguel, and Ayşe Yuva, Cultural Inquiry, 20 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2021), pp. 39–54

STEFANO VISENTIN ⓘD

Non Defuit Materia
Freedom and Necessity in Spinoza's Democratic Theory

CITE AS:

RIGHTS STATEMENT:

ABSTRACT: The relationship between politics and metaphysics in Spinoza's philosophy has been highlighted by Antonio Negri in *The Savage Anomaly*. But the determinism of God's power, implying the identity between freedom and necessity, has not been analysed in its political effects. This chapter will show by whom the imaginary reality of free will can be politically employed; that due to the identity between reality and perfection, a 'real' tyranny can be considered a 'perfect' regime; how a free multitude, living in a democratic regime, differentiates itself from an enslaved one, and how its freedom can be necessary.

KEYWORDS: necessity; freedom; multitude; democracy; politics, practical; Spinoza, Baruch

Non Defuit Materia
Freedom and Necessity in Spinoza's Democratic Theory
STEFANO VISENTIN

INTRODUCTION: ONTOLOGY AND POLITICS IN SPINOZA

One of the most relevant novelties introduced by the studies of the last decades on Baruch Spinoza's political philosophy concerns the emergence in his works of a profound connection between politics and ontology. Just to give an example, in a recent book Antonio Negri wrote: 'The political thought of Spinoza is to be found in his ontology', since 'in Spinoza the political is […] a potency exceeding all measure, an accumulation not of substantial (individual) segments but of modal (singular) potencies'.[1] It is a statement which can be read within a specific historical context, namely the birth of modern capitalism, which Negri described with the following words:

> When modernity inaugurated the capitalist development, the new productive forces (and above all the living labour) had to be subjected to an ancient, eternal seal of power, to the absoluteness of a command that legitimized the new relations of production. From then on every attempt to break this frame

---

1   Antonio Negri, *Spinoza for our Time: Politics and Postmodernity*, trans. by William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), pp. 9–10.

was considered reprehensible and heresiarch […]. With this it was affirmed that modern metaphysics (and when we say metaphysics, we always mean in some way theology) sharpened its political claim. Since then, in fact, metaphysics has always been political.[2]

Despite the great relevance of this new interpretation, which is a radical innovation in terms of reading Spinoza's two political treatises, this chapter maintains that such a reading can be developed in two further directions: on the one hand, by fostering the dialogue with a more historically contextualized perspective; on the other hand, by theoretically problematizing the implicit (and in some case even explicit) teleologism of this interpretation. In this direction, an important step has been made by Étienne Balibar in his seminal essay on the fear of the masses,[3] but there are still some more issues to take into account.

One of these issues is certainly the political meaning of the identity Spinoza establishes between necessity and freedom. This identity has been studied at length by the scholars of Spinoza's ontology,[4] but it has never received the attention it deserves from scholars of Spinoza's political philosophy. The issue concerning the political relationship between freedom and necessity or, in other words, the relationship between subjective and objective conditions of collective action, is a real 'raw nerve' of modern political theory. This is because it brings into question the very possibility of whether humans can modify their (collective) lives: in a certain way, the meaning of concepts like emancipation, progress, reform, and revolution depends on the resolution of the problem of the complex connection between freedom and necessity.

---

2   Antonio Negri, 'Politiche dell'immanenza, politiche della trascendenza. Saggio popolare', in *Storia politica della moltitudine*, ed. by Filippo Del Lucchese (Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2009), pp. 86–96 (p. 87; my translation). See also Stefano Visentin, 'A ontologia política de Espinosa na leitura de Antonio Negri', *Cadernos Espinosanos*, 38 (2018), pp. 151–70.

3   Étienne Balibar, 'Spinoza, the Anti-Orwell: The Fear of the Masses', *Rethinking Marxism*, 2.3 (1989), pp. 104–39.

4   Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) is one of the most relevant essays on this subject published in the last decades; but another significant example is also provided by Don Garrett, *Nature and Necessity in Spinoza's Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Compared to the approach taken by the vast majority of modern political philosophers, Spinoza followed quite an original path when attempting to address this problematic, which depends on the peculiarity of his ontology. His provocative perspective can be summarized by the corollary of *Ethics* II, Def. 6: 'By "reality" and "perfection" I understand the same thing':[5] a definition which never ceased to haunt his readers, because, if it is very difficult to accept that the world in which we live is perfect, it is almost unacceptable to consider human actions, both individual and collective, as such, especially when their consequences are negative — not to say catastrophic — for other people, even when they simply diverge from the intention of the agent subject(s). It is a well-known fact that, from the very beginning of the *Ethics*, Spinoza emphasizes the distinction between his conception of freedom and the idea of free will, stating that 'that thing is called free which exists from the necessity of its nature alone, and is determined to act by itself alone';[6] from this perspective, the consequences which this distinction produces on men's collective lives and actions, that is on their history, must be taken into account. Three fundamental issues must be highlighted: Firstly, what are the political effects of the illusory character of free will, i.e. how is such an illusion used politically, and by whom? This issue is taken into account by Spinoza both in *Ethics* I, App., and in *Theological-Political Treatise*, Praef., where it is exposed as the dilemma of voluntary servitude. Secondly, given the ontological identity of reality and perfection, how can a form of government which limits its subjects' freedom be considered a perfect government (this is the case of absolute monarchy or tyranny, which Spinoza deals with in the *Political Treatise*)? Thirdly, as a consequence of this second point, how a free multitude is created is something that must be understood, especially how it differentiates itself from a subjugated one and, even more so, how a subjugated multitude can develop in a free one. This last point plays a fundamental role in the definition and fulfilment of

---

5 '*Per perfectionem et realitatem idem intelligo*' (*CWS* [*The Collected Works of Spinoza*, see abbreviations], I, p. 447; *Gebhardt* II, 85). It is worth noting that this definition is not enclosed within *Ethics* I, devoted to the discussion of God's nature, but within *Ethics* II, which takes 'The Nature and the Origin of the Mind' (*CWS* I, p. 446) into account; therefore, this identity concerns not only the infinite nature of God, but also the finite nature of his modes.

6 *Ethics* I, Def. 7; *CWS* I, p. 409.

a democratic regime, i.e. of the most absolute and desirable form of political organization[7] (although some scholars, e.g. Alexandre Matheron and Riccardo Caporali, have shown that Spinoza's democracy is far from being perfect).[8] What is at stake here is the new materialist approach to both individual and collective behaviours, which Spinoza tries to elaborate: an approach which, anticipating Marx's reading of Feuerbach,[9] aims to overcome the radical dichotomy between freedom and necessity established by Descartes, thus revealing a new philosophical and political path within the conceptual framework of modernity.[10]

THE POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE IMAGINARY NATURE OF FREE WILL

In the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza remarks that

> Now if nature had so constituted men that they desired nothing except what true reason teaches them to desire, then of course a society could exist without laws; in that case it would be completely sufficient to teach men true moral lessons, so that they would do voluntarily, wholeheartedly, and in a manner worthy of a free man, what is really useful.[11]

On the one hand, this statement expresses the idea that a civil and political organization is needed for humans to live in peace, but, on

---

7   See *TP* xi, 1; *CWS* ii, p. 601; *Gebhardt* iii, p. 358: 'I come, finally, to the third and completely absolute state [*omnino absolutum imperium*], which we call Democratic'.

8   Alexandre Matheron, 'Women and Servants in Spinozist Democracy', in his *Politics, Ontology and Knowledge in Spinoza* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), pp. 260–79; Riccardo Caporali, 'La moltitudine e gli esclusi', in *Spinoza: individuo e moltitudine,* ed. by Riccardo Caporali, Vittorio Morfino, and Stefano Visentin (Cesena: Il Ponte Vecchio, 2007), pp. 93–104.

9   See Karl Marx, 'Thesen über Feuerbach', in *MEW* [*Marx-Engels-Werke*, see abbreviations], iii (1958), pp. 5–7. Spinoza's heritage in the thought of Marx has been extensively debated in the last decades: see Karl Ritter, *Prozesse der Befreiung. Marx, Spinoza und die Bedingungen eines freien Gemeinwesens* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2011); Frédéric Lordon, *Willing Slaves of Capital: Spinoza and Marx on Desire* (London: Verso Books, 2014); Franck Fischbach, *La Production des hommes. Marx avec Spinoza* (Paris: Vrin, 2014).

10 The idea of 'another' modernity, different if not opposed to the mainstream one developed by Descartes, Hobbes, Rousseau, and Hegel, is very present in Negri's thought; see, e.g. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

11 *TTP* v, 20; *CWS* ii, p. 144.

the other hand, it also emphasizes the many risks threatening the construction and duration of the same, especially the very difficult task to transform the choices of irrational individuals into rational ones. Humans are not born rational and free, as the seventeenth century doctrine of natural law — especially Hugo Grotius's — used to claim; instead, they are naturally subjugated by affects, as the title of *Ethics* IV asserts.[12] This enslavement coincides with human beings' impotence to moderate their passions and with their constant exposure to the power of external phenomena they cannot govern.[13] Nevertheless, humans imagine they possess natural freedom according to which they believe that they consciously want what they desire and what they try to achieve: '[humans] think themselves free, because they are conscious of their volitions and their appetite, and do not think, even in their dreams, of the causes by which they are disposed to wanting and willing, because they are ignorant of [those causes]'.[14]

Imagination is a constitutive element of human impotence, as it promotes the transformation of the human 'internal' subjugation to passive affects (i.e. passions) into an 'external' enslavement to those who are able to take advantage of such passivity and use it to establish political authority based upon ignorance and superstition (above all the clergy and the monarchs). Spinoza remarks upon this in *Ethics* I, App.: 'For they [the priests] know that if ignorance is taken away, then foolish wonder, the only means they have of arguing and defending their authority is also taken away'.[15] It could be said that the more humans imagine they are endowed with free will, the more they are enslaved or at risk of being enslaved. The alliance between priests and kings instrumentally manipulates the natural illusion of freedom, which affects all human beings, and establishes, in Spinoza's own words, 'the greatest secret of monarchic rule'.[16] This manipulation

---

12 *Ethics* IV; *CWS* I, p. 543; *Gebhardt* II, p. 205: 'On Human Bondage, or the Power of the Affects' (*De servitute humana seu de affectuum viribus*).

13 Ibid.

14 *Ethics* I, App.; *CWS* I, p. 440.

15 Ibid.; *CWS* I, pp. 443–44.

16 *TTP* Praef.; *CWS* II, p. 68; *Gebhardt* III, p. 7: 'The greatest secret of monarchic rule [*regiminis Monarchici summum arcanum*], and its main interest, is to keep men deceived, and to cloak in the specious name of Religion the fear by which they must be checked, so that they will fight for slavery as they would for their survival'.

induces humans to fight for their servitude as if they 'freely' accepted
a single individual's dominion who then goes on to become the one
and only reference point for all their hopes and desires. Moreover,
the passivity of such an imagination reinforces the idea (or better, the
image) of a God promoted by the theological-political apparatus, as
Ethics II, 3, Schol. confirms in an extraordinary analysis which com-
bines anthropology, psychology, and theology:

> By 'God's power' ordinary people understand God's free will
> and his right over all things which are, things which on that
> account are commonly considered to be contingent. For they
> say that God has the power of destroying all things and re-
> ducing them to nothing. Further, they often compare God's
> power with the power of kings. But we have refuted this […].
> Again, if it were agreeable to pursue these matters further, I
> could also show here that the power which ordinary people
> fictitiously ascribe to God is not only human (which shows that
> ordinary people conceive God as a man, or as like a man), but
> also involves lack of power.[17]

Spinoza's criticism of free will involves a radical calling into question of
God's 'vulgar' image — here the term *vulgus*, i.e. the common people
or plebs, does not refer to a determinate social group, but rather to
all those who are subject to the hallucinatory power of imagination
— and especially of the view that God is considered to possess an
absolutely undetermined will, the 'power of destroying all things'. This
alleged power over life and death leads to the attribution of a divine
origin for monarchs, such that their freedom reveals itself in the right
to condemn their subjects to death. However, according to Spinoza,
God's freedom has nothing to do with such a nihilist representation.
Spinoza's God is an infinite power (*potentia*, not *potestas*) strictly deter-
mined in every action, a productive force which actually realizes every
single potentiality, since it '*non defuit materia* [did not lack material]',
that is, in the words of *Ethics* I, App., God has the capacity 'to create
all things, from the highest degree of perfection to the lowest'. To be
even more precise, Spinoza's God is an infinite power '[b]ecause the
laws of his nature have been so ample that they sufficed for producing
all things that can be conceived by an infinite intellect'.[18] This is also

---

17   *Ethics* II, 3 Schol.; *CWS* I, p. 449.
18   *Ethics* I, App.; *CWS* I, p. 446; *Gebhardt* II, p. 83.

why one of the most relevant aspects of Spinoza's republicanism can be found in his criticism of the superstitious and alienating structure of monarchy. *Non defuit materia* can thus be read as the motto of Spinozist materialism, since it means that the infinite power of God is far from being circumscribed by the finite power of the human mind, which can only understand it, so to say, 'intensively' but not in its entire extension; moreover, *non defuit materia* also implies that this power is materialist and continuously produces concrete transformations of reality, including human reality, by means of an internal intervention into the structure of the body (again, including collective bodies).

TYRANNY AS A 'PERFECT' POLITICAL REGIME

In *Ethics* III, Praef., Spinoza states that humans cannot be considered 'a dominion within a dominion [*veluti imperium in imperio*]',[19] or as those who must not follow the laws of nature as if they were part of a different realm. This assertion is not only true for common people but also for kings, who, as the *Political Treatise* points out, 'are not gods, but men, who are often captivated by the Sirens' song'.[20] In Spinoza's view, kingdoms are founded on subjects' weaknesses rather than on king's strengths, since 'a whole multitude would never transfer its right to one or a few people, if its members could agree among themselves and not go from the kind of controversy generally aroused in large Councils to a rebellion'.[21] Thus, the existence of monarchical governments does not depend on the qualities of a single exceptional person but rather on the passivity of popular imaginations and affects, which expresses the (relative) impotence of a multitude which is unable to create a more developed and rational regime. In other words, a kings' authority is produced by the fear the multitude incites in itself much more than by the fear incited by kings over the populace. This reflexive fear[22] comes from the natural (that is: necessary) complexion of human im-

---

19 Ibid., *CWS* I, p. 491; *Gebhardt* II, p. 137.
20 *TP* VII, 1; *CWS* II, p. 544.
21 *TP* VII, 5; *CWS* II, p. 547.
22 See Stefano Visentin, 'Paura delle masse e desiderio dell'uno. Considerazioni sull'ambivalenza della *potentia multitudinis*', in *Storia politica della moltitudine*, ed. by Del Lucchese, pp. 181–98.

agination, which prevents the multitude from peacefully resolving the inevitable disputes and conflicts that arise internally. For this reason, Spinoza emphasizes that 'a multitude freely transfers to the king only what it cannot have absolutely in its power, i.e., an end to controversies and speed in making decisions',[23] in order to avoid the threat of uninterrupted sedition within the citizenry; this is also the reason why 'a Commonwealth is always put at greater risk on account of its citizens than on account of its enemies'.[24]

Because the conferral of absolute power upon the monarch derives from a collective hallucination, it follows that the 'perfection' of monarchies and even tyrannies originates from very natural and necessary causes that define the history of these regimes, including their birth, developments, and crises. Moreover, this identification between reality and perfection plays a fundamental political role because it rejects any moralistic justification of monarchy that would consider the monarch's power as the result of an ethical superiority of one man over the masses, or of tyrants' authority as God's punishment for citizens' sins. On the contrary, Spinoza removes the monarch-tyrant from the centre of the stage and integrates them into a wider causal configuration in terms of a collective subject (the multitude), which then appears as the main political actor, even within the historical circumstances where this collective subject appears to be at the lowest level of its capacity. The *imperium* (that is, the articulated structure of power relationships within an organized collectivity)[25] is thus always 'defined by the power of a multitude (*potentia multitudinis*)',[26] even when this power appears to be a sort of impotence or incapacity to give birth to free and democratic regimes.[27] However, this impotence is necessary, and this necessity frees politics of any moralistic or voluntaristic overdetermin-

---

23   *TP* VII, 5; *CWS* II, p. 547.

24   *TP* VI, 6; *CWS* II, p. 534.

25   The Latin term is hereby maintained because translating the Spinozist meaning of *imperium* with a single English word is very difficult, if not impossible, since neither sovereignty (as in Curley's translation), nor 'State', nor 'dominion', nor 'government' are fit to express the complexity of a political structure which is composed by laws and institutions, but also by (collective) imagination and affects.

26   *TP* II, 17; *CWS* II, p. 514.

27   In his *Imperium. Structures et affects des corps politiques* (Paris: La fabrique, 2015), Frédéric Lordon points out that 'there is no tribunal for the peoples' merit or fault, there is only the entirely positive measure of their power' (p. 157; my translation).

ation: there is neither a God to reward or punish humans, nor a devil to deceive them, nor original sin to cloud their free willingness to do good; there is only the natural constitution of a finite mode — or a composition of finite modes — which expresses the divine power in a dynamic and continuously transforming historical reality. It is not a coincidence that, in *Ethics* IV, Praef., Spinoza once again takes into account the meaning of perfection in a different context from the quotation already given in *Ethics* II, Def. 6. The emergence of this new definition of perfection is preceded by several references in *Ethics* III to a gradation of perfection in terms of it being lesser or greater, as in the following example: 'We see, then, that the mind can undergo great changes, and pass now to a greater, now to a lesser perfection.'[28] Therefore, the concrete existence of minds (and bodies) can modify their reality — that is, their perfection — insofar as they affect and are affected by other minds (and bodies), and this is true so long as minds and bodies are seen as equally enmeshed in this process:

> Perfection and imperfection therefore are only modes of thinking, i.e. notions we are accustomed to feign [*fingere*] because we compare individuals of the same species or genus to another. But the main thing to note is that when I say that someone passes from a lesser to a greater perfection, and the opposite, I do not understand that he is changed from one essence, or form to another […]. Rather, we consider that his power of acting [*agendi potentiam*], insofar as it is understood from his nature, is increased or diminished.[29]

With this meaning, the word 'perfection' expresses the measure of the power of an individual (or a collective) to act in a specific moment of their lives, therefore it indicates the intersection between reality as the essence of a God's finite mode and the same reality as the indefinite perseverance in existence, that is, as a continuous and necessary transformation.

---

28   *Ethics* III, 11 Schol.; *CWS* I, p. 500. See also *Ethics* III, DA 2 and 3; *CWS* I, p. 531; *Gebhardt* II, p. 191: '2. Joy [*Laetitia*] is a man's passage from a lesser to a greater perfection. 3. Sadness [*Tristitia*] is a man's passage from a greater to a lesser perfection.'

29   *Ethics* IV, Praef.; *CWS* I, pp. 545–46; *Gebhardt* II, pp. 206–08.

THE NECESSARY FREEDOM OF THE MULTITUDE

The third and last point concerns the meaning of political freedom in Spinoza's thought, and the conditions by which a multitude can concretely realize it. In a fascinating essay, François Zourabichvili has called this issue 'the enigma of the free multitude'.[30] To face this issue (from a different but complementary perspective to Zourabichvili's), a brief summary of Spinoza's conception of natural law must be taken into account, in order to highlight the original and profound connection between freedom and necessity it contains. In the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza writes that every individual is 'naturally determined to existing and having effects in a certain way' by his natural right, therefore this right is the expression of a 'determinate power' (*determinata potentia*),[31] which defines a real and effective space of action, legitimately included (to maintain a juridical lexicon) within the infinite effects and connections caused by divine power. From this perspective, as André Tosel once noted in a fundamental essay,[32] the mode's finitude is a positive one, since it expresses an operative part of an infinite power to act. The ethical problem *par excellence* is thus, to use Tosel's words, 'to become active on the foundation of an irremovable passivity',[33] since every human, just as every finite mode, is 'both a product and a producer of transitive indefinite operations, which at the same time express themselves as intrinsic determinations'.[34] To put it in a slightly different manner, the issue becomes how to relate to other humans who affect us from a perspective which, although unable to entirely overcome this otherness, nevertheless tries to build connections on the basis of what is common by promoting both the internalization of positive affections and the externalization of what affects others in a positive way. Obviously, such positivity is far from being absolute, because it is delimited by the power of other modes,

---

30 François Zourabichvili, 'L'Énigme de la multitude libre', in *La Multitude libre. Nouvelles lectures du 'Traité Politique'*, ed. by Chantal Jaquet, Pascal Sévérac, and Ariel Suhamy (Paris: Amsterdam, 2008), pp. 69–80.

31 *TTP* XVI; *CWS* I, p. 282; Gebhardt III, p. 189.

32 André Tosel, 'La Finitude positive', in his *Spinoza ou l'autre (in)finitude* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008), pp. 157–72.

33 Ibid., p. 163; my translation.

34 Ibid., pp. 165–66; my translation.

and, as far as humans are concerned, by the ambivalent character of affects and imagination; nevertheless, since every individual occupies a specific place within the spatio-temporal continuum, they also develop the capacity (in Spinoza's words, the *aptitudo*)[35] to compose their bodies and ideas — including their imagination and affects — strategically (to recuperate the military metaphor used by Laurent Bove).[36] They do this in order to resist the external forces which try to break up their cohesion and which would therefore weaken the common power they want to build. Consequently, the ability to be active (that is, to be an adequate cause of one's own actions), and thus to be free, depends on the permanent confrontation and collision with the external world, driven by the striving to modify the relationships towards it (and in particular towards other humans), to increase our power, and to resist the power of others according to our capacity. Hence, everyone's determinate *potentia* materializes within an existential and indeterminate framework in a continuous variation of its increments and reductions. Nonetheless, as *Ethics* II, 45 Schol. states, 'even if each thing is determined by another singular thing to exist in a certain way, still the force by which each one persists in existing follows from the eternal necessity of God's nature'.[37] As Christopher Skeaff recently noted in his book *Becoming Political*, this persistence cannot be interpreted as a 'norm' in the legal sense, that is, as the conformity to a predetermined rule, but rather as 'the power to transform the conditions of one's activity'.[38] Here the 'extrinsic [and extensive] finitude' of a mode's power coincides with its 'intrinsic [and intensive] infinitude', producing an indefinite striving to persevere — that is, to increase one's power — in existence.

---

35   In *TP* IV, 4; *CWS* II, p. 526; *Gebhardt* III, p. 293, 'capacity' (*aptitudo*) is defined with the following words: 'When we say each person can decide whatever he wishes concerning a thing of which he is the master, this power must be defined not only by the power of the agent [*non sola agendi potentia*], but also by the capacity of what he's acting on [*ipsius patientis aptitudine*]'.

36   Laurent Bove, *Affirmation and Resistance in Spinoza: Strategy of the Conatus* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

37   *CWS* I, p. 482.

38   Christopher Skeaff, *Becoming Political: Spinoza's Vital Republicanism and the Democratic Power of Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), p. 84.

The same existential indefinite nature of a mode's finite power, which Spinoza calls 'vacillation of mind [*fluctuatio animi*]',[39] is traceable in the life of a mode's aggregate, since, as Spinoza states in *Ethics* II, Def. 7: 'if a number of individuals so concur in one action that together they are all the cause of one effect, I consider them all, as to that extent, as one singular thing'.[40] The political existence of a multitude develops as a transition from a degree of power to a different degree of power; therefore, the different political regimes analysed by the *Political Treatise* cannot be understood as rigid and monolithic realities, but rather as the effects of a continuous variation of the *potentia multitudinis*, which produces what could be called a *fluctuatio imperii*, that is, the uninterrupted transformation of a political regime into another.[41] In this perspective, the relationship between the power (*potentia*) of the multitude and the *imperium*, as defined in the *Political Treatise* II, 17, can assume two different configurations: on the one side, it can be represented as an internal determination — so that the *potentia multitudinis* coincides with the *imperium*'s laws and commands; but, on the other side, in specific circumstances, this determination emerges from the 'outside', so that the action of the multitude on the *imperium* assumes the shape of a form of resistance to its laws and commands.

Two examples of this second relationship can be found in the *Political Treatise*: the first one concerns the aristocratic regime, the second one the political consequences of the affect of indignation. Regarding his analysis of aristocracy, Spinoza points out that this kind of *imperium* is based upon the clear distinction between the patricians and the rest of the multitude who are excluded from institutions and even from the rights of citizenship.[42] Therefore, the only instrument the multitude possesses to obtain political visibility is that of instilling fear in the rulers: 'The only reason its [aristocratic] rule is not in practice absolute is that the multitude is terrifying to its rulers. If it [the multitude] doesn't claim that freedom for itself by an explicit law, it still

---

39   *Ethics* III, 17 Schol.; *CWS* I, p. 504; *Gebhardt* II, p. 153: 'This constitution of the Mind which arises from two contrary affects is called "vacillation of mind"'.

40   *CWS* I, p. 447.

41   Skeaff defines this movement as a 'scalar, as opposed to dichotomous, understanding of freedom and power that finite individuals [and finite ensemble of individuals as well] are capable of achieving' (Skeaff, *Becoming Political*, p. 86).

42   See *TP* VIII, 3; *CWS* II, p. 566.

claims it tacitly and maintains it'.[43] The *potentia multitudinis* applies an affective 'pressure' on the institutional framework, determining it from the outside, and thus constituting an apparent otherness which cannot be integrated unless it is through the transformation of the institutions themselves. The second example concerns the emergence of a collective aversion to the ruler(s), due to their behaviours which strongly collide with citizens' imaginative constitution:

> So for the Commonwealth to be its own master, it is bound to maintain the causes of fear and respect. Otherwise it ceases to be a Commonwealth [...]. To slaughter and rob his subjects, to rape their young women, and actions of that kind, turn fear into indignation, and hence turn the civil order into a state of hostility.[44]

The transformation of the multitude's fear into indignation (which is defined as 'hate toward someone who has done evil to another' in the *Ethics*)[45] produces a radical change in the political order of the *imperium* and creates the conditions for the emergence of a 'state of hostility' (*status hostilitatis*), which resembles the Hobbesian state of nature/state of war, with the relevant difference that the conflict is now polarized between those who were formerly ruled and the former rulers in a sort of reinterpretation of the Machiavellian theory of humours.[46]

In these two examples, the multitude expresses its power through an affective dynamic which is not integrated into political institutions but rather obeys a very natural law that can be summarized in the

---

43   *TP* VIII, 4; *CWS* II, p. 567. See also Stefano Visentin, 'La parzialità dell'universale. La moltitudine nell'*imperium aristocraticum*', in *Spinoza: individuo e moltitudine*, ed. by Riccardo Caporali, Vittorio Morfino, and Stefano Visentin (Cesena: Il Ponte Vecchio, 2007), pp. 373–90.

44   *TP* IV, 4; *CWS* II, p. 527. But see also *TP* III, 9; *CWS* II, p. 521: 'Because the Commonwealth's Right is defined by the common power of a multitude, it's certain that its power and Right are diminished to the extent that it provides many people with reasons to conspire against it.'

45   *Ethics* III, DA 20; *CWS* I, p. 535.

46   Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* [1513], ed. by William J. Connell (Boston, MA: Bedford, 2005): 'For in every city these two different humours are found, whence it arises that the people desire to be neither commanded nor oppressed by the great, and the great desire both to command and to oppress the people'. And this situation arises because the people do not want to be dominated or oppressed by the nobles, and the nobles want to dominate and oppress the people' (ch. 9).

statement: 'being frightening in order not to be afraid' (the reversal of
the famous Tacitan saying: *terret vulgus, nisi metuat*).[47] Nevertheless,
the externality of this power to the *imperium* does not only involve neg-
ative consequences for the existence of a political subject, which could
appear to be the case at first sight, since the power itself expresses the
relentless and necessary (that is, it stems from the multitude's nature)
movement of the collective imagination and passions. The institutional
framework must continuously adapt itself to these passions, producing
a collection of different institutions that replace one another without,
however, denying the very essence of the political body. In fact, in the
Political Treatise, Spinoza reminds us:

> When disagreements and rebellions are stirred up in a Com-
> monwealth — as they often are — the result is never that
> the citizens dissolve the Commonwealth — though this of-
> ten happens in other kinds of society. Instead, if they can't
> settle their disagreements while preserving the form of the
> Commonwealth, they change its form to another. So when I
> speak of the means required to preserve the state, I understand
> the means necessary to preserve its form without any notable
> change.[48]

An important consequence of this statement is that every transition is
caused by an increase or decrease in the multitude's power, and every
political regime can be seen as a determinate (both ontologically and
historically) expression of the democratic natural structure of a polit-
ical organization. Thus, democracy takes on a dual meaning: it reveals
the political regime which expresses the highest degree of collective
power (although it is known that even within a democratic regime
some transitions of *potentia* are still present), but it also exhibits the
immanent movement of this power within every form of government.

In a similar way, freedom is never a 'natural' property of human
beings but rather a process of liberation: being free in an absolute

---

47   *TP* VII, 27; *CWS* II, pp. 558–59: 'What we've written may be ridiculed by those who
     think the vices common to all mortals belong only to the plebeians — those who
     think "that there's no moderation in the common people; that they're terrifying, unless
     they themselves are cowed by fear"; or that "the plebeians either serve humbly or rule
     proudly, like despots", and that "there's neither truth nor judgment in [the plebeian
     class]", etc. But everyone shares a common nature, we're just deceived by power and
     refinement.'

48   *TP* VI, 2; *CWS* II, p. 562.

sense means to be able to use one's own power, principally reason but
also affects and imagination, insofar as they help to unify every indi-
vidual's strength. That is why freedom and necessity coincide, since
everyone's natural power derives from a necessary causal chain which
involves a basically infinite network of relations and mutual trans-
formations. However, another definition of freedom can be found,
in which Spinoza expresses the (imaginary) discordance between the
essential determination of the mode's power and the existential indef-
inite nature of the same power, and at the same time the attempt to
overcome it both individually and collectively. Given this situation,
how can the multitude escape the threat of an infinite conflict among
humans while promoting the transitions which increase power and
cooperation to the detriment of those which produce impotence and
divisions? How can the multitude become free? In the *Theological-
Political Treatise*, Spinoza states that 'we've never reached the point
where a state is not in more danger from its own citizens than from its
enemies, and where the rulers don't fear their citizens more than their
enemies'.[49] Therefore, a political process aiming at collective emanci-
pation should begin with unmasking the phantasmagorical nature of
the regimes which disempower the multitude's affects and imagination
— that is, all regimes, such as monarchy, tyranny, and oligarchy, which
are founded on negative passions, primarily on fear (fear which rulers
and the ruled inspire in each other, but also an overall fear which
the multitude inspire in themselves). The second step (only logic-
ally, not chronologically) should consist in implementing common
spaces (spaces of rights, communication, exchanges, even of conflicts,
provided that they are regulated by laws),[50] so that positive affects can
find a way to develop into a rational form (since rationality always
derives from a collective development). In the *Theological-Political
Treatise*, Spinoza calls a 'republic' the process of gradual transforma-
tion of individual liberty into a 'general freedom [*communis libertas*]'.[51]

---

49   *TTP* xvii, 17; *CWS* ii, p. 299.

50   See Filippo Del Lucchese, *Conflict, Power, and Multitude in Machiavelli and Spinoza:
     Tumult and Indignation* (London: Continuum, 2009); Stefano Visentin, 'From Secur-
     ity to Peace and Concord: The Building of a Free Commonwealth in Spinoza's Political
     Treatise', *Theoria*, 66.2 (2019), pp. 71–90.

51   *TTP* Praef., 10; *CWS* ii, p. 69; *Gebhardt* iii, p. 7: 'For it is completely contrary to the
     general freedom to fill the free judgment of each man with prejudices, or to restrain it
     in any way.'

The republic's aim is 'to free each person from fear':[52] not simply to guarantee a supposed natural freedom to everyone, but rather to foster the shift from an imaginary independency of the will — which is always at risk of being turned into voluntary servitude — to a network of powerful relationships among individuals who are able to free them from their fears and illusions, or at least to prevent these fears and illusions from being dominant. Freedom can thus reveal itself as both the quest for security and the organization of popular surveillance; as both the freedom of judging, as well as the resistance of the many to the oppression of the few.

To conclude, freedom, especially political freedom, can acquire different meanings in Spinoza's philosophy, but it is always deeply connected to the necessity of the causal process generating the body, the imagination, and the affects of the multitude. Such a dynamic identity of necessity and freedom causes both the practical predominance of democracy (which is meant as the immanent movement of the multitude) and the theoretical superiority of a democratic political science, which is based upon the refusal of any transcendent legitimacy of authority or individualistic perspectives. This is an ontological and materialist conception of democracy. For this reason, Spinoza states that '[a] man who is guided by reason is more free in a state, where he lives according to a common decision, than in solitude, where he obeys only himself':[53] in fact, obeying oneself, within the solitude of an abstract individualism, generates an imaginary and thus unstable freedom, which must be replaced by a progressive freedom, engaging all citizens in a common process of emancipation from their fear and passivity.

---

52   *TTP* xx, 11; *CWS* ii, p. 346; *Gebhardt* iii, pp. 240–41: 'From the foundations of the Republic explained above it follows most clearly that its ultimate end is not to dominate, restraining men by fear, and making them subject to another's control, but on the contrary to free each person from fear, so that he can live securely, as far as possible, i.e., so that he retains to the utmost his natural right to exist and operate without harm to himself or anyone else.'

53   *Ethics* iv, 73; *CWS* i, p. 587.

REFERENCES

Balibar, Étienne, 'Spinoza, the Anti-Orwell: The Fear of the Masses', *Rethinking Marxism*, 2.3 (1989), pp. 104–39

Bennett, Jonathan, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984)

Bove, Laurent, *Affirmation and Resistance in Spinoza: Strategy of the Conatus* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020)

Caporali, Riccardo, 'La moltitudine e gli esclusi', in *Spinoza: individuo e moltitudine*, ed. by Riccardo Caporali, Vittorio Morfino, and Stefano Visentin (Cesena: Il Ponte Vecchio, 2007), pp. 93–104

Del Lucchese, Filippo, *Conflict, Power, and Multitude in Machiavelli and Spinoza: Tumult and Indignation* (London: Continuum, 2009)

Fischbach, Franck, *La Production des hommes. Marx avec Spinoza* (Paris: Vrin, 2014)

Garrett, Don, *Nature and Necessity in Spinoza's Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018) <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195307771.001.0001>

Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009) <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjsf48h>

Lordon, Frédéric, *Imperium. Structures et affects des corps politiques* (Paris: La fabrique, 2015)

—— *Willing Slaves of Capital: Spinoza and Marx on Desire* (London: Verso Books, 2014)

Machiavelli, Niccolò, *The Prince* [1513], ed. by William J. Connell (Boston, MA: Bedford, 2005)

Marx, Karl, 'Thesen über Feuerbach', in *MEW*, III (1958), pp. 5–7

Matheron, Alexandre, 'Women and Servants in Spinozist Democracy', in *Politics, Ontology and Knowledge in Spinoza* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), pp. 260–79

Negri, Antonio, 'Politiche dell'immanenza, politiche della trascendenza. Saggio popolare', in *Storia politica della moltitudine*, ed. by Filippo Del Lucchese (Rome, DeriveApprodi, 2009), pp. 86–96

—— *Spinoza for our Time: Politics and Postmodernity*, trans. by William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013) <https://doi.org/10.7312/columbia/9780231160469.001.0001>

Ritter, Karl, *Prozesse der Befreiung. Marx, Spinoza und die Bedingungen eines freien Gemeinwesens* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2011)

Skeaff, Christopher, *Becoming Political: Spinoza's Vital Republicanism and the Democratic Power of Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018) <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226555508.001.0001>

Spinoza, Benedictus de, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, ed. and trans. by Edwin Curley, 2 vols (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985–2016)

—— *Spinoza opera*, ed. by Carl Gebhardt, 4 vols (Heidelberg: Winter, 1925)

Tosel, André, 'La Finitude positive', in *Spinoza ou l'autre (in)finitude* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008), pp. 157–72

Visentin, Stefano, 'From Security to Peace and Concord: The Building of a Free Commonwealth in Spinoza's Political Treatise', *Theoria*, 66.2 (2019), pp. 71–90

——'A ontologia política de Espinosa na leitura de Antonio Negri', *Cadernos Espinosanos*, 38 (2018), pp. 151–70

——'La parzialità dell'universale. La moltitudine nell'imperium aristocraticum', in *Spinoza: individuo e moltitudine*, ed. by Riccardo Caporali, Vittorio Morfino, and Stefano Visentin (Cesena: Il Ponte Vecchio, 2007), pp. 373–90

——'Paura delle masse e desiderio dell'uno. Considerazioni sull'ambivalenza della *potentia multitudinis*', in *Storia politica della moltitudine*, ed. by Del Lucchese, pp. 181–98

Zourabichvili, François, 'L'Énigme de la multitude libre', in *La Multitude libre. Nouvelles lectures du 'Traité Politique'*, ed. by Chantal Jaquet, Pascal Sévérac, and Ariel Suhamy (Paris: Amsterdam, 2008), pp. 69–80