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# Power and the Multitude: A Spinozist View

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## Abstract

Benedict Spinoza (1634–1677) is feted as the philosopher par excellence of the popular democratic multitude by Antonio Negri and others. But Spinoza himself expresses a marked ambivalence about the multitude in brief asides, and as for his thoughts on what he calls “the rule of (the) multitude,” that is, democracy, these exist only as meager fragments in his unfinished *Tractatus Politicus* or *Political Treatise*. This essay addresses the problem of Spinoza’s multitude. First, I reconstruct a vision of power that is found in the *Ethics* but that tends to be overlooked in the scholarly literature: power is not just sheer efficacy or imposition of will, but rather involves a capacity for being-affected; I call this the conception of power as sensitivity. The second part of my argument shows how, given Spinoza’s emphatic political naturalism, the conception of power as sensitivity can be extended to his political philosophy to shed light on what Spinoza calls *potentia multitudinis*, or “the power of the multitude”—a term found solely in the *Political Treatise* and nowhere else in his oeuvre. This juxtaposition reveals significant qualifications to the liberatory potential of the multitude currently claimed in the scholarly literature.

## Keywords

Spinoza, multitude, power, *Political Treatise*, receptivity, ethics

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## Introduction

Hailed as philosopher par excellence of the democratic multitude, Benedict Spinoza's (1634–1677) writings nonetheless evince an explicit ambivalence about the masses. Nor, beyond its affirmative propensities, have scholars come to a clear conclusion about just what precisely *multitudo* or the “multitude” is. The difficulty I think stems from the fact that in Spinoza's work, the multitude's power, composition, and persistence, as I will demonstrate, are coeval with protean, bodily, imaginary, and ideational *sensitivities*. My essay shows how the distinctive conception of ontological power articulated in Spinoza's *Ethics* can be applied to his political philosophy, in order to shed light on a key term in the *Political Treatise*: *potentia multitudinis*, “the power of the multitude.”

Throughout much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, “the masses” were characterized as an undifferentiated, unthinking herd (Nietzsche), gullible conformists susceptible to manipulation (Tocqueville, Mill), driven by superstition and irrationality, and by their sheer numbers threatening a contagious, uncontrollable violence (Le Bon, Canetti, Freud).<sup>1</sup> By contrast, contemporary critical theories use the term “multitude” to suggest a pluripotentiality capable of spontaneous and emergent collective action, teeming with irrepressible, insuppressible difference and otherness. For Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Michael Hardt, Christian Marazzi, Antonio Negri, and Paolo Virno, “multitude” invokes a popular, participatory, and emancipatory politics and serves as an indictment of the failures of formal, procedural theories of representative democracy and liberal rights discourses to address endemic problems of access, inequality, and membership. The term *multitude* thus carries both a descriptive and a normative function. Theories of the multitude not only recount what the multitudes are capable of, what they can do, but also, what they *should* do. They are therefore a call to arms, an attempt to awaken the revolutionary potential of the multitude by drawing attention to what it is already accomplishing.

Contemporary theories of the multitude often claim intellectual descent from the philosophy of Benedict Spinoza (1632–1677), although his philosophy serves primarily as an inspiration and a point of departure. Posthumously anointed the first supporter of democracy in modern political philosophy,<sup>2</sup> recent biographies paint Spinoza as an intellectual revolutionary and incendiary.<sup>3</sup> His anonymously published *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* or *Theologico-Political Treatise* (1670),<sup>4</sup> a merciless critique of the religious sanction of political authority, was considered so heretical, atheistic, or pantheistic (its detractors could never decide which it was truly guilty of) it was banned, and all copies ordered destroyed. The name “Spinoza” and the

appellation “Spinozist” were popular both as invective and as a call-to-arms in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>5</sup> Burgeoning interest in the second half of the twentieth century has unleashed a slew of studies on *multitudo* or the multitude.<sup>6</sup> Yet Spinoza’s own experience of mob violence—his horror and outrage at the mob lynching of the Dutch Republican Stadtholder Jacob de Witt and his brother Cornelius, whose secular policies Spinoza supported against those of rival Catholic monarchists—seemed hardly likely to dispose him favorably toward the multitude. Nonetheless, Spinoza’s *Political Treatise*, on which he was working at the time of his death, declares democracy—“where the multitude rule”—*omnino absolutum imperium*, or the most absolute rule.

Spinoza’s “multitude” remains a mystery because of inherent ambiguities in his writing. Spinoza does not explicitly define the “multitude” in any of the texts, an absence especially noteworthy for a philosopher who took so much care to clarify all the key terms of his work. It is compounded by his use of related terms such as “mob” (*vulgo*) and “plebeians” (*plebs*), which are likewise undefined. Finally, Spinoza’s death left his *Political Treatise* unfinished, and deprives us of his view on democracy—in which the multitude plays a key role.

This study begins with a clue Spinoza left us in the *Political Treatise*, the intriguing phrase, *potentia multitudinis*, or “the power of the multitude.” Used four times in the *Political Treatise*, its significance is clear, even if its meaning must still be excavated. One way of getting at what *potentia multitudinis* means, I will argue, is to analyze the multitude’s power as another expression of the natural or ontological power that is explained in the *Ethics*.

Two features of Spinoza’s conception of power endow it with singular explanatory force, but they are also what render it indigestible to many readers. First, in vivid contrast to classical liberalism, Spinoza does not oppose right (*ius*) to power; indeed, he says they are the same thing: big fish have every right to gobble up little fish.<sup>7</sup> Second, Spinoza holds that power is the capacity for affecting—and for being affected. Accustomed as we are to images of political power as an irresistible efficacy often entailing conflict and/or domination, it seems ludicrous to equate being powerful with being *affected*.<sup>8</sup> However, Spinoza’s complex and in many ways counterintuitive conception of power is consistent with his stated desire in both the *Ethics* and *Political Treatise* to “understand men as they are, not as we would like to see them.”

I am not the first to link Spinoza’s ontological conception of power to his vision of political power; scholars argue that Spinoza’s conception of power as a capacity for affecting and being affected highlights the entangled interdependencies of political power, and these scholarly inquiries have shed much light on the role of passions and affects in political life.<sup>9</sup>

My essay focuses on the quixotic side of Spinoza's conception of power, the capacity for being affected, which I will henceforth call sensitivity. Sensitivity implies sensing, making sense of, responding to. The systematic application of power as sensitivity to an interpretation of Spinoza's conception of the multitude in the *Political Treatise* is my particular contribution. The multitude's sensitivity deserves closer scrutiny, for it leads us to some precise mechanisms by which multitudes generate—and on occasion tear down—the power of the commonwealth.

### Translations and Transpositions: Notes on Method

The consensus is that Spinoza's political philosophy draws strongly from his *Ethics*; the debate is over the precise nature of this indebtedness.<sup>10</sup> The *Ethics*<sup>11</sup> contains the most detailed articulation of Spinoza's ontological conception of power, and part of this essay is concerned with showing how this ontological power applies to political power as well, by using the former as an interpretive key in a close reading of key passages in the *Political Treatise*. Most studies on Spinoza's political philosophy discuss the *Tractatus Politicus* or *Political Treatise*<sup>12</sup> together with the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, or *Theologico-Political Treatise*. The key phrase, *potentia multitudinis*, is used only in the *Political Treatise*. Given the differences in rhetorical intent and substantive content between the *Theologico-Political Treatise* and *Political Treatise*,<sup>13</sup> it is likely that a new set of considerations about the multitude had arisen by the time Spinoza began writing the *Political Treatise*. Moreover, attempts to compare across the two texts should take into account their systematic similarities and differences. Though a worthwhile task, it is beyond the scope of an essay such as this.

Next, a question of translation. Spinoza's Latin *potentia* and *potestas* are both translated into English as "power." Both are translatable as might, force, power (*potestas* refers to the "quality of *potens*," and therefore a general "ability or power of doing anything"). Antonio Negri argues that Spinoza uses *potentia* for the spontaneous potentiality of the multitude, but *potestas* for the domination of a State.<sup>14</sup> While *potestas* does tend to refer to instituted and organized authority in the *Political Treatise*, this is because *potestas*, and not *potentia*, is used in Latin to refer to political dominion, rule, sovereignty (*summa potestas*). There are slight differences in connotation that do not make a substantive difference to my argument, and I will note when each term is used. While I cannot deal with the differences in connotation between the two here, for the sake of consistency my essay pays most attention to *potentia*, the term Spinoza uses in conjunction with *multitudo* in the *Political Treatise*.<sup>15</sup>

I will use the term *commonwealth* rather than *State*. There was no equivalent in Latin for our modern (Weberian) concept of the state as “an apparatus of government distinct from both rulers and ruled.”<sup>16</sup> The *Political Treatise* uses the terms *civitas*, the entire body of citizens (*cives*), and *imperium*, rule or the sphere of command.<sup>17</sup> “Commonwealth” is the translation of *civitas*, and its English meaning I think best captures the nebulous field of political forces that always stands in a shifting relation to the multitude, whose nature we have yet to define.

## Power as Affecting and Being Affected

### *Nature as Power*

Spinoza’s conception of power is rooted in his vision of Nature. While we commonly think of artifice as Nature’s antithesis, in Spinoza’s time the real antithesis was between God (which Spinoza also calls “substance”<sup>18</sup>) and Nature. In the *Ethics* Spinoza repudiates the popular and philosophical-theological insistence on an omnipotent Godhead acting “by pleasure or will” on a “fallen” world (E1 Appendix; G/II/77), a “magnified human despot.”<sup>19</sup> Spinoza’s explosive disjunctive, *Deus, sive Natura* (E4 Preface; G/II/207/1)<sup>20</sup>—God, or Nature—identifies God *with* Nature. But it is Nature that comes out the triumphant term, and it is a Nature strange, pulsing with infinite energy, force, and life.

In the *Ethics*, Nature is not merely a sum of all finite realities or things.<sup>21</sup> Nature is first and foremost a *creative* and *generative* power; it expresses, rather than sanctions; it produces, rather than forbids. The power of Nature expresses<sup>22</sup> itself as finite realities (*modus*) and things (*res*) infinitely generating and (re)producing other finite realities and things (E1p28 and dem.). Much scholarly exegesis has been devoted to Nature’s productivity.<sup>23</sup> Yet *being-affected* is also a part or aspect of Nature’s power<sup>24</sup>; grasping this somewhat counterintuitive idea will enable us to understand the truly radical implications of Spinoza’s ontology.

### *Power as Being-Affected, as Sensitivity*

When Spinoza refers to power, he is not speaking of some intangible quality or force. Instead, power is *reality* (E1p11alt.dem. and p11s.), or, in Spinoza’s terms, Nature (E1p34 and p35).<sup>25</sup> This section briefly explains the ontology of substance, attribute, and mode that underpins Spinoza’s conception of power as sensitivity. Spinoza’s terms are difficult and do not map easily onto contemporary or familiar ontologies, but whatever remains obscure in this

section will hopefully become clearer in the following section, when I illustrate the idea of power as sensitivity with a discussion of the human body.

We have said that Nature “produces” its finite realities. But not as something separate, apart from or “above” its finite realities. Nature “produces” finite realities through an infinite unfolding of affectings and beings-affected:

Every singular thing, or any thing which is finite and has a determinate existence, can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to exist and produce an effect by another cause, which is also finite and has a determinate existence; and again, this cause also can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to exist and produce an effect by another, which is also finite and has a determinate existence, and so on, to infinity. (E1p28)

To paraphrase, each finite thing begins to exist, endures, and acts upon other finite things only because it has itself been “determined,” given its contours, character, been acted upon, by other finite things. This infinite web of beings-affected is the “production process” if you will of Nature. Conversely, “Whatever exists expresses the nature, *or* essence of God in a certain and determinate way, that is, whatever exists *expresses in a certain and determinate way the power [potentiam] of God*” (E1p36dem.). In the *Ethics*, the thing expressed does not differ substantially from its expression (otherwise there would be two substances, and Spinoza has proved that cannot be the case). So, finite realities *express* the power of Nature/God/substance in two ways: when they “determine” or affect other finite things, and when they are themselves “determined,” that is, *affected*, by other finite realities.

In fact, finite realities or things, according to Spinoza, are *modes* (Latin: *modus*) or articulations of different attributes or “ways of being” of Nature or substance (E3p6dem.<sup>26</sup> and E1p25cor.<sup>27</sup>).<sup>28</sup> Modes are realities and not just objects. They can also be degrees of warmth of a fire, varying intensities of sunlight in dappled shade—in other words, differences and differentiations, changes undergone by things. Spinoza calls the mode an “affection” (Latin: *affectio*) of substance, that is, a particular way in which God or Nature *is affected*.<sup>29</sup> So each of these modes is a being-affected of Nature or substance. This being-affected (of substance), this mode, can itself become affected, or undergo modifications; one may speak of a mode of a mode.<sup>30</sup> (We will return to this in the discussion of the human body below.) To return to E1p28dem., a mode, according to Spinoza, is “determined to exist and produce an effect by God [or Nature] or an attribute of God,” “*insofar as it is considered to be affected [affectum] by some mode.*”<sup>31</sup> This is the crucial point—that God, and



his attributes, can *be affected*, and more importantly, that this *being affected of substance itself* is responsible for the production of other finite realities.<sup>32</sup>

### *The Example of the Power of the Human Body*

Spinoza's description of the human body in the *Ethics* provides us with an exemplary account of affecting and being affected, of sensitivity. Stripped of divine *telos*, the human body is just one other body amongst others, organic and inorganic. Each body is distinguished from other bodies by its "motion and rest, speed and slowness" (E2p13L1), which I will call its *rhythm*. A body can affect another body and change the latter's rhythm, but will itself in turn be affected by that body it affects. Spinoza explains in a letter to Oldenburg that "all bodies are surrounded by others, and are *mutually determined* to exist and operate in a fixed and definite proportion."<sup>33</sup> This mutual determination is responsible for the emergence and existence of the human body. As with other complex bodies, the human body is composed when infinitely many simpler bodies<sup>34</sup> begin to "communicate their motions to each other in a certain fixed manner" (E2p13L3def.; G/II/100). So complex bodies are rhythmic resonances of simpler bodies affecting and being affected by one another (E2p13a1 and E2p13post.1; G/II/102). Even if the body changes (for instance, all the cells in a human body are completely replaced every seven years), the body will retain its integrity and coherence as long as its rhythm remains *more or less* the same; as Spinoza notes, "a composite individual can be affected in many ways, and still preserve its nature" (E2p13L7s.; G/II/102). In a Spinozist body, affecting and being-affected are not a series of inputs and outputs to a stable unchanging body (a black box model), but rather waves of (re)constitutions of the human body itself. In a manner of speaking, the human individual is already a multitude.

In fact, we could go so far as to say that *being-affected precedes the existence of the individual*. For it is only the beings-affected of simpler things that initially constitutes the individual, bringing the latter into existence; furthermore, it is only by ceaselessly being-affected by other finite realities that a body continues to cohere as a reality. Different finite things have different modes and different thresholds of sensitivity. The human and the crocodile have quite different sensitivities; even a glass might be said to have its characteristic sensitivity: a glass that cracks when hot coffee is poured into it has a different sensitivity from a coffee mug. Those things that seem to us so stable, so solid, whose contours are so clearly drawn, are in fact composites of beings-affected, composite sensitivities. What is more, these shifting sensitivities are in fact part of the powers proper of each thing. For "the more reality belongs to the nature of a thing, the more powers [*potentiam*] it has, of



itself, to exist" (E1p11s). Power is not something we can choose to use, exercise, wield, or to hold back; nor, as Hobbes would have it, some "present means to obtain some future apparent good." Power oozes from our very pores, it is as instinctive and involuntary as our very breath.

The human being is a dynamic reality, striving and expansive. This dynamism is invoked by Spinoza's term, *conatus*.<sup>35</sup> Its dynamism is rooted in sensitivity, in our capacities for being-affected.<sup>36</sup> Spinoza very clearly states, "Whatever so disposes the human body that it can be affected in a great many ways, or renders it capable of affecting external bodies in a great many ways, is advantageous to man" (E4p38). There are innumerable things in our environment that we cannot do without, many things that can help us, but also things that can harm or even destroy us (E4Axiom1). There are better and worse ways of being-affected, and certain things that heighten our sensitivities and powers for a short while may damage us in the long run, as is the case with some drugs. We often cannot know beforehand which ways of being-affected will harm us. Yet, it is precisely this fraught relation that calls for *more*, not less, *receptivity* to our milieu. Thus, Spinoza's congenial prescription in the *Ethics*, all the more memorable for its celebration of sensuousness in the rarefied thought of the *Ethics*, encourages a greater sensitivity, a wise receptivity, to a variety of experiences: "to refresh and restore [oneself] in moderation with pleasant food and drink, with scents, with the beauty of green plants, with decoration, music, sports, the theater, and other things of this kind, which anyone can use without injury to another" (E4p45schol., G/II/244).

As we will see later, a sensitivity to other humans is crucial to the rhythms of being-affected that compose the existence and power of each individual. That is to say, the human individual *needs to be affected* by other humans, and it is this necessary sensitivity that is responsible for the emergence of the multitude and for all political life.

## Multitudes

### *Power-as-Sensitivity as a Working Hypothesis for Interpretation*

In the following sections, I use Spinoza's conception of power as sensitivity as a working hypothesis, an interpretive guide, to unearthing hidden moments of *potentia multitudinis* in the *Political Treatise*. This roundabout method is necessary because Spinoza does not provide us with a recognizable origins story for the multitude; his multitude appears in a flash, out of nowhere, and remains un beholden to those conventions so popular with Spinoza's peers in political philosophy, the conventions that oppose right to power, that explain

the emergence of political life through a social contract. But this is partly because the multitude and its power is protean and depends on the political order or constitution in relation to which it finds itself. The justification for my interpretive strategy emerges only in the process of reading itself, in the concrete instances of the multitude's sensitivity and power it enables us to find in Spinoza's detailed institutional prescriptions for each constitution form: monarchy, aristocracy, democracy, and in the negative instances, where the multitude fails, where it degenerates into the mob (*vulgo*) and other weakened forms.

### *Multitude Generates and Produces the Commonwealth*

In Spinoza's day, the quarrel over who—or what—conferred the authority to govern was at fever pitch. Spinoza's first reference to *potentia multitudinis* in the *Political Treatise* addresses this question. His solution appears at first sight deceptively Hobbesian. I quote it at length because we must work out its implications:

§16. Where men have common laws, and are all led as if by one mind [*una veluti mente ducuntur*], it is certain that each of them has less right in proportion as the rest of them together are more powerful [*potentiores*] than he is, i.e., that he really has no right [*ius*] against nature beyond [III/282] that which the common law grants him. For the rest, whatever he is commanded to do according to the common agreement [*communi consensus*], he is bound to carry out or he is rightly compelled to do. (TP2.16)

§17. This right [*ius*], which is defined by the power of the multitude [*multitudinis potentia*], is usually called Sovereignty [*imperium*]. And whoever, by common agreement, has the care of Public Affairs [*reipublicae*], i.e., responsibility for making, interpreting and repealing laws, protecting cities, making decisions about war and peace, etc., has this right absolutely. (TP2.17)

§16 describes conditions that lead to the features and functions of sovereignty outlined in §17. There are a few things to note here.

What we must first note in Spinoza's use of "right" (*ius*) here is that, *contra* classical liberalism,<sup>37</sup> Spinoza refuses to acknowledge right (*ius*) as the antithesis or opponent of power. If, as Spinoza claims in the *Ethics*, there is no transcendent, omnipotent Creator, then there can be no divine sanction for right or *ius*. Spinoza is relentlessly hardheaded about the political implications of his philosophical naturalism. Big fish have every right to gobble up the little fish. Right *is* power.<sup>38</sup> The right (*ius*) of government, then (§17), is no more than a specific constellation of power.

Spinoza very deliberately and specifically uses the term *define*: the fact that *imperium* is “defined” by *potentia multitudinis* is reiterated (in Chapter Three, where he states that the power of the commonwealth is “defined” by the power of the multitude<sup>39</sup>). Like other logicians in the seventeenth century such as Bacon and Leibniz, Spinoza abandoned the Scholastic method of classifying things according to *differentia specifica* and *genus* (*pace* Aristotle), and sought instead “genetic” or “causal” definitions, that is, definitions that explain “the inner law according to which the whole either originated or at least can be conceived of as originating.”<sup>40</sup> Therefore, to say that *potentia multitudinis* “defines” the power of the commonwealth is to say that *potentia multitudinis* generates or produces the power (and reality) of the commonwealth.<sup>41</sup> But from these two Sections of text alone it is not clear how this is accomplished.

Significantly, the *Political Treatise* does not invoke that volitional compact, the social contract, as so many other modern political philosophers (Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau) do, to explicate the *Ur*-moment of political life.<sup>42</sup> Spinoza rejects a pre-political “state of nature,” a key element of social contract theories. Its lone human pitted against others, relying solely on his own strength, is chimerical (TP2.15); for Spinoza this “state of nature” is in fact extremely *unnatural*, for it is simply impossible for humans to ever exist or live in such a manner (TP2.2, 2.8). “[A]ll men,” observes Spinoza in the first chapter of the *Political Treatise*, “whether they are Savages or civilized, form associations everywhere” (TP1.7, G/III/276-7). In other words, there exists no onto-political breach between pre-political masses and a politically ordered populace; or rather, a pre-political multitude simply does not exist. Since Spinoza believes that “experience has revealed every conceivable form of commonwealth where men may live in harmony” (TP1.3[S]), it means that there is for Spinoza something universal and ubiquitous about political association, however historically contingent its various manifestations; it is always already there, right alongside the multitude that produces it.

The continuity between the ontological and the political underpins Spinoza’s political philosophy in the following ways. The naturalism of the *Ethics*, its identification of right with power, is explicitly made the basis for thinking about political life in the *Political Treatise* (as is clear from the reprise of the *Ethics*’ main lines in the second chapter of the *Political Treatise*). Further, the constitution of “the political” is not accomplished through a break with a prepolitical past (as it is in contract theories). Rather, what is properly political is always already present in some way, nascent in the multitude. This makes it very difficult for us to pinpoint the exact movements that turn a multitude into a commonwealth.

Added to the difficulty of tracing the transformation of multitude into commonwealth is the fact that the precise nature of the commonwealth, as conceived in the *Political Treatise*, remains in question. At times Spinoza seems to suggest that the commonwealth has a “body” and “mind” in much in the same sense as a human individual does (“the whole body of the state is called a Commonwealth” [TP3.1]). At other times it seems as if his reference to the commonwealth’s “body and mind” is only an analogy (TP3.2). (We will return to this point shortly.) Yet Spinoza speaks of the commonwealth’s survival and destruction (TP4.4, 6.2), of its subjection to natural laws as a “natural thing” (*res naturalis*) (TP4.4), of its capacity for acting “from the dictates of reason” (TP4.4), which seems to indicate some kind of *conatus*, or striving.

The question about the nature of the “body” of the commonwealth is linked in a crucial way to the formation and political action of the multitude, as is evident from a Section of the chapter on sovereign powers (*De iure summarum potestatum*):

the Right of the state, *or* of the supreme powers, is nothing but the very Right of nature, which is determined, not by the power of each person, but by the power of the multitude, which is led as if by one mind, [III/285] i.e., that as each person in the state of nature has as much right as he has power, so also the body and mind of the whole state have as much right as they have power. (TP3.2; G/III/284-5)<sup>43</sup>

[*imperii seu ius nihil esse praeter ipsum naturae ius, quod potentia, non quidem uniuscuiusque, sed multitudinis, quae una veluti mente ducitur, determinatur, hoc est, quod sicuti unusquisque in statu naturali, sic etiam totius imperii corpus et mens tantum iuris habet, quantum potentia valet.*]

A corollary is added a few sections later in the *Political Treatise*:

the Right of a Commonwealth is determined by the power of the multitude which is led as if by one mind [*civitatis ius potentia multitudinis, quae una veluti mente ducitur*]. But there is no way this union of minds can be conceived unless the Commonwealth aims most at what sound reason teaches to be useful to all men. (TP3.7)<sup>44</sup>

Spinoza does not explicitly state, either in the passages above or in other places, how the multitude can be “led as if of one mind” (*una veluti mente ducuntur*). But it is one of the defining features of the commonwealth; Spinoza stipulates several times that the power of the commonwealth stems from “the power of a multitude led as if by one mind” (TP2.16, 3.2, 3.7).

Further, Spinoza's analyses of corporate bodies other than the commonwealth as a whole (in the *Political Treatise*) refers repeatedly to men acting or being guided "as if of one mind" (TP 2.21, 6.1, 3.5, 8.6). It is therefore a key term, one whose precise mechanisms—how do men "act as if of one mind?"—remains nebulous. The phrase troubles us today because of the historical legacies of totalitarianism, Fascism, and National Socialism.<sup>45</sup> Scholars have dismissed the phrase as mere metaphor (and by implication unworthy of serious philosophical consideration) based on Spinoza's use of the term *veluti*, "as if."<sup>46</sup> Marijn Terpstra for instance criticizes the above citation for logical circularity: §2 suggests that *potentia multitudinis* causes the power of the commonwealth, while §7 on the contrary appears to argue that the commonwealth causes the "union of minds."<sup>47</sup>

It does not seem to me possible, relying solely upon a strict reading of the *Political Treatise* (one that is Spinozian rather than Spinozist), to decide whether the commonwealth is an "individual" in the same sense as a human being is. Because, as we will see, the "union of minds" is far from a simple conformity. The question of whether the unison of *potentia multitudinis* precedes the commonwealth, or whether the commonwealth must act first to bring about any "union of minds," in fact poses the wrong problem, relies upon a mistaken premise. For it presupposes "man in Nature as a dominion within a dominion" (E3Preface),<sup>48</sup> a vision Spinoza criticizes in the *Ethics*. Moreover, commonwealths also have greater or lesser degrees of perfection. Democracy is *omnino absolutum imperium*, the "most absolute commonwealth" (TP11.1),<sup>49</sup> which, according to Spinoza, emerges only "when the multitude [*multitudo*] rules" (TP8.3; G/III/326). (But, as I have already mentioned, the *Political Treatise* is missing the key chapters on democracy.) Spinoza's statement that the *form* or *constitution* of a commonwealth (aristocracy, monarchy, democracy) must be preserved for a commonwealth to persevere implies that the form of commonwealth is also proper to its nature. Taken together, it would seem that monarchy and aristocracy are less absolute, less *perfect* kinds of commonwealth; perhaps in those cases the "union of minds" is less complete, different in a significant (even essential?) way. However, there is a way around this conceptual difficulty, this haziness of contour of the commonwealth.

I propose we trace those nascent moments when a multitude first begins to form. It seems to me that Chapter Three, §2 and §7, in fact spell out two conditions that must *coexist* and *simultaneously function* in order for any commonwealth to be viable. This will be made clearer in the sections that follow. We should not look for the multitude in any "ready-made 'mass' or 'people' (or indeed, nation or community)."<sup>50</sup> We will follow the two clues Spinoza leaves us. First clue: "when the multitude naturally agree, and wish to be led,

as it were, by one mind [*una veluti mente*], this happens, not because reason is guiding them, but because of some common affect" (TP6.1; G/III/297). So we begin by tracing this "common affect." Second clue: laws are "the soul of the state," (TP10.9) that prescribe "a common rule of life [*communem vivendi rationem*]" (E4p37s2; G/II/238). Accordingly, we will also focus on the description of laws in the *Political Treatise*, especially those that structure affects.

### *Affect and Imagination*

Affect moves the multitude to "act as if of one mind" (TP6.1); political life is defined by its accomplishment of a very distinctive orchestration of affect: "in the civil order everyone fears the same things, and that for everyone there is one and the same cause of security and principle of living" (TP3.3). Fear, in the *Ethics*, is described as an affect (*affectus*).

Affect is what ties the sensitivity of individuals to the sensitivity of the multitude. An affect is the trace, left on our *bodies and minds*, by an encounter (with another person or thing). For Spinoza our loves, fears, hopes, and joys are not merely subjective states; they are the marks of our *being-affected*, alterations in the composition and intensity of power of the human body and mind. Each affect may trail further changes in its wake.

We saw earlier how being-affected composes the human body. Being-affected is also responsible for the composition of the human mind. Affects like fear have such a hold on us because *all thinking begins with the body being affected* (E2p19). For Spinoza, the human mind does not preexist its thinking, imagining, and dreaming.<sup>51</sup> We begin to think only when we have been affected by an other thing—even if we perceive only how external bodies affect us, not their true natures, and even if "we do not know yet what the body is capable of."<sup>52</sup> (Hence the inadequacy of much of our thought.) Spinoza argues that the "mind and the body are one and the same individual" (E2p21schol.).<sup>53</sup> Thus, whatever we encounter affects us in both body and mind, and this connected body–mind movement is *immediate* and *instantaneous* (E2p26).

Fear is a particular modality of being-affected that impels humans to civil organization. On the one hand, we can neither defend nor provide for ourselves alone, and hence fear isolation (TP6.1). On the other hand, other humans can be vengeful, envious (E4Appendix XIII; G/II/269), and cunning (TP2.14); hence we fear them as well. These two conflicting modalities of fear are, Spinoza suggests, universally present. It does not matter if we are not immediately threatened by either isolation or another person; fear is also triggered by what we *imagine* may diminish our power or destroy us—fear is

tied to our uncertainty about the effects of something (E3p18s.). It is no less real for being (sometimes) imaginary. While fear's awful commonness makes it the lowest common denominator of affects, it is also the most rudimentary form of sensitivity in the generation of civic life.

However, fear is but among one of many modes of being affected. But sovereigns who rely on fear as a primary instrument, who seek to affect their subjects or citizens by fear alone, remain blind to the wider range of sensitivities that compose the commonwealth. This becomes clear in Spinoza's criticism of monarchical absolutism and its disproportionate reliance on fear (TP 5.4).<sup>54</sup> Spinoza argues that the ideal of monarchical absolutism, the conferral of political rule upon one man, is tantamount to despotism. And the putative stability of "oriental" despotism is only apparent, for its "peace" derives merely from the "wretched" conditions of the citizens, from "slavery, barbarism, and desolation" (TP6.4). A political order that "terrifies" its subjects with fear, that cows them into sheep-like submission, he avers, is not a condition of peace but only an absence of war, more a "wasteland than a commonwealth" (TP5.4).

Hence, even if "in the civil order everyone fears the same things," Spinoza's characterization of despotism as a barren, unreceptive wasteland should caution us against too hastily equating "fearing the same thing" with a blind conformism born of simple obedience. (We should also note that the "common affects" [*communi . . . affectu*] that cause the multitude to act as if of one mind include not just fear but also a "common hope" [*communi spe*], and "desire to avenge some common harm [*desiderio commune aliquod damnum ulciscendi*]" (TP6.1). The Latin *communi* means "that which is common," but also, can signify "a community," or "(something) for all." Thus, a *shared*, rather than *identical*, way of being affected. How this may come about: the fear is directed towards what Spinoza calls a "universal notion" [E2p40s1; G/II/121], that is, an indistinct image made up of a composite of several other similar images, a *palimpsest of offabulations* that nonetheless has very real effects.<sup>55</sup> (However, this is a tantalizing possibility that needs a more elaborate explanation than we can afford at this point.)

A wider range of sensitivities have to be in play, for "peace consists not in the absence of war but the union or harmony of minds or spirits [*animorum unione sive concordia*]" (TP6.4).<sup>56</sup> And "a free multitude (*multitudo*) is guided more by hope than by fear" (TP5.6).

It seems at one point that the *Ethics* promises to show us how other, joyful affects and adequate ideas can bring about civic life: "Man . . . can wish for nothing more helpful to the preservation of his being than that all should so agree (*convenient*) in all things that the minds and bodies of all would compose, as it were, one mind and one body" (E4p18s.; G/II/223), for where "two



individuals of entirely the same nature are joined to one another, they compose an individual twice as powerful as each one" (E4p18s.; G/II/223). This happens when men live and act "according to the guidance of reason" (E4p35).

Yet for the reader who proceeds, after these tantalizing (and alas fleeting) glimpses of harmony and concord, to search the text further in an attempt to decipher the affective mechanisms that will explain how humans join powers, what she or he gets is a description of how *difficult* it is for humans to act in union, how humans are often torn apart by contrary passions, that "they are usually envious and burdensome to one another" (E4p35s.; G/II/234), and that only the "threats" of a political order can effectively compel them to live in (relative) harmony of body and mind (E4p37s2; G/II/238-9). In other words, whereas it seemed initially that we can explain the origin of the commonwealth through the composition of a single civic mind and body out of adequate ideas and joyful affects, the turn in Spinoza's argument (in Part Four of the *Ethics*) suggests that civic or political society is in fact a *precondition*.<sup>57</sup> This is similar to the dilemma we were faced with earlier in the discussion of the *Political Treatise*. The harmonious concord of the *Ethics*, I suggest, is a sort of ideal situation,<sup>58</sup> or more accurately, a *possible* composition of joint powers whose nature we may grasp in a rare moment of lucid, adequate thought, when we are not affected by envy, hatred, fear, when we truly understand the essence and nature of our fellow man—and if that lucid thinking is undergone by enough human individuals for a long enough period of time, perhaps a political community built of joyful affects, based on adequate understanding, will come to pass. But the detailed account of (destructive) affects that follow suggests that this is not something we should demand of political life.

Nor, as the opening chapter of the *Political Treatise* suggests, is it something that we will have to. In the *Political Treatise*, Spinoza argues that his political philosophy begins with the concrete, historical-empirical account of how humans at all times have managed to arrange some sort of political life, despite their destructive passions and inadequate ideas—or rather, by working with them.

This brief foray into Spinoza's complex understanding of the affects shows that the accounts of being-affected (or affects) within the human individual alone are inadequate for explaining how the multitude is generated. We need to supplement these with beings-affected and sensitivities that transect individuals. The latter we will find scattered throughout the *Political Treatise*, in the nitty-gritty advice Spinoza gives on institutions (primarily aristocratic and monarchic, often couched in political language borrowed from Roman and Stoic writers), rather than in any overarching theoretical

statement. We will focus on advice designed to draw in wider ranges of human sensitivity into the construction and daily functioning of various institutions; it is these measures that are shown to generate to new rhythms of concerted action and communal arrangement, and that are therefore signs of a nascent or emergent *potentia multitudinis*.

### A Harmony of Minds

Before we proceed, let us note that there are many kinds of multitude; aristocratic and monarchical multitudes are less efficacious, less capacious than democratic ones.<sup>59</sup> However, since all commonwealths are “determined” by the power of the multitude (TP3.2, 3.7), “led, as it were, by one mind [*una veluti mente*], . . . because of some common affect” (TP6.1; G/III/297), we may examine those events or situations that lead to a shared sensitivity to certain things, certain encounters. Since laws, according to Spinoza, are “the soul of the state” (TP10.9), and prescribe “a common rule of life [*communem vivendi rationem*]” (E4p37s2; G/II/238), we should be especially attentive to any point where affects intersect with law and its cognate institutions, or where laws structure affects.

To begin, Spinoza recommends a large governing council for aristocracy (TP8.6) as well as monarchy (TP6.16). In monarchy, this is meant not only to prevent a few men from seizing the reins of government but also to prevent the monarch from ruling out of fear and suspicion—leading to wretched conditions for his subjects (TP6.5, 6.8). In an aristocracy, Spinoza reasons,

the will of a Council so large cannot be determined so much by inordinate desire as by reason; indeed, evil affects pull men in different directions and *they cannot be led as if by one mind* except insofar as what they desire is honorable, or at least has the appearance of decency. (TP8.6)<sup>60</sup>

When the council or governing body is large enough, its actions and decisions appear not only honorable but also reasonable. In other words, its sheer size compensates for the “evil affects”—the envy, fear, ambition—of its individuals. Spinoza does not go on to explain how the dynamics of a large governing body may alter the effects of human affects. However, I will show that a large governing body makes the commonwealth—its making of laws and day-to-day decisions—more receptive to a wider range of ideas and affects—in other words, the commonwealth becomes more sensitive to the sensitivities of the multitude.

Second, Spinoza argues that only those who are fifty or older should be allowed to make law, or be admitted to any one of the governing bodies

(TP11.2). This measure must be significant, for Spinoza prescribes it for *all* commonwealths—democracy, aristocracy, monarchy. Even if large governing bodies are “necessarily . . . filled with many whose native intelligence is quite uncultivated,” nonetheless, “each person is reasonably competent and sagacious in matters in which he has been long and attentively engaged” (TP7.4[S]). What is required of each of these men is not yet a political know-how, and definitely not goodwill. Their primary qualification seems to be the fact that they have simply gone on with their lives and managed their affairs. We may say these individuals have “learned from experience,” but that remains an opaque phrase. This recommendation in fact folds entire life-worlds of sensitivity into the commonwealth. A person is more likely to have been affected by more things, more events and encounters, simply from having lived longer. Perhaps we could say that with the age stipulation, Spinoza has physiology and experience accomplish for us what we may not be able to accomplish ourselves, that is, to become more capable of being-affected.

Yet their task is not a simple application of a private *praxis* to collective problems. Spinoza is confident of their ability to advise the commonwealth, “especially if there is adequate time for reflection in matters of great weight” (TP7.4). Reflection implies an activity of thinking that transmutes available ideas and perceptions. It implies that the councilors must allow their beings-affected—their sensitivities, their experiences—to affect them in a new way, so that new ideas emerge; these ideas enjoin the resonances of the commonwealth. In other words, the individual’s power must be transmuted before it becomes a part of the power of the commonwealth, just as eggs, sugar, and flour have to be mixed and baked before a cake becomes a cake.

Third, Spinoza advises the monarchical commonwealth to include individuals “from each group or class of citizens” (TP7.4[S]) in its governing councils, so that the council will make decisions that benefit a “majority of the subjects,” and each member’s advantage is tied to the “peace and common well-being of all” (TP7.4). (The reason, though unelaborated, is simple: even if each member of the Council only guards his own interests—which will be the rule rather than the exception—his interests will nonetheless coincide at critical points with the interests of others in his “group” or “class.”) Spinoza’s introduction of social diversity implies that there are sensitivities specific to each way of life that “class” signifies, and that the incorporation of entire spans of alternative affections and attachments are not solely a matter of ethical choice but a question of the survival of the commonwealth. Behind this prescription lies the idea of multitudes within “the multitude” that gives the commonwealth its power.

Finally:

human minds are too dull to penetrate everything immediately. But by consulting, listening to, and discussing with others, they are sharpened. When they try all things, they eventually find means to the things they want which everyone approves, and *which no one had thought of before*. (TP9.14; G/III/352.)<sup>61</sup>

The production of ideas that are irreducible to the sum total of the knowledge possessed by all the individuals present, ideas that “no one had thought of before,” involves something that happens not just on the level of the human individual alone; or rather, it presupposes a sensitivity—“consulting, listening, and discussing”—that will never be the outcome of a volitional decision, but that rather may be ascribed to a predisposition that must be sustained and encouraged on an institutional level. What is more, the process of producing an “ecological” idea alters the individuals involved (their minds are “sharpened”).<sup>62</sup>

Spinoza’s prescriptions—enlarging the governing body, setting an age limit, allotting time for reflection, drawing legislators, administrators and judges from different segments in society, and finally, allowing new ideas to emerge out of discussion—demonstrate that the multitude is more than the sum of its individuals, just as the multitude’s power is more than the sum of individual powers. There is a strand of Spinoza’s philosophy that distinctly shows a commonwealth is composed of *partial* rhythms, that is, the rhythms of the individual human body and mind are only partially affected and through this being-affected attached to the commonwealth.

One may object that the prescriptions I examine all presuppose the commonwealth or political institutions that the multitude is supposed to generate. Yet this is the distinctive point of Spinoza’s political philosophy. Commonwealths and multitudes always begin *in media res*; we are always already in the thick of the political. When the power of the multitude is “led as if of one mind,” it does not mean that all individuals begin to think the same. On the contrary, the commonwealth becomes more sensitive to myriad affects, and a greater span of actions in concert becomes possible. What is more extraordinary is that the multitude becomes more sensitive precisely when it expands to include those ranges of being-affected—in other words, the *reality* of the multitude itself changes when its sensitivity does.

## When *Potentia Multitudinis* Breaks Down

### *Indignation and Hostility*

Finally, we turn to the negative examples, the limits of *potentia multitudinis*—when it is severely tested, when it corrodes, becomes weakened. The

final occurrence of *potentia multitudinis* in the *Political Treatise* addresses the breakdown of the commonwealth:

Matters which arouse general indignation are not likely to fall within the right of the commonwealth. It is without doubt a natural thing for men to conspire together either by reason of a common fear or through desire to avenge a common injury. And because the Right of the Commonwealth is defined by the common power of the multitude [*ius civitatis communi multitudinis potentia definitur*], it is certain that the power and Right of the Commonwealth are diminished to the extent that it provides many people with reasons to combine in a hostile action [*plures in unum conspirant*]. (TP3.9)

Here, Spinoza describes the threshold beyond which a commonwealth ceases to be viable: when a widespread indignation [*indignationem*] unites too many subjects in hostility against the commonwealth. What happens to the multitude then? Does it split into two opposing forces (one for and one against the commonwealth)?<sup>63</sup> Does it disperse?<sup>64</sup> Or does it return to an unspoiled *potentia*, the better to begin anew?<sup>65</sup> Spinoza remains silent on this point. But the multitude's fear, indignation, and hostility hint at the possibilities.

In a subsequent chapter in the *Political Treatise*, fear and indignation appear again to play a crucial role. If, instead of conserving the requisite "fear and reverence [*reverentia et metus*]," a political authority (*imperium*) slaughters, plunders, assaults, and viciously violates its own citizens and laws, it will turn "fear into indignation, and *consequently* the civil state into a state of enmity" (TP4.4).<sup>66</sup> It is the fundamental shift from reverence and fear [*metus*] to indignation [*indignatio*] that ultimately destroys a commonwealth. Spinoza's own argument about how precisely the commonwealth does wrong in this case is instructive. By acting with brutality and savagery, these political authorities have forgotten that

even though we say that men are not their own masters, but are subject to the control of the Commonwealth, we do not mean that they lose their human nature and take on a different nature; nor, consequently, do we mean that the Commonwealth has the right to make men fly, or (what is equally impossible) to make men honor those things which move them to laughter or disgust. What we mean is that when certain circumstances are present, subjects revere and fear the Commonwealth, and that when those circumstances are absent, this fear and reverence are destroyed, and with them, the Commonwealth. (TP4.4; G/III/293)

Spinoza condemns the political authorities in this case, not on ethical grounds, but simply because they have created conditions that are harmful to the

maintenance of that commonwealth, they have neglected to observe those most important of laws, the laws of human nature. The commonwealth is destroyed *together with* the dissipation of the multitude's fear and reverence. In other words, something has happened to the multitude's power, since it no longer sustains the life of the commonwealth. A closer examination of indignation solves a part of this puzzle.

Indignation [*indignatio*] is a curious affect, or at least as so conceived in the *Ethics*. Indignation is a very peculiar way of being affected. It is a response to someone else's pain, "a hate toward someone who has done evil to another" (E3 Definition of the Affects XX; G/II/195). Indignation need not stem from noble or altruistic causes; it does not even require empathy. Instead, it depends on a special mechanism: the strange attraction of *res nobis similis*, or a "thing like us."<sup>67</sup> According to Spinoza, simply imagining the joy or sadness of another "thing like us" immediately affects us with similar joy or sadness (E3p27). The key lies in similitude. Because the other is so *like us*, when we perceive or imagine this other, our image of this doppelganger instantaneously and spontaneously blurs into an image of ourselves (E3p27dem.). Like a trick of light. It is a pure transmission of being-affected<sup>68</sup>; what causes the joy or sadness of the other *becomes* the cause of our joy or sadness, as if this cause were antecedently attached to our being-affected by sadness or joy. Out of the mind's tendency toward imaginative muddle, there arises a simulacra of fellow-feeling that engenders very real effects—hatred toward political authorities who violate the lives of others.

This is how an involuntary, muddled, and imaginary sensitivity to another's pain creates a counter-resonance against the commonwealth. However, the union that joins individuals in fear, indignation, hostility, and hate (we return to the "desire to avenge some common harm [*desiderio commune aliquod damnum ulciscendi*]" [TP6.1]) is precarious. It does not yet fully express the power of the multitude. This is why, to return to our own time, so many successful revolutionary depositions of dictators have been followed by unsuccessful attempts to constitute new governments. Spinoza warns that it is foolish beheading the king if the (structural) causes for tyranny are still in place (TP5.7).<sup>69</sup> He highlights the hazards that a multitude faces when it attempts to recompose political power and a commonwealth—and above all, itself—after it has accomplished the imperatives of animosity.

### *Plebeians and Mobs*

Scholars argue that Spinoza embraced the masses in the *Political Treatise* as he had never done in the earlier *Theological-Political Treatise* and *Ethics*.<sup>70</sup> It seems then that his use of terms with a family resemblance to *multitudo*

deserves careful scrutiny, especially since they may tell us about different possible mutations of the multitude.

Spinoza uses the term *plebs*<sup>71</sup> solely in the chapters on aristocracy in the *Political Treatise*. (There is one important exception to which we will return later.) When Spinoza first begins to outline aristocracy, he still uses the term *multitudo*. Once past this initial and general discussion, however, he switches to *plebs*, especially when detailing the organization and workings of aristocratic government. In aristocracy, it seems something happens to the multitude to turn it plebeian, to turn it into something not quite itself.

Spinoza describes aristocracy as consisting of two classes of citizens. The aristocrats or Patricians are to be selected by their peers. (This is not the hereditary aristocracy we are most familiar with.) The plebs are to be barred from all public affairs (TP8.24), most public offices, advisory roles, and finally, voting (TP8.44). This allows the plebs to devote their time and energy to their private affairs (TP8.24); their interests are safeguarded by a right of appeal (TP8.42, 8.37, 8.28). Even as Spinoza betrays an anxiety about corruption in the Patrician class and oppression of the plebs, he is adamant that in an aristocracy only the aristocrats can be allowed to govern: “absolutely every declaration of the Council’s will is law,” and the aristocratic commonwealth “rests only on the will and judgment of the council” (TP4.4). To contemporary eyes, these measures are unfair, but that will not be why Spinoza criticizes aristocracy.

In the chapters on aristocracy, the term “*multitudo*” is invoked only in connexion to what it is *not* to be allowed to do (TP4.4). Spinoza argues that the Patricians can govern without obstruction, and more importantly, that an aristocratic commonwealth to approaches absolute sovereignty (*imperium absolutum*) only to the extent that it excludes the multitude:

insofar as this Aristocratic rule never . . . returns to the people [*multitudinem*], and there is no consultation of the people [*multitudini*] in it, but absolutely every declaration of the Council’s will is law, it must be considered completely absolute; hence its foundations ought to rest only on the will and judgment of the council, not on the vigilance of the people, since they are prevented both from offering advice and from voting. (TP8.4)

Yet the multitude’s exclusion leads to a political paradox: “Thus the only possible reason why [aristocratic] rule is not in practice absolute is that the people [*multitudo*] are fearsome to their rulers” (TP8.4).<sup>72</sup> Through its exclusion, the multitude becomes an object of fear (*formidolosa*). According to Spinoza, the multitude preserves its modicum of freedom only insofar as it sustains this fear (TP8.4); but this is also why the multitude’s very existence threatens



aristocracies with “civil strife” (TP8.4). In other words, fear, which we have earlier seen conjured by the *fabula* of the commonwealth, is now also invoked by another object—the excluded multitude. The process of exclusion turns the multitude into plebs. A tamping down of sensitivities on both sides: the commonwealth cannot be receptive to the plebs (they have no public duties, and must be paid for military service as a foreign mercenary might [TP8.9]); the plebs are rendered sensitive to the commonwealth only by the seduction of profit (through property ownership and paid military service). There is an ever-present undercurrent of antagonism, since the commonwealth is “less in the possession of the Patricians, the more rights the plebs claims for itself” (TP8.5).<sup>73</sup> But to avert this danger, and for an aristocracy to survive qua aristocracy, it must have a large enough council, and “the power of a state [*imperiarii potentia*] which has once been conferred on a sufficiently large Council never returns to the multitude [*multitudinem*]” (TP8.3). It is here, in an aristocratic commonwealth, that the multitude comes closest to Montag’s description of an “excess or remainder” of power that always escapes *imperium*.<sup>74</sup> Here is a multitude split in two, turned against itself, its power attenuated by divided and unequal sensitivities.

Outside of the chapters on aristocracy, “*plebs*” is used just once—together with the single use of the term *vulgo*, or “mob,” in the *Political Treatise*.

Spinoza chides those who “restrict to the common people (*plebem*) the faults that are inherent in all mankind,” who assert that the *plebs* are incapable of truth and good judgment, and say that “there is no moderation in the mob [*vulgo*], that they terrorize unless cowed by fear.” But, Spinoza counters, “everyone has the same nature, everyone is proud when he is master; everyone terrorizes unless cowed by fear” (TP7.27; G/III/319).<sup>75</sup> Spinoza argues that it is because the *plebs* are not privy to matters of governance, because they have no access to authority, that they become unreliable in politics. In other words, the behavior typically (and mistakenly) attributed to the *plebs* is in fact not inherent to any particular class of persons but arises from the composition of sensitivities in a commonwealth—or rather, when certain modes of sensitivity are cut off and corralled.

Spinoza’s own proclamation about the mob (*vulgo*) in the *Ethics* seemed to have haunted him in writing the *Political Treatise*. For he repeats his own words, states them twice in the *Political Treatise*: “Again, ‘there is no moderation in the mob; unless they are cowed by fear, they themselves terrorize,’ for freedom and slavery are not easily mixed.”<sup>76</sup> In this context, the mob (*vulgo*) is a cancerous growth caused by a suppression the *plebs* naturally face. (“[I]t is certain that the power and Right of the Commonwealth are diminished to the extent that it provides many people with reasons to combine in a hostile action” [TP3.9].) Freedom, as Spinoza explains in early in

the *Political Treatise*, in fact *imposes* the necessity of action (TP2.11), while slavery, as we have seen, is the suppression of a natural human diversity and ebullience (TP5.4). The terror of the mob but reflects the terror that has been inflicted upon them. The mob is not a pre-given, unruly mass that threatens the commonwealth from outside of its constituted order, but is rather constituted within the commonwealth itself, or more specifically, it is constituted by a defective constitution.

In the *Political Treatise* the figure of the despot is an inversion of the figure of the mob, despotic fear a chiasmus of the fear that leads to mob behavior (TP7.27; G/III/320).<sup>77</sup> The despot, too, terrorizes unless he is frightened. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the despot terrorizes precisely because he is frightened. Despotism is a vicious circle of fear. For the despot can never subdue an entire commonwealth alone, he needs the aid of others, whom in turn he must placate, tyrannize, but whom he therefore has reason to fear. The tyranny of the despot engenders not merely servility but hostility, so that the erstwhile tyrant becomes subjected to his own—often justifiable—fear of his own subjects. In a despotic State, there is no freedom, not even for its putative rulers. This fear is a sign of a want of power; it is the signal and cause of a paucity of alternative sensitivities (PT3.9). The miasma of fear that infests the despotic commonwealth, then, becomes a sign of sovereign weakness, rather than an instrument of its strength.

## Conclusion

Spinoza's hidden conception of *potentia multitudinis* amply illustrates his claim that men are not born citizens, but are made so (TP5.2). Sensitivity is efficacious in political life because it is necessary and indispensable to human life itself. When the multitude turns into the plebs, or a mob, then a crucial rhythm of sensitivity will have broken down in the commonwealth. This analysis of *potentia multitudinis* has admittedly left us with an unsatisfactorily hazy view of its origins, as well as a complex and sometimes equivocal perspective of the relation between the commonwealth and its multitudes. But perhaps there is no satisfactory origins story, neither for the multitude nor for the commonwealth. Spinoza's conception of power as sensitivity underscores the fact that what we find in his political philosophy is not an *ex nihilo* Creation story but a pagan cyclism of recurrent natalities, perennial rites of spring.

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### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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### Notes

1. Serge Moscovici, *The Age of the Crowd: A Historical Treatise on Mass Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
2. Lewis S. Feuer, *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).
3. Steven Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Daniel Schwartz, *The First Modern Jew: Spinoza and the History of an Image* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment Philosophy and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001); Susan James, *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion and Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2012).
4. Henceforth TTP; Chapters are followed by section numbers; when a section is long, I include the Gebhardt numbers.
5. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*.
6. On the "French Spinozists," see Lorenzo Vinciguerra, "Spinoza in French Philosophy Today," *Philosophy Today* 53, no. 4 (Winter 2009).
7. TTP16.2; G/II/137.
8. Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). On its contestability as a concept see William E. Connolly, *Terms of Political Discourse* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).
9. Filippo Del Lucchese, *Conflict, Power and Multitude in Machiavelli and Spinoza* (London; New York: Continuum, 2009); Susan James, "Democracy and the Good Life in Spinoza's Philosophy," in *Interpreting Spinoza*, ed. Charlie Heunemann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Hasana Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* (Chicago: University of

- Chicago Press, 2011); Caroline Williams, "Thinking the Political in the Wake of Spinoza," *Contemporary Political Theory* 6 (2007): 349–69.
10. Wolfgang Bartuschat. "The Ontological Basis of Spinoza's Politics," in *Spinoza's Political and Theological Thought*, ed. C. De Deugd (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1984); Etienne Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, trans. Peter Snowdon (London: Verso, 1998); Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*.
  11. Citations of *Ethics* (from *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985]) are in parentheses in the body of the essay; abbreviations: *Ethics* = E; Part = roman numeral; proposition = p; demonstration = dem.; scholium = s.
  12. Henceforth TP. Chapters are followed by section numbers; when a section is long, I include the Gebhardt numbers. I use mainly Edwin Curley's unpublished, working translation of the *Tractatus Politicus*, with occasional modifications. I insert an [S] in the references when using Samuel Shirley's translation (*Spinoza: Political Treatise*, trans. Samuel Shirley [Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000]).
  13. Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*; Alexandre Matheron, "Le problème de l'évolution de Spinoza du *Traité théologico-politique* au *Traité politique*," in *Spinoza: Issues and Directions*, ed. Edwin Curley and Pierre-François Moreau (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990).
  14. Antonio Negri, *Savage Anomaly*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); *Subversive Spinoza*, trans. Timothy S. Murphy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). On the problems with Negri's reading of Spinoza, see Sandra Field, "Democracy and the Multitude: Spinoza against Negri," *Theoria* (June 2012): 21–40.
  15. The English translations of the Latin terms are from John T. White and Joseph Edmond Riddle, *Latin-English Dictionary* (New York: Hinds, Noble and Eldredge, n.d.). That the primary difference between *potentia* and *potestas* lies in the use of the latter specifically in political terms may be seen in the French and German language translations. In French, both *potentia* and *potestas* are translatable as *pouvoir*, *puissance*, and *autorité* (Robert Estienne, *Dictionarium latinogallicum* [1552], accessed from <http://artfl-project.uchicago.edu/content/dictionary-latinogallicum>). In German, *potentia* and *potestas* can similarly be translated as *Kraft*, *Macht*, *Gewalt*, although *potestas* acquires the additional significance of *Herrschaft* (Hermann Menge, *Langenscheidts Woerterbuch Latein* [Berlin: Langenscheidt 2003]). Thus, if there is a difference between *potentia* and *potestas*, it cannot be mapped onto these other distinctions in German and French. I have found Emiliana Giancotti Boscherini's *Lexicon Spinozanum* (Springer, 1987) invaluable in tracing the different instances of use of each term.
  16. Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 393; and "A Genealogy of the Modern State," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 162 (2009): 325–70.
  17. Shirley renders the first as "commonwealth," and the second, "state"; Curley translates both as "State." *Civitas* does not correspond to contemporary civil society (which distinguishes itself from the State). Spinoza does tend to use *imperium* for regime types, political authority and institutions, and *civitas* for collective (political) agency.

18. On the substitution of "substance" for "God" see Han van Ruler, "'Something, I Know Not What': The Concept of Substance in Early Modern Thought," in *Between Demonstration and Imagination*, ed. Nauta and Vanderjagt (Leiden: Brill, 1999).
19. Frederick Pollock, *Spinoza: His Life and Philosophy* (London: Kegan Paul, 1880), 166. See E1 appendix; G/II/77.
20. Leibniz wrote, "[Spinoza] has a strange metaphysics, full of paradoxes. Among other things, he believes that the world and God are but a single substantial thing." (Steven Nadler, *Spinoza—A Life* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001], 341). On precedents, see Carlos Fraenkel, "Maimonides' God and Spinoza's *Deus sive Natura*," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44, no. 2 (2006): 169–215.
21. Sylvain Zac, "On the Idea of Creation in Spinoza's Philosophy," *God and Nature: Spinoza's Metaphysics*, ed. Yirmiyahu Yovel (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 233–43; Martial Geuroult, "Spinoza's Letter on the Infinite," in *Spinoza: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Marjorie Grene (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press (Ind.), 2nd ed., 1979 [1st ed., New York: Anchor Books, 1973]).
22. On the term *expression* [*exprimit*], see Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Zone Books, 1992).
23. Alexander Matheron, "Essence, Existence and Power in *Ethics* I: The Foundations of Proposition 16," in *God and Nature: Spinoza's Metaphysics*, ed. Yirmiyahu Yovel (Leiden: Brill, 1991); Valteri Viljanen, "Field Metaphysic, Power, and Individuation in Spinoza," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 37, no. 3 (2007).
24. This is mentioned in passing in Gilles Deleuze's *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*.
25. "To be able to not exist is to lack power, and conversely, to be able to exist is to have power [*posse existere potentia est*] (as is known through itself)." From this, "it follows that the more reality belongs to the nature of a thing, the more powers [*potentiam*] it has, of itself, to exist." The "ability to exist" does not refer to brute struggle for survival, but refers rather to a principle of reality itself, namely, substance, or God.
26. "[S]ingular things are modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way."
27. "Particular things are nothing but affections of God's attributes, or modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way."
28. Here I steal a formulation from Hasana Sharp's marvelously compact explication in "The Force of Ideas in Spinoza," in *Political Theory* 35, no. 6 (December 2007): 732–55. A possible objection to my argument here are the two terms Spinoza uses for Nature, *Natura naturans* and *Natura naturata* (roughly translated, Nature naturing and Nature natured), the first of which refers to substance and the second, the finite modes. While it cannot adequately be shown here, I believe that the two terms might be consistent with my argument. For they describe respectively the power of Nature as a whole, and this power as expressed through the finite modes—the finite expressions of infinite power. The sum of finite modes, even if stretched out in an infinite series, will never equate to infinitely absolute substance, in other words, the infinity of modes can never

- relate to absolutely infinite substance as parts to a whole. This radical break is what constitutes the *absoluteness* of the infinity of substance. Yet, Spinoza's substance monism specifies that there is only one substance in *Ethics*, and hence that modes are substantially the same as substance. It is the "two orders" of Nature that mark the difference between substance and mode, that characterizes the difference between the infinite (of modes) and the *absolutely* infinite (of substance).
29. Singular things (or finite modes) as well as substance can have, as Don Garrett observes, "affections that are *in* them (e.g., 2p13d, 2p22d, 2p38d, 2p39s, 3p52s)" (Garrett, "Spinoza's *Conatus* Argument"). Since the human body itself is an affection of substance or Nature, an *affection* (Latin: *affectio*) of the human body is an affection of an affection (E1p25cor and E3def.3).
  30. Spinoza uses *affectus* (translated as affect) to signify the changes undergone by the human body and mind, the modifications of human modes.
  31. Because of considerations of word limit, I have compressed some arguments and terms. In E1p36dem., Spinoza states that "whatever exists *expresses in a certain and determinate way the power [potentiam] of God*," and, "from [everything which exists] some effect must follow." Now, to say that each finite mode expresses substantial power is also to say that each mode "follows from" substance: "From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow (*sequi*) infinitely many things in infinitely many modes." (E1p16). And E1p28dem. justifies the substitution of the term *follow from* by the words "determined to exist and produce an effect." The different formulations in E1p28dem. of the substance–mode relation help us map the various terms onto one another.
  32. The immanence of substance to its modes, and the inherence of finite modes in substance, tells us that finite things do not differ substantially from substance, or Nature. By implication, the identification of reality with power is just as applicable to finite things as it is to substance. We may infer then that the power of each finite thing is also identical to its (the finite thing's) nature or reality. On inherence and immanence, see Yitzhak Melamed, "Spinoza's Metaphysics of Substance: The Substance-Mode Relation as a Relation of Inherence and Predication," in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 78, no. 1 (January 2009); Steven Nadler, "'Whatever Is, Is in God': Substance and Things in Spinoza's Metaphysics," in *Interpreting Spinoza: Critical Essays*, ed. Charlie Huenemann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); John Carriero, "Monism in Spinoza," in *Spinoza: Metaphysical Themes*, ed. Olli Koistinen and John Biro (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 38–59.
  33. Letter to Oldenburg, XV (XXXII).
  34. For Spinoza, there are no absolutely simple bodies or *corpora simplicissima* (Stuart Hampshire, *Spinoza and Spinozism* [Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005], xli), only more or less simple or complex bodies (Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy*; Valtteri Viljanen, "Field Metaphysic, Power, and Individuation in Spinoza," in *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 37, no. 3 [2007]).
  35. E3p8, e4p20s. Spinoza calls this striving *conatus*. Human volition, appetite and desire are nothing but such striving, variously related to body and mind (E3p9s; G/II/147-8).



36. Aurelia Armstrong, "Autonomy and the Relational Individual: Spinoza and Feminism," in *Feminist Interpretations of Benedict Spinoza*, ed. Moira Gatens [University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009]
37. "The orthodox view is that the exercise of power degenerates into abuse or usurpation of power, unless one keeps to certain ethical principles" (W.N.A. Klever, "Power: Conditional and Unconditional," in *Spinoza's Political and Theological Thought*, ed. C. de Deugd [Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1984], 97).
38. TP2.4: "The natural right of every individual is coextensive with its power [*potentia*]."
39. Chapter Three, §9: "The Right of the Commonwealth is defined by the common power of the multitude [*ius civitatis communi multitudinis potentia definitur*]." If the *right* of sovereignty is defined by the power of the multitude, then *power* of sovereignty, too, is defined by the power of the multitude.
40. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (Boston: Beacon Press, 1951), 254. In his *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* (TIE), Spinoza argues that if we define a circle as "a figure in which the lines drawn from the center to the circumference are equal," then we will not understand the essence of a circle. A definition has to include the "proximate cause" of the thing. And so, "a circle would have to be defined as follows: it is the figure that is described by any line of which one end is fixed and the other moving" (TIE §95-96; G/II/35).
41. Matheron refers to this as a "genetic definition of sovereignty" (Matheron, "Theoretical Function of Democracy in Spinoza and Hobbes," 216).
42. Matheron, "The Theoretical Function of Democracy in Spinoza and Hobbes."
43. Cf. TTP Preface 30-31; G/III/11, TTP5.3; G/III/74.
44. Cf. TTP16.
45. Etienne Balibar, "Spinoza, the Anti-Orwell: The Fear of the Masses," *Rethinking Marxism* 2, no. 3 (1989): 104-39; Negri, "Reliqua Desiderantur: A Conjecture for a Definition of the Concept of Democracy in the Final Spinoza," in *The New Spinoza*, ed. Warren Montag and Ted Stolze (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998). Hannah Arendt's influential thesis on the banality of evil, the conformism it presupposes, also applies.
46. Lee Rice, "Individual and Community in Spinoza's Social Psychology," in *Spinoza: Issues and Directions*, ed. Edwin Curley and Pierre-François Moreau (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990); Douglas Den Uyl, *State, Power and Freedom: An Interpretation of Spinoza's Political Philosophy* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1983). Etienne Balibar gives a helpful overview of the various interpretations in English and French publications in "Potentia multitudinis, quae una veluti mente ducitur: Spinoza on the Body Politic," trans. Stephen H. Daniel, in *Current Continental Theory and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Stephen H. Daniel (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005).
47. Terpstra, "What does Spinoza mean by *potentia multitudinis*?" in *Freiheit und Notwendigkeit*, ed. Etienne Balibar, H. Seidel, and Manfred Walther (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1994), 87.



48. Warren Montag, "Who's Afraid of the Multitude?: Between the Individual and the State," in *South Atlantic Quarterly* 104, no. 4 (2005): 655–73.
49. Spinoza's argument that democracy is "absolute" subverts theories of divine right absolutism.
50. Cf. TTP 17.93. See Williams, "Thinking the Political in the Wake of Spinoza" and Balibar on *ingenium* in *Spinoza and Politics*.
51. Ideas and thoughts are proper forces, efficacies, powers in their own right, "*an action of the mind*" (E2d3), not mere representations corresponding to an external reality, unlike "mute pictures on a tablet" (E2p43s), nor "mere images in the back of the eye or middle of the brain" (E2p48s). (Hasana Sharp, "The Force of Ideas in Spinoza," *Political Theory* 35, no. 6 [2007]: 732–55; Amelie Rorty, "The Politics of Spinoza's Vanishing Dichotomies," *Political Theory* 38, no. 1 [2010]: 131–41.) Interestingly, for a philosopher so often cast as a rationalist, Spinoza considers "thinking" to include not just ratiocination, reasoning, reckoning, but also perception, memory, and imagination. (On the Cartesian precedence, see Susan James, *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth Century Philosophy* [Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997], 91.)
52. E3p2s; G/II/142. "The human mind does not involve adequate knowledge of the parts composing the human body" (E2p24). [Syline Malinowski-Charles, "Rationalism Versus Subjective Experience: The Problem of the Two Minds in Spinoza," in *The Rationalists: Between Tradition and Innovation*, ed. Carlos Fraenkel, Dario Perinetti, and Justin E. H. Smith (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011).]
53. The argument is based on Spinoza's substance monism: "The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things" (E2p7). The mind is simply a human being "conceived under the attribute of thought," while the body is that same human, this time "conceived under the attribute of extension" (E3p2schol.; G/II/141).
54. "A commonwealth whose subjects are deterred from taking up arms only through fear should be said to be not at war rather than to be enjoying peace." [Shirley translation.]
55. Susan James, "Law and Sovereignty in Spinoza's Politics," in *Feminist Interpretations of Benedict Spinoza*, ed. Moira Gatens (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009). On Spinoza's use of the term *fabula* see Michael A. Rosenthal, "Spinoza and the philosophy of history," in *Interpreting Spinoza: Critical Essays*, ed. Charlie Huenemann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
56. Italics mine.
57. James, "Democracy and the Good Life"
58. Spinoza gives a similar explanation in TTP16.
59. Balibar and Lee Ward ("Benedict Spinoza on the Naturalness of Democracy," *Canadian Political Science Review* 5, no. 1 [January 2011]: 55–73), argue that Spinoza's recommendations for aristocracy and monarchy "tend toward democracy."

60. Italics mine. Cf. TTP16.30; G/III/194 (On the similarity to Hegel's "ruse of reason," see Pierre Macherey, "Spinoza, la fin de l'histoire, et la ruse de la raison," in *Spinoza: Issues and Directions*, ed. Edwin Curley and Pierre-François Moreau [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990].)
61. Italics mine. This is Spinoza's rebuttal of the well-worn claim that only a unitary sovereign is capable of effective executive decisions.
62. Hasana Sharp, "Why Spinoza Today? Or, 'A Strategy of Anti-Fear,'" *Rethinking Marxism* 17, no. 4 (2005): 591–608
63. Marin Terpstra, "An Analysis of Power Relations and Class Relations in Spinoza's *Tractatus Politicus*," in *Studia Spinozana: Spinoza and Modernity: Ethics and Politics* 9 (1993): 79–105.
64. Balibar, "*Potentia multitudinis*"; Montag, "Who's Afraid of the Multitude?"
65. Negri, *Savage Anomaly, Subversive Spinoza*.
66. Italics mine.
67. Osamu Ueno, "*Res Nobis Similis*: Desire and the Double in Spinoza," *Desire and Affect: Spinoza as Psychologist*, ed. Y. Yovel (New York: Little Room Press, 1999); Pierre-François Moreau, "Imitation of Affects and Interhuman Relations," in *Spinoza's Ethics: A Collective Commentary*, ed. Michael Hampe, Ursula Renz, and Robert Schnepf (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2011), 167–78.
68. Robert Seyfert, "Beyond Personal Feelings and Collective Emotions: A Theory of Social Affect," *Theory, Culture & Society* 29, no. 6 (2012): 27–46.
69. TTP18.28; G/III/226.
70. Warren Montag, *Bodies, Masses, Power: Spinoza and His Contemporaries* (London: Verso, 1999), 76
71. Curley translates it as "people," thus blurring the distinction between *plebs* and *multitudo*. Shirley translates it as "common people."
72. The Latin here (*Causa igitur, cur in praxi imperium absolutum non sit, nulla alia esse potest, quam quia multitudo imperantibus formidolosa est ...*) differs from the very similar English phrase in the *Ethics*, "The mob is terrifying if does not fear [*Terret vulgus, nisi metuat*]" (E4p54s.).
73. Cf. Levites in TTP17
74. Montag, "Who's Afraid of the Multitude?"
75. On Spinoza's classical allusions, see Montag, *Bodies, Masses, Power*.
76. TP7.27; G/III/320. Here the Latin is the same as the *Ethics*. [*Nihil praeterea in vulgo modicum terrere, nisi paveant; nam libertas, et servitium haud facile miscentur.*]
77. See also TP6.4, on the "oriental despot."

## Author Biography

**Dorothy H. B. Kwek** teaches social and political theory at Universität Konstanz, Germany. She writes on Spinoza's political philosophy, and is working on how the ecopolitical landscape is shaped through relations between humans and non-humans across different cultures.