

The Influence of Spinoza's Concept of the Multitude on Debates about Populism and Representation in Democracies

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Keywords: Spinoza, multitude, people, power, representation, democracy.

1 Spinoza in the Near Future

In our view, the interests and problems of the present are the criteria for organizing our encounter with the ideas of the philosophers of the past. We will thus turn to Spinoza's works interested in reflecting on the present. This does not mean that we will merely use his ideas to support views that we have already defined and settled. Instead, we will listen to him in his own voice; that is how he can help us think about our present. Which paths Spinoza research will take in the coming years depends on what we think our present interests and problems are, since the present opens the door to the immediate future.

We propose a reading of Spinoza's political philosophy from the perspective of present democracies' crisis of representation. First, we analyse the difference between Spinoza and Hobbes, paying close attention to the respective concepts of multitude and people. Second, we assess the contributions that Spinoza's philosophy can offer to today's democracies. We argue that Spinoza's philosophical ontology can help us think about a conception of modern democracy in which no one embodies the totality and where the multitude knows and exercises its power of freedom.

2 Current Problems of Political Representation

The matter of representation is one of the most pressing political problems of recent decades. Marks of the problem include the growing disinterest and disaffection of citizens regarding party politics, populist strategies that use the overrepresentation of a charismatic leader, the migration of political

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How to cite this article: Sainz Pezonaga, A. and Espinosa Antón, F.A., The Influence of Spinoza's Concept of the Multitude on Debates about Populism and Representation in Democracies, *Journal of Spinoza Studies*, 1, no. 1 (2022): 102–110, doi: <https://doi.org/10.21827/jss.1.1.38459>

decision-making to the heights of supranational organizations,¹ demands for greater citizen participation and control, and a desire for popular self-organization of the political agenda.²

Slogans such as “They don’t represent us” and “We are not commodities in the hands of politicians and bankers” that were chorused in the demonstrations of the Spanish Indignados Movement expressed how far citizens were from party politics. This distance was in tune with theories of radical democracy that had emphasized the power of communication, whether in the manner of Hannah Arendt,³ Jürgen Habermas,⁴ or Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri.⁵ Furthermore, a certain Latin American left’s response to the crisis of representation and neoliberal policies, later imported into Europe, consisted of a vindication of populist forms of representation. This was in tune at the time with the theory of left-wing populism of Ernesto Laclau⁶ and Chantal Mouffe,⁷ and their unconditional defense of representation.⁸

For our part, we will briefly review the contrast between the logics of Hobbes’s represented people and Spinoza’s unrepresentable multitude. Then we will draw up an outline of how we think it is possible to apply Spinoza’s political ontology to the matrix of modern representative democracies in such a way that opens a fruitful path for discussion of the future of individual and collective freedom.

3 The People in Hobbes and the Multitude in Spinoza

Spinoza’s position is configured, in some ways, to be opposed to Hobbes’s: “As regards political theories, the difference between Hobbes and myself consists in this, that I always keep natural right alive and intact and that I affirm that in any political community the authorities do not have more right over their subjects than the measure of the power with which they surpass the subjects, which is the same thing that always takes place in the state of nature” (Ep 50, Spinoza to Jelles, 2 June 1674/G IV 238–239, authors’ translation).

Let us first explain Hobbes’s position so that we can better understand Spinoza’s. For Hobbes, a human being is, by nature, its *conatus* to continue existing. He or she is a being who lives in continuous fear of death and who, in order to secure his or her life, has an insatiable desire for more things and more power. Because of this, human beings collide with each other and strive to destroy or subjugate each other; the state of nature is thus a condition of war of every man against every man. To get out of this unfortunate situation, the best thing is that there are rules valid for everyone

1 Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void. The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (London: Verso, 2013).

2 Dario Azzellini and Marina Sitrin, *They Can’t Represent Us! Reinventing Democracy from Greece to Occupy* (London: Verso, 2014).

3 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 175–247.

4 Jürgen Habermas, *Faktizität und Geltung. Beiträge zur Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtsstaats* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1994), 401–435 and 600–632.

5 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 22–41, 280–303, 353–369 and 404–405.

6 Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London and New York: Verso, 2007).

7 Chantal Mouffe, *Por un populismo de izquierdas* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2018).

8 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 157–171.

and that each one renounces the ambition of his appetite and, therefore, the war of all against all. What is needed is a pact that creates a State and a government. With this covenant, the natural right of everyone to do what he wants (against peace and common security) disappears and human beings cease to be a multitude of individuals in conflict. They transform themselves into a “people,” a political community that has a capacity to act in a unified manner by common laws.⁹ In short, the pre-political, the multitude, becomes political, the people.

Human beings without a State may take into account the desires of others, but because they do not agree on what the common good is, each of them tends to pursue their own private benefit. But through covenant, the sovereign who is granted political power defines the common good and manages to weld the multitude of clashing individuals into a community.¹⁰ It is the unity of the representer—and not the unity of the represented—that makes dispersed individuals become a political community, a people;¹¹ this is why Hobbes points out that the sovereign is the artificial soul that gives life and movement to the whole body.¹² He explains that the ruler, as the representative of the multitude, is like a stage actor who wears a mask (πρόσωπον) and plays the role of the collective will.¹³ And thus Hobbes puts the concept of representation at the center of modern political reflection. Politics is a great theater in which the State puts a single text against the discordant voices of individuals in the state of nature.¹⁴ There is no politics without representation.

Hobbes puts the concept of representation at the center of the stage. As Skinner points out, Hobbes does this by criticizing proponents of parliamentarism who advocate limiting royal power.¹⁵ Instead of holding that real power derives from God and is absolute, these writers devise a non-religious theory according to which power comes from the people in the form of a contract: the king must rule according to the terms of that contract. That the parliament represents the people means that it is like a totally representative portrait of the features of each of its parts; it therefore *acts in their name*.

Hobbes’s starting point is similar: man has complete natural freedom and the only way this freedom can be legitimately restricted is by the explicit consent of those who agree to submit to government. Thus, on Hobbes’s view, the people, through the covenant, are the authors of political authority.¹⁶ Yet Hobbes does not want to endorse the radical implications of the parliamentarians who claim that royal power is limited and depends on the authorization of people in the form of a contract, that the king must rule according to the terms and limitations of that contract, and that the resolutions of the parliament are the voice of the people. That is why he argues that before the covenant, there is not a sovereign people who hold power, but rather a multitude of diverse individuals in conflict. Strictly speaking, the *people* do not exist before the covenant and so they cannot be a

9 Thomas Hobbes, *De Cive: The Latin Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 137.

10 Christian David Núñez, “La Representación en el *Leviatán* de Hobbes: la metamorfosis del hombre natural en persona civil,” *Revista Filosofía UIS* 21, no. 1 (2022): 281. doi: [10.18273/revfil.v21n1-2022013](https://doi.org/10.18273/revfil.v21n1-2022013).

11 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 114.

12 Ibid., 9.

13 Ibid., 112.

14 Yves Charles Zarka, *Hobbes et la pensée politique moderne* (Paris: PUF, 2012), 3736 (Kindle pagination).

15 Quentin Skinner, “Hobbes on Representation,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 13, no. 2 (2005): 155. doi: [10.1111/j.0966-8373.2005.00226.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0966-8373.2005.00226.x).

16 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 112–113.

part of that contract: the contract is of each person with each person of the multitude. Once this contract is made and power is given to a representative, this representative, through common laws, converts the discordant multiplicity of voices and wills into one voice and one will: it creates the people (again, “it is the unity of the representer, not the unity of the represented that makes the multitude one person”).¹⁷ In a sense, representation passes off the political decisions of the rulers as if they were really always individual decisions of the citizens. With this, representation gives a reason to obey the laws besides coercion and force.

The importance given to the sovereign means that there is, in some way, a reversal of roles: the representative, the sovereign, is not a mere *actor* who represents the people and speaks in their place, but is also the *author* of laws and politics.¹⁸ All in all, to have any prospect of living together in peace and security, we simply must allow our representative to personify the monstrous power of the State (“the great Leviathan”).¹⁹

According to Spinoza, in contrast, the existence of a State does not imply that the multitude is left without political agency or rights. The reason for this is the basis of Spinoza's political philosophy: government is defined by the power of the multitude (TP 2.17/G III 282). Like so many definitions in Spinoza, this definition is genetic: the power of the multitude generates the power and the right of the rulers (where power and right are, for Spinoza, two sides of the same coin). The power of the rulers decreases to the extent that it outrages the majority and gives reasons for many to conspire in unison; the rulers thus have reason to fear (TP 3.9/G III 288). Political power works well when it is an expression of the real power of the multitude, but if it goes against the multitude, it will end up overwhelmed by reality, as the power of many is much greater than the power of one or a few (TP 2.13/G III 281). In Spinoza's political ontology, power is a function of reality.

There is no political theory of representation in Spinoza's works. The term ‘representation’ appears with epistemological meaning only, as in the case, for instance, of the mental images that the prophets had (TTP 2/G III 34) and the ideas that represent reality to us (E2p17s/G II 105; E3p27d/G II 160). Spinoza, in his definitive version of his political philosophy, the *Political Treatise*, abandons the concept of pact that he had used in the *Theological-Political Treatise* (TTP 20/G III 242–5; 16/G III 191–193; 196–197).²⁰ The ideas concerning *conatus*, *potentia*, immanent cause, and the composite individual that Spinoza develops in the *Ethics*, as well as the concept of the power of the multitude that is absolutely essential in the *Political Treatise*,²¹ make a theory of contract unnecessary. Now the political problem is the relationship between the multitude and political power, not the

17 Ibid., 114.

18 Zarka, *Hobbes*, 3928 (Kindle Pagination); Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 189.

19 Skinner, “Hobbes,” 179.

20 See Francisco Javier Espinosa Antón, “L’obéissance de l’individu et l’indignation contre la loi : que peut la multitude?,” *Revue internationale de Philosophie* 295, no. 1 (2021): 41–42. See also Laurent Bove, Pierre-François Moreau and Charles Ramond, “Le Traité Politique: une radicalisation conceptuelle?,” in *La multitude libre. Nouvelles lectures du Traité Politique*, eds. Chantal Jaquet, Pascal Sévérac and Ariel Suhamy (Paris: Éds. Amsterdam, 2008), 27–43.

21 “Multitude” in the *Political Treatise* is no longer synonymous with the negative concept of “vulgo,” but is a positive thing. See Francisco Javier Espinosa Antón, “Los individuos en la multitude,” in *Co-herencia* 28, vol. 15 (2018), 185–189. See also Paolo Cristofolini, “Peuple et multitude dans le lexique politique de Spinoza,” in Jaquet, Sévérac and Suhamy, *Multitude libre*, 45–58.

relationship between the individual and the sovereign.²² Spinoza's political philosophy, which is naturalistic and immanent, affirms that the multitude, through the play of inter-individual relations and affections, organizes itself and possesses its own instituting force, which renders recourse to the thesis of contract useless in forming the State.²³ This is the effect of a natural right, conceived as *jus sive potentia* of the multitude, so that the cause, the natural right, is maintained in what it produces, the State. As we have indicated in the first quoted text of Spinoza (Ep 50, Spinoza to Jelles, 2 June 1674/G IV 238–239), natural rights are always maintained (because they are the immanent cause).

So, for Spinoza, no political power can fully represent the multitude.²⁴ No one can claim to hold the whole opinion and will of the multitude. It is impossible for anybody to represent its complex and dynamic multiplicity, to paralyze and fasten in a determination the movement of its power.²⁵ Spinoza's multitude is the name of the irreducibility of political reality to the facticity of dominion.²⁶

The multitude, or rather the multitudes of the different polities, are contingent networks of diverse singularities. They have neither an indestructible power nor a beneficent strength capable of assuring a flourishing future without doubt. Sometimes evil affects prevail and pull men in different directions (TP 8.6/G III 320). But active affects and reason can also guide other multitudes that then behave as one mind.²⁷ For Spinoza, common reason leads to a stronger union of the multitude than does Hobbesian representation, the surrender of all wills to one.²⁸ However, this does not mean that all the members of the multitude must hold the same opinion. In one place, Spinoza describes the multitude as an *animorum unio*, emphasizing that the binding force of the multitude lies in common feelings and in the desire to make common decisions rather than in a homogeneity of ideas (TP 3.7/G III 287). Of course, however, for people to unite in a common feeling, they must also have a common background of ideas.²⁹

In conclusion, according to Spinoza, representatives cannot create the collective actor and this actor does not need representatives to act. The collective actor exists and acts when there is social cooperation and life in common. The multitude is the product and the producer of this common life. The power of the multitude is immanent to common life, and rulers or political leaders can neither fully seize this power, nor confine it in the political symbolism of representation that they create in their attempt to transcend the immanence of the multitude.

22 Aurelio Sainz Pezonaga, *La multitud libre en spinoza*, PhD diss., (University of Castilla-La Mancha, 2020), 258. URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/10578/23340>.

23 Chantal Jaquet, "L'actualité du *Traité Politique* de Spinoza," in Jaquet, Sévérac and Suhamy, *Multitude libre*, 19.

24 Antonio Negri, "Eine Ontologische Definition der Multitude," In *Kritik der Weltordnung: Globalisierung, Imperialismus, Empire*, eds. Thomas Atzert and Jost Müller (Berlin: ID Verlag, 2003), 111–125.

25 Manfred Walther, "From *Potestas Multitudinis* in Suárez to *Potentia Multitudinis* in Spinoza," *Studia Spinozana* 16, (2008): 146. The potency of the multitude is *never completely* "absorbed" or "consumed" by the directive power and the institutional design it creates.

26 Espinosa Antón, "L'Obéissance," 51.

27 See Espinosa's analysis of *una veluti mente ducitur* in Francisco Javier Espinosa Antón, "Être une Multitude et agir comme une seule âme," in *Spinoza. Ser e Agir*, eds. Maria Luísa Ribeiro Ferreira, Diogo Pires Aurélio and Olivier Feron (Lisboa: Centro de Filosofia da Universidade de Lisboa, 2011), 143–148.

28 Aurelio Sainz Pezonaga, *La multitud libre en spinoza* (Granada: Comares, 2021), 48.

29 Espinosa Antón, "L'obéissance," 47–50.

4 Spinoza and Political Representation

There are at least two respects in which today's democracies do not follow Hobbes's model of political representation: first, through the periodic election of rulers and second, through the importance of the free expression of opinions and desires.³⁰ In any case, we can still see its influence in many political theories that show a manifest distrust of the people. According to these theories, rulers must lead, construct, unite, interpret, excite... the people. We see this in the theory of Schumpeter, who thinks that the relationship between rulers and ruled is like that of the taxi driver and the user: the user can periodically take any taxi he or she wants, but they should not tell the taxi driver how to drive.³¹ We can also see this in the conception of technocracy: the people are ignorant and only experts can steer the ship of state.³² In a way, it is also present in Laclau's populism, for whom representatives must construct the people as the subject of social change. Representatives must construct it from one particular side, since, as in Hobbes, the multitude is by itself incapable of collective action³³ (it is true, though, that Mouffe and Laclau maintain a conception of democracy as the freedom of anyone to struggle to construct and reconstruct the people).³⁴ It is also seen in nationalism, where the starting point is a people, the nation, already given, and which is, in a way, the recreation and personification of bourgeois interests. Nationalism conceives humanity as made up of different national personifications.³⁵ And it appears in the conception that a certain Marxism proposes of a universal class already constituted.³⁶

The problem with these theories, each somewhat inspired by Hobbes, is that all of them, despite their differences, want a part (the leader, the ruler, the nation, the class...) to embody, and act for, the whole. They view the whole as having no internal power of acting and needing to be created from the outside. Spinoza's political view, with its concept of the multitude, is wider: political powers certainly can construct the multitude and use people as slaves, but the multitude also has the power to rebel against this domination and to autonomously shape itself (TP 5.6/G III 296). For Spinoza the multitude becomes more powerful to the extent that it forms and unites through the shared joy of cooperative action, develops concord out of diversity, and increases the power of citizens (the more they know the world and themselves, the more critical they can become). We could say that democracy, for Spinoza, consists in the increase of the power of acting of the multitude and of the individuals in the multitude. Democratic political construction can thus only be the work of the multitude.

30 Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 6.

31 Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 241–251.

32 One example is the banking expert Mario Monti who became Prime Minister of Italy in 2011 without being elected by the Italian people.

33 Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 239–242.

34 Mouffe, *Populismo*, 116–120; Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 161–162, 170–171. Laclau had already said so in “Power and Representation,” in Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996), 99–101.

35 Johann Gottlieb Fichte, “Reden an die Deutsche Nation,” VIII, in *Werke 1808–1812, Gesamtausgabe*, I, 10, eds. Reinhard Lauth et al. (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 2005), 198–213.

36 Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness. Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971), 46–82.

There are many types and degrees of power of acting in the different multitudes that exist. But for Spinoza, rulers or leaders can never represent a multitude in the totality of its power once and for all. They cannot decide on their own will what “reflecting” the interests of the people consists of, nor can their independence be absolute. On the contrary, we could say that a multitude has more power, and democracy works better, when the multitude has the power to decide whether it sees its interests and demands reflected in the action of the ruler. It must always have the power to claim that its rulers do not represent it, to point out that the government is not its personification.

Elective representation thus appears as an indefinite process that depends on the multitude and creates a political culture always open to its mandates. Since the multitude is always political, it is the ruler who must adapt to its life and power: it is the ruler who must work to translate the common desire of the multitude in such a way that the power of acting of that desire can become ever greater. Whoever claims to be the total representative of the people, be it a Hobbesian sovereign, those inspired by Schumpeter’s elitist democracy,³⁷ or a populist leader, in fact seeks to subjugate the multitude.³⁸

The question is: what institutional changes does an increase in the power of acting of the multitude require? And what force would make such changes possible? The most general answer to the first question is that such changes must lead the multitude to a better understanding of public affairs, to reasoned debates and, finally, to translate its will into political agency. There should therefore be institutional changes in the education system and in journalism as a public service.

A more concrete answer would enable us to address the second question. It requires us to think about the multitude, social cooperation, and the strength of life in common in present-day conditions. Here and now, social movements play a very active role. Feminism, environmentalism, egalitarianism, pacifism, sexual liberation, anti-racism, LGBTI+... are movements that the multitude has traced and continues to trace in search of its freedom.³⁹ They are movements of the multitude and want to make themselves felt politically and especially to be politically effective. As Nancy Fraser says, public opinion, which must involve everyone, needs to be effective and to have a real influence on those in power.⁴⁰ The public sphere is thus understood as an institution through which public opinion

37 Sandra Leonie Field, *Potentia: Hobbes and Spinoza on Power and Popular Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 1–4.

38 Our reading brings us close to the theory of representation proposed over the last two decades by Nadia Urbinati in *Representative Democracy. Principles and Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 132–135 and *Democracy Disfigured. Opinion, Truth, and the People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 6–21. Another important contemporary contribution to the theory of political representation, which would also be close to our proposal, is that of Michael Saward, as presented in *Making Representations. Claims, Counterclaims and the Politics of Acting for Others* (Colchester: ECPR Press, 2020), chap. 1. In any case, both Urbinati and Saward, as well as other scholars who subscribe to the so-called constructivist approach (like eds. Lisa Disch, Nadia Urbinati, and Mathijs van de Sande, *The Constructivist Turn in Political Representation*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), fail to detach their theories from the Hobbesian proposal of representation as the symbolic constitution of the unity of the people. See Nadia Urbinati, “Representative Constructivism’s Conundrum,” in Disch, Urbinati and Van de Sande, *The Constructivist Turn*, 183; Saward, *Making Representations*, chap. 1.

39 Aurelio Sainz Pezonaga, “Where is Spinoza’s Free Multitude Now?,” *Stasis* 12, no. 2 (2022): 228–249. URL: <https://stasisjournal.net/index.php/journal/article/view/204>.

40 Nancy Fraser, “Die Transnationalisierung der Öffentlichkeit. Legitimität und Effektivität der Öffentlichen Meinung in einer Postwestfälischen Welt,” in *Anarchie der kommunikativen Freiheit*, eds. Peter Niesen and Benjamin Herborth (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2007), 224–225.

becomes political power, so that whoever commands, commands by obeying. If public opinion and public will do not determine political authority, then politics becomes the expression of the powers that be.

On the other hand, we must consider the contemporary multitude not only in its relationship with the state, but also in its relationship with other spheres of society. For example, the awareness and resistance work of social movements aims not only to introduce changes in the legal-political order, but also to modify society's own behaviour. And we cannot reduce the plurality of issues and views that cut across the multitude to the unity of a territorial representative or to the cleavages created by political parties.⁴¹ Contemporary multitudes also have an international, transnational, or global dimension. The scope of their actions extends beyond the national territories of representation, both because communication crosses borders and ideas spread from one point of the planet to another, and because the problems they address go beyond the borders of states: wars, the environment, the economic market, the poverty of millions of human beings, cultural production...

As can be seen, the problem of democracy in our time spurs us to rethink Spinoza's ideas about the multitude and will probably continue to spur on such rethinking in the near future. We have not attempted to address all the issues that this conception of the multitude raises for current thinking, but have only tried to suggest some of the benefits it can bring to political thought. We have left many questions open. *Reliqua desiderantur*.⁴²

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41 Nadia Urbinati and Mark E. Warren, "The Concept of Representation in Contemporary Democratic Theory," *Annual Review of Political Science* 11, no. 1 (2008): 396–400. doi: [10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.053006.190533](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.053006.190533).

42 This article is part of the project I+D+i/PID2020-117219GB-I00 (*INconRES*), funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033 of Spain.

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