
The Social: a Condition and a Danger to Politics

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1 *Multitudo, societas, and civitas*

The distinction between the idea of the *multitudo* regarded as a composition of concordant and discordant forces (the *societas*) and the idea of it as a unified institution of powers (the *civitas*) paves the way to a line of inquiry into the relations between society and politics in Spinoza, an inquiry which focuses on the recognition that the social has a double face: it is both a condition for and a danger to politics. To see that natural right is not only the measure and guardian of the *civitas*, but also a danger to it, we must consider an individual who is obscured when the *multitudo* is regarded only from the perspective of *communis*: viz., this individual Spinoza calls the *privatus* (TP 4.6).

Spinoza demonstrates the ontological foundation of sociability in *Ethics* IV. There he examines what follows given that human beings are parts of Nature, living in the company of other parts with which they share the properties of being finite and being such that their individual powers can always be surpassed. This idea is expressed in E4a: “there is no singular thing in nature than which there is not another more powerful and stronger. Whatever one is given, there is another more powerful by which the first can be destroyed.”

In E4p30, Spinoza distinguishes between the *conveniens* and the *contrarium*: things of the same nature are concordant (*convenientia*) when one of them increases our power to act and discordant (*discrepantia*) when one of them restrains our power to act. A thing of the same nature as ours, therefore, is bad for us not because of what it has in common with our nature, but because of what it has that is contrary to our power. Whereas difference is established *between essences*, contrariety is established *between powers*. *Convenientia* is the ground for commonality, which favours the conservation of singular things whose natures agree with one another and that need each other to conserve themselves. Although the common does not prevent something from being bad and contrary to us, insofar as something agrees with our nature it is necessarily good. From this follows the identity between the good and the useful, since “nothing, therefore, can be good except insofar as it agrees with our nature. So the more a thing agrees with our nature, the more useful it is, and conversely”

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(E4p31d). Via *convenientia*, individual powers augment and reciprocally strengthen each other; via *discrepantia*, the powers repel each other and are weakened.

To this distinction laid out in E4p30 is added another, in E4p29, between the *diversum*—a singular thing entirely different from our nature and with which no relationship can be established—and the *communis*—a necessary relationship between singular things of the same nature. “Our power to act, however it is conceived, can be determined, and hence aided or restrained, by the power of another singular thing which has something in common with us” (E4p29d). It follows that a singular thing whose nature is entirely different from ours neither increases nor decreases our power to act and is thus neither good nor bad for us, but it will be so if its nature has something in common with ours. *Diversum* is the absence of relation, and *communis* is the necessary cause of relations between singular things of the same nature. Passion is at the heart of the discordance between affects, both in a singular human being and among human beings, and for this reason “insofar as men are subject to passions, they cannot be said to be concordant in nature” (E4p32). Therefore, the community is not identical to *convenientia*. For this reason, in discordance, there is an absence of *convenientia* but no loss of *communis*; because the passionate relations of opposition are discordances between beings who have something in common, there might be a break of the *convenientia* without a dissolution of the community.

Since things that completely share the same nature and are necessarily concordant with each other are the most useful to each other, it comes to light that the most useful thing for each human being is another human being, even if, under the sway of passions, they are troublesome to each other. Reason *demonstrates* and experience *shows* the benefits of life in common and the harms of loneliness. This line of thought leads, according to Spinoza, to the traditional definition of man as a social animal.

In the political treatises, the relations of *convenientia* and *discrepantia* (or of concordance and discordance) refer to the concept of *multitudo*, which is conceived differently in each of the treatises. In the TTP, the *multitudo* (typically preceded by the adjective *saeva*, meaning ‘ferocious’ or ‘furious’, e.g. TTP 18.6/G III 225) is described as fickle, permeated by contrary affects, always oriented *ex suo ingenio*; to keep it within the boundaries required for the stability and conservation of the *imperium*, prudent and vigilant men are needed who make the laws conform with the *ingenium gentis*. In the TP, despite its changeable *ingenium* and its contrary passions, the *multitudo* is conceived as a political subject and its natural right becomes the definition of civil law. The difference between the two treatises stems from the conceptual elements established in the *Ethics*, such as the physics of *cohaerentia*, *constantia*, and *convenientia* between bodies, the definition of the human mind as the idea of its body, the articulation between physics and psychology with the theory of common notions, the definition of the singular essence as *conatus*, the sociability emerging from the affects, and the distinction between *sui juris* and *alterius juris*.

According to the TTP, reason and experience teach us no surer means to live in peace and security than by forming a *societas* with fixed laws, occupying a certain region of the world, working together, exchanging the products of labour, and concentrating the strength of all “as it were (*quasi*), into one body, the body of the social order” (TTP 3.5/G III 47/C II 114).¹ Because it is a set of individual bodies, variability is intrinsic to the *multitudo*, which can only be stabilised by becoming,

1 G III 47: “*omnium vires ad unum quasi corpus, nempe societatis, redigere.*”

as it were (*quasi*), a single body: society. That is why Spinoza introduces the notion of *fides* (reciprocal trust) from which the pact arises, which in turn is not the traditional foundational moment of politics, but rather the image that the *multitudo* requires in order to give meaning to its unity as a social and political body. In the TP, the right of the *imperium* is the collective natural right determined not by the power of each individual, but by the power of the *multitudo* insofar as it “le[ads] as if by one mind (*una veluti mente*)”, because “just as each person in the natural state has as much right as he has power, so also the body and mind of the whole state [*imperii*] have as much right as they have power” (TP 3.2/G III 284–285/C II 517). The collective acquires then a new shape, in which the *multitudo*, insofar as it is *una veluti mente* and not just *quasi unum corpus*, does not require the imagery of the pact to devise its own unity.

Although both treatises highlight the fundamental role of the passions and of the ceaseless changeability of circumstances, the arguments they develop are different. The TTP emphasises the rational dimension of the foundational political moment, even though the sovereign power must still employ political art and strategies to take advantage of the citizens’ imagination and passions in order to conserve itself. This is perfectly understandable, as it concerns the *body* of society and the *body* of sovereignty, which, like every other body, are subject to varying circumstances and the whims of fortune, thereby continuously putting at risk the social and political institutions. In contrast, the TP emphasises the passional dimension inherent in the very political foundation, which stems from the natural condition of humans. However, in the TP, Spinoza also emphasises the rationality of institutions as the only means to preserve sovereign political power.

Thus, in the TTP, the rational character of the political foundation does not prevent, but rather asks for, a political art: the quality of institutions and laws depends on political leaders’ prudence and vigilance vis-à-vis the passions of citizens. In the TP, despite the passionate nature of politics, the rational quality of institutions and laws is what determines political leaders’ prudence and vigilance. This change in the line of reasoning occurring between the two treatises mirrors the passage from the reference to the *single body* of the *multitudo* in the TTP to the unity of the *single mind* of the *multitudo* in the TP.

Let us now point out the similarities between the two treatises regarding the *multitudo* as a social and political subject.

In the correspondence and in the *Cogitata Metaphysica*, Spinoza uses the word *multitudo* in the arithmetic sense of numerical multiplicity or of extrinsic plurality (as opposed to extrinsic unity). In the political treatises, however, he describes a *practice* by which an extrinsic multiplicity manages to become an intrinsic unity, that is, the passage of individuals to the *multitudo*, and from the *multitudo* to *societas* and the *civitas*. The passage from numerical multiplicity to socio-political unity takes place on two levels, which can be simultaneous or consecutive, depending on the circumstances.

The first level is that of the material institution of society: i.e., when a group of individuals agrees to jointly occupy a territory, establishes cooperative relationships in the division of labour and in the distribution of products, forges a common language, and creates the means to protect itself against the dangers that threaten them from the outside (TTP 3). It also comes about with agreements and the union of the forces of individuals, who acquire more rights over nature when united than when isolated (TP 2.13 and 15), and in such a way that there can be no right of nature specific to human beings except “where men have common rights and are jointly able to claim for themselves

lands they can inhabit and cultivate, are able to protect themselves, fend off any force, and live according to the common opinion of all” (TP 2.15/G III 281/C II 512–513).

The second level is that of the institution of politics, or the passage from the common natural right of the (materially or economically formed) *societas* to civil law or sovereign power, i.e., a passage from individual and group power to the unique power of the *multitudo* as the subject of sovereign power. The *civitas* is instituted with the purpose of protecting the *societas*, that is (as we read in the two treatises), of imposing limits on the natural right of each individual by means of the natural right of the *multitudo* constituted by the unity of citizens under the law.

In both treatises, society is a unified *composition* of individuals, and politics is a unitary *constitution* of citizens; the passage from composition to constitution is the *institution of politics*.

Together, the TTP and TP teach us that the institution of society is the gathering or concentration of individual *forces* to form “one body, as it were,” whereas the institution of politics is the union of individual *powers* to constitute the power of the *multitudo* “guided, as it were, by one mind.” Politics, *the guidance by one mind*, is the idea of society, *one body*. However, the use of *quasi unum corpus* in the TTP and of *una veluti mens* in the TP indicates that, although social and political life must be deduced from the natural condition of humans, it is not immediately given but is rather *instituted* by human action when the extrinsic or numerical multiplicity of composition gives way to the intrinsic plurality of the constitution of an entirely new body and new mind. Regarded as “one body, as it were,” society is the materiality of the concentration and gathering of individual *forces*. Considered as “guided, as it were, by one mind,” politics is the union of individual *powers* under the rule of law or of civil law understood as a collective natural right.

As a body, society can be defined by the *ingenium multitudinis*, by the simultaneity of the effort of self-perseverance in existence and by the variation and change typical of social relations (due to their submission to circumstances and to the ceaseless interchange between conflicting or concordant passional individual forces). If, in the TTP, Spinoza underlines the importance of prudent and vigilant men to keep the institutional order, and if, in the TP, he claims that politics must be an art so as to preserve the harmony and fidelity of the citizens, it is because he conceives of the *multitudo* not only as the origin of the social and the political realms, but also as internally torn apart by opposing affects that can endanger the two institutions of which it is the efficient cause, namely, the *societas* and the *civitas*.

In other words, the presence of the *multitudo* as a subject is not the presence of reason in the public space, but that of the passions, which determine both the private space and social life: “So people who persuade themselves that a multitude, which may be divided over public affairs, can be induced to live only according to the prescription of reason, those people are dreaming of the golden age of the Poets. They’re captive to a myth” (TP 1.5/G III 275/C II 506).

2 *Potentia, ingenium, and aptitudo*

According to the *Ethics*, a *res singularis* is one whose components operate together and simultaneously as a single efficient cause to produce an action or an effect; an *essentia singularis* is a power to exist and act that operates in view of its self-preservation and defines itself as *conatus*. The causal unity (which defines the singular thing) and the power to exist and act (which defines the singular essence)

imply that, from *res* to *essentia*, a transition occurs from a singularity's *components* to its *constituents*, that is, to its nature (for a *natura* is a determinate way of acting). According to the *Ethics*, an individual is an integration, connection, and internal differentiation of the parts that constitute it and that can be distinguished as either weak or strong according to their bodily affections or to their relationship with external causes. Weak parts are those affected, which are subject to the power of external causes; strong parts are those capable not only of resisting the power of external causes, but also of overcoming it or affecting it in such a way as to make it agree with their own power and assimilate it, thereby becoming even stronger. The same individual can be weak in certain affections and strong in others, and the power of its *conatus* will depend on its ability to push away or minimise its weak parts and increase its strong ones. Conflict and agreement are not reduced to external relations; they also occur internally among the individual's constituent parts. The dynamics of bodily affections and the logic of the affects are, therefore, open to agreement and conflict between the individual and others and within the individual himself. Every *res singularis* and every *essentia singularis* is a field of forces or intensities that are internally concordant and contrary, and engaged in relations with fields of forces that agree or conflict with them.

Regarded as "one body, as it were" and "guided, as it were, by one mind," the *multitudo* must be conceived of as an individual or a complex singularity whose components form a single efficient cause (like all singular things) and constitute a single power (like all singular essences). But, at the same time, like all individuals, the *multitudo* must be conceived as a field of forces with different intensities within its power, that is, according to the differences in the forces that constitute it and, therefore, prone to both agreement and conflict between its parts or between its forces. As necessary effects of the action of the *multitudo*, agreement and conflict relate thus to *societas* and *civitas*, as well as to the relations between them.

In this way, we understand the meaning of the three theses that ground Spinoza's political thought and determine the decisive presence of the social both in the institution of politics and in the risk of its disappearance:

1. The institution of politics seeks to establish a balance between three powers: the power of individuals, the power of the *multitudo*, and the power of the sovereign. This balance is achieved by means of a geometric proportionality (*ratio*) among the three powers at the time of political foundation, when the decision concerning who will have the right to exercise government or direct public affairs is made.
2. Since the natural right of individuals is kept in the *multitudo* as a collective natural right which is the civil law, it follows that the main enemy of the body politic is not external but internal to it, and can be found in a private individual (*privatus*) or in a group of private individuals wishing to seize civil law to serve their own interests.
3. The balance among the three powers is ceaselessly disrupted as a result of the dynamics of social forces. This is the key to understanding the duration of a body politic, that is, the causes and means for its conservation as well as its change or disappearance. The history of a body politic is determined by what occurs in the realm of social relations regarded as a field of forces—sometimes in agreement, sometimes in conflict—that determine political relations.

These three theses ground two universal principles of the political *ratio*, or of the (geometric) proportional relation among the three powers:

1. Sovereign power must be inversely proportional to the power of individuals considered in isolation or as a whole: that is, the power of collective natural right or civil law is incommensurate with the power of the citizens' natural right considered in isolation or as a whole.
2. Conversely, the power of the rulers must be inversely proportional to the citizens' collective power, as the latter must be greater than that of the rulers: that is, the power of the rulers is not identical to the *imperium*, since this always belongs to the *multitudo* regarded as a political body and mind.

These two principles show that sovereignty cannot be dispersed, as it belongs to the *multitudo* as a whole (*integra multitudo*). Thus, political regimes can be distinguished neither by the source of sovereign power (since the source is always the *multitudo*), nor by the number of rulers (since sovereignty is not synonymous with the rulers). Therefore, what can be dispersed is the right to exercise government; that which distinguishes political regimes is the determination of who holds this right. This means that *potestas* (ruling power) can be dispersed, whereas *potentia* (sovereignty) is indivisible. That is why, when proposing the most suitable institutions for each political regime, Spinoza turns to society and proposes institutions that may compensate the part of society that is excluded from the government. In monarchies, this is realized by the great councils and the general assembly of the people, which prevent the king from being alone and governing arbitrarily; it also works by creating the institution of the armed people or the popular militia, which ensures to those excluded from government what is traditionally regarded as the privilege of the nobility, namely, the force of arms. In aristocracies, it is necessary to have institutions that allow the plebs, in their capacity as public servants, to participate in acts of administration, while also appearing on the public scene as a threat to the power of the patricians. The only political regime in which the *potentia* of the *multitudo* and the *potestas* of government are identical is democracy, thus called *omnino absolutum imperium* because in it sovereignty and the right to exercise government belong to the *integra multitudo*, which remains *sui juris* and an efficient immanent cause of the political regime, thereby materialising Spinoza's assertion of *jus sive potentia*.

The social is a condition of and a danger to the political realm as long as we understand that the natural right of individuals is not just the measure and guardian of civil law, but also its greatest threat. It is the measure: natural right determines the *ratio* between the power of social subjects and that of sovereignty. It is the guardian: natural right prevents rulers from identifying themselves with sovereignty, since natural right is what preserves the power of political subjects or citizens as a collective natural right (civil law). It is a threat: by natural right, all men wish to rule rather than be ruled, so no one renounces the desire to identify themselves with the sovereign power. Consequently, natural right turns citizens not only into protectors of the law, but also into possible enemies of the *imperium* and threats to the power of the *multitudo*. Thus, when Spinoza uses the word *privatus* in TP 4.6, he declares that no individual or private group *qua* private has the right to either claim the status of defender of public law or to violate it in the name of the common good: whoever does so is a usurper, or an enemy of the *imperium*.

Hence, Spinoza is the first political thinker who, while taking the social as a reference, develops the idea that the private seizure of public power introduces domination and tyranny. The novelty of Spinoza's position lies, firstly, in not attributing domination to the arbitrary will of someone or some

few (the classic definition of tyranny). Secondly, it lies in the fact that the possibility of domination is inscribed in the natural individual right itself. The cause of domination is thus not to be found in some accidental vice of some citizens; the cause of domination is not moral but natural, since social subjects are naturally ambitious, haughty, proud, and envious. Therefore, political practice consists in determining the means by which the natural desire for domination that runs socially through the *civitas* might be contained or, in extreme cases, blocked. Those resources are to be found in the quality of public institutions rather than in the moral virtues of government officials.

In light of the triple meaning of natural right and of the distinction between *potentia* and *potestas*, we can add a fourth thesis to the three theses that ground Spinoza's political thought. This thesis is introduced in the TTP when Spinoza discusses the wisdom and the prudence of political founders who are attentive to the *ingenium multitudinis*, and in the TP when he asserts that the *imperium* presupposes not only the agent's *potentia* (the *multitudo* as a political subject) but also the patient's *aptitudo* (the *multitudo* as a social subject). Thus, for example, war gives rise to a society terrified in the face of the fear of death, and which cannot be expected to have an aptitude for democracy; such a society is instead likely to imagine that it can save itself from fear by giving power to (i.e., electing as king) whoever has weapons, without realising that, in getting rid of a momentary evil, it has instituted lasting evils for the future. The distinction between power (*potentia*) and aptitude (*aptitudo*) indicates that this fourth thesis has an ontological basis, namely, the thesis from the TP that by nature everyone wants to rule and not be ruled, and that consequently it is necessary to guide humans in such a way that they believe they are not guided but rather live according to their free discretion. For this, sovereignty and the ruler cannot be identical; their non-identity ensures there is an obstacle to the desire for the private appropriation of sovereign power and, therefore, to the natural desire for domination that unfolds in society.

Why does Spinoza consider it essential for the conservation of sovereign power to guide humans in such a way that they do not believe they are guided (that they are *alterius juris*), but rather that they live according to their free discretion (*sui juris*)? The answer lies in democracy.

In a row of thinkers ranging from the ancients to the moderns, Spinoza is the only advocate of democracy. In TTP 16, democracy is presented as "the most natural of political regimes," as it preserves socially and politically the status of equality that everyone enjoyed in the state of nature (G III 195, line 17). And, according to TP 11, in democracy, unlike in other regimes, there is no separation or distinction between the power (*potentia*) of the *multitudo* and the power (*potestas*) of government. Instead, there is an agreement of political power and social aptitude when fulfilling the natural desire to rule and not be ruled. In a democracy, everybody is a ruler, a citizen, and a subject (*subditus*); everyone obeys the laws that they themselves established, and political power is the immanent effect of their efficient cause. In other words, democratic politics presupposes and preserves a democratic society.

Spinoza can show by means of democracy, and with several historical examples, that the distinction between *potentia* and *potestas*, on the one hand, and the divisibility of the *potestas* itself, that is, the exclusion of a part of the *multitudo* from the exercise of government, on the other hand, is the effect of social divisions produced by social inequalities. In this way, we understand that the indivisibility of sovereignty (or of the power/*potentia* of the *multitudo*) and the indivisibility of the power/*potestas* to govern, which characterise democracy as the regime that preserves natural equality, disappear under the effects of social inequality. In other political regimes, the indivisibility of

sovereignty (or the power of the *multitudo* as a political subject) does not prevent the divisibility of government power, and therefore does not prevent the unequal distribution of power and the political exclusion of a part of society.

The indivisibility of sovereignty, the divisibility of government power, political exclusion, social divisions, and the preservation of the natural right of individuals under civil law all work together as a necessary efficient cause of the conflicts between politics and society. The social source of these conflicts is the *multitudo* fractured by inequalities that determine the social emergence of the *privatus* which comes to express itself politically.

Civil law is the natural right of the *civitas*, that is, its *potentia* of permanence and its *potestas* of operation. Therefore, according to the TP, the *civitas* cannot be an enemy of itself since it would destroy itself. This means that the limits of its power are limitations that the *civitas* imposes on civil law: (1) to prevent it from being exercised arbitrarily; (2) to ensure the preservation of harmony, determining which conflicts it can withstand not only without loss of power, but also with an increase in power; and (3) to determine the obedience of citizens. The limits of *potestas* are first established negatively and then established positively.

Negatively, the *civitas* cannot legislate on what is not subject to the laws (e.g., thought and speech, as well as private affective relationships), as this legislation will be useless. It also cannot impose what is contrary to human nature and to individual natural right (e.g., parricide, matricide, fratricide, loving what you hate, hating what you love) because it will give rise to the fury and indignation of society, which will rebel against the *civitas* and destroy it. In short, the *potestas* must take into account the citizens' *ingenium* and *aptitudo* in order to instil them with respect and fear and to avoid being hated by society, which, in a rage, might conspire against the *civitas*, whose power diminishes the more it fears the social subjects (TP 3.9).

Positively, the *civitas* must be obeyed. Since the sovereign right was instituted by the *multitudo* at the time of the institution of the *imperium*, and since the right to establish laws belongs exclusively to the sovereign because the law is simply the *multitudo* guiding itself as if it were a single mind (TP 4.1), it follows that obedience is nothing but the *multitudo* obeying itself (or *sui juris*). Political obedience is the reiteration, in the collective imaginary, of the institution of the *civitas* and the *respublica* since, at the time of this institution, the *multitudo* qua society institutes the incommensurability between the power of the *imperium* and the individual powers of citizens (the first principle of proportionality), as well as the distinction between what concerns public affairs and what concerns only private affairs (the second principle of proportionality). Obedience is a second or derivative act, which expresses the virtue of the *civitas* because it is capable of preserving the citizens in a condition of *sui juris*.

The negative and positive limitations of the rulers' *potestas* are possible because they are consequences of their conformity to the *multitudo*'s *potentia*, *ingenium*, and *aptitudo*. These limitations make it possible to comprehend the difference between the consented obedience or the political freedom of the citizen in a condition of *sui juris* and the tyranny or servitude of the subject (*subditus*) in a condition of *alterius juris*. But these limitations also help to reveal the origin of conflicts and seditions:

For certainly we should impute rebellions, wars, and contempt for, or violation of, the laws not so much to the wickedness of the subjects as to the corruption of the state. Men

aren't born civil; they become civil. Moreover, the natural affects of men are the same everywhere. If wickedness is more prevalent in one Commonwealth than in another, and more sins are committed there, this surely comes from the fact that the [more wicked] Commonwealth hasn't provided adequately for harmony, hasn't set up its laws wisely enough, and so, hasn't obtained the absolute Right of a Commonwealth. (TP 5.2/G III 295/C II 529).

The source of conflicts and rebellions should not be sought in the *ingenium multitudinis*, but rather in the fact that the commonwealth itself does not function to ensure harmony insofar as it does not institute rights with prudence and is not capable of maintaining its own right qua absolute. Instead, the source of rebellions and wars must be sought in politics itself in its relation to society.

If the *civitas* enacts useless laws or laws that cause indignation and fury among citizens, who then deem it legitimate and necessary to rise up against them, or if political institutions are made in such a way as to generate privileges and exclusions, then it is the *civitas* itself that is the cause of seditions.

Rebellions, arising out of *indignatio*, express the political division of the *multitudo* as an effect of social divisions (unequal relations of forces or, as Spinoza maintains, unequal relations of the possession of weapons and wealth). In rebellions, social subjects relate to political power as if the latter were an external force that affects them, since the difference between the *summa potentia* of citizens and the *potestas* of rulers has been blurred due to the rulers' intentions of identifying themselves with sovereignty, which then becomes pure exteriority and repeals the *potentia* of political subjects.

If the *civitas* is powerless to prevent rebellions, if it appears as an external force that befalls citizens, it is because it is not truly established as a political reality; it has not carried out the transition from social unification to political unity, and there is not the recognition of its sovereignty qua power over the *multitudo* as a political subject. In rebellions, the identity between right and power (the *jus sive potentia*) was neither instituted nor recognised, that is, the *multitudo*'s right/power was not instituted as civil law and, therefore, the political body lacks its mind and allows itself to be dragged by an imaginary mind in which the *civitas* is reduced to violent sociability that institutions and laws are powerless to moderate, since this violence was engendered by the laws themselves.

We thus understand why Spinoza shows that the weakness of politics manifests itself in political forms grounded not only in the exclusion of a part of society from public decisions, but mostly in the emergence of a distance between the *image* of the political regime and its *actual form*: tyranny appears as if it were a monarchy and oligarchy as if it were an aristocracy. This is what allows the usurpation of the political form by the social power of a private individual or of private groups. On the contrary, under the guise of a subversion of the *civitas*, a rebellion shows in reality that the divided society recognises the absence of a true institution of politics and intends to make it a reality.

Translated from the Portuguese by Andre Santos Campos