Constituting Democracy
Spinoza on Power

In recent years a vital interest in Spinoza as a classical thinker has emerged that might lead to a re-evaluation of his role in the history of political thought. Among the most relevant features of his writings for political theory is his ontological theory of power on the one hand and his highly original perspective on democracy on the other hand. The timeliest motive might lie in the point of intersection of the two, i.e. in Spinoza’s thinking of democracy and democratic politics through power. His conception of democracy and politics affirms democracy as an unsurpassable form of political organisation but it remains aware of its radically dynamic character and the essential instability of its basis (in the power of the people, or, in Spinoza’s idiom, of the “multitude”) that can easily lead to turmoil and chaos. The source of this ambivalence or two-sidedness of the status of democracy in Spinoza’s lies in his ambivalent conception of power. Power for Spinoza has several forms or realizations; and the constitutive or productive function of power is on the same level as its prohibitive or negative versions. The acknowledgement of this ambivalence is no theoretical inconsistency, I think, but a philosophical insight and it might prove particularly helpful for theorizing complex issues like the power of, and in, democracy. The paper gives an outline of Spinoza’s general conception of political power and discusses its implications for his conception of democracy.

In recent years a new (or refound) interest in Spinoza as a classical philosophical thinker has emerged that might lead to a re-evaluation of his role in the history of Western thought. From the historical side, a convincing argument has been made that his influence on the emergence and development of the European Enlightenment has not been accounted for sufficiently and that there might even be several movements behind that name with Spinoza being the godfather and origin of a strand rightfully called “Radical Enlightenment”. From the systematic side, many philosophers have rediscovered Spinoza as an interesting and challenging figure to appropriate and use for problems and themes of contemporary epistemology, philosophy of mind, moral psychology, theories of the body and imagination. One specific discourse within this trend has taken its inspiration mainly from French and Italian Spinoza scholarship from the early 1960s on, including the work of Louis Althusser and Gilles Deleuze and their many followers. And it is here where it becomes most clear that this “New Spinoza” (cf. Montag/Stolze 1998) is also an important and fascinating figure to engage with for contemporary political theory. Étienne Balibar and Antonio Negri might
figure among the most prominent proponents of a contemporary version of political theorizing that takes crucial insights from Spinoza’s work. But they are building on a long-standing tradition of thorough interpretation of Spinoza’s political and philosophical work produced by scholars like Pierre Macherey, Alexandre Matheron and Pierre-François Moreau.

Among the most relevant features of Spinoza’s writing for political theory is his fundamental or ontological theory of power on the one hand and his highly original (and in the context of early modernity definitely rather radical) perspective on democracy on the other hand. The timeliest motive might lie in the point of intersection between the two, i.e. in Spinoza’s thinking of democracy and democratic politics through power. Spinoza might prove to be one of the most important authors in the history of Western political thought to turn to in order to see the outlines of a conception of democracy and politics that is as non-illusory as it is emphatic: It affirms democracy as an unsurpassable form of political organisation but it remains aware of its radically dynamic character and the essential instability of its basis (in the power of the people, or, in Spinoza’s idiom, of the “multitude”) that can easily lead to turmoil and chaos. The source of this ambivalence or two-sidedness of the status of democracy in Spinoza’s lies in his ambivalent or two-sided conception of power. Power for Spinoza has several forms or realization; and the constitutive or productive function of power is on the same level as its prohibitive or negative function. The acknowledgement of this ambivalence is no theoretical inconsistency, I think, but a philosophical insight, and it might prove particularly helpful for theorizing the complex issue of the power of, and in, democracy which is, after all, the modern political space we inhabit.

My aim in the following sections is to sketch out some of Spinoza’s views on power and politics and to offer some reflections on the lessons contemporary political theory might draw from “Political Spinozism”. I will, first, give a very short overview of Spinoza’s theory of power and try to make plausible why such a line of thinking has proven attractive for 20th century political or social philosophy (from Althusser and Deleuze to Negri, Virno, and Balibar). I will then, second, very briefly comment on the most important contemporary (and mainly Neo-Marxist) political interpretation of Spinoza, namely Antonio Negri’s, and try to determine where it gives away some of the strengths inherent in the Spinozist framework. I will, third, give a short overview of Spinoza’s controversial discussion of democracy, and fourth, try to argue that this historical episode might provide important suggestions for current debates on democratic governance, political change and forms of self-government. Spinoza’s thinking of power in and of democracy, I will claim, presents an alternative vision of democratic agency that can be usefully linked to current debates about democratic legitimacy.
and “radical democracy”. And it might even help us to rethink the very form political philosophy could or should take today.

I. Spinoza on Power

One might claim that the entire thinking of Spinoza is centered on the notion of power. It is as such a thinking of power.\(^4\) Because whatever he says about God, nature, cognition, life or desire, remains framed in a perspective that tries to explicate dynamic relations, the play of forces and the factors that facilitate or prohibit, that empower or weaken. In the widest, categorical sense, “power” (or \textit{potentia}) is nothing else than the name for specific relations of potentiality, and Spinoza’s thinking as such is the thinking of potential effects, of what is made possible and impossible in a given situation by given forces and capacities.

Of course, everything Spinoza “officially” says about power within his rationalist metaphysics, remains connected to the ultimate power, the power of God or \textit{potentia dei} from which everything depends.\(^5\) While this might be hard to swallow for any modern social theory, the obviously attractive methodological move is to follow Spinoza in starting from power as the central notion of explication and analysis. \textit{Potentia} in Spinoza’s metaphysics is of course not equivalent with the modern notion of political or social “power”. Rather in his vocabulary (and in line with neo-Stoicist and also partly late scholastic and neo-Aristotelian usage at the time), it is a basic metaphysical notion that helps to formulate ontological principles. “Power” does not necessarily refer – as in contemporary usage – to relations between persons or institutions in which someone “has” or “holds” power over another. It is rather a concept that defines or specifies being as such. Talking about the being of something, Spinoza claims, involves talking about its power, about its capacity to do or effectuate something. Therefore power is always plural: it is the power of something (its powerfulness, its capacities) that also already is in relation with the power of another thing (and its capacity). To know \textit{what} something is, is to know its power. Its power belongs to it in as much as it is what it is (in this sense, power is an ontological notion).

In the framework of Spinoza’s monist metaphysics, everything ultimately depends on God’s power; since everything – every (single) thing – is nothing more than a “mode” of this one substance.\(^6\) Leaving aside this part of his thought, let us see what follows from his ontological way of talking about power (and especially for situations involving human beings). What features does this concept of power imply?
1. Constitution. Talking about power ontologically means to leave the level of the theory of action. If power is a capacity of a being as such, power is more than the “possession” of an agent, and power cannot be reduced to the exercise of power of an agent. Ontologically speaking, existing or living already happens or embodies itself in forms or figures of power, because what a thing can do is its power beyond any factual effect. Human power in this sense, the power of a human being, is determined by what the human body and mind can do, how they relate to others that influence their range of actions (physically, psychologically, and intellectually). Therefore, power is nothing that comes as a new element into a social situation, but is its very condition. “Power”, as it were, is already there, where there is anything at all, because power is the very realm of potentiality present in a given situation. There is no being without power (in this sense of potentia), because power constitutes being (and all beings: things, persons etc.). Spinoza’s famous determination of the conatus as the desire to “persist in one’s own being” does the same: It specifies what a thing is by pointing to its driving force, its potentiality of self-preservation. But what this means is that there is nothing without or beyond power; power, in this sense, is everywhere.

2. Interindividuality. The radical relationality inherent in the ontological conception of power extends to the human realm. Spinoza is a thinker of individuality (as a form of individuation of the substance) but he is no individualist. The power of human beings is related to their individual bodies but also exceeds them. According to his logics of power, every power relates to itself but also to others (with which it competes, interacts, or combines itself). The political and social implications of such a way of thinking about power are drawn by Spinoza in his political philosophy. For him, the theory of the state is a special case of his philosophy of power.

The power of the state and of the political community ultimately rests on the power generated and enacted by the multiplicity of political subjects, the “multitude” as Spinoza calls it (echoing Hobbes and Suarez and some of the classical Roman writers). But what this means is that the power of the multitude is a power between, not of subjects. The power of the multitude or potentia multitudinis is no collective or superpower that emerges out of the harmonious consensus of its members. This power is the always temporary and always precarious product of forms of collective action in which the individual powers reinforce themselves mutually. This can only happen when the multitude is “guided as though by a single mind” – this is Spinoza’s recurrent formula for the instable quasi-unity of the people in a well-governed polity.
This formula expresses that politics is in itself a process of making and unmaking of political entities and identities. It is a process of the emergence and negotiation of political agency (and be it hypothetical) in which individuals form and untie new relationships. This also means that politics is a realm of “transindividuality”, as Balibar (2001: 132) has called it: In politics, individuals transcend themselves and enter into new transformative relationships with others. It is equally true that every new form of power will also necessarily remain relational and that the social therefore remains a realm of “interindividuality”: power is a medium, an in-between of individual bodies and forces.

3. Accumulation. The first two features of Spinoza’s concept of power show how far his use of the term is removed from contemporary usage (in which actors have or hold power over others). Just to recall: power for him first is a medium of constitution; it is a ubiquitous medium of the social. It is second not the possession of a single actor but a differential, relational entity in a plural play of forces; for this reason, every single power is related to its surrounding power. There is now, third, a quantitative or comparative dimension in his approach that is also only half-familiar in comparison to contemporary usage.

Spinoza opposes the view that there is only one site or locale of power or that power can have a stable center. But this doesn’t imply that power is distributed equally throughout the political field. Spinoza’s break with the traditional, purely instrumental conception of power comes out of his idea that power follows a certain logic of accumulation, of the increasing (or intensification) of forces. This for him is an ontological principle but only on the level of politics does it gain crucial importance. Whereas his predecessor Hobbes only knew the competition of forces (forces fighting each other), Spinoza also posits a counter-dynamics: forces joining and combining themselves and therefore gaining a new form that exceeds the powers of the individuals: “If two man come together and join forces, they have more power over Nature, and consequently more right, than either one alone, and the greater the number of who form a union in this way, the more right they will together possess”. (TP, II, 686)

These seemingly harmless formulations indicate a more than quantitative step: joining forces leads to a new quality (more right) that emerges out of the force of the accumulation. Forces (or powers) therefore don’t necessarily compete or fight each other, there is always the possibility of new alliances, combinations, temporary unions. And politics for Spinoza is the art to facilitate these unions where the multiplicity of powers becomes creative and not destructive. Power in this view is not a zero sum game.10

To resume this discussion: Spinoza’s dynamical social ontology knows two fundamental “modes” of power: destruction and creation, confrontation and accumulation. Rational politics
is the attempt to mobilize the latter and minimize the former, but you never know in advance which direction the coming together of two forces will take. Let’s call this the axiom of the ambivalence or bipolarity of power, or of power’s double potentiality. (Let me just add as an aside that this axiom is what singles out Spinoza’s theory of power from many other contemporary approaches in philosophy and the social sciences that conceptually reduce power to one or the other “mode”: either empowerment or domination).  

II. Excursus: Negri’s Political Spinozism

Of course, there is no need to complain about the absence of a contemporary philosophical and political reading of Spinoza that puts power in its center. The Italian Antonio Negri has done exactly that. Almost all of his books from his first major study *Spinoza: Savage Anomaly* (1981) up to the theoretical manifestoes *Empire* (2000) and *Multitude* (2004) – *Commonwealth* was to follow this year – were written from a perspective that clearly deserves the term “Political Spinozism”. And indeed almost all of these contributions focus on power: The Italian subtitle of the first Spinoza book already points to the two poles of power, potentia and potestas, and of course also the later books refer to it, “Empire” referring to the apparatus of domination and “Multitude” to the social counter-power that resists it.

Negri’s monumental Spinoza interpretation is far too complex to summarize but let me comment on one point that follows from his understanding of the Spinozian concept of power. Negri places Spinoza firmly on the material ground of the early bourgeois age. For him, Spinoza is the one bourgeois proto-modern thinker who grasps the radical immanence and the contradictions of society and capital and who is the first to dream of a radically self-organizing society, a utopia of autonomy. He takes Spinoza’s conceptual distinction between potentia (power as capacity or constitution) and potestas (power as structure) to refer to a radical dichotomy and a symbol for the eternal struggle between productive labour and capitalist appropriation. This move shapes and frames all that Negri has to say about power, and it doesn’t come without a cost. The dichotomic distinction between potentia and potestas introduces an essentializing moment in his conceptual apparatus that tends to obscure some important issues. Because in Spinoza, potentia and potestas are no absolute opposites, but only different degrees, different forms of power: more or less institutionalized, structured, incorporated.
The idea that one could differentiate power-as-capacity as active, benevolent, social from power-as-violence as negative, repressive and individualizing, contradicts Spinoza’s own monism of power. For Spinoza, no power, not even the power of the multitude, is as such more constitutive than others, and no power, and not even the power of the state or institutions, is as such destructive. For him this is a matter of balances, technologies, and appropriate ways of governing individuals. Against the scheme of liberation vs. domination scheme Negri seems to suggest, one might rather say that Spinoza is the thinker of intermediate variants of being-governed, regulated and being self-governing or self-regulated at the same time, exactly because he thinks there is always power and power everywhere.

Negri seems to give a polarizing and dichotomizing reading that misconstrues the relationship between empowerment and domination by just attributing it to different instances, different agencies of power. But this proves problematic for any political analysis that then has to determine on which side a given social actors stands. But to claim that one side is absolutely and “ontologically” against violence and to claim the radical “innocence” of the multitude (Hardt/Negri 2000: 413) seems to be a trivialization of political struggle. It is hard to imagine the “destruction of all negativity” (Negri 2004a: 98) that would not also mean the end of politics proper. And even democracy, which remains a form of krātein after all, as a form of domination or government becomes utterly unintelligible when we think of it as the end of force, coercion, or structures.

Spinoza’s radical enlightenment perspective on institutions is not allowing for any transcendent legitimation. His radical immanentism in politics seems to evaporate once you allow for a vision of social redemption: an end to all struggles, to differences, to the need to defend oneself. Spinoza’s far more “realist” vision of the ambivalence of power lead him to postulate the need for strong and more or less reasonable institutions, for civil laws that guard the freedom of the citizens and for a coherent ethos of the republic. But he never thought you might leave the space of constitutions and counter-constitutions for good or break the cycle of creation, fixation and degeneration of powers and forces. Compared to this outlook, Negri’s idea of a “destruction of all negativity” seems rather naïve because negativity or fixation or stucturation doesn’t hold this one place which you can leave; negativity (or the destructive side of power) rather is inherent in the realm of constitution and action as such.
III. Spinoza on Democracy

There are two main sites in the body of Spinoza’s works where democracy is discussed at length. There are some important allusions to democracy in the *Ethics*, too;¹³ but the two political treatises together in fact advance something like a coherent theory of democracy. In the earlier *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, published anonymously in 1670, while discussing “the foundations of the state; the natural and civil right of each person, and the authority of sovereign powers” (this is the heading of the seminal chapter XVI), Spinoza argues for democracy being the “most natural” form of state, since it “approaches most closely to that freedom nature bestows on every person” (TTP, XVI, 202). In an interesting and complex maneuver, Spinoza employs the language of early modern natural right theory and of Hobbes’ conception of a social contract, and he constructs an argument for the strictly natural (and in a way, non-normative) character of what one might call the “natural right” of an individual in a pre-political state. Nothing an individual can do from his or her natural capacities can go against the “natural law” because this has to be understood as being nothing else as the “rules determining the nature of each individual thing by which we conceive it is naturally determined to exist and to behave in a certain way” (195). In this sense, in the state of nature “power” and “right” coincide; what an individual can do, what is within the range of his or her possible actions, it can do with the “right” of nature. As in Hobbes, the strive for self-preservation or the desire to persist in one’s being are natural and inalienable facts and therefore “rights” of the individual. The impulse to form a community and to found a state in which the individual can live in peace because he or she knows that only generally binding laws prohibit the others from harming me, is also “natural” in the sense that it is motivated by the wish for self-preservation: “it was necessary for people to combine together [in unum conspirare] in order to live in security and prosperity” (197). In an interesting combination of ontological, anthropological and political arguments, Spinoza can explicate the (rational, utility-driven) emergence of a state authority out of natural conditions and rudimentary reasoning. But contrary to the Hobbesian picture it resembles so closely, this thought experiment “naturally” leads to democracy:

“Human society can thus be formed without any alienation of natural right, and the contract can be preserved in its entirety with complete fidelity, only if every person transfers all the power they possess to society, and society alone retains the supreme natural right all things, i.e., supreme power, which all must obey, either of their own will or through fear of the ultimate punishment. The right of society is called democracy. Democracy therefore is
properly defined as a united gathering of people which collectively has the sovereign right do all that it has the power to do.” (200)

But this “transfer” is no cession; and the individual keeps his or her powers and rights as a part of a larger unit (or unity), namely the societas. This is a “formal” way to define democracy in that “all remain equal” (202); and Spinoza makes clear it would be compatible with several forms to organize the factual office of government. Democratic state-building, one might say, is the accumulative or synthetic sharing of powers and rights in order to overcome the isolation and precarity in the state of nature. Binding oneself to the rules of collective self-organization is a double gesture of trading in power, of entering into a circulation of power and right. Nothing except the newly-founded authorities of the state (summa potestas) can guarantee that the individuals actually behave peacefully and this is why they have the absolute right to enforce the law. The founding and legitimizing act of transferring power and right to the community and the state is never complete and lives on as a demand on the efficiency of state authority. This “political naturalism” of democracy is radical in that it appeals to nothing else but some minimal ontological principles to make an immanent case for collective self-organization; there is no “higher” law in the name of which state authority could be authorized. (And Spinoza uses this line of thought to attack alternative theories of political legitimacy in the second part of the Tractatus theologico-politicus; and in a feat of historical and biblical interpretation he goes on to show that even the “theocracy” of the Hebrew people under Moses had several crucial democratic features [cf. TTP, XVII, esp. 214-219]).

In comparison to the Tractatus theologico-politicus, the unfinished Tractatus politicus, published in 1677 shortly after Spinoza’s death, might appear pessimistic and less emphatic. In a long and almost classical discussion, Spinoza tries to account for the different forms of state organization, comparing and explicating monarchy, aristocracy and democracy (the last part is unfinished). He now refuses to use the language and framework of contract theory and argues straightforwardly from some basic anthropological premises like the essentially affective nature of human beings which makes them vulnerable to seduction and manipulation. Obviously echoing Machiavelli’s political realism, Spinoza tries to determine the different degrees of stability and security to be reached within the different forms of state in given historical and political conditions. There seems to be no general answer to the (classical) question of which form of state might be the best. Without being too explicit, he seems to recommend a version of de-centralized regional aristocratic rule for political regions likes the Dutch free cities (cf. TP, XVIII and IX). Since the last chapter on democracy is
unfinished, we cannot know what he would have said, but from some remarks in the earlier chapters it is clear that he was also about to warn against the dangers and risks inherent in the unleashing of the masses that is at the basis of democracy. But in another sense the Tractatus politicus is a radically democratic treatise (cf. Negri 2004b): Every form of state is submitted to the test whether it can efficiently respond and do justice to its own basis, namely the “power of the multitude” that generates and enables state power. Spinoza is explicit that political legitimacy as such can only be measured against the degree to which the political powers act in the service of the people and to which they make reasonable use of the powers and competences of the people. This is why in his many detailed suggestions for administrative and organizational structures within monarchies and aristocracies, Spinoza leaves space for huge deliberative bodies and committees that ensure that all parts of society are represented in political opinion formation and decision making. Even in (Spinoza’s stylized case of) monarchy, the king is radically dependent on his subjects and has to acknowledge “that the king’s power is determined only by the multitude’s power” (TP, VII, 722, transl. modif.).

As to democracy, which Spinoza calls the “completely absolute state [omnino absolutum imperium” (TP, XI, 752), it might not live up to the standards to necessarily produce the most stable and secure form of polity. And this shows that Spinozas doesn’t endorse popular government as the most practical option, but he think of sovereignty generally, in all forms of state, in terms of the multitude or the people. His theory of politics is “popular” or radically democratic in that it thinks political power in radical dependence from the power of the people enabling and generating it. So his political theory of democracy obviously is a version of radical republicanism but there is no reliance on the “unity” or coherence of the people.

The multitude is a radically contingent and ephemeral political actor that can be given a place in the political system temporarily but that first and foremost remains the constitutive enabling outside of official politics. Diverse, as it is, it easily falls prey to mass psychological manipulation, but it also generates (out of sheer mass) resources to respond to the restricted rationality of single rulers. The power the multitude has and transfers to the political system is as ambivalent as power itself: it can manifest itself as popular support of legitimate state action or as mass violence. This form of republican democracy is not necessarily the name for the best and most secure form of government, but also (as Marx put it) the name for the “truth” of all constitutional forms, namely its foundation in the people.

Spinoza’s redescription of political action based on his ontological account of the forces and powers of citizens allows articulating the structural dynamics of political life that will
never be fully contained by institutions and systems of rights. In a Spinozian perspective, politics will always remain a realm of power, struggle, and the constant need to form alliances because politics is the space in which political subjectivities and identities are forged and negotiated. The formula of the “power of the multitude” provides a perspective on collective action that goes beyond the alternative between a political theory starting from the premises of methodological individualism (asking: how do rational individual subjects in a polity behave?) and the essentialist positing of a “collective subject” (asking: what do “the people” want?).

IV. Democracy Unbound

This attempt to claim Spinoza for contemporary political theory or political philosophy is meant to show how the inspiration from a classic author of political thought might provide resources to rethink collective agency and political action beyond the framework of current political theories. While many elements of Spinoza’s thinking remain provocatively distant from current ways of thinking, two core elements of his political theory are not.

First, it remains the task of every critical theory of politics to develop a robust conception of power in order to conceptualize the social and the political as realms of power and domination. Spinoza’s “deep” ontological conception of power might appear hard to integrate into more restrained theories that most of the time think (following Weber, Dahl, and indeed the mainstream of modern social science and theory) power as a means to control the behaviour of others. Spinoza’s example, however, to think of power in radically relational and virtual terms, complicates this picture. The challenge – to which of course many theorists from Foucault, Luhmann to Latour have responded in their way – is to think power beyond human intentionality, beyond the factual exercise, and beyond any center of control. Spinoza might help to get a grip on phenomena of diffused, materialized and embodied power(s), simply because in his register, power is everywhere where something is happening, and where causes produce (positive or negative, enabling or restraining) effects.19

Second, his conception of “deep” democracy might help to see that political power in particular comes into existence on the basis of a variety of many singular powers coming together. The hypothetical moment of the founding of the state is a metaphor for the assemblage of powers that “make” the state. Spinoza might be too quick to call this moment democracy proper, but the point he is getting at might still be valid for contemporary political theorizing: The units of the political realm have to be theoretically disassembled in order to
see the process behind the entity. The coming-about of state authority can only be made intelligible as a process of circulation and communication of power that is ongoing. Behind the stable and institutionalized forms of politics lies the radical dynamics of political process. The traditional republican and the current discussions on “constituent power” are a good example for the relevance of such a line of thought. And it might very well be that every democratic theory that wants to explicate democratic life and not only democratic institutions has to take recourse to similar motives.\(^{20}\)

But the most important perspective Spinoza’s theory of power and democracy is opening up might be the lesson that power and democracy are internally connected insofar as any political space is itself a realm of power and that democracy can only be understood as a certain circulation or communication of power. Modern Politics can never dispose of the tension between the constituent role of power as generating and constituting political space and the destructive and harmful role of power as destabilizing and disrupting any unity and stability. Power and political action are therefore immanent factors, politics is (made up of) power, and political and social power is nothing else than a realm of potentiality constituted by the very fact that a mass of bodies (i.e. citizens) share a territory and are thrown into the need to cooperate and coordinate their action. Politics (so understood, i.e. in a modern way) is radically contingent as it is a human affair, and neither divine authority nor the eternal laws of Nature (with a capital N) can regulate and anticipate its outcomes. As in his metaphysics, also in politics Spinoza is a thinker of immanence; but in political and ethical theory, thinking anti-horizontally means thinking anti-authoritarian.

It is not for no reason that Spinoza’s metaphysics was treated as atheism and heresy and his critique of theological authority as immoralism. But there is a radically modern sense in which the rejection of transcendent elements in political thinking (as the Law and the Sovereign) is a perpetual task of any critical theory of politics, since the seduction of taking recourse to transcendence is indeed an essential and ongoing threat to immanentist conceptions of political. One might even try to rethink the history of modern political thought as a history of the failure to be modern and a history of attempts to reground and refinalize politics by appealing to the ultimate right of the sovereign, the unrejectable law of morality or the hidden systematic truths of the political. Spinoza, one might say and this does justify the term “radical enlightenment” as a title for his historico-philosophical enterprise, may have been one of the thinkers opening up the path of radically modern political thinking and already anticipating its contestations and counter-projects.
So paradoxically (and quite in contrast to his epistemological and ontological project), Spinoza’s political thought is modern or radical in that it doesn’t solve any problem. In his analysis, democracy is neither a solution to the “problem” of political power or sovereignty nor the final dissolution of hierarchy and asymmetry (pace Negri). It is just a way and a form of coping and living with power, and the very actors of democratic politics are not given but come into existence in the very process of communal action. Democratic action might on the one hand be capable of forming consensual alliances between the different parts of the people but on the other hand it is also permanently in danger of collapsing into mere affect-driven behaviour (the multitude can turn into a mob every day). Populism and modern democracy are indeed twin brothers, and one might not get rid of the one without also damaging the other. And there might even be a populist element in the best forms of democratic action. Spinoza, for his part, was cautiously optimistic about the possibility of a “rational” institutional design in which the dangers of instability can be minimized but never eliminated. We might share this hope and accept that the power of democracy has no and needs no outside.

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5 This basic thought is developed in Ethics, pt. I, esp. prop. 5-15 (Collected Works: 218-227).
10 For these reasons, Spinoza opposes the Hobbesian idea of a complete renouncing or ceding of power and natural right. Cf. the famous remark in a letter to Jarig Jelles from 1674 that „the difference between Hobbes” and Spinoza is that the latter „always preserve[s] the natural right in its entirety” (Ep. 50, Complete Works, 891). For discussion of these differences cf. Matheron 1997, Lazzeri 1998.
12 Cf. Kaliyas 2003, Laclau 2003, Saar 2006a; this whole section is a very condensed summary of the argument in Saar 2011: 147-165.
14 For extensive treatment of the function of the example of the Hebrews cf. Rosenthal 2002, for a reading (and cautious defense) of the idea of democracy appearing as the “most natural” form of state cf. James 2008.
17 The term “republicanism” here should not carry too much weight. It does not refer to any full-fledged (and classical) view of civil life or politics being the proper sphere of human flourishing (a view that Machiavelli might have held but Spinoza certainly didn’t) but to the principle of political legitimacy ultimately residing in the people. Cf. Israel 2001 and Prohovnik 2004 for attempts to place Spinoza in the history of republican thought of his time.