

# **“Sed de his satis”: Spinoza’s Famous Last Words**

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Abstract: Employing a method that Spinoza used in both the *Tractatus Theologico-Political* and the *Political Treatise*, this article proposes an allegorical interpretation of the recent political events in the U.S. as repetition of the events in the Dutch Republic in 1672. In providing a close textual analysis of the *Political Treatise* in the historical context of the original Dutch situation when Spinoza was drafting the *Political Treatise*, the article also examines a regressive theory of the State-Form in light of Spinoza's own reflection on the future of the Dutch Republic.

Key Words: "Disaster Year," Democracy, Mathematical Absolute, Multitude, State Science, Spinoza, Politics

As Marx wrote in the *18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, "all great world-historic events and personages appear, so to speak, twice ... the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce."<sup>1</sup> The historical repetition I am referring to concerns the consequence of events and personages that took place in the United Provinces in 1672 ("*Rampjaar*") and then again in the United States in 2021. What began as a protest march of Trump supporters in the capitol, soon became the mob that stormed the capitol building to stage a right-wing version of the "occupy movement," and ended as the failed "insurrection" as was reported in the media. The principal character, of course, is Trump himself, who plays the role of William III of Orange in our farce, and Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer, who play the brothers De Witt.

The historical parallel raises some interesting questions: Like William III, was Trump behind the insurrection and did he order the state and federal police to stand down in the early hours of the mob storming of the capitol? If the occupation had been more successful, would the mob have dragged the senators outside to the steps of the Capitol building and lynch them, and then afterwards, roast their livers on *Weber* BBQs and consume them in a cannibalistic frenzy? Finally, if they had been better organized rather than merely a riotous mob, would they have occupied the Senate and issued a number of public edicts for reforms, including the purging of the democratic governors and election officials in the states of New York, Michigan, California, Georgia, and Pennsylvania? Although these events would make for a good alternative reality television series on *Netflix*, the political parallels between the events of 2021 and 1672 are compelling enough to draw similar conclusions to Spinoza's own sober observations on the role of the passions of the multitude in the *PT*, which he began drafting three years after the "Orange revolution" and the end of the First Stadtholderless period (1650-

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<sup>1</sup> Marx 1978, p. 584.

1672).<sup>2</sup> What both events perfectly illustrate, however, is a major axiom of Spinoza's realist interpretation of sovereignty concerning the "indefinite state" of any form of *Imperium*. (For example, as discussed in chapter XVI of the *TTP*, the social contract only binds the subjects of a multitude as long as its utility lasts; "If the utility is taken away, the contract is taken away with it, and remains null and void.")<sup>3</sup> More importantly, for the purposes of our contemporary allegory, *the future state of any form of sovereignty may change for the better or for the worse*. This axiom applies equally to our current period as it does to the end of the period of "True Freedom" (*de Ware Vrijheid*).

Even though Spinoza defines democracy as the most optimal constitution of sovereignty (*omnino absolutum imperium*), we have also witnessed how democracies can suddenly devolve into a worse constitution through the resurgence of another form of sovereignty in the imagination of the multitude. As he already addressed in the very beginning of the *TTP*, this most often occurs in a "time of crisis" in reaction to a greater power that threatens both the sovereignty of the state and the peace and security of the multitude, which I will argue is also the case of the recent pandemic. In Spinoza's own time, this might address the resurgence of the popularity of Orangist monarchy during the period of the Franco-Dutch war, and in ours, the despotic features of popular sovereignty, racism, and nationalism. One lesser known historical parallel with 1672 was the greatest crash of the Amsterdam exchange in early modern times, which could be compared to the NYSE market crash caused by the pandemic in early spring 2020.<sup>4</sup>

However, we must not imagine a simple teleological progression exists in the passage from Monarchy to the different historical arrangements of Aristocratic and Democratic sovereignty, but instead that all forms remain as permanent features of the popular imagination in accordance with Spinoza's own sober understanding of the common effects of human nature. In fact, Spinoza argues that the initial state of sovereignty was originally democratic, but due to fear of their own individual sovereignty, a more democratic constitution of sovereignty is gradually concentrated in a few (Aristocracy), and then finally in one individual (Monarchy). In the *PT*, he returns to this argument again: "That's the reason, I think, that Democratic States are transformed into Aristocracies, and Aristocracies in the end, into Monarchies. For I am quite convinced that most Aristocratic states were initially Democratic."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> According to Curley, Spinoza was working on it intensively from the second half of 1675 until his death in February 1677. See Curley (1985-2016), preface to *TP*, vol. 2, p. 488, n. 245.

<sup>3</sup> *TTP* XVI.25.

<sup>4</sup> Israel 1995, p. 798.

<sup>5</sup> *PT* VIII.12.

What I will call Spinoza's "regressive theory of the State-Form" contradicts the implicit teleology that guides much of the more recent "radical democratic" interpretations of the *PT*. For example, this is especially true of Negri, who recasts the Subject of the Multitude as the true ontogenetic source of resistance that has been present throughout this history in a revolutionary form of *potentia* that outstrips any constituted form of state power (*potestas*). Negri's interpretation of the asymmetrical nature of power, between *potentia* and *potestas*, is primarily based on an affirmative reading of the second definition of *Ethics* that "a body is called finite because it can conceive another that is greater," and "a body is not limited by a thought nor a thought by a body."<sup>6</sup> Negri applies this axiomatically to all of Spinoza's writings, including his interpretation of the *PT*, arguing that the expansive thought of the Multitude grows in potency as the association broadens; finally, *producing* the *democratia omnino absoluta* that is purportedly forecast in the last chapter.<sup>7</sup>

In *Spinoza politique: Le transindividual*, even though Balibar eschews a "simple progression," he still maintains the "absolute subject" of a free multitude as the "problematic" of a "Science of the State."<sup>8</sup> In other words, he simply replaces a "simple teleological progression" with a more complicated and overdetermined structural analysis in the manner of Althusser's own solution to the problem of the history of State-Form in traditional Marxist theory. Therefore, in each "model" of governmentality, or concrete "state-apparatus," he detects the perfection of the conditions of democratization, according to an onto-genetic principle of "perfectibility," as the golden thread leading to "the determination of the State-Form in the last instance," evoking the famous phrase of Althusser.

Of course, the reader will not be surprised to learn that this teleology can be found nowhere in the *PT* itself, but only in the tradition of modern interpretation that followed. Thus, it is somewhat ironic that the author of the *TTP*, a work of crucial importance for the invention of a secular form of biblical criticism, should also become the subject of so much bad interpretation. Although we might applaud the overall goals of affirmative reading and appreciate the providential design of "Universal History," the problem with this manner of theoretical interpretation is that it often by-passes the preliminary (and necessary) step of textual criticism to grasp the rhetorical intention of the author in the context of the text's own internal history and audience. This intention is clearly

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6 *Ethics* I.D2. Matheron has demonstrated through a close reading of the *PT* a more equivocal use of these terms. See Matheron 2020, pp. 190-191.

7 Although after much criticism, Negri must finally acknowledge that "clearly there is nothing teleological in Spinoza's ontology"; nevertheless, he still claims that the absolute subject of democracy represents the "telos of his thought," a distinction that appears somewhat nebulous. Negri 2013, pp. 8-9.

8 Balibar 2020, pp. 118-136.

stated in the heading to Chapter One, which outlines the entire purpose of Spinoza's argument that was written in the immediate wake of the events of 1672 and the beginning of the Stadholderate of William III:

DEMONSTRATING HOW A STATE MUST BE SET UP,  
WHEN THE GOVERNMENT IS MONARCHIC,  
OR WHEN AN ELITE RULE [ARISTOCRACY]  
SO THAT IT DOESN'T DECLINE INTO A TYRANNY  
AND THE PEACE AND SECURITY [*Veilighide, Libertas*]  
OF THE CITIZENS ARE PRESERVED.<sup>9</sup>

Concerning the immediate context when Spinoza began drafting the *PT*, as recounted by Israel, after the tragedy of 1672 things only got worse:

The greater part of the Republic was in French, or Munsterite, hands and the rest was gripped by riots and political turmoil. [...] Groningen became a war zone and a city under siege. The countryside of Gelderland, Overijssel, and Utrecht ... was ravaged. [...] The Stadholder's purges ended the rioting and political turmoil; but the disturbances of the summer of 1672 left a lasting impression on the political élite themselves. The spectacle of mass insurrection against unpopular officeholders and policies, excited ambition in some, and anxiety in others.<sup>10</sup>

Out of 460 Regents, in 1672 William III purged 130 as "politically undesirable." However, the purges ultimately undermined the stability of the Republic by driving rivalry and contention deeper in civil society and rendering civic government more factionalized; consequently, the rival political blocs were either compelled to enlist support from the mob, or bow to their pressure, only creating further instability.<sup>11</sup> The final blow to the remaining hopes of the Republic came in 1674 when William III's stadholdership in the province of Holland was made "perpetual and hereditary," and there was also a political move by the States of Gelderland a year later to make him "Duke of Gelderland" and grant him true sovereignty over the province. Although William III declined the title, owing to opposition from the Republicans in Amsterdam, it was also clear

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9 Even though the heading is ascribed to the editors of the original manuscript based upon the letter to Jelles in 1676 (Letter 84), Spinoza writes: "Now I am busy with the seventh chapter, where I demonstrate Methodically all the main points of the preceding sixth chapter, concerning the organization of a well-ordered Monarchy. Afterward I'll proceed to Aristocratic and Popular Governments, and finally to the Laws and other particular Questions concerning Politics." The editors--and the first readers of the *Political Treatise*--seem to have taken Spinoza's abstract of the argument of the sixth chapter in his draft as the summary of the argument of the entire treatise.

10 Israel 1995, pp. 808-809.

11 Israel 1995, p. 810.

that the new constitution of government would no longer be Republican.<sup>12</sup> Given this immediate political and social context in which the *PT* was written, as Nadler has also argued, Spinoza's primary intent "was ensuring that any steps away from a purely republican form of government and toward a monarchist one would be as benign as possible," but his greatest concern was *that it would not devolve into something worse!*<sup>13</sup>

On a sliding scale that runs from worst to best, of course, Monarchy is the "worst" model for the constitution of sovereignty, and democracy is the "best," meaning "absolute" in geometrical terms (meaning perfect, complete, total). The different models of Aristocracy (i.e., "the rule of the best") are distributed throughout the middle of the scale; moreover, some aristocracies are "better" than others (for example, aristocracies composed of several city-states or provinces). But in most cases, Spinoza concludes, aristocracies are "better" than monarchies (i.e., "coming close to being absolute, without actually being absolute"), but still not the "best" constitution of sovereignty, "for if there's any absolute rule, it's the rule that occurs when the whole (i.e., complete, total) multitude rules."<sup>14</sup> According to the above scale, which assumes the form of a Cartesian coordinate plane composed of absolute values (on the y axis) and multiple variables (on the x axis), the true target of Spinoza's "Science of the State" is the geometrical calculation of an ideal constitution in which the disposition of natural right and civil law achieves an absolute condition of ensuring the peace and security of *both the state and the multitude*, since the state can only secure its own right to sovereign power through the agreement of the multitude, including in special circumstances the use of force and violence to insure their peace and security. In representing the form of agreement (*convenientia*) that is established as the foundation each constitutional model, many scholars have already observed that in the *PT*, Spinoza abandons the juridical convention of the "social contract" he employed in the *TTP*, even though few have observed that in the historical example of the original covenant of the Hebrew Theocracy, the actual convention employed is a treaty of peace between a suzerain and his vassals (i.e., a suzerainty treaty). In other words, the original covenant between the cannot be understood a contract between equal parties, especially since all juridical agreements must refer to a third power to enforce the agreement between the parties (i.e., the law), and in the example of the original Hebrew covenant there is no stronger power than God, the absolute sovereign. As is well known, Spinoza does not abandon metaphorical conventions entirely in the *PT*, but merely substitutes one fiction for another, which the concept of

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12 Nadler 2018, p. 401.

13 Nadler 2018, p. 402.

14 *PT* VIII.3.

“agreement” or “symmetry” (the etymological meaning of *convenientia*) that is expressed by the phrase “as if by one mind” (*una veluti mente duci*).<sup>15</sup> “Thus, he writes: “it’s evident that the Right of a state, or of the supreme ‘power,’ is nothing more than the right of nature, determined not by the power of each individual, but by the power of the multitude, *led as if by one mind*.”<sup>16</sup>

Although I am in complete agreement with Balibar that the *PT* represents Spinoza’s “Science of the State” in applying the same geometrical method he used in the *Ethics*, we must understand that the “State” itself nothing more than a modern *convenientia* that expresses the same geometrical symmetry as the phrase “as if by one mind.” In defining this modern *convenientia* of the “State-Form,” however, I prefer Foucault’s definition of the State as simply a mobile “profile” of multiple concrete or physical governmentalities (*étatisations*).<sup>17</sup> This is because the state is an abstraction and should be understood exactly as Spinoza described the illusory figures of metaphysical concepts that cannot adequately represent the complex chemical and microphysical nature of the physical bodies they attempt to describe. Thus, as a mobile figure in profile, the apparition of the State-Form is a central perspective that emerges from every vantagepoint of civil society, “as if by one mind,” as the instantaneous apprehension of the simultaneous convergence of power and right in the manifestation of the State, even in a phenomenological sense. Perhaps this apparition is best depicted in Kafka’s *The Castle* as a vague and distant figure that appears through the mist, and yet seems to be present from any point of the village that surrounds the Castle, including the interiors of the most private chambers. However, when K. finally sees the Castle from a direct perspective, it is revealed in reality as a motley assemblage of thatched roof shacks and hovels spread out across a hill.<sup>18</sup>

Returning to the *TP*, what is crucial to observe in the convention that Spinoza invents to replace the common people (*plebians* or *vulgari*) is that the entity of “the multitude” (*multitudo*) is a numerically indistinct form of individuality. That is to say, the conventional agreement of sovereignty cannot be represented the “collective agreement” of each separate individual to cede a portion of their natural right to the sovereign, according to the fiction of the social contract employed in

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15 Matheron chooses to translate this phrase as “being, as it were, of like mind,” but this would be a much weaker figure based on a mere resemblance of the thought of two separate minds. This is much closer to Foucault’s use of *convenientia* as one of the cardinal orders of resemblance between words and things in the Renaissance. See Matheron 2020, p.192.

16 *PT* III.2.

17 Foucault (2008), p. 77.

18 For a discussion of Foucault’s analysis of the geometrical figure of the State, see also Lambert (2020), 28-39.

both Hobbes and earlier in the *TTP*, but instead as the mental *consensus* of all subjects (the sovereign included) in the image of coming together (*convenire*), which is expressed by a new mental image of symmetry, or a new *convenientia*. For Spinoza, however, the “image of thought” that this new *convenientia* assumes, at least in its outward appearance, is *more geometrico*.

In *Spinoza, the Transindividual*, Balibar perhaps comes closest to the above understanding when he defines the individuality of multitude as a “transindividual,” although preferring the onto-genetic principle of individuation from Gilberte Simondon over a purely mathematical figure. In defining the notion of the “trans-individual,” or “quasi-individual,” Balibar writes:

A ‘quasi-*mens*’—if this expression can be sustained—corresponds to the idea of a ‘trans-individual’ *mens*, and more precisely to what a mental identity for a transindividual composite would be, if precisely such a composite were not situated at the limit of application of the concept of individuality and if it were not a question of a quasi-individual rather than a given or completed ‘individuality’.<sup>19</sup>

In reply to this definition, however, we might ask if the concept of the individual ever grasps a given or completed individuality? In other words, are not all actual individuals always already quasi-individuals or trans-individuals given the fact that there is no such thing as a completely separate individual? (But I will not pursue this argument any further here.)

Instead, I will pause my allegorical reading to make a number of observations (or *scholia*) on the meaning of the “Absolute.”

a. First, we must understand the absolute form of intuition that a geometrical “image of thought” (or *convenientia*) expresses is the cognitive ideal of *scientia Dei* that was also held by Descartes and Leibniz, which is to say, an *absolutum visio libera* in which there is no form of successive contingency; or rather, all contingent predicates are reduced to an order of extensive magnitude through the concept of an infinite series. According to Leibniz’s famous description of the absolute expression of *scientia Dei*, “only God can see, not the end of the analysis, since there is no end, but rather the nexus of terms or the inclusion of predicates in the subject, since he sees everything which is in the series.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, the “final cause” that determines the definition of the “Absolute” is mathematical and cannot be understood by the metaphysical

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19 Balibar 2020, p. 128.

20 Leibniz 1969, p. 265.

category of “History,” which is the final cause of the Subject of the Absolute beginning with Hegelian philosophy, and afterwards. In the appendix of the *Principles of Descartes*, Spinoza already underlines the mathematical principle does not consider causes from the perspective of final ends, but rather with essences or properties of figures, since “Mathematics is concerned not with ends, but only with the essences and properties of figures, had not shown men another standard of truth.”<sup>21</sup> According to this mathematical determination, therefore, the multitude is the variable figure of a numerical multiplicity ( $xy$ ), that is, the complete set of all individuals, almost as if Spinoza had discerned a primitive set theory from the algebraic principles of Cartesian Geometry—and almost two hundred years before Cantor!

b. Second, in applying this geometrical convention to the expression of “absolute imperium,” it expresses the absolute in terms of *the complete (or perfect) set of all individuals that are counted* in the sovereignty of the state, even though the axiomatic function of this definition is theoretical and not intended as practical or empirical description of a demographic population. In other words, according to a theoretical and geometrical construction of perfectly absolute constitution in which all individuals who constitute a multitude are also included in the state—the sovereign included (whether this refers to a single individual, as in a monarchy, or a subset of individuals, as in an aristocracy)—*then all individuals would express the same conatus of the State*. From this ideal constitution of *absolute imperium*, it would logically follow that there would be no individual of the multitude separated from the State who might threaten its future peace and security. In fact, the existence of such an individual would already constitute, according to the same axiom, the existence of another multitude and the possibility of an oppositional State, as in the case of a revolution or civil war between two separate factions of the *civitas*.

c. Third, from the above definition of the multitude as a purely numerical multiplicity this would also require the subtraction of any moral attribution as a “moral person,” or “humanity,” or even a “class of individuals,” which is why Spinoza no longer employs the term *vulgarus* in referring to the masses or the common people as he did in the *TTP*.<sup>22</sup> Rather, moral attributes and common affects that are deduced from the complete set of all individuals

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21 PD 20.3.

22 See TTP III/9, 10, 12.

who constitute the multitude are simply treated as variables like elements of the weather; thus, the difference between vice and virtue can be judged in the same way that one can determine it is hot or cold by measuring the temperature. Of course, in the beginning of the *PT* Spinoza clearly states this method explicitly: To investigate the matters pertaining to this science with the same *freedom of spirit* (i.e., *visio libera*) we're accustomed to use in investigating Mathematical subjects, ... I've contemplated human affects—like love, hate, anger, envy, love of esteem, compassion, and the other emotions—not as vices of human nature, but as properties which pertain to it in the same way heat, cold, storms, thunder, etc., pertain to the nature of the air.<sup>23</sup>

d. At the same time, the above theoretical principle is constantly modulated by the variable rule of proportion that Spinoza applies to determine the optimum size of the State (i.e., the supreme council): “From this it follows that for an Aristocratic state to be stable, we must take account of the size of the state in determining the minimum number of Patricians”.<sup>24</sup> This same rule of proportionality was applied earlier in the *TTP* concerning the imperfect establishment of the Great Sanhedrin after the death of Moses: “So in proportion as the Hebrew state was divided, there were many supreme councils in it, which inevitably led to many rebellions as the overall argument demonstrates.”<sup>25</sup> In the *PT*, for example, applying this same proportional rule, Spinoza “calculates” that an aristocratic state of moderate size must constitute an assembly of 5,000 members of the supreme council in order to insure at least 100 skillful and virtuous politicians at any given time.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, Spinoza never provides the total population of the “average aristocracy,” nor does he explain how he first arrives at the ratio of 50/1 at the basis of his calculation. In the case of democracies, moreover, where the legal exclusion of subjects from eligibility to serve on the supreme council is determined by laws that originate from history and culture, he calculates that the proportion of eligible citizens might be smaller than the average size aristocracy he previously discussed.<sup>27</sup> For example, the number of citizens that actually constituted the Greek *polis* was much smaller than

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<sup>23</sup> *PT* I.4.

<sup>24</sup> *PT* VIII.3.

<sup>25</sup> See *TTP*, XVII/55.35n.

<sup>26</sup> *PT* VIII.2.

<sup>27</sup> *PT* XI.2.

the population of an average village in the surrounding territory. Needless to say, in making these calculations, he would never have imagined a number over 17 million as the average size of a modern democracy.

At this point, let's turn now to the last chapter of the PT in order to see how this numerical principle returns in the calculation of the most complete and perfect state (*omnino absolutum imperium*). Concerning Spinoza's actual discussion of democracy, however, it is remarkable to observe in recent scholarship the almost complete lack of attention to the constitution of democracy through the principle of suffrage as the only model under examination, as Spinoza states quite explicitly: "to consider only those democracies where the laws of the country dictate, and also independent of class or a 'respectable life' (*honestesque vivunt*), all those who have the absolute right to vote in the supreme council and to hold offices in the dominion" (*sed meum institutum non est de unoquoque, sed de eo solummodo agere, in quo omnes absolute, qui solis legibus patriis tenentur, et praeterea sui iuris sunt honesteque vivunt, ius suffragii in supremo concilio habent muneraque imperii subeundi*).<sup>28</sup> Perhaps this lack of attention can easily be explained by that fact that it does not support a "revolutionary" origin of the constituent power of an absolutely free multitude? (Once again, here I am simply applying an exegetical method of textual criticism that is usually reserved for sacred texts.) But perhaps this is also caused by the controversy surrounding the natural exclusion of women in the passages that follow, that is, before Spinoza abruptly breaks off his own discussion with the famous last sentence—"but enough of that" (*Sed de his satis*).

For most readers, however, it may appear more than a little contradictory when, immediately after claiming democracy as the most complete and perfect state (*omnino absolutum imperium*), Spinoza begins his description of its constitution by first defining those classes of individuals (specifically, "legal subjects") who are excluded from being part of the multitude—including foreigners, women and slaves, children and orphans, and all those denied membership owing to some crime or disgrace. As he explicitly defines the criteria for their exclusion in the following passage, which would probably appear as a *scholium* in the *Ethics*:

I say, explicitly, who is bound only by the laws of his native land to exclude foreigners who are counted as subjects of another sovereign, aside from the fact that they are bound by the laws of

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28 PT XI.1.I have modified the standard translation in order to make Spinoza's intended meaning clearer. I have also added the term "class" as an interpretation of "*honestesque vivunt*" given that the immediate comparison is with criteria of membership in the supreme council of an Aristocracy.

the state and in other things are independent. Next, to exclude women and menservants who are under the dominion of men and potentates, and also children and pupils, so long as they are under the control of their parents and tutors. Finally, I said, and who live honorably, to exclude especially those whose disgraceful means of livelihood is owed to some crime or moral turpitude. (*Dico expresse, ut peregrinos secludam, qui sub alterius imperio esse censentur. Addidi praeterea, quod, praeterquam quod legibus imperii teneantur, in reliquis sui iuris sint, ut mulieres et servos secluderem, qui in potestate virorum et dominorum, ac etiam liberos et pupillos, quamdiu sub potestate parentum et tutorum sunt. Dixi denique, honesteque vivunt, ut ii apprime secluderentur, qui ob crimen aut aliquod turpe vitae genus infames sunt.*)<sup>29</sup>

As one can see in the above explication, the criteria that is applied to determine exclusion is whether the individual is first determined as a “free” and “independent” substance (that is, legally free to become a subject of sovereignty of the state), or the “subject to another power” that has priority over the state’s dominion. This would be nothing more than the basis for any juridical claim of individual right, which presupposes that the individual is not subject to a prior legal claim by another form of dominion that determines the individual’s substance and thus under its power (*qui in potestate virorum et dominorum*). This is the same definition of legal subjection is stated earlier on in VII: “Insofar as they need the other’s power, they are subject to the other. For as we’ve shown in Chapter II [§2–3], right is defined only by power.”<sup>30</sup> Moreover, in listing those classes of individuals who are excluded on the juridical grounds of being subjects to another form of dominion, Spinoza never asks whether their exclusion is just or unjust, but only deduces the laws of a particular individual’s substance either from the more general laws of human nature as outlined in *Ethics* III, or according to the legal determination of this class of subjects in the historical constitutions of both aristocracies and popular forms of government. Of course, it is only in the case of the exclusion of women that he asks whether this is *ex natura an ex instituto sub potestate virorum sint?*

Here, we must return once again to the definition of the “absolute,” since in the above passages it is clear that Spinoza does not understand it to mean that all individuals are included in the State, and indeed, there has never existed a form of democracy that includes all classes of individuals in its legal constitution. The question of the constitution of

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29 *PT* XI.3. Once again, I have altered the translation to highlight the legal definitions of power for each class of “subjects” (*imperio* for foreigners; *potestate virorum* and *dominorum* for slaves and women; *sub potestate* for children and pupils).

30 *PT* VII.16

democracy will be who counts as a sovereign subject belonging to the imperium? Therefore, if earlier on I formulated a purely theoretical (i.e., mathematical) principle of the absolute imperium where all individuals who constitute a multitude are also included in the State, this principle must now be redefined in practical and legal terms to include only those individuals of the Multitude *who are counted* as subjects of sovereignty, or as sovereign individuals. This transforms the purely theoretical set of all individuals into a finite set of all individual “subjects” who are legally counted as part of the body of the multitude. As for the rest of the individuals, they are not counted as subjects and thus appear as merely *supernumerary individuals* (i.e., not enumerated among the regular components of a group).<sup>31</sup> Once again, the association with Cantor’s set theory is somewhat uncanny, since what Cantor called an absolute (or perfectly closed) set, can also be finite and moreover the rules that determine the inclusion of members can indeed be quite arbitrary.

Therefore, while it may have appeared at first as counterintuitive for Spinoza to begin his discussion of democracy as absolute imperium by determining those subjects who are excluded from being eligible to participate in the Supreme Council (i.e., to vote or be eligible to participate in dominion), this is where the purely theoretical principle is once again submitted to the proportional calculation that is deduced from actual statutes and customs, which can be arbitrary. For example, when a child reaches the age of majority and leaves his or her parent’s dominion to become a “free” and “independent” substance, the legal determination of majority is quite arbitrary since there is no guarantee that the individual has obtained an adequate conatus of his or her own individual substance to act independently of other forms of dominion. (Of course, this will become the basis of the Kantian problem of “self-incurred tutelage” as the primary obstacle to Enlightenment.) In the case of other classes of individuals who were excluded as legal subjects under the original constitution of sovereignty, especially women and slaves, they underwent a long historical ordeal until their own natural power as a class cast off the dominion of their former “Lords and Masters” (*potestate virorum et dominorum*). At that point, since right follows natural power, according to Spinoza, the State had no other choice than to hold them equally with all other subjects “who have the absolute right to vote in the supreme council and to hold offices in the dominion.”<sup>32</sup>

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31 In employing the definition of the “supernumerary individual,” I favor the theatrical convention that does not count members a crowd that appears on stage as individual actors, but instead as “extras” or “spear-carriers.” This convention will be important when I return to the figure of the mob in the conclusion.

32 In the history of suffrage law in the United States, there were actually many classes excluded by the property laws that were replaced in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by income tax requirements in many states. It is only when wealth requirements were weakened by the “common school movement” that new restrictions emerged that were specifically designed to keep “undesirable groups” out of the elector-

Nevertheless, simply a change in laws and their legal status as subjects are not like “miracles” immediately enfranchised these classes with the necessary political power as well, since if “laws rest only on reason alone,” and not also on the “common affect” that belongs to the body of the multitude, “they are weak, and easily overcome.” Of course, it is well known that Spinoza doesn’t believe in miracles, and so it follows that these classes of “supernumerary individuals,” in particular, have been vulnerable to the resurgence of common affects (racism, sexism) and other “sad passions” (class hatred or envy, the desire for revenge or justice, etc.) that also belong to the bodies of the multitude. Concerning Spinoza’s own observations on the primary causes for the fall of historical aristocracies in Ch X—implicitly an allegory of the failure of De Witt’s “True Freedom” (*de Ware Vrijheid*)—he concludes that it is either owed to the fact that the original constitution was not “set up prudently” to begin with, creating a permanent affliction or poison in the entire body, or by an external cause that overcomes the peace and security of the state, thus threatening its dissolution and return to something like a state of nature in which all individuals are enemies. However, there is also a third cause in the convergence of both internal and external causes in what can be compared to “a perfect storm,” which I will return to address in the conclusion.

But at this point, I will depart from this calculation of who legally constitutes the multitude to what I earlier called Spinoza’s “regressive theory of the State-Form.” How are we to understand the statement that the initial constitution of sovereignty was democratic? As I have discussed elsewhere, in Chapter XVII, “On the Hebrew Theocracy,” Spinoza narrates the original account from *Exodus* precisely in terms of the Hobbesian state of nature as the war of all against all, in which suddenly freed from a state of slavery, each individual entered into his natural right and was “bound by no covenant,” and was free to either retain this right, to give it up, or transfer it to another.<sup>33</sup> And yet, there is a fundamental distinction with Hobbes argument, since the state of nature in Spinoza’s account is not prelapsarian, but rather a state that follows the first period of subjection. This is what Spinoza describes as the first covenant with God, the first Hebrew understanding of their freedom. It is precisely at this point where the Hebrew people are said to most resemble a universal form of *imperium* in which each individual has an exactly equal share in self-government and thus equal authority interpretation of

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ate—e.g., blacks, women, Native Americans, the mentally incompetent, those with criminal records, and immigrants who were non-residents. Poll taxes were revived in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, along with literacy tests (which naturally excluded blacks, Native Americans, immigrants, and poor whites). See S. Engerman, K. Sokoloff, et al. (2002), pp. 41-109.

33 *TTP* III. 24. See my “Two Covenants of Authority in the *TTP*,” in Kordela, Vardoulakis (2018), pp. 153-166.

the laws by which they will choose to govern themselves. However, at this point Spinoza immediately recounts the actual return to a state of nature, that is, to the original state of fear that leads to the creation of a new superstition by which they shrink back before the abyss opened in the voice of an equality they could not understand, as a power they became fearful of in that they did not feel capable of possessing this power for themselves. “Full of fear, therefore, they went afresh to Moses, saying, lo, we have heard the voice of God ourselves speaking in the fire, and surely we will die and this fire will consume us.”<sup>34</sup>

It was after their experience in slavery under a sovereign who was an animal like themselves, the Multitude wanted to avoid this same form of sovereignty in the future as a means of also avoiding the complete loss of their own natural sovereignty as free individuals. Consequently, as Spinoza writes, “it is because they believed that nothing, but God’s power, could preserve them that they surrendered to God the natural power of self-preservation, which they formerly, perhaps thought they possessed, and consequently they surrendered at the same time all their natural right.”<sup>35</sup> This is why I defined the convention of this agreement or consensus in the form of a suzerainty treaty between a Lord and his vassals. Consequently, the original decalogue can be understood as the articles of a peace treaty with the Lord of Nature, as truce that outlines the conditions of peace and security in order to guarantee that the Lord will cease his endless war against the people themselves. In another sense, which is that of Moses himself as warlord and sovereign under the terms of the new agreement, it might also be understood as the establishment of a civil society by outlining the juridical laws of the State, which in reality are only very practical guidelines that would ensure peace and security of the Multitude—e.g. don’t murder, don’t steal, don’t perjure yourself in taking oaths, don’t sleep with your neighbor’s spouse, or envy his house, his animals, or his slaves, etc. As Spinoza writes, “They thus clearly abrogated their former covenant, and absolutely transferred to Moses their own right to consult God and to interpret his commands.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, as Spinoza interprets it, the original covenant—the covenant that would have been more democratic in principle since it establishes a subjective principle of equality by investing the principle of sovereignty not in any human being, but in a pure voice that speaks in consensus in giving each individual access to the direct interpretation of the law and to a form of self-government—is thereby, owing to fear, transformed into the principle of sovereignty that replaces the democracy with a form of government that Spinoza identifies as Theocracy.

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34 *TTP* III.33.

35 *TTP* III.36.

36 *TTP* III.36.

As a whole, the *TTP* employs the Hebrew state as an allegory of the different articulations of political power: the Davidic dynasty corresponds to the arrangement of monarchy, which is succeeded by the construction of the temple and the rule of the Levites who represent the aristocracy or nobility (the feudal states), and finally, the Diaspora (the loss of the State and the destruction of the temple) which foregrounds the return to an earlier state of nature in which State does not yet exist in actuality. Of course, this is the state of the Dutch Republic itself that Spinoza forecasts at the very beginning of the revolutionary period that culminates in the “disaster year” and the return of the House of Orange. Thus, the allegory of the Hebrew Commonwealth in reference to the contemporaneous Dutch situation. Like the Hebrew who just came out of bondage to a form of Monarchy, the Dutch are also in the perilous situation of choosing their own form of government, and thus the allegory of the Hebrew people who were in the unique position of choosing something resembling a form of democracy, but then retreated from fear for their own individual substance and decided instead to choose a form of sovereignty that resembled a Monarchy. This informs a somewhat pessimistic outlook that Spinoza has on the future of Dutch politics in 1670 and the ultimate failure his own aspirations for a more radical democratic constitution, especially following the imprisonment and eventual death of his closest friend Koerbagh on October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1669, after which, and despite the objections of his editors and closest friends, he decided to publish the *TTP* anyway. Anyway, the rest is history.<sup>37</sup>

Returning now to penultimate chapter of the *PT*, it is here that Spinoza again employs the allegorical method used earlier in the *TTP* to outline both the internal and external causes of the overthrow of the Dutch Republic through the historical examples of the fall of the Florentine and Roman aristocracies. The external cause concerns the fear of death that grips each individual in a time of crisis that Spinoza also begins with in the *TTP*, certainly in reference to the Anglo-Dutch wars and the immanent Franco-Dutch war that effectively ended De Witt's government and the period of “True Freedom” (*de Ware Vrijheid*). Here, we can see a similar state of fear that originally drove the Hebrews to abandon their own autonomy and surrender their natural power to the sovereign figure of Moses. However, Spinoza will ultimately argue that the true cause of the dissolution of the sovereignty of the state is not from an external enemy, but rather from the weakness of the aristocratic constitution to preserve the state in a time of crisis by inspiring in the mind of the Multitude a common affect of hope--if not love!--for the future of the Commonwealth. While the common affect of hope can assume a theologico-political image of the state or the figure of the sovereign himself, as in the case of the divinity of Moses for the Hebrews, the

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37 See Nadler (2011), p. 42.

common desire for vengeance can also unify composite individual bodies of the multitude into a conspiratorial form of temporary alliance. As Filippo Del Lucchese has observed, *conspirare* etymologically means “to breathe in the same direction,” referring to the composition of individual bodies into a larger body of the mass that moves in the same direction as if it was being blown by the same breath or great wind.<sup>38</sup> Thus, “coming together” (*convenire*) of separate individual bodies to form a more powerful body is vividly demonstrated in the formation of a mob, and here Spinoza is clearly commenting on the recent events of mob violence and the murder of the De Witts. Moreover, although it may appear that a mob is also “led as if by one mind,” it is commanded less reason than one of the common affects addressed in proposition 45 of *Ethics IV*: “Envy, Mockery, Disdain, Anger, Vengeance, and the rest of the affects which are related to Hate or arise from it.”<sup>39</sup> Concerning the primary affect that first cause individuals to suddenly become a mob, which is the fear of death and solitude, the most remarkable aspect of the collective phenomenon is the absence of individual fear. Thus, as Spinoza already observed, “the mob is terrifying, if unafraid.”<sup>40</sup> Finally, if the above historical example is not vivid enough, one can easily witness the farcical repetition of the same mob-scene in the crowded streets of Amsterdam on “King’s Day,” including boatloads of drunken pirates sailing in from the *Oost!* However, the sad passions of revenge and cannibalistic rage that had originally animated the Dutch mob have today been replaced by extremely joyful affects, such as the self-love of “being Dutch,” accompanied by the entire Multitude singing “*Willhelmus*” (“The William”) in unison.

I will now return to our contemporary allegory; although, at this point I am not sure whether its proper genre is a tragedy or a farce. I suppose it is more tragic than comic if one regards 2021 as yet another “disaster year,” but according to a more Freudian principle of repetition that one repeats what one does not remember. As I have already commented on the internal cause for recent events that stems from an inherent defect in the original constitution, which is fruit from a poisonous tree, but besides war with an external enemy, there is another external cause that Spinoza only mentions in passing, but which can be interpreted to refer to a caused by natural disaster, plague, or pestilence, when each individual is reduced to a state of fear and solitude by the overwhelming power of nature itself.

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38 Lucchese, “The Revolutionary Foundation of Political Modernity,” in Melamed, Sharp eds. (2018), p. 201.

39 On the topic of revenge, see Chantal Jaquet, “Longing (*desiderium*) for Vengeance as the Foundation of the Commonwealth,” in Melamed, Sharp eds. (2018), pp. 77-92.

40 *PT* II.10.

For there's no affect which isn't sometimes overcome by a stronger, contrary affect. We see that the fear of death is often vanquished by the desire for someone else's property. Those who flee an enemy, overawed by fear, can't be restrained by fear of anything else, but rush headlong into rivers or into a fire, to escape their enemies' steel. So, however properly a commonwealth may be organized, and however well its laws may be set up, still, in the greatest crises of the state, when everyone is seized by panic, as often happens, then everyone approves only what the present fear urges, without giving any consideration to the future or to the laws.<sup>41</sup>

In this case, the weakening of the state's sovereignty occurs as if "by some inevitable fate" that the state could never have avoided by simple "prudence" (in reference to Machiavelli's primary virtue in the "art of government"). However, it is also in the periods of crisis caused by natural disasters and plague, that new *conspiracies* abound in the body and mind of the Multitude, as well as superstitions and miracles, as Spinoza addressed in the *TTP*—but this is certainly also true of the crisis caused by the pandemic of 2020, our *Rampjaar!* As I have already observed above, for the State to survive caused by the fear of death and enforced solitude against each citizen, the multitude must already have as a common affect a sufficient love and confidence in the sovereignty of the state to maintain its hope in a future state of peace and security; otherwise, as Spinoza argues, every free multitude has the "natural right" to completely dissolve its alliance with the State, which in some ways implies that all political alliances, including an established Commonwealth, are indeed temporary. Spinoza deduces this natural power that innately belongs to the multitude from the fact that in a state of nature each individual is his own master:

But if either Commonwealth loses its hope or fear, it is once again its own master (by II.10), and the chain by which the Commonwealths were bound to one another is broken of its own accord. So each Commonwealth has a complete right to dissolve the alliance whenever it wants to. It can't be said that it acts deceitfully or treacherously because it rescinds its assurance as soon as the cause of fear or hope is taken away.<sup>42</sup>

In other words, in being forcefully reduced to a state solitude and loneliness in which every individual is at its weakest, any free multitude can either return to a state of nature where every autonomous individual

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41 *PT X.2.*

42 *PT X.4.*

becomes a little despot (although, powerless to exercise its sovereign right over others), or, on the other hand, losing all hope in the current constitution of sovereignty, each separate individual can surrender his or her own individual substance to form a larger and more powerful body, a body that in some respects resembles another natural power, like a hurricane, that destroys the institutions of the State itself. However, unlike a natural force like a hurricane, a final parallel between recent events and the events that took place in Holland in 1672 is that winds that blew the mob in a particular direction were subject to political calculation.

To conclude our allegorical interpretation, as Spinoza observes, “in a time of crisis something happens which returns a state to the principle on which it was established.”<sup>43</sup> However, since the democracy of the United States was not originally established as a Monarchy (although some would argue that it was originally an Aristocracy), the original principle upon which the United States was established returns us to the revolutionary situation of a “free and independent multitude.” Therefore, as was also the case in the Dutch situation, this has effectively split the multitude into two opposing minds, if not into two completely different bodies as well. According to one mind and one body, the revolutionary aims of B.L.M. protest movement and the “1619 Project” seek nothing less than to completely *re-constitute the constituent power of the State* in order to finally enfranchise those originally excluded classes (but especially blacks) with actual political power (*potestas*) and not only civil or legal rights (*potentia*). According to the opposing mind and body, the revolutionary aim of Trump-supporters like the “Proud Boys” (who actually identify themselves as “patriots”) is to defend the original constitution of sovereignty, and in particular, the exclusion of blacks, immigrants and women.

In keeping with Spinoza’s own method of deducing the common affections of human nature, I am make these observations without any moral evaluation, that is, just as if I were describing two natural bodies simply by listing their properties and affects. And yet, from a realist description I will say that it is impossible for one body to contain only virtuous and joyful affects, and for the other body to be filled only with vices and sad passions. Of course, the only remaining question is whether a multitude can actually be composed of two separate minds and two different bodies and still belong to a single State by whatever form of consensus, agreement, or even mere “convention” (*convenientia*)? Since the answer is most likely negative, we can only conclude that the entire multitude can think “as if with one mind,” it will be necessary for the state of democracy that Spinoza defined as *omnino absolutum imperium* to become—for an indefinite period of time!—indeed, something that

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43 PT X.9.

resembles “a state within a state” (*imperium in imperio*). But since I have clearly departed from Spinoza’s method by prophesizing of future things that are yet unknown, I will simply conclude by invoking his own famous last words:

*“Sed de his satis.”*

Fayetteville, New York  
March 5, 2021

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