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Democratic Moments

Reading Democratic Texts

**EDITED BY
XAVIER MÁRQUEZ**

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CHAPTER NINE

Baruch Spinoza: Radical Republican

Emma Cohen de Lara and Nathan Cooper

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 over all things, i.e., supreme power, which all must obey, either of their own free will or through fear of the ultimate punishment. The right of such a society is called democracy. Democracy therefore is properly defined as a united gathering of people which collectively has the sovereign right to do all that it has the power to do.¹

In this chapter, we seek to explain how Spinoza's low opinion of the masses can be reconciled with his affirmation of democratic self-rule as the best form of government. We also seek to show that Spinoza was, in fact, a radical republican.² He is a republican in virtue of his opposition to monarchical government. He is a *radical* republican because, unlike ancient republicans like Aristotle, Polybius and Cicero, Spinoza does not advocate a mixed regime composed of democratic, aristocratic and monarchical elements. Rather, Spinoza is committed to a strictly egalitarian foundation for society and government. This distinguishes Spinoza from contemporary British republicans such as James Harrington who favoured a mixed regime

with a monarch deprived of absolute power. Harrington is still closer to the ancient understanding of government, whereas Spinoza is one of the first moderns on account of his unyielding emphasis on egalitarianism. Spinoza's political and philosophical corpus remains radical even today, although it also contains elements that resonate with modern democracies.

The masses constitute the main political challenge according to Spinoza. He considers the masses to be superstitious, capricious, fickle, motivated by passion rather than reason, easily corrupted and angered because of their poverty, and generally predisposed to wish ill towards others. In particular, the masses' susceptibility to superstition poses a problem. Political instability, conflict, scarcity and the uncertainty of human knowledge cause most people to live in a state of doubt and, in this condition, '[n]o suggestion they hear is too unwise, ridiculous or absurd to follow' (preface, 2). In his *Ethics*, Spinoza explains how human beings have developed the imagination in order to provide a response to potential threats to one's self-preservation with fear and superstition. It is under the physical contingency of war, scarcity or petulance, that human beings easily accept superstition or religious dogmatism to offer an explanation of these conditions.

In the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza blames religious agitators for manipulating the masses. By religious agitators, he denotes the contemporary Calvinist clergy as well as the rabbinical authority of his time and the Catholic ecclesiastical authorities who 'fill the minds of every individual with so many prejudices that they leave no room for sound reason' (preface, 6). Instead of teaching Christianity's universal values of neighbourly love and natural justice, they generate conflict, rivalry and resentment by articulating new and controversial interpretations of the Bible. In this way, the religious agitators take advantage of the fears and weaknesses of the masses while undermining state authority and profiting from lucrative positions they obtain in the church.

There are two ways in which Spinoza aims to free the masses from the subversive influences of the religious agitators. First of all, he argues that the social relevance of the Bible should be understood purely in terms of the moral message of Christ, whose core message was one of charity and justice. The Bible conveys these universal principles through parables and narratives, which make them accessible to the common people who are not competent to perceive things clearly and distinctly by the use of reason. The clergy should restrict themselves to this core message and not engage in religious disputes. The social relevance of the Bible as a document that cultivates obedience to the universal moral law of charity and justice is enormous. Spinoza's interpretation of the Bible contributes to making the masses 'safe' for democracy.

The second way in which Spinoza seeks to free the masses from the subversive influences of the religious agitators is by subjecting religion to state authority. In order to secure the laws of the civil state, by means of which stability and safety is obtained, 'the supreme right of deciding about

religion, belongs to the sovereign power' (16:21). Those who hold sovereign power must be both the interpreters and guardians of things sacred. They must offer this religious interpretation in light of the peace and security of the state. Those who advocate a separation of civil and divine authority simply seek to devise a path of worldly power for themselves (19:1; 19:16).

Spinoza's argument in favour of providing the state with authority over religious matters may seem inconsistent with his commitment to religious tolerance and freedom of thought. For Spinoza, however, there is no contradiction. The state has authority to judge over the actions of people, including religious actions such as external religious worship and every expression of piety (cf. 19:9). People's *thoughts* remain free. It may be naïve to think that people's thoughts can be divorced from people's actions. But Spinoza shows himself to be part of a liberal tradition that separates the private – an individual's thoughts and judgments – from the public – the individual's actions insofar as they have a public impact.

Spinoza's account of the social relevance of the Bible and his argument for subjecting religious authority to the state are not the only ways in which he is paving the way for democratic rule. It is also the other way around: Spinoza favours a democratic government by virtue of the very fact that the masses are susceptible to being deceived and are prone to be fickle and egocentric. Democratic government actually responds best to the incapacity of the masses for sound reasoning; it provides the most stability given the tendency of the masses to follow passion instead of reason and, on top of that, it provides the most freedom of thought, which in turn supports good governance because it generates knowledge. In order to see how this argument works, we will first look at why Spinoza rejects an alternative form of government, namely, monarchy.³

According to Spinoza, a monarchy is a regime defined by a lack of freedom. Monarchs are predisposed to seek too much power because the security of their government depends on the one ruler. This makes monarchies unnatural, or at least less natural than republics. Nature dictates that absolute power is an unattainable goal; the natural freedom of people will always resist such concentration of power. Monarchs, however, will strive endlessly for the accumulation of power in order to secure their regime.

For people to sacrifice their natural freedom, a monarchical government needs to keep the subjects in a permanent state of deception (preface, 7). Monarchies thus manipulate the people into loyalty to the regime, and this loyalty extends as far as believing that one should fight for the glorification of a single man at the risk of losing one's life. This is an irrational proposition as far as Spinoza is concerned, especially because monarchs are likely to start and continue wars for irrational reasons such as pride and glory instead of peace and liberty (18:5). Out of the constant and essential need for deceiving the people, kings use religion to channel the fear that the subjects experience. Spinoza points out that false prophets eagerly feed into this strategy and flatter kings and promise them to subdue the people

(18:5). In short, monarchies by definition promote people's susceptibility for superstition and religious falsehoods. These regimes maintain the people in a less rational state than they could be.

In a democratic republic, deception is no longer essential to exact the obedience of the people and to ensure stability. Instead, obedience and stability is much more easily maintained in a democratic republic because the people are the authors of their own laws. Spinoza develops this argument by means of a social contract theory. This theory warrants more attention than we can provide here, but a few key aspects should be highlighted.

The first is that Spinoza starts from the premise of the natural equality between people. In the natural condition, by which Spinoza indicates a hypothetical, pre-societal and pre-political condition, all human beings are equally free to ensure their individual self-preservation. Some people may be stronger, more rational or cleverer than others, but this makes no difference for the normative premise that *everyone* has the natural right to do what it takes to survive.

People come together and 'contract' with one another in order to guarantee their own survival more effectively. Without political organization, people 'lead wretched and brutish lives' (5:7). Contracting with one another is the best way to ensure security and prosperity. The contract establishes a political society where the people agree to live according to laws and certain dictates of reason, by which Spinoza means general principles such as not harming others, not treating others like one would not want to be treated oneself, and defending other people's rights as their own (16:5). Importantly, with the social contract, sovereign right – that is, the right that trumps any other right – is now held collectively. This right, the right to all things that each individual had from nature, is now no longer determined by the force and appetite of each individual but 'by the power and will of all of them together' (16:5). In other words, human society is formed not by alienation of each individual's natural right, but by exercising natural right collectively. This, Spinoza writes, is properly called a democracy: 'Democracy therefore is properly defined as a united gathering of people which collectively has the sovereign right to do all that it has the power to do' (16:8).

Spinoza argues that the people have an interest in obeying the collective, sovereign right. We should note that people's psychology does not change; everyone, in particular the masses, remain guided by self-interest, pleasure, greed, glory and so forth. However, laws that provide security and prosperity *are* in each individual's interest. A properly functioning democratic citizen obeys the command of the sovereign and, by doing so, does what is useful for the community and consequently also for himself (16:10). In principle, this means that the democratic citizen should carry out 'absolutely all the commands of the sovereign power however absurd they may be' (16:8). However, Spinoza is keen to point out that democratic governments never issue absurd or irrational commands for a sustained period of time. Democratic governments govern by majority

rule and although Spinoza does not use the word ‘elections’ it is clear that everyone who has submitted to the democratic government is periodically consulted: ‘In a democracy no one transfers their natural right to another in such a way that they are not thereafter consulted’ (16:11). Furthermore, one person or a few may be caught by the whim of the moment, but deliberations by a large group of people are likely to be more rational and conducive to wise decision-making.⁴

The key insight guiding Spinoza’s social contract theory is that democratic republics are more stable than other forms of governments. In a way, the problem of the masses remains; they are still predisposed to act irrationally and in their self-interest. However, by submitting oneself to the rule of the majority in a democratic regime, ‘all remain equal as they had been previously, in the state of nature’ (16:11). In other words, a democratic republic is most natural, requiring the least amount of coercion and deception to maintain its condition. People in general are unlikely to be obedient to rules or to others but in the state of political equality that a democratic republic most closely approximates, the people are *most* likely to obey the laws and rules. In a society where the laws are made by common consent, ‘the people remain just as free [as in the natural state], since they are not acting under the authority of another but by their own proper consent’ (5:9). It would indeed be reprehensibly irrational to act ‘contrary to the decree and dictate of one’s own reason’ (20:8). People contracting into a democratic society actively consent to being governed by their own reason, which is now exercised collectively. People may not be inclined towards the common good, but it *is* more rational to obey a law if one is its own author even though one may still be inclined to do the opposite. Furthermore, manipulation of the masses is less necessary because they will obey the laws (more often) out of their own free will.

In short, compared to monarchies, democratic republics are less violent, more rational and more free. The masses, no longer manipulated by religious agitators, receiving an uncorrupted Christian message from the clergy, and with a stake in governmental decision-making, have become capable of political agency. Still, this is not Spinoza’s final argument as to why democracy is a better and more natural form of government than other kinds. Democracy is most natural not only because it most closely approximates man’s natural state of equality, but also because it approaches most closely the state of freedom that nature bestows on every person (16:11). By freedom, Spinoza means the freedom to govern oneself and, importantly, the freedom to think and judge for oneself. Unlike Hobbes, who proposes an absolute government in order to guarantee peace and stability, Spinoza understands freedom of thought as the main purpose of political association, second only to stability.

The value of freedom of thought and toleration is arguably the closest to Spinoza’s heart. As a philosopher with radical ideas, he must have longed to live in a freer society. He calls the city of Amsterdam ‘a fine example of a city

which enjoys the fruits of this liberty' (20:15), but he ironically wrote this sentence while he was living in Voorburg, banished from his own Sephardic community in Amsterdam at the age of 23, and seeking quieter waters and employment. He had witnessed the imprisonment and subsequent death of his friend Adriaan Koerbagh who, a few years before the publication of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, had published two treatises that provoked the wrath of the Calvinist clergy. Spinoza published the *Theological-Political Treatise* anonymously and although his authorship was an open secret in Europe, it remained a text that one could not admire openly, for its 'monstrous opinions'.

It is with particular fervour that Spinoza seeks to explain how 'this freedom [to think, judge and worship according to one's own mind] may not only be allowed without danger to piety and the stability of the republic but cannot be refused without destroying the peace of the republic and piety itself' (preface, 8). Not only is freedom of thought not a threat to peace and stability, but the active oppression of freedom of thought inevitably tends toward conflict and unrest. Freedom of thought is a right that people possess naturally. No one would accept being completely stripped of this right; it is a right that 'no one can give up' (18:6; 20:1; 20:4). It is simply impossible to have someone's mind completely under one's control. Although the power of governments can be great, it will never be so great that the rulers can do whatever they want (17:3). Governments that try to control people's thoughts will only rouse the anger of the people (18:6). Therefore, those who hold sovereign power 'can best retain their authority and fully conserve the state only by conceding that each individual is entitled both to think what he wishes and to say what he thinks' (preface, 14). A government that denies the people freedom to think would have to be a very violent one. The 'less people are accorded liberty of judgment, consequently, the further they are from the most natural condition and, hence, the more oppressive the regime' (20:14). A government that recognizes people's natural right to think and judge (although not act) as they see fit is a more moderate, more stable and more durable government.

Spinoza also affirms the social and political benefits of allowing freedom of thought and judgment. This liberty is essential to the advancement of the arts and sciences and will promote progress and prosperity (20:10). Freedom of thought is needed to cultivate knowledge that feeds into a sound foundation for government: 'that society will be safer, more stable and less vulnerable to fortune, which is for the most part founded and directed by wise and vigilant men' (3:5). Even though Spinoza insists on the natural and political equality of man, those very few who have a propensity to develop their reason have a role to play as well.

In terms of thinking about democracy, Spinoza challenges the reader to think about how and why democracy is the best form of government even when one shares Spinoza's assumption that most people are unlikely to become rational political agents committed to the public good. Furthermore,

Spinoza's argument that democracies are more stable compared to other regimes merits attention. Arguably, the influence of religion on the people was Spinoza's main concern at the time, and he seeks to explain in the *Theological-Political Treatise* how the negative impact of superstition on political stability can be dealt with. At the same time, one may wonder how modern democracies can deal with people's propensity to seek easy explanations for things that cause fear and anxiety. We wish Spinoza *were* still alive today; he would have made a fascinating companion in our conversation about the state of our democracies in the twenty-first century.

Notes

- 1 Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. M. Silverthorne and J. Israel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 16:8. Page references to this edition will be given in parenthesis throughout the text of this chapter.
- 2 In broad outline, we follow the main thesis of Jonathan Israel who, in his important article 'The Intellectual Origins of Modern Democratic Republicanism (1660–1720)', *European Journal of Political Theory* 3, no. 1 (2004): 7–36 argues that Spinoza is one of the main representatives of a particular brand of republicanism, namely Dutch republicanism, that is distinct from the British republican tradition on account of its more radical nature.
- 3 Spinoza's rejection of monarchy was a sensitive issue at the time. When the *Theological-Political Treatise* was published in 1670, the United Provinces had been under republican rule for twenty years after the death of the quasi-monarchical Stadholder William II of the House of Orange. However, monarchical forces remained strong and in 1671, the *Rampjaar* or 'Year of Disaster', an angry mob roused by monarchical and clerical forces murdered the brothers De Witt, who were the leaders of the United Provinces for most of its republican period and admired by Spinoza, in the streets of The Hague. The year marked the end of the republican period as William III, also known as William of Orange, was appointed as Stadtholder of several of the provinces.
- 4 This point was made by Justin Steinberg, 'Benedict Spinoza: Epistemic Democrat', *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (2010): 145–64.