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The Crowd, the People, and the Philosopher in Spinoza's Political Philosophy

Carlo Altini 

Abstract: The article analyzes the relationship in Spinoza's thought between the figures of the philosopher, the people, and the crowd. This distinction is anchored in his theory of knowledge, of the passions, and of natural right and plays a fundamental role in his conception of political philosophy. Spinoza establishes a direct connection between these three figures and the forms of political regimes: while in democracy human beings who are completely rational (the philosophers) can fully deploy their theoretical passions and the people can develop their desire for freedom, in theocracy and tyranny the crowd's superstition dominates. These aspects of Spinoza's thought allow us to interpret the relationships between the contemplative and the active life, and to rethink the relationship between the philosopher and the city, in the early modern age as well as in our contemporary one.

Introduction

Baruch Spinoza's love for the republic and for democracy does not mean that his theory expresses unconditional support for the crowd or for the people. He evinces a profound contempt for the political incapacity and theoretical inability of the crowd, whose social life expresses the pursuit of short-term primary interests and so makes possible the existence of a political power that exploits this pursuit to consolidate its absolute or tyrannical dominion. The crowd has no awareness that the true individual and social good lie in a political virtue that includes utility as much as rationality. Only a crowd that transforms itself into a people, into a political subject aware of this connection between rationality and utility present in natural right and in political virtue, raises the level of its social existence and its political action until it reaches the construction of a republic and of a liberal democracy. For Spinoza there is a link between the people and democracy, as well as one between the crowd and tyranny, making it important to examine the relationship between anthropology and politics in his work.

Carlo Altini is professor of history of philosophy at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Via Università, 4, 41121 Modena, Italy (carlo.altini@unimore.it).

Spinoza's theory of knowledge is central to this theme. He distinguishes three forms of knowledge. The first he identifies with imagination; this type of knowledge derives from partial perceptions and opinions, makes men slaves to their passions, and is characteristic of the crowd. The second kind of knowledge is reason, which corresponds to ideas adequate of things and therefore to the liberation from the base passions; this kind of knowledge is characteristic of the people who form a republic. The third kind of knowledge is intuitive and proceeds from the idea adequate of God. This kind is characteristic only of the philosopher, because the practical (i.e., political) art of the people fails to reach the level of true knowledge—the contemplative life. Spinoza places the figure of the wise individual at the apex of human perfection. In the *Theological-Political Treatise* the crowd is in reference to theocracy and the people is in reference to democracy. In the *Ethics* the differences between crowd and people are associated with questions of causality and imagination. Here I discuss only the interpretation of the crowd and of the people—and their differences—in Spinoza's political philosophy.

This article compares Spinoza's interpretation of the crowd (*vulgus*) with his image of the people (*populus*) and with the figure of the wise (*sapiens*), that is, the philosopher. I employ the concepts of *vulgus* and *populus*—and not the concept of *multitude*—because I do not use the interpretative perspective which in recent years has become popular in studies of Spinoza. Studies by Antonio Negri,¹ Étienne Balibar,² Laurent Bove,³ and Filippo Del Lucchese⁴ identify the “multitude” as a central category in Spinoza's political philosophy. In my view, this perspective is characterized by an anachronistic and antihistorical interpretation which attributes to Spinoza themes and problems from our moment and, in particular, the class relationships of a capitalistic economy. I analyze Spinoza's political philosophy in reference to his own vocabulary and context, which is the struggle for freedom against political absolutism and religious superstition at the inception of modernity. This struggle would create the conditions for the economic and political affirmation of the bourgeoisie in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (and thus for the subsequent class conflict with the proletariat), but Spinoza could not have known what would happen in Europe after the industrial revolution. However, my historical and conceptual approach does not imply a merely erudite or antiquarian perspective. It can provide us with tools for

¹Antonio Negri, *L'anomalia selvaggia: Saggio su potere e potenza in Baruch Spinoza* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1981); Antonio Negri, *Spinoza* (Rome: DeriveApprodi, 1998).

²Étienne Balibar, *Spinoza et la politique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985); Étienne Balibar, *Spinoza politique: Le transindividuel* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2018).

³Laurent Bove, *La stratégie du conatus: Affirmation et résistance chez Spinoza* (Paris: Vrin, 1996).

⁴Filippo Del Lucchese, ed., *Storia politica della moltitudine: Spinoza e la modernità* (Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2009).

understanding some contemporary political dynamics regarding the ideas of the crowd and of the people, about what kind of education and of critical thinking is needed to increase the critical capacity of citizens in an age of social media.

To illustrate the differences between the crowd and the people (and the philosopher) in Spinoza it is necessary to see, first of all, the ontological and anthropological foundations of his conception of politics. In the next section I deal with Spinozan “political realism,” which derives from his ontology: this dependence of politics on ontology reveals the necessary character of the human passions, which is fundamental for the comprehension of political life and, therefore, for the distinction between the crowd and the people. The second section is dedicated to the human passions and their importance in relation to the transition between the state of nature and the civil state: this transition is founded on the complex relationships between virtue-reason and virtue-power. Section 3 highlights the political differences between *vulgus* and *populus* and their relationship with the political regimes, while the difference between the political life and the philosophical one is identified. In the fourth section, the role and importance of the contemplative life with respect to political life is investigated, so as to grasp the superiority of the philosopher to the crowd and the people. Indeed, for Spinoza the people is superior to the crowd as the republic is superior to tyranny or monarchy; but again, contemplative life—which is possible only in a civil society—is superior to the *vita activa*, or political life. The conclusion offers very brief reflections on the usefulness of Spinoza’s political philosophy for the analysis of the social contexts in Western countries at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

1. Spinoza’s Realism: Ontological and Political

To understand the distinctions between the crowd, the people, and the philosopher in Spinoza’s political thought, it is first necessary to analyze (a) the relationship between politics and ontology in his realism and (b) the role of passions in the political life, in the light of the relationship between politics and ontology. This makes it clear that Spinoza’s distinctions between the crowd and the people are based not on moral arguments, but on a political (and still more on a theoretical) perspective, since they concern the difference between the effective power of political action of the crowd (which is lower) and that of the people (which is higher).

In his *Political Treatise*—but also in the *Theological-Political Treatise*—Spinoza talks about republics and tyranny, democracy and theocracy from the perspective of political realism.⁵ His admiration for Machiavelli’s realism is

⁵Scholars who label Spinoza’s political philosophy “political realism” include Harry A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934) and Leo Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken Books,

obvious: “Perhaps he [Machiavelli] also wished to show how wary a free people should be of entrusting its welfare absolutely to one man. . . . He is well known to be an advocate of freedom, and he has given some very sound advice as to how it should be safeguarded.”⁶ For Spinoza, it is not a question of justifying political cynicism, nor seeking out and preserving worldly success, nor the realist overcoming of amorality in political life, but rather a question of addressing—from the perspective of political realism—the effectual stability of different forms of political power, especially those that revolve around the principle of republican liberty.⁷ Spinoza’s Machiavelli associates the difficulty of establishing stable political forms with a lack of knowledge of true causes: for example, attempts to get rid of a tyrant are foolish if the causes that made the tyrant possible are not detected and removed.⁸ These causes can be traced to the human misery of the crowd, understood as theoretical impotence and political incapacity, or as weakness of reason and of will.

Spinoza’s realistic point of view is not limited to the political dimension, however. The link between ontology, politics, and anthropology is so intimate that his analysis of political themes in the *Political Treatise* is accompanied by continuous references to his *Ethics*.⁹ Spinoza’s realism is present, in particular, in his conception of natural right, which is “naturalistic.” He applies a concept of natural right to human beings which is to be interpreted *sub specie aeternitatis*: natural right must be interpreted not only from an anthropological perspective, but in relation to the laws of all nature. Thanks to the supreme law of nature, according to which each being strives to persist in its own state, every being (ant, lion, or human being) has as much right as it has power.¹⁰

1965). See also Filippo Del Lucchese, *Conflict, Power and Multitude in Machiavelli and Spinoza* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

⁶Baruch Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, V.7, 700, in *Complete Works*, trans. S. Shirley, ed. M. L. Morgan (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2002). In what follows, references to Spinoza’s works are to this edition; quotations are from this translation, occasionally modified slightly.

⁷However, we should not be misled by the doubts that Spinoza expresses regarding Machiavelli’s intention in *The Prince* when tackling the problems of founding and preserving a state in the case of a tyrant: this is a rhetorical device developed for defensive purposes against the accusations made against Machiavelli of immorality and impiety. Any doubts regarding Machiavelli’s true intention have entirely disappeared by the end of the passage: here we observe the issue of *reticence* in Spinoza’s writings (cf. *Political Treatise*, V.7).

⁸Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, V.7, 700.

⁹For a decisive reading of the relationships between metaphysics and politics in Spinoza, see Edwin M. Curley, *Spinoza’s Metaphysics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969).

¹⁰Spinoza, *Ethics*, IV, Def. 8; IV, Prop. 24; IV, Prop. 37 proof; *Political Treatise*, II.2–8 (II.3: “Every natural thing has as much right from Nature as it has power to exist and to act”; II.4: “The natural right of every individual is coextensive with its power”).

By the right and established order of Nature I mean simply the rules governing the nature of every individual thing, according to which we conceive it as naturally determined to exist and to act in a definite way. For Nature's power is the very power of God, who has sovereign right over all things. But since the universal power of Nature as a whole is nothing but the power of all individual things taken together, it follows that each individual thing has the sovereign right to do all that it can do; i.e., the right of the individual is coextensive with its determinate power.¹¹

The power of each being is a "mode" of the power of Nature (i.e., of God) and, in nature, right and power are the same thing. Natural right does not prohibit any action that a being has the faculty to perform, as every being acts in this way because it is determined by Nature. For Spinoza, therefore, it is impossible to discuss liberty or a republic without basing his political theory on the necessity of reality itself. He avoids the dreams of utopia as well as the superstitions of religions.¹² And this is where his praise of Machiavelli comes from.¹³ It is necessary to establish a realistic doctrine of the state, capable of understanding the reasons and passions of human beings. Human actions must not be analyzed in the light of abstract prejudices, moral judgments or imaginative theories, but through concrete analysis—conducted in a deductive way—of the elementary fundamentals of human nature, in particular the passions. Ontology precedes politics and its foundation. Political action is based on ontological necessity and political realism is based on ontological realism. For Spinoza, before Hegel, what is real is rational and vice versa. Therefore any reflection on the differences between crowd and people cannot have a purely moral or purely political character, but must be based on a realistic analysis (in the ontological sense) of human nature.

One fundamental aspect of human nature is constituted by the passions. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize their power in politics as well as their complex relationship with reason. The result is a twofold evaluation, in which Spinoza can see both *humana impotentia* (human impotence) and *communis naturae potentia* (power of common nature): these aspects together constitute the *naturae necessitas et virtus* (necessity and virtue of nature), which is connected to the realistic and nonutopian founding of a civil state. As Aaron Garrett has shown,¹⁴ Spinoza argues that the effective power of the passions can be understood—with reason—as a useful and positive instrument for political action. In politics reason crosses the passions, and

¹¹Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, XVI, 526–27.

¹²Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, I.

¹³Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, V.7. On Spinoza's "Machiavellianism" and "utopianism," cf. Alexandre Matheron, "Spinoza et la décomposition de la politique thomiste: Machiavélisme et utopie," *Archivio di filosofia* 46, no. 1 (1978): 29–59.

¹⁴Aaron Garrett, "Knowing the Essence of the State in Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*," *European Journal of Philosophy* 20 (2012): 50–73.

vice versa while politics is the dimension of human life in which ontology and anthropology cross one other. But to recognize the power of the passions does not mean that we restrict ourselves to accepting passively this kind of power. In the face of the irrationality of most human beings, we can resign ourselves to the situation or positively channel that irrationality to construct a civil state.

Here the other aspect of the passions comes into play: the *humana impotentia*. In the crowd, this leads because reason is absent: superstition, fear, ignorance, envy, and greed prevent the consideration of the true interests of the individual and community, which consist not in the gross and immediate satisfaction of material needs, but in the comprehension of the true nature of political action. In the people, by contrast, these aspects (superstition, fear, etc.) are not absent, but they are not dominant either: the short-term interest is mediated by long-term interest of the individual and the community. In this case, the strength of the passions is equivalent to that of reason: what is useful is also rational and what is natural is also right. Consequently, only the people—and not the crowd—can actually construct a civil state.

2. The Passions in the Crowd and in the People: Between Reason and Power

To understand the other anthropological and social differences between the crowd and the people it is necessary to analyze the function of the passions as well as reason for the construction of the civil state. These differences represent the distance between republic/democracy and monarchy/tyranny/theocracy, between the state that arises from natural right (which joins power and reason together) and a state that arises only from force.

As we have seen, for Spinoza's political philosophy, acting according to virtue is living and preserving one's own being according to Nature, on the basis of one's own power and with the guidance of one's reason (in both cases, looking out for one's own profit).¹⁵ Furthermore, everyone must follow his *conatus* and respect the inner tendency for self-preservation justified by natural right. Since *conatus* corresponds to the power of each individual, reason cannot enter into conflict with the passions, which are not vices but a property of human nature. Reason and the passions "work" together for self-preservation. From this "naturalistic" point of view, virtue is identified with power (*potentia*)¹⁶ and with the explanation of *conatus* itself:

Since reason demands nothing contrary to nature, it therefore demands that every man should love himself, should seek his own advantage (I mean his real advantage), should aim at whatever really leads a man toward greater perfection, and, to sum it all up, that each man, as far as

¹⁵Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, I.4.

¹⁶On Spinoza's conception of power, see Sandra Leonie Field, *Potentia: Hobbes and Spinoza on Power and Popular Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

in him lies, should endeavor to preserve his own being. . . . Since virtue is nothing other than to act from the laws of one's own nature, and since nobody endeavors to preserve his own being except from the laws of his own nature, it follows firstly that the basis of virtue is the very conatus to preserve one's own being, and that happiness consists in a man's being able to preserve his own being. . . . Further, it follows that we can never bring it about that we should need nothing outside ourselves to preserve our own being and that we should live a life quite unrelated to things outside ourselves.¹⁷

However, in Spinoza's thought there is another conception of virtue which is identified with reason itself.¹⁸ The life of the human being cannot be conducted in isolation because the social relationship is both useful and necessary. But reason indicates that utility and necessity are the same. We are not self-sufficient, and so we require the construction of a social world: this construction is made possible by reason channeling the strength of the passions:

There are many things outside ourselves which are advantageous to us and ought therefore to be sought nothing is more advantageous to man than man. Men can wish for nothing more excellent for preserving their own being than that they should all be in such harmony in all respects that their minds and bodies should compose, as it were, one mind and one body, and that all together should endeavor as best they can to preserve their own being, and that *all together they should aim at the common advantage of all*. From this it follows that men who aim at their own advantage under the guidance of reason, seek nothing for themselves that they would not desire for the rest of mankind; and so are just, faithful, and honorable.¹⁹

Thus there are two different conceptions of virtue, which can complement one another. The power enjoyed by a human being in the state of nature is generally ineffective and precarious because it is vulnerable to the power of other human beings. Only in the civil state can individuals live safely and without fear according to the dictates of reason and the passions: the construction of civil society is useful and rational because it is the only condition for collectively having the right that each would have individually in the state of nature, in such a way that this right is no longer determined by the strength and instinct of each one but by the power and will of all human beings

¹⁷Spinoza, *Ethics*, IV, Prop. 18 sch., 330–31. Regarding the identification of virtue and power, see *Ethics*, IV, def. 8: "By virtue and power I mean the same thing. . . . Virtue, insofar as it is related to man, is man's very essence, or nature, insofar as he has power to bring about that which can be understood solely through the laws of his own nature."

¹⁸Regarding the identification of virtue and reason, see *Ethics*, IV, Prop. 24; IV, Prop. 37 proof.

¹⁹Spinoza, *Ethics*, IV, Prop. 18 sch., 331 (emphasis added).

together. Reason teaches us that there is a true harmony of self-interest between men.

In their complementary capacity, the two concepts of virtue (virtue-reason and virtue-power) can be clarified by grasping the utilitarian nature of Spinoza's idea of reason: virtue as reason is nothing other than the social explanation of virtue as power. In this case the social contract cannot have any force outside of its usefulness for individuals: the construction of the state must be carried out in such a way that greater damage results from breaking the pact than from its continued maintenance.²⁰ Virtue understood as reason helps to eliminate the conflicts that would emerge from virtue understood as power.²¹ The search for individual benefit through reason is closely linked to the search for social benefit, or to the construction of the civil state in which such individual benefits can be realized in a rational and stable way. As Hans W. Blom has written, if men understood the true meaning of natural right, they would live together in peace.²²

Every man exists by the sovereign *natural right*, and consequently by the sovereign natural right every man does what follows from the *necessity of his nature*. So it is by the sovereign natural right that *every man judges what is good and what is bad*, and has regard for his own *advantage* according to his own way of thinking, and seeks revenge, and endeavors to preserve what he loves and to destroy what he hates. Now *if men lived by the guidance of reason, every man would possess this right of his without any harm to another*. But since men are subject to emotions which far surpass the power or virtue of men, they are therefore often pulled in different directions and *are contrary to one another, while needing each other's help*. Therefore, in order that men may live in harmony and help one another, it is necessary for them to *give up* their natural right and to create a feeling of mutual confidence that they will refrain from any action that may be harmful to another.²³

This result, however, is achieved only by the people and not the crowd. Only the people can comprehend and realize the relationship between virtue-power and virtue-reason while the crowd remains crushed by its own emotions (superstition, envy, fear) which make it unable to detach itself from the immediacy of short-term private interest. The construction of the civil state (the republic of a liberal democracy) is possible and necessary through

²⁰Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, XVI.

²¹For a historical and philological analysis of Spinoza's concept of power, see Eugenio Fernandez, "Potentia et potestas dans les premiers écrits de B. Spinoza," *Studia Spinozana* 4 (1988): 195–223; Emilia Giancotti, "Sui concetti di potenza e potere in Spinoza," *Filosofia politica* 4 (1990): 103–18. For a theoretical study of the relationship between virtue-reason and virtue-power, see Myriam Revault d'Allonnes and Hadi Rizk, eds., *Spinoza: Puissance et ontologie* (Paris: Kimé, 1994).

²²Hans W. Blom, "Politics and Virtue and Political Science. An Interpretation of Spinoza's Political Philosophy," *Studia Spinozana* 1 (1985): 209–30.

²³Spinoza, *Ethics*, IV, Prop. 37 note 2, 340–41 (emphasis added).

the expedient of a social contract, which facilitates the achievement of a better condition of the human life. This condition is characterized by peace, security, well-being, and peaceful relations with others, and is based on the transfer of right and power from individuals to the state. This is not the case with monarchy, theocracy, or tyranny, however, which are those political regimes that correspond to the social being of the crowd.

For Spinoza, the birth of the civil state is guaranteed by the transfer of power and right from single individuals to a political regime whose end is individual and collective freedom. The political regime that arises from this pact can only be a democracy or a republic. This civil state must not limit itself to guaranteeing the security of the individual but should secure the freedom for each to realize his *conatus*. As Steven Frankel has argued, Spinoza's main interest lies in the search for the rationality of political action, which is no different from the nature of true political action: living according to reason in political society is living in accordance with Nature.²⁴ In such a state—in which citizens obey decrees common to all—human beings are freer than they are in the state of nature.²⁵

3. Before the Contemplative Life: The Political Life of the *Vulgus* and the *Populus*

We can now analyze the consequences of these differences between the crowd and the people in relation to Spinoza's account of political regimes. For Spinoza, the contemplative life is superior to political life and the philosopher has a higher rank not only to the crowd but also to the people. He makes a clear distinction—with a noticeable premodern imprint—between the common human being and the figure of the philosopher. The gap between the two is vast: all nonphilosophers (i.e., crowd, people, rulers, citizens, etc.) are "social beings." The philosopher, on the one hand, and politicians and citizens, on the other, are separated by an abyss: theoretical virtue and political virtue are not the same. Theoretical virtue does not belong to citizens and politicians, but typifies the philosopher living a contemplative life. Political virtue is not concerned with the life of the philosopher (and neither the life of the crowd, which is entirely bound by superstition and base affections), but with the life of the people, which can carry out political actions founded on the close relationship between virtue-power and virtue-reason.

Spinoza's interest in political life, however, derives from his interest in contemplative life, the truly necessary dimension for achieving happiness. But

²⁴Steven Frankel, "Determined to Be Free: The Meaning of Freedom in Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*," *Review of Politics* 73 (2011): 55–76.

²⁵Spinoza, *Ethics*, IV, Prop. 73. Cf. David L. Williams, "Spinoza and the General Will," *Journal of Politics* 72 (2010): 341–56.

contemplative life is possible only in a civil society. Political virtue is necessary to construct the social conditions which make possible the contemplative life. Spinoza understands true happiness as ancient philosophy, and Aristotle in particular, does:

It is of the first importance in life to perfect the intellect, or reason, as far as we can, and the highest happiness or blessedness for mankind consists in this alone. For blessedness is nothing other than that self-contentment that arises from the intuitive knowledge of God. . . . Therefore for the man who is guided by reason, the final goal, that is, the highest Desire whereby he strives to control all the others, is that by which he is brought to an adequate conception of himself and of all things that can fall within the scope of his understanding.²⁶

Despite this, philosophy and politics are not radically separate. Political philosophy is justified by the fact that it is a necessary condition for a well-ordered life. And a well-ordered society is the necessary condition for the theoretical life of the philosopher. Logical primacy (philosophy) and chronological primacy (politics) are not the same. Philosophy is the greater good but politics is the first and primary good because human beings can live only within a society. From this "aristocratic" perspective, Spinoza declares the primacy of the theoretical life, but the elements that constitute the logical primacy of the philosophical life are not the same as those that make up its chronological primacy, which corresponds to the political life. Spinoza's affirmation of the chronological primacy of the political life does not contradict his affirmation of the logical superiority of the theoretical life because the theoretical life, consisting of virtue and happiness, is the supreme good, even though it may not be the chronologically primary one.

Political life is necessary and, at a strictly political level (the level aimed at building a civil state), natural right must address the active and real life of the people and of the crowd, and not only the contemplative life of the philosopher. The state concerns the many and not the few (i.e., the philosophers), and so is realistically based on the presence of the two concepts of virtue already analyzed (virtue-reason and virtue-power). The civil state is both rational and natural. As Steven B. Smith has argued, the construction of the civil state would be impossible if Spinoza established a direct equivalence between natural right and the law of the strongest (as a crowd usually does, owing to the persistence of its imaginative life).²⁷ Spinoza rejects this equivalence between natural right and the law of the strongest. The civil state cannot rely on force and fraud, but also requires respect for freedom of thought and expression. He does not conceive the strongest as a single person, whose power, in the state of nature, is ineffective, given the constant

²⁶Spinoza, *Ethics*, IV, app., para. 4, 358.

²⁷Steven B. Smith, "Spinoza's Democratic Turn," *Review of Metaphysics* 48 (1994): 359–88.

precariousness to which everyone is exposed. Instead, “the strongest” corresponds to the greatest amount of power, irrespective of whether this refers to a single individual or to a large group of individuals. But the power of a single individual, however eminent, can only be equivalent to a small fraction of the power of a large group, both in amount and duration. A state founded on the power of all individuals is thus more powerful and rational than one founded on the power of a single individual.

But what differences exist, from the point of view of political philosophy and of natural right, between the several forms of the state, between a republic or a liberal democracy—which are the forms closest to the natural condition precisely because they respect natural equality—and a theocratic state or a tyranny? For Spinoza this rests on the political distinction between crowd (*vulgus*) and people (*populus*). This distinction is based not only on a different degree of imaginative capacity and thus of theoretical knowledge, but also on a different degree of comprehension of political knowledge. Both the crowd and the people lack intuitive knowledge. They are slaves to prejudices that make them unable to understand the true nature of things (for example, the geometric character of Nature, i.e., of God). Both the crowd and the people believe that God and all natural things act with a view to some aim,²⁸ and that natural things are done for them. Their judgment about natural things depends on their preference for them or on their rejection of them.²⁹ Regarding both the people and the crowd, then, the ignorance of true causes prevails:

We see therefore that all the notions whereby the common people are wont to explain Nature are merely modes of imagining, and denote not the nature of anything but only the constitution of the imagination. And because these notions have names as if they were the names of entities existing independently of the imagination I call them “entities of imagination” rather than “entities of reason.” So all arguments drawn from such notions against me can be easily refuted. . . . But [the arguments] are easily refuted. For the perfection of things should be measured solely from their own nature and power; nor are things more or less perfect to the extent that they please or offend human senses, serve or oppose human interests.³⁰

While the crowd is dominated by the first type of knowledge (imagination), the people manage to reach the second type of knowledge (reason). For Spinoza, the effect of the imaginative faculty on political life is frequently devastating: riots, inconstancy, prejudices, fury, hatred, anger, fraud, which result in death, pain, and misery on the individual and social level. This is the condition of the crowd which is dominated by fear, superstition, and vanity. Because the crowd lives in the shadow of imagination it is forever changeable

²⁸Spinoza, *Ethics*, I, app.; IV, pref.

²⁹Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, pref.

³⁰Spinoza, *Ethics*, I, app., 243.

and inconstant. The fundamental passion of the people is by contrast the desire for liberty. These two fundamental passions (fear and liberty) are present in two different types of political regime (tyranny, monarchy, and theocracy; and democracy and republic, respectively). And just as the desire for freedom is superior to fear, so the republic is superior to any form of absolute power. For Spinoza, politics can never be the realm of intuitive knowledge but it can be a realm of reason and not only of imagination.

Spinoza's answer to the question of the distinction between the crowd and the people emerges also in his realistic conception of political power. A state founded on absolute domination over the crowd (a theocracy or a tyranny) does not have the power of one in which the people form an active part of political action (as they do in a democracy or a republic). Despite the fact that *sub specie aeternitatis* theocracy and democracy are equally "natural," the true and stable power of human beings exists as power only in the rational state, which is to say in the democratic state, made up of a people that does not consist of plebeians, and which is strongly motivated by the desire for liberty for which it is prepared to fight. Only in the rational state is the power of the individual real and effective over a long period of time with a view to achieving peace and freedom. A state not governed by reason (monarchy, tyranny, or theocracy) does not safeguard for every individual the realization of his own *conatus*, his own natural power. A nonrational state is also precarious because it must be based only on the authoritarian force of the tyrant or hierocracy and is therefore subject to crises and riots. The state based on a free people which rules a democratic republic is, therefore, "more powerful" in the distinctly Spinozan sense than that based on a crowd dominated by the power of a tyrant since only democracy allows the full deployment of the power of each and every individual.

The imaginative life of the crowd is not capable, on its own, of guaranteeing the security of the state, which in this case is an authoritarian state, a theocracy or tyranny. It is impossible to achieve a political situation in which order and freedom, welfare and reason prevail if the political body simply consists of plebeians, individuals entirely subject to superstition and prejudice. Were the political body made up entirely of plebeians and thus completely governed by inconstancy and imagination it might be true that even a theocratic state or a tyranny could reflect the highest power of human beings to a great extent and over a considerable period of time. The problem of the stability of theocracies and tyrannies depends on the fact that they are not always formed only by plebeians. The political body is instead not always or wholly plebeian, since no human can renounce his freedom to think and judge forever. The rational state emerges as more solid and long-lasting than states based on mere superstition or force, especially when we are dealing with the power of a potentially "enlightened" people, one made up of free and equal human beings. The rational floor of democracy is therefore a more solid foundation for the state over the long run than any another regime type.

The identification of natural right with the rational state (democracy or republic) is effective only if the crowd transforms itself into a people, where freedom and equality are feelings that exist in individual minds and in social relationships. Spinoza's preference for the rational state can only be understood (and reconciled with his doctrine of natural right) if the people has freed itself from superstition and thus is no longer made up of plebeians enslaved to their imaginations (i.e., the condition of the crowd). It is evident, then, that the emotional life of plebeians (the condition making theocracy or tyranny possible) is invested with less power than the rational life of a democratic people. This said, it is difficult to free the crowd from its superstitions, which it maintains with perseverance and obstinacy:

Those who have experienced the fickleness of the crowds (*vulgus*) are almost reduced to despair; for the crowds are governed solely by their emotions, not by reason; they rush wildly into everything, and are readily corrupted either by avarice or by luxurious living. Every single man thinks he knows everything, and wants to fashion the world to his liking; he considers things to be fair or unfair, right or wrong, according as he judges them to be to his profit or loss. Vanity makes him despise his equals, nor will he be guided by them. Through envy of superior fame or fortune—which is never equal for all men—he desires another's misfortune and takes pleasure therein.³¹

The case of the people is quite different. Although not made up of philosophers capable of knowing the true causes of things, the citizens who make up democracy live according to reason just as they live according to Nature, according to their own usefulness, maintaining that mutual equality which characterized the state of nature.³² The passions continue to have a central role in political life, but, crucially, without the polemical excesses in the crowd. As Susan James has argued, in the people there is less wild inconstancy in the range of its emotional mutability.³³ The rational state is real and at the same time virtuous because it realizes the desire for liberty in the mutual respect of each individual. Virtue, reason, and freedom are the only ways to achieve human happiness in political and social terms precisely because in individual terms the only true human happiness is the contemplative life.

Democracy, or republic, consists of a union of all human beings who collectively have full right to everything within their power. Such a state has

³¹Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, XVII, 537–38. For such a critical interpretation of the crowd elsewhere in Spinoza, see *Theological-Political Treatise*, pref.; *Ethics*, I, Prop. 36, app.; IV, pref.; IV, Prop. 58.

³²For a thoughtful discussion of the relationship between equality and hierarchy in Spinoza's political theory, see Beth Lord, "Spinoza, Equality, and Hierarchy," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 31 (2014): 59–77.

³³Susan James, *Spinoza on Learning to Live Together* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 137–53.

absolute power over its citizens, but this power is realized in full respect of the individual's natural right. Moreover, no one will ever be able to transfer to rulers—and not even to the community—his own right and his power, to the point of no longer being able to use the faculty of thinking and of public speaking. In a democracy it is impossible—and counterproductive—to prevent the free expression of thought. The aim of the democratic state is not to dominate citizens with fear, but to free everyone from the fear characteristic of the state of nature, while the purpose of living in peace and security is to secure the good of every individual. But fear is the characteristic condition of the monarchy, of the theocracy, and of tyranny in which the crowd lives. With the social contract, individuals have renounced acting out of their own will, but not thinking, judging, and speaking. Therefore, while everyone is forbidden to act against the decrees of the state, everyone is free to think and express himself, even against such decrees, on the condition that he leaves the faculty of political decisions to the common power and does not oppose its decrees with action.³⁴

Spinoza's political philosophy allows us to distinguish the people from the crowd. The welfare of the people requires peace at any price, but also demands a peace that entails the constitutive presence of other social goods, such as freedom, rationality, welfare, and mutual respect, as Andrea Sangiacomo has maintained.³⁵ Theocracy and tyranny could guarantee peace, but this would only be the peace of the desert. Spinoza describes the political limits of the crowd's political action, but for him the crowd can become the people. A considerable part of the Spinoza literature tends not to distinguish between the people and the crowd in this way, using a single image or concept (generally the people) to indicate the social life of individuals.³⁶ As noted above, other authors use the term "multitude" to indicate how Spinoza can be considered the theorist of radical democracy (in a pre-Marxian sense). In both cases, the Spinoza literature does not grasp the criticism that Spinoza levels at the crowd as passive subject of political action and as social actor incapable of rational knowledge. This article reaffirms the image of Spinoza as supporter of democracy and of republics, without forgetting that the crowd is the object of his contempt and that the people, however "enlightened," remain incapable of true knowledge.

³⁴Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, XX.

³⁵Andrea Sangiacomo, *Spinoza on Reason, Passions and the Supreme Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

³⁶Alexandre Matheron, *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1969); Stanislas Breton, *Spinoza: Théologie et politique* (Paris: Desclée, 1977); Sylvain Zac, *Philosophie, théologie et politique dans l'oeuvre de Spinoza* (Paris: Vrin, 1979); Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Philosophie pratique* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1981).

4. The Philosopher: The Contemplative Life beyond the Political Life

For Spinoza, the philosopher lives within human societies but on their threshold, in the condition of a “stranger,” which distinguishes him from both the crowd and the people.³⁷ The philosopher’s virtue is of a theoretical type (characterizing the contemplative life), while the virtue of a human being—a ruler or a simple citizen—is of a practical or political type (i.e., the *vita activa*).

We have seen that the distinction between the crowd and the people is valid above all on the political level. The distinction is also effective in Spinoza’s theory of knowledge, because all human beings live unaware of the true causes of things (the necessity of Nature) even at the moment in which they seek their own profit. Furthermore, they choose between evil and good not beginning from the guidance of reason and of knowledge but because they are dominated by their fear and superstition.³⁸ Their changing minds and hearts are at times prey to doubt and at other times to vanity, as well as to fear or presumption, depending on the good or bad luck which characterizes human affairs. They are inclined to believe anything can be useful to appease their anxiety in the face of danger or to reinforce their vainglory. From this condition of ignorance it follows that human beings believe on the political level in “images” and “dreams,” because they do not know the true causes of their own wills. Moreover, human beings always act with a view to a purpose, their own immediate utility.

The philosopher, who seeks the true causes of phenomena and strives to understand the foundation of natural things—regardless of established ideas or common prejudices—is often declared a heretic or impious by the common people and their rulers, who base their power on the ignorance of human beings.³⁹ Such individuals misunderstand the necessary nature of things: “By God’s power the common people understand free will and God’s right over all things that are, which things are therefore commonly considered as contingent. . . . God acts by the same necessity whereby he understands himself. . . . God’s power is nothing but God’s essence in action.”⁴⁰ Only the philosopher knows the truth of the relation between *potentia* and *actus* in Nature (i.e., in God) that corresponds to the knowledge of causes. The individual can only be fickle and changeable, prey to his own self-satisfaction and vainglory, not only on the epistemological level, but also on the political level and in relation to religious questions. Human beings believe themselves to be free because it appears legitimate to instantly obey the

³⁷For a careful discussion of the social and political significance of philosophy in Spinoza’s thought see Mogens Laerke, *Spinoza and the Freedom of Philosophizing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

³⁸Spinoza, *Ethics*, IV, Prop. LXIII sch.; *Theological-Political Treatise*, pref.

³⁹Spinoza, *Ethics*, I, app.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, II, Prop. 3 sch., 245.

passions.⁴¹ But conditioned by weakness of the soul and the impotence of reason, they become slaves to fear and superstition and thus are not truly free. Individuals are troubled by external causes and for this reason live unaware of the nature of reality. They are therefore unable to access the bliss of the soul. Such human beings are not masters of themselves but at the mercy of luck.

For Spinoza this consideration introduces a clear and irremediable contrast between the philosopher, the completely rational and wise human being capable of mastering his passions, and the crowd and the people. Only the philosopher is truly free, in the authentic sense, and only the philosopher is able to reach the third and highest level of knowledge, which is intuitive knowledge.⁴² The advantage, or rather the priority, of the wise over the ignorant depends on his *potentia* and not on his spiritual *habitus*.⁴³ The first and only foundation of virtue is the search for one's own profit, which here coincides with the pursuit of knowledge, that is, with the rational understanding of Nature, and in not being overwhelmed by one's passions.⁴⁴ However, Spinoza does not pose the problem of a difference between "human natures" or of a classification between social classes, but rather of the capacity to realize the possibilities present (*in potentia*) in every human being, without distinction of rank: "So the highest good of those who pursue virtue is to know God; this is a good that is common to all men and can be possessed equally by all men insofar as they are of the same nature."⁴⁵

It is important to underline the expression "the same nature." According to Spinoza, human nature is unique but not all men can become philosophers. Some of them will remain part of the people or of the crowd. The philosopher desires the good not only for himself but also for other human beings, because the philosopher aspires to the happiness of beatitude. However, unlike the common human being, dominated by his passions, the free human being—guided by reason—chooses the good not on the basis of fear but for the sake of the good itself. Moreover, he does not aim at the benefits offered by the ignorant but rather at friendship with other free human beings. From this perspective, beatitude is not a reward of moral or political virtue but coincides with philosophical virtue. As Sylvain Zac has argued, Spinoza distinguishes between the essence of human being (*conatus*) and the goal of human being (knowledge).⁴⁶

The wise man suffers scarcely any disturbance of spirit, but being conscious, by virtue of a certain eternal necessity, of himself, of God and of

⁴¹Ibid., IV, Prop. 58; V, Prop. XLI sch.

⁴²Ibid., IV, Props. 67–73.

⁴³Ibid., V, pref.

⁴⁴Ibid., V, Prop. XLI proof.

⁴⁵Ibid., IV, Prop. 36, 338. Cf. also IV, Prop. 37.

⁴⁶Sylvain Zac, "The Relation between Life, Conatus and Virtue in Spinoza's Philosophy," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 19 (1996): 151–73.

things, never ceases to be, but always possesses true spiritual contentment. If the road I have pointed out as leading to this goal seems very difficult, yet it can be found. Indeed, what is so rarely discovered is bound to be hard. For if salvation were ready to hand and could be discovered without great toil, how could it be that it is almost universally neglected? All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.⁴⁷

Conclusion

Among the many things to emerge from Spinoza's political philosophy, at least two deserve mention here. The first relates to the relationship between philosophy and politics, between the philosopher and the city, in which it remains important to distinguish the crowd from the people. Does the philosopher have to conform to the opinions of the civic community to which he belongs or, on the contrary, does his task consist in questioning the prejudices, the stereotypes that derive from tradition (including democratic tradition) and religion, even at the cost of his own life? Socrates's existential trajectory, in its tragic nature but at the same time its coherence, remains the best example of the fraught relationship between philosophy and the city. The second element is Spinoza's distinction between crowd and people. This expresses the contradictory character of contemporary democracy, in which freedom and well-being are widespread goods, but in which a mass culture dominates and becomes, especially in the world of social media, an almost absolute ideology. For this reason, it is necessary to ask whether crowds or peoples actually live in contemporary democracies.

These problems remain alive, in a political situation dominated by the crisis of the modern form of liberal democracy, by the dangers of conformity and cultural homologation, and by the risk posed by new populisms and new dictatorships, in which it is difficult to distinguish between the crowd and the people. Returning to Spinoza will not furnish us with solutions to the problems of our moment, but it can help us to frame, grasp, and interpret them more fully and consciously.

⁴⁷Spinoza, *Ethics*, V, Prop. XLII sch., 382.