



# "A Response to Jonathan Israel: Spinoza's Paradoxical Radicalism"

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## A Response to Jonathan Israel: Spinoza's Paradoxical Radicalism

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On the opening page of his contribution, Jonathan Israel defines the “Radical Enlightenment” as “an intellectual tendency combining two fundamental components: rejection of religious authority from law, politics, and education, on the one hand, together with democratizing republican social and political programs, on the other.” From this point of view, Israel characterizes Spinoza’s philosophy, in the framework of the *cercle spinoziste*, as “subversive”<sup>1</sup> and even “revolutionary.”<sup>2</sup> Of course, for each of us today, just as for preceding centuries,

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<sup>1</sup> Israel writes: “One sees then, given this Spinozist framework, that there is nothing at all forced or artificial about postulating as a fundamental and defining feature of the Radical Enlightenment its tying its assault on ecclesiastical power to a wider propensity to social and political *subversion*.” He then further claims: “The *cercle spinoziste* was a network forged by political and social crisis from which a common pool of ideas emerged. They were not a study circle simply imbibing the ideas of Spinoza, but a questioning, reforming, *subversive* creative network active in many spheres of study and the arts.” (our italics for “subversion,” etc.)

<sup>2</sup> Israel reveals the connection between the Spinoza’s ideas and the “revolutionary era” that begins at the end of the eighteenth-century, making numerous references to the French and American Revolutions. He considers Spinoza’s philosophy (as well as the philosophy of Spinoza’s *cercle*) as intrinsically revolutionary: “In British and American work on Spinoza since the start of the new millennium there has been an increased willingness to accept, or at least consider, the idea of Spinoza as a central figure in the Western Enlightenment and a

Spinoza's philosophy has something "subversive" or "revolutionary" to it – and this is why historically this philosophy has been so loved or so hated. However, it seems to me that the radical dimension of Spinoza's philosophy can be seen as distinct from his "rejection of religious authority from law, politics, and education," and the concomitant "democratizing of republican social and political programs." The thesis I will defend here, in effect, is that the "radical" dimension of Spinoza's philosophy is rather tied up with the "conservative" and "relativistic" features of his philosophy than with its "subversive" or "revolutionary" features: and this is why I think we can correctly speak of Spinoza's "paradoxical" radicalism.<sup>3</sup>

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Describing Spinoza's political thought as subversive obliges us, it seems to me, to ask why Spinoza so consistently and so vigorously denigrates the very idea of "subversion", or what he usually refers to as acts of "rebellion" [*seditio, rebellio*], "obstinacy" or "stubbornness" [*contumacia*], and "disobedience" [*inobedientia*]. The references are innumerable, and all point in the same direction. Indeed, Spinoza reserves a particularly negative judgment for "rebellions", as many quite explicit passages from the *Political Treatise* show.<sup>4</sup> The most striking and

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*revolutionary* force [...]"; Again: "It was ultimately a consequence of an uncompromising separation of philosophy and theology that enabled Spinoza and his circle to integrate the social and political dimensions of their thought to their naturalistic metaphysics in a *revolutionary* new manner." Israel repeats his claim in the last sentence of his paper: "Radical Enlightenment is about *revolutionizing* all philosophy, politics, society, morality, and education by decisively and irrevocably changing the relationship between the individual and authority, between learning and "ignorance", and between theologians and social reality." (our italics for "revolution," etc.)

<sup>3</sup> The theses I present here were progressively developed over the course of my other works on Spinoza, from Charles Ramond, *Qualité et quantité dans la philosophie de Spinoza* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1995) to Charles Ramond, *Spinoza contemporain: Philosophie, Éthique, Politique* (Paris: Harmattan, 2016). In 2002, François Zourabichvili published *Le conservatisme paradoxal de Spinoza: Enfance et royauté* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France). My reading of Spinoza is very different from Zourabichvili's, but the expression "paradoxical conservatism" suits it well.

<sup>4</sup> See the following passages: *TP*, ch. v, §2: "For certainly we should impute *rebellions*, wars, and contempt for, or violation of, the laws not so much to the wickedness of the subjects as to the corruption of the state. [...] For a civil order which hasn't eliminated the causes of *rebellions*, where you constantly have to fear war, and where the laws are frequently violated, is not that different from the state of nature, where everyone lives according to his own mentality, his life always in great danger."; *TP*, ch. vii, §12: "As soon as the citizens allow mercenary troops to be engaged—men whose trade is war and whose power is greatest when there is dissension and *rebellion*—they're completely reduced to subjection and lay the foundation for eternal warfare."; *TP*, ch. vii, §13: "This would lead to great inequality among the citizens, and so to envy, constant grumbling, and finally, to rebellions. These would not be unwelcome to Kings eager to be the master."; *TP*, ch. x, §3: "In addition, the authority of the Tribunes against the Patricians was defended by the support of the plebeians. Whenever they

significant of these is the passage where Spinoza discusses “Hannibal’s virtue.” There, Spinoza notes that “it is rightly credited to Hannibal’s exceptional virtue that there was never any rebellion in his army” [*merito eximia virtuti ducitur quod in ipsius exercitu nulla unquam seditio orta fuerit*].<sup>5</sup> “Rebellion” [*seditio*] appears, therefore, to be the very contrary of what political virtue permits.

The word *contumacia* – “obstinacy” or “stubbornness” (in Edwin Curley’s translation), or, again, “insubmission” – appears in the last lines of the Preface to the *Theological-Political Treatise*, carrying with it a solemnly negative connotation: “And I know,” writes Spinoza, “finally, that what the common people call constancy is obstinacy [*novi denique constantiam vulgi contumaciam esse*]. It’s not governed by reason, but carried away by an impulse to praise or to blame. I don’t ask the common people [*vulgus*] to read these things, nor anyone else who is struggling with the same affects as the common people.”<sup>6</sup> The “obstinate” reader is asked to close the book. “Obstinacy” is meant to designate that which is worst in collective human behavior,<sup>7</sup> just like “disobedience” characterizes that which is worst in individual human behavior. Evoking the myth of Nero’s murder of his mother, Agrippina the Younger, Spinoza writes in Ep. 23 to Blyenbergh that “What then was Nero’s knavery? Nothing but this: he showed by that act that he was ungrateful, without compassion, and *disobedient* [*inobediens*].”<sup>8</sup>

The contemporary reader is likely to be surprised to find the qualifier “disobedient” [*inobediens*] following “ungrateful” and “without compassion,” and, as it were, surpassing them in the hierarchy of horror (it is the ultimate adjective in the sentence, and with it ends the sentence.) It is in effect hard to understand why “disobedience,” perhaps a venial sin (when it is not praised), would be invoked to characterize the odious nature of an act to this degree so odious. But still, the fact is there: whether we want to accept it or not, Spinoza considers “disobedience” to be the worst thing about Nero’s matricide.

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called upon the plebeians, they seemed to promote *sedition* rather than convene a Council. These disadvantages have no place in the state we’ve described in the preceding two Chapters.” (our italics.)

<sup>5</sup> *TP*, ch. v, §3

<sup>6</sup> *TTP*, pref., §33 [G III 12, ll. 13-14].

<sup>7</sup> So, Moses declares, addressing himself to the Hebrews: “For I know your rebelliousness and your stubbornness [*rebellionem et contumaciam*]. If you have been rebels against God while I lived among you, how much more will you be rebels after my death.” [*TTP*, ch. xvii, §105 / G III 219, ll. 25-26]

<sup>8</sup> Ep. 23 [G IV 147, ll. 8-14]. The Latin reads: “*Quodnam ergo Neronis scelus? Non aliud, quam quod hoc facinore ostenderet se ingratum, immisericordium, ac inobedientem esse.*”

This critique of “disobedience” is systematized by the more general thesis of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, an anti-rebellion treatise, according to which the salvation of the ignorant by “obedience” is the central and primary aim of Scripture.

The *Theological-Political Treatise* teaches us that the priests, broadly construed, are interested in sowing discord and provoking *rebellions* [*seditiones*], insofar as revolts weaken state and thereby allow for the priesthood to grow stronger. The mob or crowd [*vulgus*], hysterical, unconscious, blind, easily manipulated, inconstant, and furious, is the agent of such rebellions. The free man at the end of the *Theological-Political Treatise* is not opposed to political authority per se, but to the rebellious crowd that’s been riled up by the priesthood. To provoke a rebellion, it suffices for the priests to proclaim that the sacred texts teach something theoretical – say, about God’s nature, or about any other thing for that matter – and that believing in the truth of the revealed, theoretical knowledge is paramount. With this in hand, the state is divided and becomes fragile. In effect, if the common people come to think that their beliefs have a public import, the specialists of holy texts will have greater and greater influence. Certain opinions or beliefs will be held as valid and saintly even, whereas others will be forbidden and cursed. Following the ruination of the freedom of belief, liars, tricksters, hypocrites, and false prophets of all sorts will begin to appear in droves, as will resistance to this form of oppression, and with resistance, discord, quarrels, seditions, divisions, and, finally, the destruction of the state.

Having described the sickness in this way, Spinoza’s proposed remedy in the *Theological-Political Treatise* – which, in this sense, is clearly an anti-rebellion treatise – consists in showing that, contrary appearances notwithstanding, Scripture actually teaches nothing with regards to matters of faith, and has only a practical aim or teaching, which consists in inspiring the “true way of life.” Just like the Christ did when protecting the adulterous woman from the crowd of men (“he who is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her”), Spinoza’s thesis, *that beliefs have no importance*, intends to disarm the hostile crowd. In effect, if we admit with Spinoza that Scripture teaches nothing about God’s nature, nor anything regarding any other speculative matter, therefore opinions and beliefs, all at once, are liberated. The freedom to think what one wants and to say what one thinks, the veritable object of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, becomes effective. The “priests” lose their grip on opinions. There are no longer any sacred or heretical opinions. There is no longer any reason to battle over beliefs, and the state ceases being weakened or divided. The question is not therefore to know what people “believe”, but to know whether they “obey” the sovereign power’s orders. Everything is therefore brought back to the question of obedience, such an important question in the *Theological-Political Treatise* that it makes explicit the link between the chapters consecrated to the interpretation of Scripture and the chapters consecrated to the freedom of thought.

The thesis is ceaselessly taken back up in the most explicit fashion: “the purpose of Scripture,” writes Spinoza, “was not to teach the sciences, because [...] it requires nothing from men but obedience [*nihil praeter obedientiam eandem ab hominibus exigere*], and condemns only stubbornness, not ignorance [*solanque contumaciam, non autem ignorantiam damnare*]”.<sup>9</sup> The end of Chapter 13 regroups all beliefs into only two categories of behavior: those which show “obedience,” and those which show “stubbornness” or “insubmission.” This is the supreme criteria, and the condemnation of insubmission is without any equivocation in this particularly remarkable passage:

a person believes something piously only insofar as his opinions move him to obedience, and impiously only insofar as he takes a license from them to sin or rebel [*licentiam ad peccandum aut rebellandum sumit*]. So if anyone becomes stiff-necked by believing truths [*si quis vera credendo fiat contumax*], he is really impious [*impium <habet fidem>*]; on the other hand, if he becomes obedient [*obediens*] by believing falsehoods, he has a pious faith [*pium habet fidem*].<sup>10</sup>

In the *Political Treatise*, Spinoza also identifies disobedience as a form of “sin” against the state, which is to say he views disobedience as a major political fault, as opposed to “obedience,” which he explicitly associates with what is “good,” “right,” and “the common decree”: “Sin [*peccatum*]”, writes Spinoza, “[...] is what can’t be done rightly, or [*sive*] what’s prohibited by law. And obedience [*obsequium*] is a constant will to do what by law is good and what the common decree says ought to be done.”<sup>11</sup> “Sin” and “disobedience” are therefore equivalent. This is also true of the only passage in the *Ethics* where Spinoza uses the term “disobedience” [*inobedientia*]. There, once again, “sin” is associated with “disobedience” whereas “obedience” is held as a “merit”: “Sin, therefore, is nothing but disobedience [*est itaque peccatum nihil aliud, quam inobedientia*],” writes Spinoza, “which for that reason can be punished only by the law of the State. On the other hand, obedience is considered a merit in a Citizen [*et contra obedientia Civi meritum ducitur*], because on that account he is judged worthy of enjoying the advantages of the State.”<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, the *Theological-Political Treatise* cannot be considered as a “subversive” text, in that it would be “anti-religious,” though it has often been held as such. In fact, exactly the opposite is true. The application of his new method of interpretation in the central part of the *Theological-Political Treatise* allows Spinoza to reveal the fundamental, unique, and simple message of

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<sup>9</sup> *TTP*, ch. xiii, §7 [G III 168, ll.11-14]. Dan Garber, in his contribution to this volume, underlines the importance of these passages of the *TTP* for his own reading. I was myself very happy to notice this convergence.

<sup>10</sup> *TTP*, ch. xiii, §29 [G III 172, ll. 20-25].

<sup>11</sup> *TP*, ch. ii, §19.

<sup>12</sup> *E4p37s2*.

Scripture: *obedience to the true way of life is the path to salvation*.<sup>13</sup> With his careful and scrupulous study of a considerable number of passages of Scripture, Spinoza shows, in effect, that just as much as the sacred texts diverge, contradict themselves, or are simply confused on a number of points that concern theoretical matters (i.e. the nature or activity of God), they are likewise in perfect agreement about salvation by obedience. And what could be more logical, since Scripture is addressed to anybody, and therefore everybody? “Everyone, without exception, can obey [*omnes absolute obedire possunt*]. But only a very few [...] acquire a habit of virtue from the guidance of reason alone.”<sup>14</sup>

The Spinozist method leads in this way to revealing the essentially behaviorist and externalist character of Scripture’s teaching. Likewise, in stark contrast with charity, a behavioral and external virtue par excellence, faith and internal virtues are practically entirely effaced from Scripture.<sup>15</sup> Scripture shows therefore that “obedience” to the true way of life is the behavioral and externalist criteria of the value of belief, just like “works” [*opera*] are the criteria of “faith”<sup>16</sup>: “Who does not see,” declares Spinoza, “that each Testament is nothing but a training in obedience? [*Quis enim non videt utrumque Testamentum nihil esse praeter obedientiae disciplinam?*]”<sup>17</sup> Scripture, read attentively, always folds “faith” back onto “obedience”: “the Gospel [...] contains nothing but simple faith: to trust in God, and to revere him, *or* (what is the same thing) [*sive quod idem est*], to obey Him [*Deo obedire*].”<sup>18</sup> And thus, faith, in Scripture, is “not saving by itself, but only in relation to obedience.”<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, the lesson of Scripture is that “faith requires, not so much true doctrines, as pious doctrines, i.e., doctrines which move the heart to obedience.”<sup>20</sup>

Spinoza, thus, does not reveal the factual errors, the confusions, the obscurities, or even the contradictions of Scripture as a means of destroying

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<sup>13</sup> *TTP*, ch. xiii, title: “That Scripture teaches only the simplest matters, that it aims only at obedience [*Scripturam [...] nec aliud praeter obedientiam intendere*], and teaches nothing about the divine Nature, except what men can imitate by a certain manner of living [*certa vivendi ratione*].”

<sup>14</sup> *TTP*, ch. xv, §45 [G III 188, ll. 26-30].

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *TTP*, ch. xiii, §22 [G III 171, ll. 15-18]: *Denique Johannis [...] Deum per solam charitatem explicat, concluditque eum revera Deum habere et noscere, qui charitatem habet.*

<sup>16</sup> *TTP*, ch. xiii, §29 [G III 172, ll. 18-19]: “So we must not for a moment believe that opinions [*opiniones*], considered in themselves and *without regard to works* [*absque respectu ad opera*], have any piety or impiety in them.” (my italics.)

<sup>17</sup> *TTP*, ch. xiv, §6 [G III 174, ll. 9-11].

<sup>18</sup> *TTP*, ch. xiv, § [G III 174, ll. 17-19].

<sup>19</sup> *TTP*, ch. xiv, §14 [G III 175, ll. 18-19]: *Fidem non per se, sed tantum ratione obedientiae salutiferam esse.* The entire following passage insists on the central role of obedience for “faith” and for “works.”

<sup>20</sup> *TTP*, ch. xiv, §20 [G III 176 ll. 18-19]: *Sequitur denique fidem non tam requirere vera quam pia dogmata, hoc est, talia, quae animum ad obedientiam movent.*

religion. Rather, quite the contrary: his aim is to say show? that even if each Testament is bugged by countless obscurities and contradictions from the point of view of speculative or theoretical understanding, nevertheless Scripture does not contain any obscurity with regards to its essential feature, that is to say salvation by obedience to the true way of life. Far from being a critique of religion, the *Theological-Political Treatise* shows that Scripture delivers an irreplaceable message, because it is inaccessible to reason and to philosophy. Like Alexandre Matheron showed in his work *Le Christ et le salut des ignorants*, Spinoza confesses his inability to make sense of how the ignorant can be saved, since such a claim runs against the grain of his own philosophy (that is to say, for him, it would be contrary to reason). Yet, not only does Spinoza, by means of his method of interpretation, show this claim to be present in Scripture itself, but moreover he admits its truth as much as he can, and describes it as a “moral certainty”: “I maintain unconditionally,” writes Spinoza, “that the natural light cannot discover this fundamental tenet of Theology – or at least that no one yet has demonstrated it. So revelation has been most necessary [*revelationem maxime necessariam fuisse*]. Nevertheless, I maintain that we can use our judgment, so that we accept what has already been revealed with at least moral certainty [*morali certitudine*].”<sup>21</sup>

Far from having “drastically demoted theology and religion,” like Richard Popkins claims, having “cast them out of the rational world,”<sup>22</sup> Spinoza, in a sense, humiliates reason in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, forcing it to accept, with a “moral” certainty (though this is only “moral”, a moral certainty is, for Early Modern philosophers, a very high degree of certainty), the need to give way to a “revelation” that it cannot understand, demonstrate, nor even integrate into its own system. Like Feuerbach will later do, Spinoza lowers theology, without a doubt, but only in order to elevate religion. Few philosophers have found so much clarity and power in Scripture’s message. Likewise, few have so clearly shown the necessity of revelation, giving it such a warm welcome. Theologians who for centuries now have tried to show that Spinoza “was attacking religion,” were only defending their own interests, as is often the case, at the cost of truth, and we do not have any reason to borrow their discourses today.

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Seeing Spinoza as a “subversive” philosopher obligates us, furthermore, to explain why he shows himself so constantly and explicitly conservative in political matters. If we accept that the *Political Treatise*, Spinoza’s last work, is the culmination of his thoughts about political matters, we must also recognize that his ultimate preoccupation was to schematize political regimes that would be

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<sup>21</sup> *TTP*, ch. xv, §27 [G III 185, ll. 23-28].

<sup>22</sup> Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism, from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 325.



as “durable” as possible and that would best resist any potential crisis, upheaval, reversal or rebellion.

In effect, with the *Political Treatise*, Spinoza’s project is to propose reforms (or models) for monarchic, aristocratic, and democratic regimes that would permit each of these regimes to “last” as long as possible. So, at the beginning of *Political Treatise*, ch. viii, we read: “So far we’ve discussed the Monarchic State. Now we’ll say how an Aristocratic State should be organized so that it can *last*.”<sup>23</sup> In the *Political Treatise* at least, Spinoza does not aim to propose a history (or, even less, a dialectic) of political regimes. His gesture, rather, is conservative. It consists in trying to build model regimes that would be as long-lasting as a possible, like permanent great structures, each stable in their own way. Chapter 10 shows this very clearly, which acts as a general cross-check after the long developments of the two preceding chapters on aristocratic regimes. Returning to his own model aristocracy, Spinoza asks if it is well-balanced and capable of lasting perennially (which is to ask if it fulfills the basic need of any regime to remain stable), or if there still subsists some “inherent defect” which could cause it to be “dissolved” or “changed into another form.”<sup>24</sup> To measure its strength, Spinoza raises what he takes to be the strongest possible objections against his proposed model regime. Then, convinced that the regime he proposes would be able to respond victoriously to such “objections,”<sup>25</sup> he concludes the chapter, and with it his remarks on aristocracy, as if in a fit of triumphal pride: “I can assert unconditionally, then [*possum igitur absolute affirmare*],” declares Spinoza, “that both a state which one city alone controls, and especially a state which several cities control, is everlasting [*aeternum esse*], or can’t be dissolved or changed into another form by any internal cause [*sive nulla interna causa posse dissolvi aut in aliam formam mutari*].” Evidently, Spinoza takes great delight (which explains his general carelessness, with respect to the rest of his philosophy, when he describes the singular thing in question as “eternal”) in the idea that through patience and hard work he has succeeded in his political project with respect to aristocratic regimes.

This political conservatism – Spinoza’s effort to build long-lasting regimes – is, besides, only the result of Spinoza’s broader philosophical valorization of duration.

“Duration” is defined as “an indefinite continuation of existing [*duratio est indefinita existendi continuatio*].”<sup>26</sup> Likewise, he definition of the *conatus* by the

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<sup>23</sup> TP, ch. viii, §1: “*Huc usque de imperio monarchico. Qua autem ratione aristocraticum instituendum sit, ut **permanere** possit, hic jam dicemus*” [my boldface].

<sup>24</sup> TP, ch. x, §1, beginning.

<sup>25</sup> TP, ch. x, §10: “But here’s another objection someone might make [*At objici nobis adhuc potest*] [...],” and, later, “To reply to this Objection, I say first [*sed ut huic objectioni respondeam, dico primo*].”

<sup>26</sup> E2d5.

“perseverance in being”<sup>27</sup> means that the notions of duration and self-preservation are endowed with universal ontological value. The duration of a singular thing thus becomes the scale for measuring its *conatus*. Absolutely speaking, of course, any singular thing could indefinitely prolong its own existence.<sup>28</sup> But due to the nature of their respective encounters, singular things possessing a more powerful *conatus* than others will last longer than others, the hierarchy of powers being measured according to the hierarchy of durations. In the last lines of the *Ethics*,<sup>29</sup> Spinoza explicitly writes that the wise man, “being by a certain eternal necessity, conscious of himself, and of God, and of things, never ceases to be [*nunquam esse desinit*].” It is not forbidden to take this claim literally, as an affirmation of the indefinite prolongation of the wise man’s existence. Were the wise men of Antiquity not always represented as enjoying a particularly long life? And is the spectacular augmentation of the average human lifespan over the course of recent centuries in developed countries not also the sign of the augmentation of humanity’s power?

This valorization of duration is also to be found in the domain of Spinoza’s theory of understanding. Spinoza makes the possibility of pursuing some line of thought “without interruption” a criteria of its rational value: “when the mind attends to a thought,” Spinoza writes in *the Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* at §104 “– to weigh it, and deduce from it, in good order, the things legitimately to be deduced from it – if it is false, the mind will uncover the falsity; but if it is true, *the mind will continue successfully* [*sin autem vera, tum feliciter perget*], *without any interruption*, to deduce true things from it” (my italics). This property of valid deductions to be able to “continue successfully, without any interruption,” is, by all evidence, one instantiation of the claim that “the truth is the standard both of itself and of the false.”<sup>30</sup> Spinoza already had made a note of this at TIE §44, where he declared that: “to prove the truth and good reasoning, we require no tools except the truth itself and good reasoning. For I have proved, and still strive to prove, good reasoning by good reasoning [*nam bonum ratiocinium bene ratiocinando comprobavi, et adhuc probare conor*].” For Spinoza, therefore, with respect to our understanding and to life in general, perseverance in being is indissociably a criterion of both rationality and power: an indefinite chain of consequences itself attests to the validity of the reasoning, just like, without a doubt, the indefinite prolongation of some life would itself attest to an incomparably great power.

Logically, the same claims are therefore present in Spinoza’s political philosophy. We have seen that Spinoza valorizes the *duration* of political regimes,

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<sup>27</sup> E3p6: “Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being [*Unaquaeque res, quantum in se est, in suo esse perseverare conatur*].”

<sup>28</sup> E3p8.

<sup>29</sup> E5p42s.

<sup>30</sup> E2p43s.

such as with respect to the durability of the model aristocracy in the *Political Treatise*. From this point of view, the superiority of democracy consists not in its moral superiority, or in the “values” it embodies. Rather, democratic regimes are superior in virtue of the fact that democratic regimes are particularly stable, much more so than despotic regimes (Spinoza speaks of the “Turks”), insofar as the agreement among the citizenry, inner peace and stability, are constantly renewed within them. For Spinoza, clearly, democracy is not the *imperium absolutum* because it is subversive. Rather, a well-built democratic regime is the *imperium absolutum* because it is the most stable kind of regime, which is to say it is the most stable, the most powerful, the most long-lasting, the most capable of persevere in its being, and of self-preservation. Just as the formalism of the *more geometrico* leads to “human freedom” by means of the power of the understanding, so does the formalism of democratic counting allow for political freedom –and peace. Indeed, since it is always possible to know which opinions receives the greatest number of votes, the law of counting allows for the peaceful resolution of the quasi-totality of all conflicts.

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It was probably inevitable, given the historical context of Early Modernity, that a critique of theology would be mistaken as a critique of religion, and that a conservative defense of democracy would be misapprehended as a willful desire to subvert monarchies. If therefore the belief in the subversive or radical dimension of Spinoza’s philosophy happened to depend on some kinds of misunderstandings, these misunderstandings necessary, and, regardless, as is often the case with respect to error and belief, they have not failed in producing powerful effects.

Nevertheless, a Spinozism of “salvation by obedience” and “perseverance in being” possesses, paradoxically enough, a radical emancipatory force that has maybe not yet produced all of its effects even with respect to actually existent political and social structures. If we admit that all the talk of “values” constantly invoked in our democracies (such as with the motto of the French Republic: “liberté, égalité, fraternité”) is but some leftover, in the form of transcendent contemporary morality, of ancient religious transcendence, then the Spinozist conception of democracy, strictly immanent and relativist in its goals to maximize its duration, reveals itself to be a horizon our democracies are far from having reached.

To diminish the power of the theologians, the *Theological-Political Treatise* maintained that beliefs have no importance, and that only behavior and works count in matters of religion. In this sense, the valorization of “obedience” to the true way of life was only the other face of indifference about opinions. This same indifference about opinions is present, in a striking way, in Spinozist democratic politics. In effect, his conception of democracy as an *imperium absolutum* is but the spectacular outcome of Spinoza’s entirely quantitative

conception of *Natura naturata* or “singular things.” “Each thing, as far as it can by its own power [*quantum in se est*], strives to persevere in its being.”<sup>31</sup> All reality is a *quantum*. From this point of view, it is easy to understand the Spinoza’s enthusiasm for democracy, which is itself nothing but the pure, immanent law of counting. Democracy, when it is “absolute,” does not depend on a “value” or preestablished transcendence. Democratic rights are not submitted to a superior morality but depend entirely on elections and on counting. “The power of a state, and hence its *right*, are to be reckoned by the *number* of its citizens,” declares Spinoza in the *Political Treatise*,<sup>32</sup> submitting in this way all juridical laws to the exclusively political law of counting. Spinoza may very well be a theoretician of “natural right”; he maintains nevertheless that “justice” and “injustice” cannot precede laws, or transcend them, but that they depend on and derive entirely from the state’s existence: “Therefore, like sin and obedience, taken strictly, so also justice and injustice can be conceived only in a state.”<sup>33</sup> Justice and injustice themselves no longer possessing any transcendent value, obedience to the law can, paradoxically, become emancipatory: I obey the law because it is the law and not because it is good. There is no sense, anyway, in speaking of “good” or “bad” laws, or “just” and “unjust” laws, because there only exist laws that were “voted” or “non-voted” by a majority. Spinoza opens the way to a democracy without values, a democracy that would separate itself from morality, having already been separated from religion. Each one of us can measure the radicality of such positions by looking at the spontaneous resistance that they create in us: so difficult is it to deliver ourselves totally from the taste for transcendence!

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<sup>31</sup> E3p6.

<sup>32</sup> TP, ch. vii, §18: “*Nam imperii potentia et consequenter jus ex civium numero aestimanda est.*”

<sup>33</sup> TP, ch. ii, §23: “*Ut itaque peccatum et obsequium stricte sumptum, sic etiam justitia et injustitia non nisi in imperio possunt concipi.*”