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Spinoza, a Democrat or a Republican?

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Introduction. Country Names: The Names.

Is Spinoza a “Democrat” or a “Republican”? Although at first sight anachronistic, this question can be justified with the fact that Spinoza, by making constant use of the term “republic” and paying homage to Machiavelli¹, is considered a “republican” by a certain number of theorists of

¹TP 5/7 [= *Tractatus Politicus (Political Treatise)*, chapter 5, paragraph 7]; see SAINT VICTOR and BRANTHÔME, *Histoire de la République en France*, p. 77 and following ; cf. ROUSSEAU : « *Le Prince de Machiavel est le livre des républicains* » (*Contrat Social* III 6, p. 409). The complete references of the works cited in the notes are given below in the Bibliography.

political philosophy², while in the meantime having been acknowledged in the history of philosophy as a prophet of “democracy” – his last work (*The Political Treatise*) culminating with an evocation of democracy as an “absolute regime” <*imperium absolutum*>³ which would accomplish and complete politics in that it would best correspond to “human nature”⁴. Contemporary history, whatever its convulsions, has given reason to the Spinozist prophecy (later reaffirmed by Tocqueville) since democracy, always desired although always decried, has continued to spread everywhere in the surface of the Earth over the last centuries.

This double Spinozist determination (“Democrat” and “Republican”) can invite us (such will be the proposal of the present study) to take up for itself, on a precise and elaborate philosophical example, the question of the relations between these two notions. Today, most countries name or entitle themselves as “republics”. This fact deserves to be taken into consideration, because these names (in their “complete form”) stem from thorough reflections which in turn have culminated in the historical syntheses of proclamations and claims of belonging. Therefore, the “ordinary language” method of analysis, which consists in taking into account as much as necessary the linguistic uses (“what do we say when?”), finds here its full legitimacy.⁵

There are approximately 196 states in 2021. Of this number, 158 (over 80%) refer to themselves as “Republics”. Then we find, by decreasing

²For example Blandine KRIEGEL, in *Philosophie de la République*, and also in *Spinoza, L'autre voie*; Christophe MIQUEU in *Spinoza, Locke et l'idée de Citoyenneté – Une génération républicaine à l'aube des Lumières*; Jacques de SAINT VICTOR and Thomas BRANTHÔME in *Histoire de la République en France*, p. 103 sq. On the other hand, it is true though that one does not find a mentioning of Spinoza in *L'idée de République* of Juliette GRANGE, and only one brief mention (as a “democrat” rather than as a “republican”) in *Les théories de la république* of Serge AUDIER (p. 25).

³TP 11/1: “I come, finally, to the third, and *completely absolute state*, which we call Democratic.”

⁴See § III below, and in particular notes 36 to 38.

⁵The present study, in some ways, therefore follows on from our *24 Études de philosophie du langage ordinaire* (to be published in Limoges: Lambert-Lucas, 2021).

number, 17 “Kingdoms”⁶, 16 States which simply carry their name without further qualification⁷, then 13 States calling themselves “State”⁸, 4 “Federation”⁹, 3 “Commonwealth”¹⁰, 3 “Principality”¹¹, 1 “Grand Duchy”¹², 1 “Holy See”¹³, 1 “Sultanate”¹⁴ and 1 “Union”¹⁵.

Although the vast majority of states give themselves the name or title of “Republic”, none of them designates itself primarily as “democracy”, which in fact and in practice indicates the instinctive and universal perception of a strong categorical difference between the two terms, and not at all of their equivalence, not even of their proximity in usage. This categorical distinction seems to be coupled with a hierarchy, insofar as the term “democracy” appears in the names of certain States only in the form of the adjective “democratic”, as if “democracy” were a sub-category or species of “republic”: “*Democratic People’s Republic of Algeria*”, “*Democratic Republic of the Congo*”, “*Democratic People’s Republic of Korea*”, “*Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia*”, “*Democratic People’s Republic of Laos*”, and a few others.

Undoubtedly the claim of the “democratic” status of certain “republics” has a function of display and compensation for an absent reality: one can think of Algeria, China, North Korea, or Vietnam, similar to the old “East Germany” which called itself “German *Democratic Republic*” by antiphrasis

⁶“Kingdoms” of Saudi Arabia, Bhutan, Spain, Bahrain, Belgium, Cambodia, Denmark, United of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Hashemite of Jordan, Lesotho, Morocco, Norway, Sweden, Thailand, Netherlands, Swaziland, Tonga.

⁷Antigua and Barbuda, Belize, Canada, Grenada, Hungary, Cook Islands, Solomon Islands, Jamaica, Barbados, Mongolia, New Zealand, Romania, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Tuvalu, Ukraine.

⁸“States” of Kuwait, Qatar, Independent State of Papua New Guinea, Independent State of Samoa, Japan, Plurinational State of Bolivia, Federated States of Micronesia, United States of America, United Mexican States.

⁹“Federations” of Malaysia, Russia, Saint Kitts and Nevis, United Arab Emirates.

¹⁰“Commonwealths” of Dominica, Bahamas, Australia.

¹¹“Principality” of Andorra, Monaco, Lichtenstein.

¹²“Grand Duchy” of Luxembourg.

¹³“Holy See”, or “Vatican State”.

¹⁴“Sultanate” of Oman.

¹⁵“Union” of the Comoros.

in the eyes of Western democrats. Nevertheless, the presence of the term “democratic” in the official name of a country indicated and always indicates a reference, an aspiration, a horizon. “Democracy” is moreover a matter of degrees rather than nature in the various “republics” of the world today – even assuming that there is a reliable scale for measuring these “degrees of democracy”. Yet, we do not know of a “Republic” which proclaims itself “anti-democratic” or “non-democratic”, even when they indicate in their name their state religion (for example the “*Islamic Republics*” of Afghanistan, Iran, Mauritania and Pakistan), or other characters they wish to distinguish¹⁶. Ultimately, in usage, “democracy” never appears as a subspecies of “republic”, since that would suppose that there are two kinds of “republics”, the “democratic republics” and the “non-democratic republics”, which is not the case.

I. The *Theological-Political Treatise*: a Treatise of “the” Republic.

In Spinoza, the term “republic” is used as in most of the names of countries that we have just mentioned, that is to say in a neutral way, very close to the etymology “public thing”. “Republic” for Spinoza designates not only any form of state or political power, but more broadly all form of human association. The subtitle and preface of the *Theological-Political Treatise* (published in 1670) clearly indicate this versatility or neutrality in Spinoza’s use of the term “republic”. In fact, the subtitle of the work specifies that it will be a question of showing “that the *republic* can grant freedom of philosophizing without harming its peace <*reipublicae pax*> or piety, and

¹⁶In alphabetical order of the adjectives specifying the nature of the “republics”: “Syrian Arab Republic”, “*Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela*”, “*Cooperative Republic of Guyana*”, “*Democratic Republic of Congo / Sao Tome and Principe / East Timor*”, “*Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia / Nepal*”, “*Democratic People’s Republic of Algeria / Korea*”, “*Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka*”, “*Federal Republic of Germany / Nigeria / Somalia*”, “*Federation of Brazil*”, “*Islamic Republic of Afghanistan / Iran / Mauritania / Pakistan*”, “*Eastern Republic of Uruguay*”, “*People’s Republic of Bangladesh / China / Laos*”, “*Socialist Republic of Viet -Nam*”, “*United Republic of Tanzania*”, “*Republic of the Union of Burma*”.

cannot deny it without destroying its peace and piety”¹⁷. Spinoza does not specify here what he means by “republic”. One could suppose that he designates by this term a “republican” regime (as opposed to a despotic regime), and more precisely the “republic of Holland”, since he addresses the entire work to this “republic”, in thanking her for having made it possible and thereby offering empirical proof of the validity of the theses he defends there, namely that “freedom of thought” can be granted “without damage to the republic”.¹⁸ Reading the *Theological-Political Treatise*, however, leaves no doubt as to the fact that Spinoza uses the term “republic” in it in a much broader sense than that of “republic of Holland in the 17th century”. Despite his opening and concluding statements on his “submission” to the Sovereign of his homeland, Spinoza had indeed shown some mistrust during the publication of the *Theological-Political Treatise*. He had published the book without the author’s name, with a false indication of location (Hamburg instead of Amsterdam). The “prudence” which served as his motto¹⁹ had decidedly made him guess what scandal his book was going to cause throughout Europe, and he could definitely not be sure that the freedom of thought was already sufficiently present in the Republic of Holland for it to be tolerated there. Moreover, he had written and published it in Latin, refusing a Dutch translation. Holland cannot therefore be considered as the unique model of the republic, much less as its paragon, in the *Theological-Political Treatise*.

In fact, the term “republic” throughout the book refers to much more than just the republic of Holland. Chapters 17 and 18, for example, deal with

¹⁷Highlights by CR in all the cases unless otherwise stated.

¹⁸See the end of the *Preface* and the last lines of chp. 20, also the last lines of the book, which practically retake the same text. See also, in *TTP* 20, 351-352 [= *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (*Theological-Political Treatise*), chapter 20, page 351-352], the homage to the “city of Amsterdam” <*urbs Amstelodamum*>, this “most flourishing republic” <*haec florentissima respublica*>, and “most outstanding” <*praestantissima*>, in which “all men live in the greatest harmony”; and in *TP* 8/3: “The Republic of Hollanders <*hollandorum respublica*> on the other hand takes its name from a whole province, with the result that the subjects of this state enjoy a greater liberty”.

¹⁹Spinoza’s motto was indeed “*Caute*”: “with caution”. Jean-Claude MILNER, at the beginning of his book *Le sage trompeur*, offers a fine and in-depth analysis of this motto.

the “republic of the Hebrews” <*respublica hebraeorum*>, from the history of which Spinoza intends to draw general lessons in matters of politics <*dogmata politica*>. But the term “republic” in the expression “republic of the Hebrews” does not refer to anything that we would call today “republic”, nor even to what was called by that name in Spinoza’s time. This is an extremely vague and general meaning, equivalent to “state”. The French translators of the *Theological-Political Treatise* translate *respublica* sometimes by “République”, sometimes by “État”²⁰; and Spinoza himself sometimes considers the two terms *respublica* and *imperium* to be synonymous, since he happens to redouble one by the other as if they were equivalent.²¹

Although he designates it by the generic term of “republic”, Spinoza considers, in chapter 17 of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, that the State of the Hebrews under Moses had been “rightly” called the “kingdom of God”.²² A few lines later, Spinoza believes that we could legitimately also call this state “theocracy”, “since its citizens were not subject to any law other than that revealed by God”²³. He subsequently shows that this was only an appearance, and that in fact this State, this “republic of the Hebrews”, had been instituted “like a democracy”, by an equal renunciation of each one of his right which had left everyone, “by this covenant”, “completely equal”.²⁴

²⁰ *TTP* 4 128 25-28, Curley: “But what these means are, and what principle of living this end requires, and how the foundations of the best republic and the principle of living among men follow from this <*quomodo hunc optimae reipublicae fundamenta sequantur*>, these matters all pertain to a universal Ethics”; Moreau / Lagrée: “ce que sont ces moyens, quelle est la règle de vie exigée par cette fin, comment s’ensuivent les fondements de l’État le meilleur, et quelle est la règle de vie entre les hommes, cela concerne l’éthique universelle”. In chapter 5, the 12 occurrences of the Latin *respublica* are rendered in french sometimes by “république”, sometimes by “État”; the same goes for the 2 occurrences of chp. 14.

²¹ See for example *TTP* 16 288-289: “But in a Republic, and a state <*at in reipublica et imperio*> where the supreme law is the well- being of the whole people, not that of the ruler, someone who obeys the supreme power in everything should not be called a slave, useless to himself, but a subject”.

²² *TTP* 17 302 7-8 <*Imperium hebraeorum [...] regnum Dei jure vocabatur*>.

²³ *TTP* 17 302 18 <*Et hac de causa hoc imperium theocratia vocari potuit*>.

²⁴ *TTP* 17 303 24: “The Hebrews didn’t transfer their right to anyone else, but everyone surrendered his right equally, as in a Democracy <*ut in democratia*>, and they

Spinoza therefore suggests, in these few lines, a possible justification for his recourse to the term “republic” to designate this “kingdom of God” instituted in the manner of a “democracy”. Continuing his account of the history of the Hebrews, Spinoza, however, closes this barely open door. After the direct encounter with the voice of God, the Hebrews, “terrified and frightened” <*peterriti et attoniti*>, had in fact transferred their right no longer to God but to Moses, thus becoming “the supreme judge” <*supremus iudex*> of their state. Thereafter, Moses, explains Spinoza, ruled with such authority that the only name that actually suited the state of the Hebrews was “theocracy”.²⁵ Spinoza therefore calls “the republic of the Hebrews” a state which he himself judges, after analysis, to be theocratic in its essence. This is to say if the political content of the term “republic” matters little to him.²⁶ The history of France still prompts French people today to consider the term “republic” as exclusive of that of “monarchy”. However, Spinoza did not hesitate to call a “republic”, that related to the Hebrews, the pure theocracy of Moses.

The use in the singular of the term “republic”, starting from the subtitle of the *Theological-Political Treatise* (“the peace of the republic” <*pax respublicae*>), goes well with the Spinozist intention of drawing universal, even timeless lessons, from the history of certain nations.²⁷ What holds for the “republic of the Hebrews” (that is, for a theocracy) will hold in his eyes for “the republic” in general. If there were no homogeneity of the notion of “republic”, Spinoza could not draw lessons from the history of the “republic

cried out in one voice “whatever God says” (without any explicit mediator) ‘we will do’. It follows that everyone remained completely equal by this covenant”.

²⁵*TTP* 17 304 [41]: “Moses [...] left the state to be administered by his successors in such a way that it couldn’t be called either popular, or aristocratic, or monarchic, but Theocratic” <*ut nec populare nec aristocraticum nec monarchicum, sed theocraticum vocari potuerit*>. Passage repeated verbatim in *TTP* 17 308 28-29.

²⁶When Spinoza, in *TTP* 17 319 31-32, envisages the possibility that “the republic” could have been “constituted in accordance with [God’s] first intention”, he designates, by the expression “the republic”, “the State of the Hebrews”. Likewise, in *TTP* 18 323-31-32, when he states that his “intention” was not “to treat a Republic in detail”, he also speaks of the “republic of the Hebrews”.

²⁷*TTP*, chp. 18, title: “Certain Political doctrines are inferred from the Republic and history of the Hebrews” <*Ex hebraeorum republica et historiis quaedam dogmata politica concluduntur*>.

of the Hebrews” for “the republic” in general, that is to say for any form of political human association. And if a theocracy can be a form of “the republic”, so will a monarchy. At the end of chapter 18 of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza declares that one should not follow the example of the Romans and the English, who overthrew “kings”: because most often, we see it, a tyrant comes to replace the overthrown king. Rather, the aim of politics must be to “retain the form of any state, whatever it is”²⁸ – even when it is a monarchy. This conservatism is the political version of “the striving <conatus> to persevere in one’s being <in suo esse perseverare>”²⁹ which forms the basis of Spinozist anthropology and its ontology, and which will find its full development in the *Political Treatise*. Therefore, there will undoubtedly be a preference of Spinoza for “democracy” understood as one of the possible forms of the “republic” or of the “state” – but certainly not for a “republican” regime in the sense of “non-monarchical”.

II. The *Political Treatise*: Multitude, Primitive Democracy, Natural Republic.

The reading of the *Political Treatise* confirms these conclusions. The term “republic” appears from the first paragraph of the book, in the singular and in the most general way possible. Spinoza recognizes at the outset that there are “no men less able to govern the republic <regendae reipublicae> than the theorists or the philosophers”.³⁰ The term “republic” does not here designate any form of power or government in particular. “Politics” in general is considered by Spinoza to be the art of “governing the republic”, or “a republic”, that is, any republic. This very broad use of the term is found throughout the entire book. In chapter 2/17, Spinoza thus considers “democracy”, “aristocracy” and “monarchy” as the three possible options for

²⁸*TTP* 18 331 12-13: “The form of each state must necessarily be retained and [...] it cannot be changed without a danger that the whole state will be ruined” <*uniuscujusque imperii forma necessario retinenda est absque periculo totalis ipsius ruinae mutari potest*>.

²⁹*Ethics* III 6 sq.

³⁰*TP* 1/1.

distributing the “charge of the republic” <*reipublicae cura*> over everybody, a few, or just one. The term “republic”, here as elsewhere, is used by Spinoza in the singular, as designating an invariant background under the variety of political regimes. Monarchy, aristocracy and democracy are then only quantitative variations on the same republican theme.

Spinoza does not distinguish “republic” and “city”, thus conforming to their ordinary usage. It is said that there are “citizens” in a “republic”, as in a “city”. But there is no such thing as a specific term for the inhabitants of a “republic”. We do not say “a republican”, who could have been forged as an “academician” is from “academy / academic”, nor “a republicanist” who could have been formed in the image of “publicist”. In the absence of a noun denoting a member of a “republic”, the adjective “republican” nowadays denotes a certain way of thinking or behaving. This way it is very close to the adjective “citizen”: to have a “citizen behavior” or a “republican behavior” or a “republican attitude” are synonymous expressions, additional indication of the proximity of the terms “republic” and “city” (in Greek “*polis*”, hence “political”, a vague and generic term just as much as “republic”). Just as Spinoza happens, as we have seen, to redouble “republic” by “State” (*respublica* by *imperium*)³¹, so it happens to him to redouble “republic” by “City”³². It has become customary to capitalize both “City” and “Republic”, to underline the generic dimension of these terms responsible for designating (most often indifferently) any “city” or “republic”. It is therefore legitimate, as Christophe Miqueu suggests, to move freely from the notion of “republic” to that of “citizen”, and to consider that each of the two implies the other.³³

³¹See n. 21 above.

³²*TP* 8/3: “The Patricians are commonly citizens of one city, which is the capital of the whole state, so that the *Commonwealth or Republic* <*civitas sive respublica*> takes its name from that city, as the Roman republic once did, and as the Venetian, Genoese, etc. do now”.

³³Christophe MIQUEU, *Spinoza, Locke et l'idée de citoyenneté – Une génération républicaine à l'aube des Lumières* [*Spinoza, Locke and the Idea of Citizenship – A Republican Generation at the Dawn of the Enlightenment*], Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2012. The “citizenship” of the title is made explicit by the “republican generation” of the subtitle. Miqueu goes so far as to suggest translating, in Spinoza’s work, *civitas* by “republic” (and not, as is usually done, by “city” – a “traditional” choice according to the

The term “republic” is so generic in Spinoza that he comes to designate “primitive democracy”, this first state of society imagined by Spinoza immediately after the state of nature. Spinoza indeed thinks, unlike many political theorists, and contrary to common sense, that democracy is the “most natural” of political regimes. We would spontaneously think that democracy or the regime of equal rights is the furthest of the regimes, and not the closest, to the state of nature, since only the law of the strongest seems to reign in the state of nature. Yet Spinoza is constant on the “natural” and original dimension of democracy, due to several arguments, the first of which is very unexpected and paradoxical. Spinoza indeed asserts, contrary to the most spontaneous and generally accepted opinion, that democratic regimes are even more hereditary than aristocratic regimes.³⁴ This argument is unexpected to the extent that it has troubled the commentators of Spinoza themselves. We spontaneously think that aristocracy is linked to heredity (therefore to nature) while democracy is the place of merits and could therefore in this respect to some extent be freed from natural constraints. Yet Spinoza thinks the opposite:³⁵ he (rightly) associates aristocracy with the notion of “choice”, and democracy rather with “heredity” and the universality of law. The accuracy of this analysis is striking. French citizenship, for example, is hereditary, and is not the object of a choice either on the part of the citizens concerned or of any other citizen or group of citizens. Democratic citizenship then turns out to be a sort of fatality, which one acquires by birth,

author), and explains this (p. 316 n. 4) by the fact that according to him “there is no major difference in meaning between the two words” – which we also maintain here. This overload of republicanism obviously goes in the direction of the author’s general thesis, at the cost, however, of a certain forcing (because the two terms exist in Spinoza) which obliges him to “slightly modify” the existing translations which render *civitas* by “city” (cf. p. 378, 384, 392, 486, 491, 503), so that the reader who does not have the Latin text may believe that Spinoza speaks only of “Republic” even when he sometimes speaks of “City”. And if we see “citizen” everywhere, why not instead translate *respublica*, everywhere, by “City”? But there is no substantive which is to “city” what “republicanism” is to “republic” (no “citizenism” in ordinary usage), which turned out to be annoying for a thesis which intended to emphasize the importance of the “republicanism” of Spinoza and Locke.

³⁴TP 8/1.

³⁵Spinoza in fact reaffirms in TP 11/1 this thesis of a democracy distinguished from aristocracy by its more fundamentally “hereditary” character.

or by “fortune” as Spinoza says, for example when one is born in a country like France which practices the law of the soil.

This naturalistic dimension of democracy is extended by Spinoza to the “republic” itself in several passages of the *Theological-Political Treatise*³⁶, the *Correspondence*³⁷, and the *Political Treatise*. Spinoza imagines the first human organizations there as kinds of nomadic tribes, paradoxically egalitarian and democratic: “When a multitude <*quaedam multitudo*>, seeking a new place to live, found it and cultivated it, the whole multitude retained an equal right to command. No one willingly gives the rule to another.”³⁸ He then imagines a gradual degradation of this primitive egalitarian democracy, which step by step transforms it into an aristocracy and then into a monarchy. The terms “citizen” and “republic” immediately appear where we previously only had a “multitude”: “While the number of the immigrants grows daily, the number of citizens <*numerus civium*> is for many reasons diminished. Indeed, often clans die out; some are excluded because of crimes; and many neglect Public Affairs <*republicam negligunt*> because of a difficulty in their domestic affairs. In the meantime, the more powerful desire nothing more than to reign alone. So gradually the rule is reduced to a few, and finally, because of factions, to one”.³⁹ So, in Spinoza’s

³⁶*TTP* 16 289 15-21: “With this I think I have shown sufficiently clearly what the foundations of the democratic state <*imperium democraticum*> are. I preferred to treat it before all others, because it seemed the most natural state <*quia maxime naturale videbatur*>, and the one which approached most nearly the freedom nature concedes to everyone. In it no one so transfers his natural right to another that in the future there is no consultation with him. Instead he transfers it to the greater part of the whole Society, of which he makes one part. In this way everyone remains equal, as they were before, in the state of nature ». Same thesis in *TTP* 17 303 23-31.

³⁷Spinoza, *Letter* 50 to Jarig Jelles, June 2, 1674. Spinoza explains the difference between Hobbes and himself as regards politics: This difference, he writes, “consists in that I always preserve natural Right <*naturale jus*> unimpaired, and I maintain that in each State the Supreme Magistrate has no more right over its subjects than it has greater power over them. This is always the case in the state of Nature <*in statu naturali*>”. What might seem a pure definition of “the law of the strongest” is in Spinoza’s eyes the very definition of the law of democratic states, which are in fact more powerful in his eyes than any other form of state.

³⁸*TP* 8/12.

³⁹*TP* 8/12.

writing, the most basic and the most original of political organizations immediately takes the name of “republic”.

This natural aspect of the republic is finally underlined in a passage of the last chapter of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, where Spinoza compares the loyalty that we must show to the “republic” and that that we must show towards God: “the loyalty <*fides*> of each person to the Republic, like his loyalty toward God” <*erga Rempublicam, sicuti erga Deum*>, Spinoza writes, “can be known only from his works, from his loving-kindness toward his neighbor” <*ex charitate erga proximum*>.⁴⁰ The formula “*erga Rempublicam, sicuti erga Deum*” is very striking. The philosopher who enunciates *Deus sive Natura*, that is, the equivalence of “God” and “nature”, could not more clearly express the naturalness of the republic.

III. Fifty Shades of Republicanism.

In Spinoza, the “republic” is thus only the first – still formless – form of the “multitude”, before the respective democratic, aristocratic, and monarchical specifications. However, and even if the ordinary use of the term “republic” is also very plastic and vague, the feeling of a specificity of the “republic” remains present, even if it is difficult to define it.⁴¹ The initial argument could, moreover, be turned around: if most of the countries of the

⁴⁰TTP 20 348 5-7.

⁴¹As evidenced by the famous article by Régis DEBRAY « République ou Démocratie » (1992). This article, first published in 1989 in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, questioned republicanism on the occasion of the commemoration of the bicentenary of the French Revolution. Debray sought to clarify, with great brio and accuracy, the vague feeling according to which, like the two great parties which structure the politics of the United States, to be “republican” is something other than to be “democratic” – but what exactly? This developed and rich text contains remarkable formulas (“Democracy, shall we say, is what remains of a Republic when the Enlightenment is extinguished” – p. 18) and at least one deep intuition with which we are in full agreement (“The Republic is interior or is not: it requires a personal ethics. In Democracy, the exterior may suffice: we only require laws” – p. 26), even if it is for us – with Spinoza – one of the main arguments to defend democracy and its immanent legalism against the remains of moralism and transcendence always present, with the sacrosanct “interiority”, in the idea of the Republic, and even if generally speaking we do not put “republic” and “democracy” as symmetrical as Debray does.

world wished to take the name of “republic” themselves, would it not be because there is nevertheless something specifically attractive in this term, in this political construction?

Several authors have attempted to characterize the “republic” positively in relation to other forms of political organization. But these descriptions, especially when confronted and interrelated with each other, paradoxically suffer from an excess of richness, and sometimes of subtlety, which leads again and always to the idea that the notion of “republic” is so welcoming and protean that it becomes impossible to specify it. In her *Philosophy of the Republic* of 1998, Blandine Kriegel thus identifies several layers under the notion: the “republic” would envelop an ancient, philosophical and religious source, then several types of superimposed “rights”, sometimes intertwined and confused: the “right of the state”, “human rights”, “citizen’s rights”, and “people’s rights”. Moreover, Blandine Kriegel grants a very special place, in this description, to the philosophy of Spinoza, which represents in his eyes an “other way”⁴² of modernity, that of the “republic” against that of subjectivity and the “empire”.

In *Theories of the republic* (2004, then 2015), Serge Audier ignites a firework of republican conceptions, none of which has exactly the color and nuance of the others. To the ancient republicanisms of Aristotle, Cicero, Polybius, succeed the republicanisms of the Renaissance, in Florence with Machiavelli; then those of Venice, Bodin, Althusius; then the “*commonwealth*” of Harrington, the “conflicting republicanism” of Sidney, the “liberalism” of Montesquieu, the “contractualism” of Rousseau, the “Girondin” model of Condorcet (a republicanism stemming rather from the “Radical Enlightenment”) which would oppose the “Jacobin” model of the Robespierrists (a republicanism rather from Rousseau), the “cosmopolitical” republicanism of Kant, the “egalitarian” republicanism of Babeuf, the “liberal and decentralizing” republicanism of Carrel, the “paradoxical” republicanism of Tocqueville (best known for being indeed a theorist of “democracy”), the “eclectic” republicanism of Vacherot, the “spiritualist” republicanism of Jules

⁴²To use the title of his work published in 2018 by Éditions du Cerf. We will return to Blandine KRIEGEL’s interpretation in the conclusion of this study.

Simon, the “republican solidarism” of Léon Bourgeois and Célestin Bouglé, the “republican socialism” of Jaurès, the “democratic republicanism” of Mendès-France, the “American” republicanism and the “French” republicanism distinguished by Hannah Arendt... As it should be, the final bouquet in Technicolor is American, with cherished admiration mainly towards the “neo-republicanism” of Pocock, the “instrumental” republicanism of Skinner, the “communitarian” republicanism of Sandel, the “liberal” republicanism of Rawls, the republicanism of the “spheres of justice” of Walzer, the “multiculturalist” republicanism of Taylor, the “deliberative” republicanism of Fishkin, the “associative” republicanism of Robert Putnam and the “participatory” republicanism of Barber... Recognizing the “multifaceted” side of republicanism, Audier concludes his work by attempting a synthesis of the main conceptual distinctions which he believes structure “republicanism”. Thus, it would be necessary to distinguish between (1) a “consensualist”, sometimes “authoritarian” republicanism, and a “pluralist and conflictual” republicanism; (2) a “democratic” republicanism and an “oligarchic and authoritarian” republicanism; (3) a “social” republicanism and a “socially conservative” republicanism; (4) an “individualist-ownerist” republicanism and a “post-ownerist” republicanism; (5) a “national – sometimes nationalist” republicanism and a “cosmopolitan” republicanism; and finally (6) a “productivist” republicanism and an “ecological” republicanism, that the author proposes to name “eco-republicanism”, through which republicanism would of course be a way of the future ... The specialists of “republicanism” can rub their hands: nothing human is foreign to them.

From the first page of their grandiose *Histoire de la république en France, des origines à la Ve république* (2018), Jacques de Saint Victor and Thomas Branthôme take into account the possibility that by dint of having passed through abused metamorphoses, the term “republic” could well be “an empty word”, “worn to the rope”. The authors therefore do not seek so much to determine a “philosophy of the republic” (in the manner of Blandine Kriegel) or an “idea of the republic” (in the manner of Juliette Grange), or to synthesize the “theories of the republic” (in the manner of Serge Audier), as to propose a “history of the republic in France”, taking into account by

definition the variations and the self-designations of the successive actors of french political life, who have not for horizon a global or essentializing coherence. However, the authors do not escape, in their preface, the task of defining, at least minimally, this “republic” which is their object. But immediately, and even though the historical point of view is not entirely abandoned, the protean character, almost elusive by dint of variety, of the notion reappears. Is the “republic” a “French singularity”, is it “exclusive” of the monarchy, or can we make a genealogy of it that goes back well before the end of the 18th century (p. 7)? On this fundamental point, discussions remain intensive.⁴³ The authors come to an attempt at a “typology” of “republican sensibilities” only after multiple warnings on the “delicate” side of an approach requiring “caution” in the face of constantly evolving “sensitivities” if it does not want to lead to “simplifications” or “confusions” (7-8). The four “republican sensibilities” finally identified, richly illustrated and convincing, are “liberal sensibility”, “Jacobin sensibility”, “plebeian sensibility”, and “conservative sensibility”. It should be remembered that what is at stake is a history of the republic “in France”. But these four French “republican sensibilities” already cover an extremely broad, complex, and rich definitional field. If we added to it the other “republican sensibilities” that one can imagine existing in other countries, one would find this profusion, this swarming of republican forms and sensibilities, which seem again and always to discourage the possibility of forming a clear idea and distinct, or adequate, of the republic.

⁴³Juliette GRANGE argues, for example, in *L'idée de république* that the Republic essentially comes from the French Revolution: “The republic does indeed date from September 21, 1792”, it is essentially anti-monarchical and “specifically French” (48). The lowercase “r” to “republic” underlines the definitional dimension of the statement: there is no “republic” until after this date. “The short-lived English Republic of Cromwell” will be “left out”, as will the “Republic of Venice”, its “potentates” and its “oligarchy” (47-48). Blandine KRIEGEL, strangely ignored by Juliette GRANGE (a single note p. 170), on the contrary supports with very strong arguments, in *Philosophie de la République*, the idea of a republican constant throughout our history. This is the overall position of the authors that we discuss in this text.

IV. The Republic and the “Common Good”.

The only characterization of the “republic” which is found in all the works which attempt to define or characterize it dates back to Aristotle. The Philosopher distinguishes, in *Politics*, the constitutions “which have as their goal the common interest” from those which “on the contrary” “have in view only the personal interest of the leaders”. The first would be “republican”, the second “despotic”.⁴⁴ The “republic” would thus be the form of power which has in view not only the “public thing”, but the “common good”, or “the general interest”. Two other global characterizations and everywhere present derive from this main characterization: the republic would be a power where “law” and “morality” reign.⁴⁵ Reading Spinoza, however, helps us to understand that none of these three main characterizations can be retained.

We must recognize that Spinoza himself evokes, from two different angles, this distinction between a power which concerns “all” citizens, and a

⁴⁴Aristotle, *Politics* III 6, 1279 a 16-21.

⁴⁵Juliette GRANGE, in *L'idée de république*, takes up the Aristotelian distinction (28), sees in “the idea of public interest” and in that of “legitimate laws” the “only characteristics” of the republic (29), considers that “the affirmation of the *Law* [...] as expressing the common Good” (italics and capital letters of the A.) “unites all the uses of the word ‘republic’” (29-30), grants to “republican institutions” the capacity to “moralize” the government (37), relies on the “moral” conception of the “Kantian republic” (66-67), calls for republican “virtue” (184), to which she associates the “public Good”, the “modern ideal of justice”, and, with Balibar, “the triumph of the good principle over the bad” (255). Blandine KRIEDEL, in *Philosophie de la République*, also quotes Aristotle (31-32), and closely associates the notion of “republic”, in all its aspects, with that of “political law” or “the rule of law”, while she masterfully reinterprets Aristotelian “despotism” as the modern temptation of “empire”. Serge AUDIER, in *Les théories de la République*, quotes Aristotle (8), recalls the Machiavellian thesis of the “superiority of the republics” which “aim at the common good”, the Rousseauist distinction between “government of the law” and “government of the men” (34), the presence of the themes of the “common good” and of the “ethics” in Pocock (78), and specifies that “the equality of all citizens before the law” is part of the “republican ideals” (92). The limits and the difficulties of relating republicanism to the Aristotelian position of a virtuous man concerned with the “common good” are underlined in the conclusion of the work (107), but this is to immediately evoke a history of republicanism “to do” (108) – therefore not yet done –, and throw oneself into the infinite conceptual fragmentation that we have noted above, which already does not seem to have convinced Christophe MIQUEU for whom, in *Spinoza, Locke et l'idée de*

power which concerns only a part of them. To characterize the republic, he in fact repeatedly uses the expression “*whole body of the state*” <*integrum imperii corpus*>⁴⁶, which means that the republic has to do with “all” of its citizens, and not only with part of them. Moreover, Spinoza distinguishes the power which is exercised for the benefit of the one who exercises it from the power which is exercised for the benefit of the one who undergoes it, which allows him to distinguish the three figures of “the slave”, of the “son” and of the “subject”: “a *slave* <*servus*>”, writes Spinoza, “is someone who is bound to obey the commands of a master, which are concerned only with the advantage of the person issuing the command; a *son* <*filius*> is someone who does what is advantageous for himself, in accordance with a parent’s command; and a *subject* <*subditus*>, finally, is someone who does what is advantageous for the collective body – and hence, also for himself – in accordance with the command of the supreme power”.⁴⁷ Spinoza therefore seems to renew here, roughly, the Aristotelian distinction.

This famous text is, however, an exception to the main theses of Spinozist politics. The *Theological-Political Treatise*, in fact, is a treatise on salvation through obedience.⁴⁸ This deep, paradoxical and skeptical thesis is put forward by Spinoza to deliver the Republic from the seditions fomented by priests of all kinds. What is more, according to him, it is the unique message of the Scriptures: the ignorant will be saved by obedience to the true rule of life, which makes it possible not to despair of humanity. Because if very few can understand, all can obey.⁴⁹ From this point of view, distinguishing between degrees of obedience, or obediences that are qualitatively distinct by the effects they produce turns out to be impossible, and above all illogical. The title of chapter 19 of the *Theological-Political*

citoyenneté, the “search for the common good”, “today as yesterday”, is “the alpha and omega of republican citizenship” (522).

⁴⁶TP 4/2 525 9. Spinoza uses this same expression in TP 3/1 517 19 to define the “city” <*civitas*>: this is normal, since, as we have seen, the terms *civitas* and *respublica* are quasi-equivalents at Spinoza.

⁴⁷TTP 16 289 10-14.

⁴⁸As Alexandre MATHERON magnificently brought to light in *Le Christ et le salut des ignorants chez Spinoza*, Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1971.

⁴⁹TTP 15 281-282.

Treatise is particularly significant in this regard. In it Spinoza sums up the thesis of the whole work by declaring that “the outward worship of religion must be in accord with the peace of the republic, if we *want to obey* God righteously” <*si recte Deo obtemperare velimus*>. Spinoza shows here the knot of consent and obedience. No one can be completely forced to obey. A citizen, a subject, but also a slave and even a child may prefer to die than to obey. Spinoza himself often repeats that the transfer of natural law can never be total.⁵⁰ So, there is always consent in obedience, just as there is always obedience in consent. They are not separate realities. And insofar as politics is in itself the locus of the knot of consent and obedience, it is futile to try to distinguish there between actions performed freely and actions performed without freedom. In a democracy in particular, everyone is both subject and object of the law, the one who makes it freely and the one who obeys it.

This same knot is found between egoistic action and altruistic action, or, to use the Aristotelian distinction found in all the theories of the “republic”, between action performed in the name of the “common good” or “general interest” and action done in the name of a personal or selfish interest. This distinction may well be satisfactory, even flattering for the mind, however it remains strange that in the absence of a single convincing example in the immensity of human actions we continue to take it up for centuries as if it went without saying. Who doesn’t know that altruism is the best investment, the best strategy in a selfish world? What political power does not claim to act in the “public good” or “general interest”? We will say: some lie. Yes, but which ones? The communist regimes claimed higher and stronger than all the others to act according to the general interest (it was even their *raison d’être*), while their critics denounced the privileges of the “nomenklatura” and the daily terror. The most liberal regimes, too, claim to act in the name of the “common good” or “general interest”, even if they are based on quite other psychological and economic principles. The theory of the “invisible hand” and of financial markets is justified by the idea that the addition of selfishness will bring general prosperity. The facts have not always proved them wrong, even if we can denounce many flaws in these regimes. The difficulty here is

⁵⁰See for example *TP* 3/8.

structural: no one can claim to know “the general interest”, any more than the “just” and “unjust”. Are nuclear power plants of general interest? Some think so, others do not. Is the construction of motorways of general interest? Yes, for some, no for others. Without even looking for self-serving objectives, on the one hand for EDF, on the other hand for the now private motorway companies, we simply do not know what is this “general interest” that is invoked everywhere. On each subject, the conflict and the uncertainties return: retirement by funding or by pay-as-you-go? Do we go for public or private schools? Do we go for the construction or not of airports, dams, and wind turbines? Are we for intensive agriculture or not? Are we for large distribution or not? Are we for Amazon or not? Are we for State sale of drugs, lottery, alcohol, or not? Are we for housing subsidies or not? Are we for subsidies to art or not?... In any case, the discourse of “general interest” or “common good” can legitimately be held in favor of each of the opposing positions. And we must avow that even the kings of the past centuries, and often even the worst of despots and tyrants, cared for the good of their country, it would be absurd to deny it. Wasn't Napoleon acting in the “general interest” of France? And Robespierre – wasn't he as well? In fact, waging a war isn't part of the “general interest” of a country? Both warmongers and pacifists will invoke “the general interest”. The more we seek, the less we find to illustrate this distinction, which therefore appears to be hollow and inoperative to analysis, and on which consequently we cannot rely to distinguish “republics” from other forms of power.

Spinoza's philosophy helps us perceive the vanity of such distinctions. Politics is much more, according to him, the place of a kind of “physics”, of a result of power struggles, than that of a morality, or a display of intentions. Power can only be obtained by fulfilling a number of conditions, one of which is the display of “concern for the common good”. The latter will therefore necessarily be present in any political regime whatsoever, and not just in a “republic”. Conversely, certain behaviors are incompatible with power, regardless of the intentions and discourses displayed. Spinoza insists on this with particular force in the *Political Treatise*: “it's as impossible for one who holds political authority (or those who do so) to run, drunken or naked, through the streets with prostitutes, to play the actor, to openly violate or

disdain the laws he himself has made, and at the same time to preserve his authority, as it is to both be and not be at the same time”.⁵¹ All politics are subject to a paradoxical logic, according to which one must pay attention to the “general interest” as long as one wishes to remain in power⁵² – a conclusion which one may find cynical, or Machiavellian, but that has never been refuted.

Conclusions. The Majority or the Law: Republican Justifications and Democratic Preferences.

Whatever the rational and argumentative dimension of his whole philosophy, Spinoza can in no way be considered as a theorist of the “justification” of political action by reference to “values” that could reach an “enlightened” or “moral” conscience”, or by the “law”, or even the “constitution” of the Republic. Spinoza is thus republican in a vague sense, but democratic in a very radical sense. In fact, it completely submits the just and the unjust (like the pious and the impious) to the legal and the illegal, that is to say, morality (just like religion) to politics, to the exteriority of accounts and behaviors rather than to the interiority of beliefs and intentions: “justice depends only on the decree of the supreme powers. So no one can be just unless he lives according to the decrees received from them”.⁵³ In the immanence of the accounts, nothing can override the preferences of the people.⁵⁴ The real name of politics in Spinoza, as in Rancière, is thus “democracy” much more than “republic”. To oppose republican “values” or “constitutions” to the democratic preferences of the people would be to bring

⁵¹ *TP* 4/4.

⁵² *TP* 7/4 (repeated in 8/24): “Everyone is most strongly disposed by his affects to seek his personal advantage, judges those laws most equitable which are necessary to preserve and advance his own interest, and defends another person’s cause just to the extent that he believes it makes his own situation more stable”. Selfishness and altruism are inseparable, although everyone would like to be able to separate them clearly.

⁵³ *TTP* 20 347 1-3.

⁵⁴ We therefore fully share the judgment of Didier MINEUR, in *Le pouvoir de la majorité* (267 n. 12) according to which the question of whether politics is a matter (or not) of “addition of preferences” is a “fundamental” question.

theology back into politics, when Spinoza's first and constant effort was to separate them.

With regard to this, we find in Spinoza something of the skepticism characteristic of the Pascalian attitude towards the laws. The ignorant obey the law because they believe it to be good; the half-skilled resist the law when they believe it to be bad; scientists (or sages) obey the law even though they know (or because they know) that it is neither good nor bad, but only necessary. These three conceptual characters do not designate distinct individuals. They coexist and struggle in each of us, depending on the occasion and the moment. The ignorant and the semi-skilled, in each of us, are still in the theological-political, because they regulate their obedience or their disobedience to the law on their appreciation of the law as "good" or "bad", "fair" or "unfair". They are still Republicans. Only the clever in us (or the sage, to use the Spinozist term), who obeys the law without subjecting it to a work of external "justification", theological or moral, from time to time achieves the liberation engendered by separation of the theological and the political. He is a Democrat.

In many ways, Spinoza's political philosophy is indeed quite striking and significant in regard to the justifications we might be tempted to give to our opinions or preferences. Spinoza affirms the anteriority of the political over the moral or the theological: "like sin and obedience <*peccatum et obsequium*>, taken strictly, so also justice and injustice can be conceived only in a state".⁵⁵ In other words, one can never submit laws to a moral assessment which pre-exists them – which amounts on Spinoza's denial of any transcendence of the moral in relation to the political, and therefore any subordination of the political to the moral. This declaration of the *Political Treatise* echoes the famous declaration of *Ethics* III 9 *scholie*: "we neither strive for, nor will, neither want, nor desire anything because we judge it to be good; on the contrary, we judge something to be good because we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it" – a statement which could otherwise be the slogan of a theory of democratic preference.

⁵⁵TP 2/23.

Even more radically, Spinoza does not hesitate to subsume law under power, and power under numbers: “the power of a state, and hence its right, are to be reckoned by the number of its citizens”.⁵⁶ The quantitative obsession, present everywhere in Spinoza in the doctrine of “singular things”, and at the highest point in the *Political Treatise*, is concentrated here explicitly in the equivalence of the power and the law of the State to the “number” of its citizens, in an entirely immanent conception, indifferent to any question of “good”, “bad”, or “better regime”, a conception in which the number alone makes law, without even being mentioned the nature of what this number, that is to say this count or these votes, could relate to. The Spinozian formula that democracy should be regarded as *imperium absolutum*, that is, “absolute regime”, can only be appreciated from the point of view of such digital radicalism.

The formal law of the “majority” thus envelops a skepticism with regard to the contents of the law: “in a democratic state (which comes closest to the natural condition) everyone contracts to act according to the common decision, but not to judge and reason according to the common decision. Because not all men can equally think the same things, they agreed that the measure which had the most votes would have the force of a decree *<id vim decreti haberet, quod plurima haberet suffragia>*, but that meanwhile they’d retain the authority to repeal these decrees when they saw better ones”.⁵⁷ This indifference to content was already Archimedes’ point of the *Theological-Political Treatise*. To argue, as Spinoza did, that in matters of religion beliefs are irrelevant as long as citizens behave correctly, was in effect playing the winning move which took away their power to the priests. This same indifference to the content, that is to say to the justification, the ends or the values of political action, is very striking. It is consonant with the most famous declaration of the *Political Treatise* (1/4), a true manifesto or philosophical testament (“*I took great pains not to laugh at human actions, or mourn them, or curse them, but only to understand them.*”) by which

⁵⁶ TP 7/18: *Imperii potentia et consequenter jus ex civium numero aestimanda est.*

⁵⁷ TTP 20 351 24-29.

Spinoza rejected any astonishment, mockery, or detestation, and consequently any *a priori* devaluation of any human action whatsoever.

There is something in this that is common to the very functioning of democracy and to other models of immanence. In the Darwinian theory of evolution, for example, all natural and genetic innovations are initially open and equally legitimate, before an immanent selection takes place, making disappear the species unsuited to their environment or subjected to too strong predatory pressures. In Popper's epistemology, all hypotheses are initially equally legitimate and favored, even the wackiest ones, before being selected by crucial experiments. Likewise, from a Spinozist and radically democratic point of view, all opinions are first and foremost equally legitimate and respectable, none deserves contempt or *a priori* prohibition; the majority (that is to say the count of preferences) then identifies the opinions which will prevail, and which the citizen will have to obey on pain of becoming the enemy of his country. But this democratic "political selection" does not confer on the laws passed any kind of moral superiority or justice over those which have not been. In Spinozist democracy, the majority cannot be subject to a prior right (any more than to a morality or a religion), because it makes the law and can therefore change it. There lies within this an intrinsically revolutionary dimension of democracy that no legal or moral framework, not even republican, can claim to contain. The majority of votes, however precarious it may be, remain in excess of law and morality, which can be neither self-founded nor self-legitimized.⁵⁸

⁵⁸Didier MINEUR, in *Le pouvoir de la majorité*, therefore quite rightly points out (p. 214 n. 23) that article 89 of the constitution of French Fifth Republic ("The republican form of government cannot be subject to a revision") is an illusory protection against the power of the majority (and even comical, we would allow us to add, thinking of the Baron of Münchhausen who had tried to extricate himself from the quicksand by pulling his own hair towards the top), because a democratic power can always "overturn the limits which it has given itself", even "to turn against itself and put an end to democracy". To carry out a "revision" of the "republican form of government" of the French Fifth Republic, it would suffice to carry out a first constitutional revision by which this sentence would be deleted from article 89. And if, to ward off this blow, the Constitutionnalists demanded that an article be inserted in the constitution prohibiting the revision of article 89, it would suffice to revise this article first, then article 89, then the "republican form of government", and so on.

The very formalist democracy proposed by Spinoza, this pure law of counting, has always aroused concerns and criticism from supporters of a republicanism in which and through which morality and law would function to limit the vagaries of popular votes. Democracy has never had a great press in philosophy, or even under “republican” regimes.⁵⁹ Pure immanence, in the absence of any reference to pre-established and transcendent “values”, always makes people fear the worst on the part of a “people” always ready to return to the “crowd” or to the “multitude”, to these “large animals” sometimes full of fury and devoid of reason, which Spinoza, long after Plato, was wary of having seen them at work in the appalling lynching of the De Witt brothers on August 20, 1672.

It is therefore quite legitimate to have seen Spinoza as a republican philosopher, worried about the irrationality and violence of crowds and irrationality in general, knowing better than anyone that it happens to men to “see the best, to approve it, and to do the worst”.⁶⁰ Blandine Kriegel thus offers a striking confrontation, in *Philosophie de la République*, between the philosophies of Descartes and Spinoza, and their political posterity. Descartes represents the first way of modernity. This is the path of triumphant subjectivity, of infinite will and therefore irrational, of decision, of man “master and possessor of nature”. Its political posterity will therefore be found in the theories of “empire”, in every sense of the word: self-control, but also domination of the world, by modern “empires”. Paradoxically, the political posterity of the most French of philosophies would thus have developed in Germany, mainly through Fichte, Carl Schmitt and Heidegger. Spinoza, from this point of view, represents the “other way” of modernity, completely opposed to that of Descartes. He develops a philosophy of nature

⁵⁹In *Toward Perpetual Peace*, KANT opposes on the one hand “republicanism” <der Republikanism>, the principle of which, according to him, is “the separation of executive power and legislative power”; and on the other, “despotism” <der Despotism>, in which this separation of powers does not exist. From this point of view, “democracy” <die Demokratie> is a despotism in Kant’s eyes, since “all” in it “decide about one and, if need be, against him” <da alle über und allenfalls auch wider Einen [...] beschließen>, which puts the “universal will” “in contradiction with itself and with freedom”.

⁶⁰In *Ethics* IV 17, Spinoza takes up Ovid’s famous verses (*Metamorphoses* VII, 20-21): *video meliora proboque / Deteriora sequor*.

(and not of the subject). For him, man is not “an empire within an empire” <*imperium in imperio*>⁶¹ but is subject to the same natural laws as any other “singular thing”. Spinoza also rejects as absurd not only the idea of “infinite freedom”, but quite simply the idea of free will, just as much as the idea of “mastery” or “training” of oneself. And for him, “individuals” are not the ultimate ontological realities, quite the contrary: each individual is composed of individuals of lower rank, and component of individuals of higher rank.⁶² Individuality is thus strongly relativized.

For all these reasons, Descartes (who for his part speaks very little of politics) would have had for posterity at the same time the theorists and the practitioners of “the empire” in its most terrifying forms, but also the contemporary democratic peoples, drunk with their individuality and their freedom, almost as disturbing as the first. The rapprochement between “democracy” and “empire” may be startling. But it is globally legitimate in the reference to “mastery” and to individual freedom. The reading of modern contractualism as aggressive virilism, on which Blandine Kriegel and Carole Pateman meet,⁶³ completes this picture of democracy as irrational, unstable, violent, ready for conquest as well as suicidal. The spinozist posterity, according to this point of view, could on the contrary be characterized as globally “republican”. Spinoza not only rejects the primacy of the subject, individualism and the infinite freedom characteristic of cartesian modernity, but grants less and less space, in his political philosophy, to the moment of a “social contract”. Whoever says “social contract”, in fact, necessarily says capacity to decide, control, will, exit from the state of nature. But Spinoza, as we have seen, naturalizes politics as much as it is possible for him to do so. For all these reasons, one could indeed attribute to Descartes the paternity of “democracy” as well as that of “the empire”, and to Spinoza the paternity of the “republic”, and more generally that of a more global relation to the world, a more peaceful, a more fluid one than that of Descartes – this is perhaps why Bruno Latour and a few others, deeply concerned with

⁶¹Spinoza, *Ethics* III, *Preface*.

⁶²See *Ethics* II 13, *Scholie* after *Lemma 7*; and *Letter 32* to Hudde.

⁶³See Carole PATEMAN, *The Sexual Contract*.

establishing new relationships between man and nature, were able to find in Spinoza the resources to a conception of modernity different from that of Descartes, even though the latter still reigns very widely today on the whole planet.⁶⁴

On this particularly powerful and interesting reading, however, one could, it seems to me, make a number of responses which would show that the very nature of Spinozism and its conception of democracy does not necessarily require republican compensation. On the one hand, there is no reason to deny that a democracy could move towards extreme actions, either that it engages in an imperial way (this is the case of several contemporary democracies, like The United States, Russia, Turkey, it was also the case of France and England in the 19th century), either that it engages in a suicidal path (one can think of certain decisions of secession or of independence). As Didier Mineur rightly writes, “any power can commit suicide, without there being a logical contradiction”.⁶⁵ And especially democracy: how could we prevent it? Derrida had particularly insisted on this in *Voyous*: democracy is a “loop” regime, where everyone is both the origin and destination of the law, a regime that as such does not go without “circularity”, “revolution”, or “globalization”. But as a result, democracy, more than any other form of power, turns against itself. For this reason, Derrida underlined the kinship between “democracy”, “auto-immunity” and “deconstruction”.⁶⁶ Democracy is indeed essentially self-critical (because it envelops, as Spinoza argues, the freedom to think and to say what one thinks), a return that weakens and not only strengthens oneself. It lives / dies from this paradox: “democracy has always been suicidal”.⁶⁷ This critique of democracy can indeed go as far as to question democracy itself: “the *alternative* to democracy can always be

⁶⁴See for example Bruno LATOUR, *Face à Gaïa : Huit conférences sur le nouveau régime climatique*, Paris : La Découverte, 2015 [*Facing Gaia : Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017]. See also the conference of Bruno LATOUR : « Portrait de Spinoza en co-enquêteur du projet sur les modes d’existence » [“Portrait of Spinoza as co-investigator of the project on modes of existence”], may 2, 2016 (online [here](#)), as part of the Seminar *Spinoza à Paris 8*.

⁶⁵Didier MINEUR, *Le pouvoir de la majorité*, p. 379.

⁶⁶Jacques DERRIDA, *Voyous*, p. 130.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, p. 57.

represented as a democratic *alternation*".⁶⁸ Democracy is thus the result of a contradictory "turn" or "return", which Derrida sometimes calls the auto-immune or democratic *double bind* (double contradictory injunction).⁶⁹ This instability consubstantial with democracy, which can be expressed as well in imperial expansion as in suicidal retraction, comes from the fact that democracy, all in immanence, shows more than any other regime its lack of foundation, that is to say of legitimacy.

We can therefore understand the concern aroused by democratic governments, and the almost irrepressible temptation to frame them, to contain them within a republican framework where constitutional values and laws prevail, as secularized forms of transcendence. But the most procedural and immanent democracy actually envelops an ethical dimension, like artistic and scientific activities. Didier Mineur has clearly shown the forced dimension of the opposition between "procedural democracy" and "substantial democracy".⁷⁰ The procedural or formal dimension of democracy, that is to say the law of the count to which Spinoza has become more and more exclusively attached in his politics, supposes the strict numerical equality of the citizens. A "principle of equality" (therefore a "substantial dimension", a "content", a value) is therefore enveloped by the very procedure of democratic additions. This is undoubtedly one of the reasons why Spinoza's philosophy, written *more geometrico*, "in the manner of geometers", therefore in the most "formal" way possible, is nevertheless entitled "*Ethics*". We are therefore not surprised to see the very rich demonstration of Didier Mineur ending with a reference to Jacques Rancière, who makes "equality of intelligence" the condition of possibility of politics in the sense in which he understands it, that is to say democracy, even if

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, p. 54 : "L'*alternative* à la démocratie peut toujours être *représentée* comme une *alternance* démocratique".

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁷⁰Didier MINEUR, *Le pouvoir de la majorité*, p. 340, 372-373. We only regret the absence of a reference to Spinoza, which would have offered a perfect illustration of the theses defended in the work.

Rancière favors a democracy of the drawing of lots while Mineur favors a democracy of the majority.⁷¹

Moreover and finally, Spinoza's vision of democracy as a count of preferences is very far, despite appearances, from the Cartesian posterity of the modern subject, drunk with his infinite freedom, capable of all irrationalities as well as of all violence (despotism or empire), and which should therefore as much as possible be bordered, limited, contained by fundamental laws and moral values, that is to say by a republican framework. Indeed, democratic preferences (in matters of manners, customs, laws, organization of public space, etc.) have nothing to do, despite appearances, with the actions of a free subject. We do not choose our preferences but experience them or see them passively. Our food, clothing, sexual preferences, etc., our "vocations", are in no way decisions or choices that we could make freely. In most cases, Spinoza had insisted on it long before René Girard, our preferences or our desires are moreover mimetic and in this are in no way the sign of subjectivities or individualities that are masters of themselves and absolutized as such. As a result, a democracy conceived in the Spinozist manner as the ceaselessly renewed account of majority preferences undoubtedly produces collective decisions. But these are passive decisions, if one can dare such an oxymoron, reflecting the stable contours of a historical and civilizational heritage much more than the activity of subjects or individuals free of their choice, which should therefore be subject as a precaution to a "republican" framework.

Translated by: Esterina CELAMI

⁷¹Didier MINEUR, *Le pouvoir de la majorité*, p. 383 and last, last note (n. 2, p. 383-384). Mineur refers to Rancière's formula "community of equals" but reintroduce in the very last lines (by reference to the work of Catherine COLLIOT-THÉLÈNE *La démocratie sans 'demos'*) the reference to a legal dimension that we do not find in Rancière. Mineur criticizes the drawing of lots p. 332 n. 33 (rightly, in our opinion: see Charles RAMOND, *Jacques Rancière – L'égalité des intelligences*, 2019, chp. 13, p. 104). But Rancière defends it for example in *La haine de la démocratie* (p. 48-56), and in *Et tant pis pour les gens fatigués* [*And too bad for tired people*] (p. 466).

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English Summary

Whatever the rational and argumentative dimension of his whole philosophy, Spinoza can in no way be considered as a theorist of the “justification” of political action by reference to “values” that could reach an “enlightened conscience” or “morals”, or by the “law” or even the “Constitution” of the Republic. Spinoza is thus republican in a vague sense, but democratic in a very radical sense. In fact, it completely submits the just and the unjust (like the pious and the impious) to the legal and the illegal, that is to say, morality (just like religion) to politics, to the exteriority of accounts and behaviors rather than the interiority of beliefs and intentions. In the immanence of the accounts, nothing can override the preferences of the people. The real name of politics in Spinoza, as in Rancière, is thus “Democracy” much more than “Republic”. To oppose republican “values” or “constitutions” to the democratic “preferences” of peoples would be to bring theology back into politics, when Spinoza’s first and constant effort was to separate them.

Résumé en français

Quelle que soit la dimension rationnelle et argumentative de toute sa philosophie, Spinoza ne peut en aucune façon être considéré comme un théoricien de la « justification » de l’action politique par référence à des « valeurs » que pourrait atteindre une « conscience éclairée » ou « morale », ou par le « droit » voire la « Constitution » de la République. Spinoza est ainsi républicain en un sens vague, mais démocrate en un sens très radical. Il soumet en effet entièrement le juste et l’injuste (comme le pieux et l’impie) au légal et à l’illégal, c’est-à-dire la morale (tout comme la religion) à la politique, à l’extériorité des comptes et des comportements plutôt qu’à l’intériorité des croyances et des intentions. Dans l’immanence des comptes, rien ne peut venir surplomber les préférences des peuples. Le

véritable nom de la politique chez Spinoza, comme chez Rancière, est ainsi « Démocratie » bien plus encore que « République ». Opposer des « valeurs » ou des « Constitutions » républicaines aux « préférences » démocratiques des peuples serait faire revenir la théologie dans la politique, alors que l'effort premier et constant de Spinoza aura été de les séparer.

Keywords

Spinoza; politics; democracy; republic; law; number, count, vote; immanence; justifications; preferences.

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