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Chapter Title: Marx, Spinoza, and “True Democracy”

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Abstract: It is common to assimilate Marx’s and Spinoza’s conceptions of democracy. In this chapter, I assess the relation between Marx’s early idea of “true democracy” and Spinozist democracy, both the historical influence and the theoretical affinity. Drawing on Marx’s student notebooks on Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise*, I show there was a historical influence. However, at the theoretical level, I argue that a sharp distinction must be drawn. Philosophically, Spinoza’s commitment to understanding politics through real concrete powers does not support with Marx’s anti-institutional conception of true democracy. And as a matter of social theory, the gap between civil society and the state which so troubles Marx is a development of modernity that has not entered Spinoza’s premodern field of view. Marx’s true democracy was also influenced by his study of Rousseau, and theoretically, it is just as close if not closer to Rousseau as to Spinoza.

Key Words: Marx; Spinoza; true democracy; Rousseau; civil society; state

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Marx, Spinoza, and “True Democracy”¹

It is common to assimilate Marx’s and Spinoza’s conceptions of democracy.² Indeed, Marx appears to have drawn his idea of “true democracy” (contrasted with democracy as a mere state-form) fairly directly from his study of Spinoza.³ In this paper, I address Marx’s relation to Spinoza both at the level of historical influence and at the level of theoretical affinity.⁴ I grant the historical influence: Marx’s notebooks reveal that he does locate key elements for his early theory of democracy in Spinoza’s TTP. However, at the theoretical level, I argue that a sharp distinction must be drawn between Marxian and Spinozist democracy.

Philosophically, Spinoza’s commitment to understanding politics through real concrete powers rather than abstract juridical rights is incompatible with Marx’s anti-institutional

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² I abbreviate the titles of primary texts by Spinoza, Rousseau, Hegel, and Marx when citing their works. For Spinoza, E=*Ethics*; TTP=*Theological-Political Treatise*; TP=*Political Treatise*, all cited with reference to chapter and section number, according to Curley’s English translation. I occasionally reference also G=Gebhardt’s edition of the Latin by volume and page number. For Rousseau, SC=*The Social Contract*. For Hegel, PR=*Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. For Marx, MTTP=1841 notebooks on Spinoza (Marx 1977); MSC=1843 notebook on Rousseau’s *Social Contract* (Marx 1981); CHPR=*Critique of Hegel’s “Philosophy of Right”*; CWF=*The Civil War in France*.

³ Abensour 2011: 51; Chrysis 2018: 37-41, 74f.; Dobbs-Weinstein 2014; Igoin 1977; Negri 1998: 246n21; Rubel 1962; Sharp 2013. All (save Sharp) explicitly highlight the link between MTTP and CHPR. The present chapter builds upon the papers of Matheron 1977 and Morfino 2013, who both sketch an ambivalent picture of the connection between Marx and Spinoza on the question of democracy. Yovel 1989: 78-103 offers a rare total rejection of a similarity between Spinoza and Marx on the question of democracy.

⁴ A third possible methodological approach would be theoretical transformation. Seeking to shed Marx’s Hegelian baggage of teleology and transcendental subjectivism, French philosophers of the late twentieth century attempted to refound Marxism on a Spinozist metaphysical basis. See Althusser 1976 for a classic statement; and Holland 1998 for an overview. Some authors have attempted more specifically to transform Marx’s conception of democracy in a Spinozist direction. For example, see Lordon 2014: 147-60 and Holland 1998: §24, §26. Such efforts sometimes retain what I’ll identify as an unSpinozist element: a blanket opposition to institutional mediation, rather than a Spinozist ambivalence.

conception of true democracy. And as a matter of social theory, the gap between civil society and the state which so troubles Marx is a development of modernity that has not entered Spinoza's premodern field of view. Marx's own notebooks suggest his notion of true democracy was also influenced by Rousseau; indeed, I argue that true democracy finds in Rousseau a theoretical forebear just as close if not closer than Spinoza.

In this chapter, I will proceed as follows. First, I will sketch Marx's theory of democracy as it appears in his early CHPR (1843).⁵ Second, I will sketch the Spinozist corroborations for this theory of democracy, as they appear in Marx's 1841 student notebook transcriptions of TTP. Third, I will articulate a systematic understanding of Spinoza's political philosophy, drawing not only on TTP, but also Spinoza's other major works. I will indicate the mismatch between the Spinozist theory of democracy emergent from this systematic understanding and the Marxist view. Fourth and finally, I will consider true democracy from the point of view of social theory, indicating a Rousseauvian influence and theoretical affinity at odds with Spinoza's premodern understanding.

1. Marx's vision of democracy

I distinguish the three key elements of Marx's early theory of democracy, as it develops in the CHPR, as follows. They are:

1. An identification of democracy, not monarchy, as the truth of all regimes;

⁵ In this chapter, I address only Marx's early views. I focus on the CHPR because it is the discussion of democracy most chronologically proximate to Marx's 1841 Spinoza notebook (MTTP).

Did Marx in his later works come to repudiate democracy as a mere bourgeois ideological cover for class rule? Or does Marx's later celebration of the Paris Commune (CWF 181-207), as well as his conceptualization of communism, display continuity with his early celebration of democracy? The relation between Marx's early and late views—both in general, and specifically with regard to democracy—is a matter of scholarly controversy, on which this chapter takes no position. For various defences of a continuist interpretation with respect to democracy, see Avineri 1993: 34; Rubel 1962; Springborg 1984; Chrysis 2018; Coletti 1975: 43.

2. A hostility to the state, insofar as it outstrips the “actual human lives” of its subjects, and correspondingly a valorization of a “true democracy” which involves the dissolution of the state;
3. And an affinity between a democratic social order and an irreligious social order.

However, I will not present these elements as freestanding theses. Marx's theory of democracy emerges within his section-by-section commentary on Hegel's PR §§261-313, and it takes shape as a fairly direct transformation of Hegelian theoretical structures.⁶ It is within these structures that we can understand the meaning and theoretical stakes of Marx's characterization of certain social orders as true and not abstract or alienated.

Hegel frames the outlook of his *Philosophy of Right* in the following terms:

This treatise [...] in so far as it deals with political science, shall be nothing other than an attempt to *comprehend and portray the state as an inherently rational entity* (PR Pref | 21).

For Hegel, the rationality of the state is fundamental for the possibility of human freedom.

[I]t is only through being a member of the state that the individual [*Individuum*] himself has objectivity, truth, and ethical life (PR §258 | 276).

Why is this? A self whose objects of action are foreign cannot be properly free, because such a self is not purely self-determining. Instead, the self's action must accommodate to the features of those objects contingent to it; or in other words, such a self is dependent on those objects. The self's freedom can only be secured if its objects can be incorporated into itself, and lose their character as other (PR §§22-23 | 53f.). If external forces can be understood as rational, then they lose their contingency and foreignness. If Hegel achieves PR's goal of showing the state to be rational, then this rational insight allows “reconciliation with actuality” (PR Pref | 22).

⁶ For an overview, see Avineri 1993: 8-40 as well as Depew 1992.

One might take this to mean that freedom is merely a question of having the correct frame of mind; but to the contrary, rationality needs to be actualized in the world in which the thinking self lives (PR §32 | 60; §153 | 196). Through history, human societies have developed increasingly rational forms (PR §342-4 | 372f.). With the emergence of the modern state,

the momentous unification of self-sufficient individuality with universal substantiality takes place (PR §33a | 64).

In Hegel's view, the modern state is the apex of the development of rationality because it uniquely accommodates both subjective freedom (private freedom or particularity) and objective freedom (public universality).⁷ In ancient Greece, citizens wholeheartedly identified with the public universality of their city. But not only did citizens lack the full subjective freedom to shape their lives individually: even worse, the city was dependent on a slave class to serve the sphere of human needs. The slaves, despite their evidently human self-consciousness, were denied any reflection in the city's political form (PR §356 | 378f.). In the modern state, these limitations are overcome. Human needs are served through private activities of citizens, in what Hegel calls civil society. Within civil society everyone is granted the subjective freedom to pursue a diversity of individual ends. At the same time, the modern state does not mistake the subjective freedom of civil society for freedom *tout court*. Citizens' private subjective freedom achieves its full objectivity through their public role in universality of the state (PR §260 | 282f.).

Hegel defends a fairly detailed institutional model for the rational modern state, through which the subjective particularity of civil society can be brought together with the objective universality of the state. Without some structured mediation, civil society risks degenerating into an amorphous swarm of particular needs and desires. Hegel proposes that

⁷ For this distinction, see PR §26 | 55-57.

individuals in civil society should find their roles as members of family units but also more significantly as members of estates (the agricultural estate, the estate of trade and industry). These intermediary bodies are then coordinated by the actions of the civil service or bureaucracy as the universal estate (PR §199-208 | 233-9, §250-6 | 270-4). Finally, the whole social order is crowned with a monarch as a head of state. For only the single person of the monarch can provide the complex whole of the state with the unity and will necessary to act (PR §279 | 316f.).

Marx's general complaint is that Hegel identifies ideas or rationality as the subject of history and politics, reducing empirical contents of actual human lives to mere predicates of this cosmic subject.

The mystical substance becomes the real subject and the real subject appears to be something else, namely a moment of the mystical substance (CHPR 24, re: PR §279). For throughout the PR, Hegel does not merely identify the state as rational. More robustly, Hegel attributes agency and will to rationality itself—in Hegelian jargon, to spirit or the Idea. Then the state as a rational entity becomes the vehicle of the Idea's subjecthood.

The state is the actuality of the ethical Idea—the ethical spirit as substantial will, manifest and clear to itself, which thinks and knows itself and implements what it knows in so far as it knows it (PR §257 | 275).

In Marx's view, however, Hegel's analysis is upside down. It is the real material contents, actual human lives, which are truly subject, and the ideas as predicate (CHPR 17, re: PR §269). Marx still conceives a “true” social order in terms of the Hegelian demand for a self-knowing will, but now one where the people as a material force are the subject. The subject, always the people, avoids abstraction when it transparently and self-consciously acts, rather than having its action mystified or distorted. Let's see how this bears on the question of democracy.

1. *Democracy as the truth of all regimes.* Marx's core discussion of democracy comes as an extended response to PR §279 (CHPR 23-33). To Hegel's claim that the state must be monarchical, Marx offers this pithy chiasmus: "Democracy is the truth of monarchy, monarchy is not the truth of democracy" (CHPR 29, re: PR §279). Hegel poses monarchy as the proper constitutional vehicle of the subject, due to its inherent unity of will. But from Marx's point of view, the constitution is actually a free product of human action. Consequently, its real subject is the people, and a true social order is one in which this subject, the people, acts self-consciously and transparently. "[A]ll forms of the state have democracy as their truth, and for that reason are false to the extent they are not democracy" (CHPR 31, re: PR §279). Political orders such as monarchy that obscure or mystify the true subject are perniciously abstract.

2. *True democracy against the state.* Marx's claim that the social order is the "free product" of "actual man, the actual people" (CHPR 30, re: PR §279), and that correspondingly democracy is the unalienated political form, in fact has two separable steps. First, democracy as a state form, or what Marx sometimes labels "the republic" (CHPR 31, re: PR §279), overcomes the abstraction of a monarchical state form. But second and more distinctively, democracy beyond the state form, or what Marx sometimes calls "true democracy," overcomes the abstraction of all regimes that still feature the state.

What is this pernicious abstractness of the state? Marx observes that in a monarchy just as in a republic, there is still the distinction (so celebrated by Hegel) between public and private (CHPR 30, re: PR §279). Marx accedes to Hegel that the existence of a political sphere as against a sphere of civil society is the essence of the state, but differs on its normative significance. For Hegel, the individual of civil society, living within their family

and community, may have their subjective freedom, but this subjective freedom remains abstract. It is only through membership in the state that objective freedom is achieved. For Marx, again Hegel's analysis is upside down. The individual in these social forms of civil society is at their most concrete; it is the state that is the abstraction, and an unnecessary one at that (CHPR 27, re: PR §279). It is humans in their real material lives in civil society who act, and if they find their political status only apart from civil society, then they are alienated. The challenge is to achieve the universality promised by the political state, but within civil society: this will be called true democracy (CHPR 30f., re: PR §279).⁸

3. *Democracy and irreligion.* Marx's CHPR endorses an analogy between political abstraction and Feuerbachian religious alienation.

Just as it is not religion that creates man but man who creates religion, so it is not the constitution that creates the people but the people which creates the constitution (CHPR 30, re: PR §279).

Just as Christianity projects human needs more authentically than other religions, so too the democratic state form projects human needs more authentically than other state forms. But neither is Christianity a solution to religious alienation, nor is the republic a solution to political abstraction. True democracy is to politics what atheism is to religion (CHPR 30, re: PR §279; see also Avineri 1993: 10-12). More strongly, in the famous "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right": Introduction" (composed in 1844 and originally

⁸ How the distinction between private individual and political subject will be overcome remains unclear in CHPR. In Marx's later works, it depends on a transformation of the mode of production and a corresponding elimination of class distinctions. In CHPR, Marx suggests that the struggle for universal suffrage may already achieve true democracy (CHPR 121, re: PR §308; see also CHPR 118, re: PR §308), but this is hard to reconcile with his criticisms of the democratic state throughout the rest of the text. For discussion, see Springborg 1984: 538, 545 and Coletti 1975: 43f.

intended as an introduction to a revised CHPR), Marx proposes that political alienation and religious alienation are not merely analogous phenomena, but are actually intertwined.

This state, this society, produce religion, which is an inverted world-consciousness, because they are an inverted world. [...] Thus, the struggle against religion is indirectly the struggle against that world of which religion is the spiritual aroma (CHPR 131).

That is, in true democracy there would no longer be any religion; religion is a manifestation of more prosaic political forms of alienation, and both promise to be overcome together.

2. Marx on Spinoza on Democracy

Readers of Marx and Spinoza have enthusiastically identified a direct connection between the two philosophers' respective conceptions of democracy.⁹ Rubel 1962: 81 is representative:

One would not go wrong in asserting that Marx's criticism of Hegel is no more than a poetical and satirical transposition of Spinoza's detached pleadings for the best form of government, namely democracy.

Indeed, there is considerable *prima facie* plausibility for understanding Marx's democracy as Spinozist. Evidencing Marx's close attention to Spinoza's work, in his 1841 student notebook of selections Marx transcribed sixteen pages of selections from Spinoza's TTP in his own hand.¹⁰ Nor was this a mere unthinking transcription. The notebook selections are systematically reordered (as I will discuss in the following section). Indeed, Marx appeared to feel credit was due for the intellectual effort of this reordering: below the notebook's title, "Spinoza's *Theological Political Treatise*," Marx added "by Karl Heinrich Marx." Granted, at

⁹ See footnote 3, above. *CHECK IN PROOFS, AND THEN DELETE THIS MESSAGE*

¹⁰ Selections from Spinoza's correspondence, as well as a title page and a table of contents for excerpts from TTP, are in the hand of a copyist. All excerpts and selections were taken from first volume of the 1802-3 Paulus edition of Spinoza's works (Rubel 1977: 12-14).

that time Marx was not primarily thinking about democracy, instead focusing on religion and its place in politics.¹¹ Marx's selection of fragments from TTP does not even systematically seek out passages on democracy. Nonetheless, Spinoza's concern for religion is intertwined with his broader discussion of politics. Insofar as what emerges from Marx's selections foreshadows the three elements of his own subsequent discussion of democracy in CHPR, we can say that Spinoza was a historical influence on Marx's early theory of democracy.

1. Foreshadowing Marx's idea that democracy is the truth of all regimes, Spinoza appears to hold democracy to be the most natural of all regimes. Marx transcribes TTP's account of the formation of social order from "the power and will of everyone together" (MTTP §71; TTP XVI 13).

[E]ach person transfers all the power he has to the social order, which alone will retain the supreme right of nature over all things. [...] The right of such a social order is called Democracy. This is defined, then, as a general assembly of men which has, as a body, the supreme right over everything in its power (MTTP §73; TTP XVI 25).

Spinoza's discussion of the state's internal structure draws a very explicit conclusion regarding the status of democracy:

[The democratic state] seemed to me to be the most natural state, and the one which approached most nearly the freedom nature concedes to everyone (MTTP §75; TTP XVI 33).

2. Spinoza does speak of the political order as a republic (*respublica*) which is a state (*imperium*) headed by a sovereign (*summa potestas*) who exercises a right to rule (*ius imperandi*). But in Spinoza's usage, these terms are redefined to eliminate juridical abstraction. Foreshadowing Marx's defence of true democracy, as opposed to the republic

¹¹ For discussion of the place of the 1841 Spinoza notebooks within Marx's philosophical development, see also Bianchi 2018.

(democracy as a state form), Spinoza famously refuses any conception of right outstripping power (*potentia*), and uses an analysis of politics through real concrete powers of the people to diminish the claims of the sovereign or the state to authority. As Marx transcribes:

Now the supreme law of nature is that each thing strives to persevere in its state [*in suo statu*], as far as it can by its own power [*quantum in se est*], and does this, not on account of anything else, but only of itself. From this it follows that each individual has the supreme right to do this, i.e. [...] to exist and have effects as it is naturally determined to do (MTTP §69; TTP XVI 3).

The natural right [*jus ... naturale*] of each man is determined not by sound reason, but by desire and power [*potentia*] (MTTP §70; TTP XVI 7).

Relatedly for Spinoza, covenants and contracts—including the contract founding the state—have no force of their own, except insofar as they are continually endorsed by the contractors. Marx transcribes Spinoza's claims to this effect (MTTP §72; TTP XVI 20) as well as his resulting admission that state authority has no power or right beyond its popular support, and a ruler without real power will not endure (MTTP §74; TTP XVI 28). In sum, the good democratic state is characterized as a democracy maintaining uncoerced and wholehearted freedom (MTTP §75; TTP XVI 33).

3. Foreshadowing Marx's intertwining of religious and political alienation, Marx's selections from the final chapter of Spinoza's TTP set up a binary contrast between the free regime which allows all to think as they please, and the violent regime which attempts to enforce doctrine, particularly religious doctrine. The free regime allows nobility to flourish, whereas the violent regime encourages servility (MTTP §§36-44; see also TTP XX 39). Spinoza views the drive to impose religious doctrine as a concealed powerplay (MTTP §45; TTP XX 45). In ancient times, when tyrants and despots feared the people, they would render them docile through religious mystification. Marx transcribes:

[T]o make themselves secure they tried to persuade people that they were descended from the immortal Gods. They thought that if only their subjects (and everyone else) didn't look on them as equals, but believed them to be Gods, they would easily surrender to them, and willingly submit to their rule (MTTP §56; TTP XVII 20).

Still in modern times, rulers seek to persuade their subjects that they are God's representative on earth (MTTP §57; TTP XVII 24).

3. Questioning Marx's Spinoza

Matheron claims that Marx's 1841 notebook amounts to a “real montage” of Spinoza's text.

Matheron meticulously examines Marx's 170 textual fragments of TTP, and finds that Marx's selection and reordering alter the logical and conceptual relations between Spinoza's ideas.

As a result, Matheron argues that Marx's notebook presents a different philosophical view compared to Spinoza's own (Matheron 1977: 161).

Matheron's classic analysis undermines the Spinozist credentials of the third element I distinguish in Marx's thinking of democracy: the neat distinction between free and freethinking democratic regimes and unfree, undemocratic, superstitious regimes. Matheron shows that Marx's selections systematically leave out central themes of TTP: the permanent imaginative mooring of social life, and the potentially positive role of religion (Matheron 1977: 159f., 169-73). Spinoza is unquestionably concerned with the problem of superstitious capture of political power by despots and tyrants, and TTP's core purpose is to oppose sectarian attempts to legislate religion. But for Spinoza, the problem is with certain modes of theologico-politics, not with religion itself. Far from being antithetical to a free democratic regime, religion plays a positive role for Spinoza in facilitating commitment to and action for the common good. By contrast, Marx correlates religion with political servitude, and reads

TTP wilfully to accord with that prior view.¹² Even though Marx drew on Spinoza's texts, what he took from them was theoretically at odds with Spinoza's own view.

My own analysis will focus on the second element that I distinguished in Marx's thinking of democracy: true democracy as opposed to the state. Does Spinoza's philosophy actually substantively support true democracy, or is the apparent support a mere artefact of MTTP's selective sampling? I explore this question through a reading of Spinoza's political texts—not only the full TTP, but also TP—and through a reading of Spinoza's metaphysics in E.¹³ I find that the support is merely apparent. For Spinoza, there is no privileged subject of social life needing to be returned to itself from the clutches of an abstract and alienating state. To the contrary, for Spinoza the state and its people are intertwined results of concrete processes, nor does the state have less reality than its people.

Questioning Marx's Spinoza—The Production of the People

In fact, the state is very present in Spinoza's political philosophy. Marx gives the impression that subjects in Spinoza's democracy are bound to abide by the rule of the state only when it is useful to them, echoing Marx's own idea of true democracy where the people's action is unalienated and unimpeded by a state (MTTP §72, TTP XVI 20). But in adjacent discussions, Spinoza emphasizes the constraint that a social contract produces. Linking one's compliance with a contract to its “utility” does not translate into a freedom to exit the state when one chooses. For once the state as a union of subjects has been concretely achieved, it has

¹² A similar observation is found in Igoin 1977; Dobbs-Weinstein 2014; and Morfino 2013: 192-4.

¹³ The TP is contained (along with the *Ethics*) in the second volume of the 1802-3 Paulus edition of Spinoza's works, whereas Marx's notebooks transcribe material only from the first volume. Marx probably had access to the second volume, since his dissertation and preparatory notes quote from the E (Matysik 2021: 41). Nonetheless, there is no positive evidence he read TP. Perhaps at the time of Marx's 1841 notetaking, with his interests focused on religion and politics, he saw little reason to dwell on TP, in which the treatment of religion is minimal.

overwhelming power compared to any of its particular individual subjects. In this situation, it is extremely useful to keep one's promise to comply. Once the state exists, subjects who are not mad or foolhardy cannot individually abandon their promise of obedience without foreseeable overwhelmingly negative results (TTP XVI 27, see also TTP V 22 and Matheron 1977: 176-88). In consequence, contrary to MTTP's possible suggestion, there is no effective right to abandon one's promise, unless and until a critical mass of co-dissenters has been formed.

Spinoza is comfortable with the state's constraint on the individual because he views achieving a stable state, not torn apart by internal conflict, as a deep challenge. Humans have deep-rooted tendencies to antisocial behaviour, and so for instance may be “easily corrupted” by greed, are driven by “uncontrolled anger,” and so on (TTP XVII 14-16; see MTTP §55). It is a challenge to establish sociable conduct, and the positive phase¹⁴ of the Hebrew Republic—the theocratic phase after Moses's death—offers a case study in how this challenge might valuably be met. In it, the political institutions (broadly construed) produce sociable individual subjects, in part negatively (by punitive sanction), but also more significantly in positive ways (by cultivating affects and dispositions and structuring behaviours).

Centrally, it was for Spinoza organized around a division of powers between those interpreting God's law and those implementing it, with neither party superior to the other, meaning that no one held all the functions of supreme commander; Spinoza also discusses questions of the number of tribes, the rights of succession, and the allocation of roles and functions (TTP XVII 41-61). Spinoza explains how the manifold pressures and incentives of this institutional order generated the required behaviour in all parts of the society (TTP XVII

¹⁴ Marx's selections misrepresent the Republic as a uniformly oppressive superstitious state (MTTP 56-66; Matheron 1977: 187-97).

62). On the side of the rulers, certain functional divisions prevented usurpation and corrupt rule, supported by the vigilance and piety of the population in scrutinizing their actions. On the side of the ruled, their good conduct, both in keeping their rulers in line and in acting sociably themselves, is understood by Spinoza to emerge from a nexus of causes: hostility to foreigners (and no temptation to defect) due to religious difference; the jubilee regularly overturning emergent inequality and eliminating alienation from real property; poverty being bearable due to the lack of inequality; and more (TTP XVII 76-92). In Morfino's words, "the people are not alienated in the Jewish state; they are constituted in it as such."¹⁵

A Marxian reader might be skeptical whether any broader lesson can be drawn from the Hebrew example. Could it be the case that this ancient religious state only required institutional complexity precisely because, *qua* religious, it was an alienated state, obscuring its own true subject? To the contrary, Spinoza's institutionalist commitment is perfectly general. In TP, Spinoza again defines his task as exploring the determinate causes of good or bad behaviour (TP I 4), and again proposes that the most significant causes of human behaviour are decided by the state within which they live (TP V 3). This general framework for political analysis is then applied in TP VI-XI successively to monarchic, aristocratic, and democratic regime forms. There is no proper discussion of democracy because TP XI was incomplete at Spinoza's death, but in theorizing monarchy and aristocracy, Spinoza discusses every variety of institutional pressure or effect. Beyond outlining the principles constituting ruling assemblies, he also offers a detailed consideration of sumptuary laws, military recruitment, and checking bodies. The result is just as institutionally complex as his analysis of the Hebrew Republic, if not more complex.

These discussions add up to show that the challenge within Spinoza's philosophy is not for politico-legal forms to map onto some underlying natural order, but instead to

¹⁵ See Morfino 2013: 196 as well as Matheron 1977: 192-3.

constitute a good political order, and the good subjects within it. Marx insists that “[m]an does not exist because of the law but rather the law exists for the good of man” (CHPR 30, re: PR §279). By contrast for Spinoza, there is a meaningful sense in which both sides of the chiasm must be affirmed: law does exist for the good of man, but at the same time, man also does exist because of the law. What drops out on this account is the Marxian preoccupation with identifying a true subject. Spinoza's philosophy is anti-subjective in the sense that social order is not conceived as an edifice that can either transparently or obscurely express its true subject's action. To the contrary, the theoretical focus is on the difficult ongoing construction of coherent individual and collective action out of the messy materials of social life, without appeal to a subject. If this coherence is achieved at all, it is achieved through a dense web of processes and micropowers (Morfino 2013: 196). Such a social order is certainly a human product, but it is not a Marxian “free product of men,” nor does it have “actual man, actual people” as its subject (CHPR 29f., re: PR §279).

Questioning Marx's Spinoza—The Power of the State

It may be puzzling how I can put forward this heavily institutional reading of Spinoza, despite earlier noting with Marx his anti-juridical reduction of right to power (MTTP §§69, 70, 72, 74). For that reduction had appeared to grant greater reality to actual people, as bearers of power, and lesser reality to political institutions, as a mere effect of the actual people's power. Political institutions may pretend to have their reality in some independent possession of juridical right, but in fact (so the passages appeared to indicate) they are dependent for their continued existence their ongoing channelling of the people's power. Such an understanding appears to be strongly corroborated by TP's later invocations of the power of the multitude [*potentia multitudinis*]:

This right, which is defined by the power of the multitude, is usually called sovereignty (TP II 17).

[T]he right of the commonwealth is determined by the power of a multitude which is led as if by one mind (TP III 7).

These passages assert that the state (sovereignty, the commonwealth) relies on the power of the popular multitude for its reality. This suggests, first, that there is such a thing as the multitude's power, an originary horizontal plane of individuals separate from the state. Second, it also suggests that the most powerful state is one which flattens onto the multitude, and in so doing eliminates itself as such. Indeed, Negri 1998 has argued that while institutional complexity may well be necessary for maintaining an alienated political order (not only the Hebrew Republic, but also the non-democratic regimes in TP), by contrast had Spinoza completed TP, he would have theorized democracy as self-founding, and any necessary institutions would emanate from the multitude as such.¹⁶

The mismatch between the institutional reading that I have sketched and Spinoza's anti-juridicism is merely apparent. For the *prima facie* Marxian implications of Spinoza's "power of the multitude" do not hold up to analysis. Marx appears to take the view that real power lies in natural things like humans, whereas human political constructions like the state only have derivative power. But this intuition is not borne out by Spinoza's metaphysics, which is ontologically permissive regarding both its definition of individuality and its attribution of powers.¹⁷ An individual is nothing other than a complex aggregation of parts displaying a characteristic pattern of motions (E2p13Def, E2p13L4-L6 | G II 99-101). Suppose a state exists as a concrete arrangement of components—its members, the multitude—with certain regular patterns of interaction amongst them. Then, such a state

¹⁶ For an in-depth critique of Negri's view, see Field 2012.

¹⁷ The remainder of this section draws heavily on Field 2020b: Chapters 7 & 8.

counts as an individual (TP IV 4-5). To be sure, the state's components are human beings, but those human beings themselves are just complex aggregates of parts (E2p13PostI | G II 102). There is no Marxian separation between “true” actual humans and the “illusion” of the state, nor anything more deeply real about the former compared to the latter.¹⁸ The multitude and the state are simply the same entity under different perspectives, or in other words, as Balibar insists, for Spinoza both ruler and ruled are part of the multitude (Balibar 1998: 70), and the state is an individual whether its regular patterns of motion are horizontally or hierarchically structured. Thus, the claim ‘the right of sovereignty—or the right of the commonwealth—is the power of the multitude’ is just an analytical claim about any political regime whatsoever. The point of Spinoza's reduction of right to power is to deny that a state gains reality by the bare fact of covenant or assertion of right, and to redirect our attention to the concrete reordering and recombining of individual powers. If there is a covenant which results in a concrete recombination of powers, then the resultant state has power and is no illusion (Field 2020b: 186-92).

To be sure, Spinoza's philosophy does mark a distinction between more and less desirable political orders, mapping onto something like a distinction between more or less powerful multitudes (TP III 7, V 1). But this distinction is not Marx's between unalienated true democracy and the alienated state-form. Rather, it's the distinction between a state with greater or lesser *power of acting* (*potentia agendi*). An individual has greater power of acting to the extent it produces effects that can be understood through its own nature alone, whereas a thing has a lesser power of acting insofar as the effects it produces are understood through its own nature only in combination with another (Field 2020b: 179-84; Matheron 1988: 11-24). Recall Spinoza's conception of individual natures in terms of characteristic motions. An individual with a greater power of acting will be one which produces effects understood

¹⁸ This has been a point of interpretive controversy. For an overview, see Steinberg 2013.

through the characteristic motions that define its individuality. This amounts to maintaining those motions, regardless of external perturbations. Thus it is complex self-regulating wholes (homeostatic wholes) that count as having the highest active power. By contrast, if a thing fails to maintain its characteristic motions, or if a thing maintains its characteristic motions only through external supports, then to that extent it is understood through the power of other things, not its own active power (E2p13s, E4p38-9, E5p39; Matheron 1988: 43-51).

Let me now apply this gauge of degrees of active power to politics (Field 2020b: 192-3, 196-8). As outlined above, any state whatsoever has right and power insofar as it exists and produces effects, and this power is nothing other than the power of the multitude (the power of the actually existing combination of all elements of the society). But Spinoza's emphasis is on the state high in *active* power: in the language of TP, such a state not merely has right but also is in control of right, it is *sui juris* (TP III 6). A multitude low in active power is either fractious, swayed by controversies, or similar. A multitude high in active power is a robustly self-regulating, self-stabilizing order (TTP XX 7; TP I 6). In particular, it will produce in its individual members the attitudes and behaviours which conduce to its own continuation (TP IV 4, VII 1-2, X 9; Matheron 1988: 460). The political challenge is to increase the multitude's active power, and Spinoza's discussions throughout TP VI-XI explain the institutional measures which might be deployed to this end. In sum, even the power of the multitude is not some prior force, but an institutional result.

Questioning Marx's Spinoza—Political Freedom

It may again be puzzling how I can put forward a heavily institutional reading of Spinoza in the face of TTP's direct endorsement of natural freedom.

[The democratic state] seemed to me to be the most natural state, and the one which approached most nearly the freedom nature concedes to everyone (MTTP §75; TTP XVI 33; see also TTP XX 38).

This passage and its continuation fit neatly with Marx's idea of “true democracy,” appealing to a proper human condition of freedom, equality, and untransferred right. But in TTP various alternative understandings of political freedom jostle together, leaving the impression of theoretical bricolage.¹⁹ Elsewhere, political freedom is said to lie in citizens being more hopeful than fearful, while retaining the possibility of ethical development towards the fuller philosophical freedom of the sage. The end of the republic is to

free each person from fear, so that he can live securely, as far as possible [...] The end of the Republic, I say, is not to change men from rational beings into beasts or automata, but to enable their minds and bodies to perform their functions safely, to enable them to use their reason freely, and not to clash with one another in hatred, anger or deception, or deal inequitably with one another (TTP XX 11-12; see also TTP XVI 33-34).

This second account of freedom is consistent with the institutional view of politics laid out in the previous section: for conceiving freedom in terms of degrees of hope and fear, freedom is itself an institutional product rather than a natural possession.

Despite its prominence, the first account of political freedom should be viewed as an anomalous remnant of Spinoza's own political development. Spinoza starts his political discussions of TTP from within a directly Hobbesian vocabulary and framework. Specifically, he adopts Hobbes's starting point of natural freedom and equality of rights, and develops an internal critique of Hobbes's position from this starting point. But looking beyond this polemical context, TTP's “natural” freedom and equality is a juridical residue

¹⁹ For a third distinct account of freedom, see TTP V 25.

that makes little sense within the systematic Spinozist frame.²⁰ Indeed, TP maintains the second notion of political freedom, whereby citizens act from hope and retain the possibility of ethical development (TP V 4-6, VI 4), but very specifically drops the first. The corresponding passages in TP assiduously avoid mention of natural freedom, and directly deny the naturalness of untransferred right. Having asserted that right is coextensive with power (TP II 1-8), Spinoza then makes a distinction between a person being in control of their right against being under the control of another. He then proceeds to sketch all the many ways that individuals may come to fall in the latter category (TP II 9-11). Spinoza concludes that prior to establishing the state, individuals cannot reliably avoid coming under the control of others—whether due to force, desire, or ignorance. Thus, far from the natural condition being one of non-transfer of natural right, to the contrary the state of nature is a condition of pervasive transfer of right (TP II 15).

Spinoza clearly requires any good regime to uphold political freedom. But what is the nature of this requirement? Is it intrinsic to the very idea of a secure (powerful and self-regulating) political order, or is it an additional stipulative requirement? To be sure, Spinoza thinks it difficult to achieve a powerful multitude without this freedom. He sometimes appears to reserve the designation *sui juris* only for free rational regimes (TTP Pref. 12, XX 7; TP III 7). But in other passages, he grants that it is not in principle impossible for there to be powerful slave regimes which achieve their self-regulation in a manner not respecting this freedom (TTP Pref. 9-10; TP V 4-7, VI 4). Thus, I take citizenly freedom to be not an intrinsic feature of secure powerful regimes, but rather a stipulative specification of the normatively appealing subset of secure regimes.

²⁰ A similar explanation can account for TTP's claim, not repeated in TP, that an oppressive regime does not truly have power (TTP XX 7). This claim fits with an idea of natural freedom of the people, but it sits oddly with TTP XVI's insistence that right is coextensive with power, including in cases of irrationality and self-destructive behaviour; furthermore, it is unable to analyse oppressive regimes that somehow manage to survive.

In summary, Spinoza's distinction between good and bad political orders is not the Marxian distinction between regimes transparently manifesting the action of “the actual people” versus regimes of its institutional alienation. Rather, for Spinoza the differentiating criterion is a political order's degree of success in maintaining security and freedom. The big lesson of Spinoza's political philosophy is that constituting a good commonwealth is not a matter of revealing a true subject, but a task requiring structure and organization (TP V 1-3). Certainly, institutions can be vehicles of oppression, capturing the political process to serve the interests of some at the expense of others. But it's one thing to critique certain forms of capture of political power, and another thing to establish what political power would look like if it were free. In political philosophy, Spinoza thus maintains at least one certain affinity with Hegel: freedom is achieved, if at all, through a complex and differentiated institutional order. In this respect, his democracy is fundamentally opposed to Marx's “true democracy.”

4. Marx, Spinoza, Rousseau, and modernity

To this point, I have considered the relation between Marxian and Spinozist democracy philosophically, in terms of their respective conceptions of the subject and power. I have argued that there is a significant sense in which CHPR's true democracy cannot be considered Spinozist. Yet it would be possible for Marx and Spinoza to disagree philosophically, but to agree at the level of social theory. For “the state,” in both Hegel and Marx's use, does not refer to the institutional form of just any social order. Rather, as both Hegel and Marx explicitly and repeatedly insist, it refers to the political institutions of a social order in which the political sphere is separate from civil society (conceived as the private material sphere of everyday life). From the perspective of social theory, true democracy is not a social order without political institutions, but rather a social order which overcomes this specific separation of spheres. What does Spinoza offer us regarding true democracy in this sense?

In this section, I'll demonstrate that Spinoza's understanding of the state remains distinctly premodern. Certainly, Spinoza agrees the political regime needs to “match” the underlying material circumstances. But this requirement is taken for granted, and the possibility, so distinctive of capitalist modernity, of a pervasive mismatch between material circumstances and political status is not conceived. Hegel and Marx explain the systematic distinction between civil society and the state by a contrast to the historically prior, simple unitary hierarchy of medieval society. Spinoza's comfort with certain kinds of exclusion and hierarchy, which so troubles commentators, can be understood as a product of his premodern mindset.

Interest in the Spinozist filiation of Marx's early “true democracy” is driven in part by hopes to defend an anti-statist conception of radical democracy. In particular, a Spinozist corroboration would appear to assist distinguishing true democracy from the statist conception of radical democracy found in Rousseau (Morfino 2013: 183-198). But notwithstanding his focus on the state form, Rousseau is in fact strongly aware of and explicitly committed to eliminating sociological gap between material life and the state. This feature of Rousseau's thought is strongly present in Marx's 1843 notebooks on SC, thus as a matter of influence, Rousseau is as significant as Spinoza for Marx developing his idea of true democracy. Furthermore, I'll argue substantively that Rousseau's thought supports Marx's idea of democracy as the truth of all regimes more robustly than Spinoza's. In sum, I'll argue that Marx's theory of democracy ultimately remains as much or more Rousseauvian than it is Spinozist.

Recall that CHPR's theory of democracy involves two inversions of Hegel's defense of monarchy. The first inversion positions the state-form of democracy as primary, overcoming the greater alienation of other state-forms. But the second and more distinctive inversion positions true democracy as primary, overcoming the alienation of the republic

(democracy as a mere state-form). Commentators grant that Rousseau stands as a powerful influence for Marx in theorizing the first inversion (Della Volpe 1979: 96-99; Isaac 1990: 485-6; Leopold 2009: 74). Just as Marx asserts that “[d]emocracy is the resolved mystery of all constitutions” (CHPR 29-30, re: PR §279), Rousseau insists that popular sovereignty is the foundation for all legitimate regimes. But Spinoza is alleged to offer Marx the framework for the second inversion. Far from critiquing the alienation involved in establishing the state-form, Rousseau appears to be its foremost proponent and champion. One commentator thus notes: “it is quite clear that if *The Social Contract* served as a model for Marx, it was not to think about democracy [...but] as a model for republics” (Morfino 2013: 189).

Evidence for this assertion lies not merely in Marx's careful notebook selection of passages from Rousseau's *Social Contract* discussing alienation (MSC 91.29-30, 92.26-28, 96.8-10; SC I 6.6, I 7.8, II 6.9), but also in Marx's later works, where Rousseau stands as the explicit point of reference for understanding the state form and the alienation it involves (Morfino 2013: 196-7). By contrast, Marx's selections from TTP emphasize the connection of right to power, the non-binding character of pacts, and the fragility and derivative character of state power (MTTP §69, §72, §74). Spinoza's anti-juridicism is said to allow a movement beyond the formalism of the state. As another interpreter has put it: “Marx found” in Spinoza on democracy what was unavailable in Hegel or Rousseau, “namely: the chance offered to the individual to reconcile social existence and natural life (Rubel 1962: 82).²¹

Nonetheless, such refusals of a Rousseauvian source for Marx's anti-state conception of true democracy strike me as too hasty. This becomes clear once we look at the real social formation which corresponds to Rousseau's legitimate state. For both Marx and Hegel, the

²¹ Morfino writes, relatedly: “[t]here is no trace of democracy, understood in this sense, in Rousseau” (Morfino 2013: 188). See also Leopold 2009: 165.

state is not a transhistorical fixture of human society. Rather, it is a historically specific phenomenon emerging in modernity, dividing the political domain from everyday material life in a historically unprecedented manner (CHPR 31, re: PR §279). Previously, private or material status immediately translated into political status (CHPR 32, re: PR §279). Marx's medieval "democracy of unfreedom" has, in common with his "true democracy," an immediate connection between material life and political life. The medieval democracy of unfreedom is regrettable insofar as it

separates man from his universal nature; it makes him an animal whose being coincides immediately with its determinate character. The Middle Ages constitutes the animal history of mankind, its zoology (CHRP 82, re: PR §307).

But the modern state form, achieving equal political status in a state notwithstanding the unequal concrete status of private individuals in a market economy, only falsely and abstractly achieves universality. Marx's challenge is to heal the rift between private and public, not by going back to the old medievalism, but by levelling up material life so that it achieves universality directly (CHPR 82, re: PR §307).

In this light, Marx's true democracy can be understood not as a general and metaphysical anti-institutionalism, but rather, as an opposition to a very specific institutional division (Leopold 2009: 260). Rousseau is sharply aware of this division, and fundamentally opposed to it (Coletti 1975: 33-46). Rousseau may be the classic theorist of juridical alienation to establish state sovereignty, but his central concern with this state sovereignty is how to bring people's actual material lives in line with their juridical roles. Rousseau recognizes the possibility of a state which purports to express the moral equality of citizens but in fact is a cover for economic inequality and oppression. Marx himself transcribes:

Under bad governments this equality is only apparent only and illusory; it serves only to maintain the poor in his misery and the rich in his usurpation. In fact the laws are

always useful to those who possess something and harmful to those who have nothing (MSC 93.29-34; SC I 9 note; see also SC IV 1.5-6).

The legitimacy of the political order is threatened unless “no citizen be so very rich that he can buy another, and none so poor that he is compelled to sell himself” (SC II 11.2).

Rousseau's theory of the state may prominently deploy the word “alienation,” but the concrete picture he draws of the good state is about as contrary to Marxian alienation as can be imagined:

When, among the happiest people in the world, troops of peasants are seen attending to affairs of State underneath an oak and always acting wisely, can one help despising the refinements of other nations which make themselves illustrious and miserable with so much art and mystification (SC IV 1.1)?

The commercial metropolises of London and Paris are Rousseau's paradigms of viciousness (SC IV 1.3). The difference between the good and the bad state lies in whether the citizens efficaciously identify as citizens and orient their lives to upholding the common good, or whether they pursue their own individual interests. Rousseau worries that “each individual may, as a man, have a particular will contrary to or different from the general will he has as a Citizen.” When individuals' private pursuits driven by their particular wills dominate, at the expense of the common purposes of the commonwealth, this tends towards the “ruin of the body politic” (SC I 7.7, see also MSC 96.25-37; SC II 7.3).

Genuine popular sovereignty would require actual regular popular assemblies of the whole populace (reflecting citizens' moral equality), willingly attended by the whole citizenry, and in which the common good is upheld (SC III 13.1; MSC 9.323-27; SC I 9.8). By contrast with this image of genuine legitimate statehood, Rousseau is particularly vexed by the modern invention of political representation, which he views as the reflection of a

failure to sustain a citizenry whose real material lives and passions concretely support the common good. For Rousseau, this is a pervasive problem:

The cooling of the love of the fatherland, *the activity of private interest*, the immensity of States, conquests, the abuse of Government, have led people to imagine the expedient of *Deputies* or *Representatives* of the people in the nation's assemblies. [...But s]overeignty cannot be represented for the same reason it cannot be alienated [...] The idea of Representatives is *modern* (MSC 100.32-34, 100.38-39, 101.4, re: SC III 15.4, III 15.5, III 15.6, Marx's emphasis).

The Rousseauvian state is dissolved as soon as the political order is no longer inhabited by real substantial popular sovereignty.

[T]he moment the Government usurps the sovereignty, the social pact is broken, and all are ordinary Citizens, restored by right to their natural freedom, are forced to obey but not obligated to do so (SC III 10.6, see also III 14.2).

But this is a strange inversion: this usurpation of popular sovereignty by the government and private interests, which for Rousseau marks the dissolution of the state, sound very close to Marx's definition of the state.

In sum, while Marx does appear exercised by Rousseau's characterization of the state as an abstraction and alienation from its subjects' natural condition, in fact Rousseau's solution to his own sharp differentiation between citizenly and natural status is to demand that citizens are concretely shaped to become citizenly. Rousseau's demand for alienation from naturalness amounts to a demand for efficaciously and continually achieving a new subjectivity amongst citizens. In particular, the required subjectivity is anti-commercial, economically egalitarian, and communal. When citizens immerse themselves in commercial affairs, or are made servile as a result of commerce, then Rousseauvian sovereignty vanishes, meaning that Rousseau's state cannot be abstract from civil society. These features of

Rousseau's view were all transcribed in Marx's notebooks, and they appear in substantial alignment with Marxian true democracy's vision of the real concrete elimination of the distinction between private individual and political citizen.

Spinoza's models of good regimes in TP may appear to be well aligned to Marxian true democracy. In TP, Spinoza asserts that both monarchy and democracy are regimes grounded in the equality of citizens.²² Correspondingly, it is essential that the institutional order should maintain and reinforce this equality (TP VI 13-14, VII 20). Spinoza's primary concern is the risk of an emergent nobility. He wards off this possibility through both economic and political measures. All land and houses are the public property of the commonwealth, and are merely rented out to citizens (TP VI 12, VII 19). Nobility may only be bestowed on close relatives of the king, and those who are paid by the king are barred from taking up public office. Finally, the king acts only through a robustly equal popular assembly, structured to ensure representation across clans and classes, and involving such a high number and rapid rotation of councillors as to amount to a broad-based system of lot or sortition (TP VI 13-25, VII 4-5, 18; Field 2020b: 255).

In fact, Spinoza's view remains deeply premodern. Marxian equality is conceived as a universal nature of human beings, to which their objective existence or determinate character must be brought to conform (CHPR 82, re: PR §307). Civil society must really and materially bring about the universal equality of citizens which the state only abstractly promises. Spinoza's commitment to equality, although no doubt striking for his time, is not a modern universalist commitment. He presumes the need for a broad alignment of actual lives and abstract status, and tightens up this alignment where it is not quite right. But he straightforwardly accepts political inequality for those whose actual lives are distinctly

²² I'll focus mostly on monarchy, due to the incompleteness of the discussion of democracy.

unequal. For first, virtuous aristocracy is proudly a regime of inequality (TP VIII). In it, political hierarchy and deep social and material inequality mirror one another. In Spinoza's view, it is proper that patricians should be linked together with one another and distinguished from commoners in multiple ways: by patricians' training in the military arts and leadership in the military, against non-ranked commoners; by patricians' shared state religion, against commoner freedom of confession; by patricians' shared distinctive clothing; by their greater wealth. Second, even in his regimes of equality, he affirms the inequality of women, servants, and those in servile professions (TP VI 11, XI 3). The logic of this exclusion is clear: given that these people are enduringly materially and socially unequal, they thus cannot count as equal citizens.

In sum, Marx conceives of a social order beyond the state in terms of the collapse of the distinction between civil society and the state, but he only endorses this collapse in its egalitarian form. Rousseau absolutely insists upon citizenly equality, nor does this insistence stand as mere abstraction: it is an explicit challenge to bring citizens materially in line with their formally equal status, on pain of the illegitimacy of the state. By contrast, for Spinoza, the need for a conformity between civil society and the political state does not have democratic implications. In cases where Spinoza sees some entrenched inequality within civil society, he does not hesitate to require the state structure to fit with that inequality.

Marx views the genuine universalism of his true democracy as a possibility which arises only after the experience of the false universalism of the bourgeois state, within which individuals have universal equal status as citizens despite their inequality in their everyday material lives. Thus, the theoretical puzzle of the state (and its solution in true democracy) belong only to a period after Spinoza's death.²³ To the extent Spinoza reflects on early

²³ In this vein, note that a key feature of Spinoza's monarchy is state ownership of land. But Marx insists that the bourgeois state presupposes that "private spheres have attained

commercial society, he has in mind merchants, not capitalists or industrialists, and he views commerce as a benign force (TP VII 8, VIII 31; TTP XX 40). He is anti-commercial only as a question of personal ethics—seeking money for its own sake does not conduce to blessedness (E4appXXIX)—not as a question of social structure. There is no inkling in Spinoza of the political phenomenon facing Marx in the mid-nineteenth century, by which the state power assumed more and more the character of the national power of capital over labour, of a public force organised for social enslavement, of an engine of class despotism (CWF 182).

In principle one could apply Spinozist philosophical machinery to analyze the modern Marxian problem of the capitalist state. One could identify it as a slave regime, insofar as the proletariat comply not for sake of living but for fear of starving. As such, it would be a case of the peace of the Commonwealth “depend[ing] on its subjects' lack of spirit—so that they're led like sheep, and know only how to be slaves” (TP V 4). In the capitalist state, the subjection of some sections of society is so grave as to threaten ethical development of the poor, and the dissonance between official equality and *de facto* inequality is perhaps sufficient to threaten the security of the regime. But the fact remains that in Spinoza's actual writings, this analysis is not present, and there is no hint that modern political equality could coincide with slavery (Balibar 1993: 213). Spinoza does not in fact consider the distinction between civil society and politics, neither the benefits nor the problems that might follow from it. Rousseau, writing a century later, has more insight into the coming social order and its challenges.

The bulk of my discussion has focused on Marx's “true democracy.” Now finally I turn to consider the first of the three elements of Marx's conception of democracy in CHPR:

independent existence”, and this critically requires that private property in land must have emerged (CHPR 32, re: PR §279).

democracy as the truth of all regimes. This element surely was surely influenced by Marx's reading of SC. For Rousseau, all legitimate regimes are popular, and the popular sovereign must regularly express its will in actual assemblies. It is often presumed that Spinoza also unequivocally considers democracy to be the truth of all regimes. In MTTP's story of the foundation of the social order, democracy is presented as fundamental state form, and repeatedly described as most natural for intrinsic reasons.²⁴ In light of my argument in the previous section, it is necessary to reject the argument from naturalness as a juridical remnant in Spinoza's thought. But there appear to be other more Spinozist grounds for asserting that democracy is the truth of all regimes. I provided an account of Spinoza's criterion of a good regime as one achieving security (self-regulation), consistent with freedom (citizens acting from hope not fear, and retaining the possibility of ethical development). If this criterion is best met by democracy, then we can say that democracy is indeed the truth of all regimes.

Whereas TTP offers various arguments suggesting that democratic regimes do best meet this criterion (TTP V 23, XVI 30, XX 38), TP is less confident of the merits of formally democratic regimes (TP VI 4), and it no longer positions democracy as the natural or primary state form (TP II 11). But central to TP's analysis is the idea that the security of a regime depends on much more than its mere formal regime type. The question thus needs to be reformulated: is it the case that regimes which are substantially equal, inclusive, and responsive (regardless of their formal regime type) are the most secure and free? In this revised sense, is Spinoza committed to democracy as the truth of all regimes? It is common to answer in the affirmative (Balibar 1998: 33, 72-3; Matheron 1998: 213-17; Morfino 2013: 192). Balibar points out that for Spinoza in TP, a good monarchy amounts to a crypto-democracy. If a monarch attempts to rule alone, then they will find themselves excessively

²⁴ On a similar textual basis, Francès 1951 classically demonstrates that the conception of the state in SC bears direct debt to TTP.

dependent on advisors and also always at risk of praetorian usurpation, breeding paranoia and leading to oppressive rule and a restive populace (TP VI 5-7). The best monarchy will maintain citizen equality, and in particular it will be one organized around an inclusive and equal council, as described above. An aristocracy with few rulers will face the same problems that confronted a monarchy. The solution is to expand the membership of the patriciate indefinitely, such that a good aristocracy is again in reality a crypto-democracy (TP VIII 3).

I don't believe this argument is supported by the text. As I have argued at length elsewhere (Field 2020a), even though a good monarchy may amount to a crypto-democracy, a virtuous aristocracy specifically does not (TP VIII 4-5). Spinoza envisages a patriciate of a moderate size (Spinoza suggests 5000 patricians for a state of a moderate size, amounting to 2% of the adult male population, TP VIII 13) overcoming the problems that beleaguer very narrow patrician rule. But expanding inclusion, responsiveness, and equality to the commoners beyond this patriciate is destabilizing and undermines the state (TP VIII 13). It may be that under many circumstances people hate being ruled by their equals (TP VII 5), but real material processes—such as a deep rural-urban divide, or a history of migration leading to variable feelings of political entitlement—sometimes constitute subjects accepting differential political status (TP VIII 12), without necessarily living in fear, and without any necessary impediment to their Spinozist ethical development. When Spinoza asserts that “rule transferred to a sufficiently large [patrician] council is absolute, or comes nearest to being absolute” (TP VIII 3), it is aristocracy as such that he is endorsing, not aristocracy as crypto-democracy. Thus, I question whether Spinoza is committed to democracy as the truth of all regimes.

Spinoza's comfort with inequality marks a theoretical distinction between his democratic theory and Marx's, both with regards to Marx's conception of “true democracy” and also to Marx's idea of “democracy as the truth of all regimes.” Thus, Marx's democratic

theory has stronger theoretical affinities with the egalitarian Rousseau than with Spinoza, even if TTP's discussion of the naturalness of democracy and his critique of right provided Marx inspiration in developing his own view.

5. Conclusion

Rousseau opens his SC with a vehement rejection of any approach to politics which understands right in terms of force; such an approach can only result in an “unintelligible muddle” (SC I.3.2; see also SC I.1.2). For Rousseau, a view such as Spinoza's, attributing to big fish the right to eat the little ones, commits a category mistake. Rousseau frames his task as offering a more robust moral frame for thinking about politics, centred on right as a moral legitimacy separate from power.

This Rousseauvian criticism is no doubt crude when applied to Spinoza's political philosophy as a whole. For even though Spinoza's political philosophy starts by granting right to all actually existing regimes, as I have argued he does subsequently offer a framework for distinguishing between better and worse regimes, according to how secure and free they are. But Rousseau is astute in his worry that approaching politics from the point of view of power does not build in an intrinsic commitment to moral qualities such as freedom and political equality, unless there is some assurance that the power of the multitude is intrinsically free and equal. I suggested that the security—in the sense of self-maintaining, active power—of a regime is not intrinsically linked to the freedom of its subjects. Rather, Spinoza stipulatively requires that a good regime be free as well as secure. But even these regimes *sui juris* and free are not necessarily democratic, as illustrated by the case of virtuous aristocracy. Thus, for Spinoza to be a democrat, he would need an additional stipulation: only sanctioning

regimes that are not only *sui juris* and free, but also equal.²⁵ I simply don't see any such general stricture in TP.

Marx transcribes the very passages in Spinoza on right and power that would appear to bother Rousseau (MTTP §68; TTP XVI 2). But Marx's positive interest in these passages seems to connect with a presumption that the real greater power lies with the people conceived as a horizontal collection of equals, and not with the rulers. These people are the subject of social life, possessed of a power that may be obstructed, but which tends to express itself over time. In this way, Marx reads human ends into nature. By contrast, despite some humanist tendencies in TTP, overall Spinoza's view is jarringly anti-humanist:

For the perfection of things is to be judged by their nature and power; things are not more or less perfect because they please or offend men's senses, or because they are of use to, or are incompatible with, human nature (E1 app | G II 83; see also TTP XVI 10-11).

For Spinoza, a good regime which is also free and democratic is not a natural tendency or development, but a challenge to be achieved.

In the end, Marx's theory of democracy was genuinely and significantly influenced by Spinoza, but this influence failed to transmit some core Spinozist conceptual commitments. It seems Marx's encounter with Spinoza lent generic encouragement to Marx in developing his own conception of democracy. But Marx's selections from TTP already painted a misleading picture of TTP's view of democracy, appearing even more incongruent in light of the later TP, let alone Spinoza's broader philosophical system. Nor does Spinoza display any particular insight into the historically emergent challenges with which Marx's theory of true

²⁵ In my own neo-Spinozist theory of democracy, this is just what I have added (Field 2020b: 235-63).

democracy grapples. Thus, on the final analysis, Marx's conception of democracy must be sharply distinguished from Spinoza's.