

Potentia: Hobbes and Spinoza on Power and Popular Politics

Sandra Leonie Field

Oxford University Press, New York, 2020

<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/potentia-9780197533864?lang=en&cc=us#>

We live in an age of growing dissatisfaction with the standard operations of representative democracy. The radical democratic idea of the power of the people, as something irreducible and prior to the institutional forms of politics, regularly resurfaces in political discourse and practice: mass plebiscites and mass protest movements are celebrated as the quintessential expressions of popular power. But the outcomes of these mass political phenomena can be just as disappointing as the ordinary politics they sought to overcome, breeding skepticism about democratic politics in all its forms.

Potentia: Hobbes and Spinoza on Power and Popular Politics proceeds from the conviction that the very meaning of popular power needs to be rethought. It offers a detailed study of the political philosophies of Thomas Hobbes and Benedict de Spinoza, focussing on their concept of power as *potentia*, concrete power, rather than power as *potestas*, authorised power. In contrast to the radical democrats who draw on Hobbes's 'sleeping sovereign' or on Spinoza's 'multitude' to bolster an extra-institutional conception of popular power, instead on the revisionist interpretation that the book establishes, a political phenomenon should be said to express popular power when it is both popular (it eliminates oligarchy and encompasses the whole polity), and also powerful (it robustly determines political and social outcomes). The book distinguishes two possible institutional forms that this popular power might take: Hobbesian repressive egalitarianism, or Spinozist civic strengthening. But despite divergent institutional proposals, the book argues that Hobbes and Spinoza share the conviction that there is nothing spontaneously egalitarian or good about human collective existence. From this point of view, radical democrats are accused of pernicious romanticism; the slow, meticulous work of organizational design and maintenance is the true centre of popular power.

Potentia: Hobbes and Spinoza on Power and Popular Politics makes an original contribution at the intersection of early modern philosophy and democratic theory.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

1. Context
2. Hobbesian and Spinozist radical democracy
3. *Potentia*: the core argument of the book
4. Conceptual transformations and political models
5. Outcome
6. Note to readers

Part I: Hobbes

2. Relational power

1. Introduction
2. Human power as faculties in Hobbes's early writings
3. Hobbes's early debt to scholasticism

- 4. Relational human power in Hobbes's later writings
- 5. Hobbes's departure from scholasticism
- 3. Juridical politics
 - 1. Introduction
 - 2. Formal and informal political collectivities in Hobbes's early writings
 - 3. The scholastic context of Hobbes's early science of politics
 - 4. Sovereign robustness in Hobbes's early writings
- 4. The political problem
 - 1. Introduction
 - 2. Formal and informal political collectivities in Hobbes's later writings
 - 3. Hobbes's imperfect departure from scholasticism
 - 4. The political problem in Hobbes's later writings
- 5. Repressive Egalitarianism
 - 1. Introduction
 - 2. Internal and external motivations of subjects
 - 3. Internal and external motivations of sovereigns
 - 4. Repressive egalitarianism
 - 5. The conditions of success of Hobbes's politics

Part II: Spinoza

- 6. Ethics and efficacy
 - 1. Introduction
 - 2. Spinoza's immanent critique of Hobbes
 - 3. Combining ethics and efficacy: two standard approaches
 - 3.1 The radical approach
 - 3.2 The constitutionalist approach
 - 4. Three Hobbesian problems for Spinoza's political philosophy
- 7. The Power of producing effects
 - 1. Introduction
 - 2. *Potentia agendi* and *potentia operandi*
 - 3. From metaphysics to politics
 - 3.1 'Colloquial' power as *potentia operandi*
 - 3.2 Being *sui juris*
 - 4. Conclusion
- 8. Nature's indifference
 - 1. Introduction
 - 2. Accepting the problem of inner oligarchy
 - 3. Accepting the problem of non-ideal endurance
 - 4. Conclusion
- 9. Civic strengthening
 - 1. Introduction
 - 2. A criterion of popular power
 - 3. Accepting the problem of democracy's perverse effects
 - 4. Schematic elements for a political order expressing popular power
 - 5. Conclusion

Abstracts and Keywords

Potentia: Hobbes and Spinoza on Power and Popular Politics

Sandra Leonie Field

Oxford University Press, New York, 2020

<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/potentia-9780197533864?lang=en&cc=us#>

Abstract: This book offers a detailed study of the political philosophies of Thomas Hobbes and Benedict de Spinoza, focussing on their concept of power as *potentia*, concrete power, rather than power as *potestas*, authorised power. The focus on power as *potentia* generates a new conception of popular power. Radical democrats—whether drawing on Hobbes's 'sleeping sovereign' or on Spinoza's 'multitude'—understand popular power as something that transcends ordinary institutional politics, as for instance popular plebsites or mass movements. However, the book argues that these understandings reflect a residual scholasticism which Hobbes and Spinoza ultimately repudiate. Instead, on the book's revisionist conception, a political phenomenon should be said to express popular power when it is both popular (it eliminates oligarchy and encompasses the whole polity), and also powerful (it robustly determines political and social outcomes). Two possible institutional forms that this popular power might take are distinguished: Hobbesian repressive egalitarianism, or Spinozist civic strengthening. But despite divergent institutional proposals, the book argues that both Hobbes and Spinoza share the conviction that there is nothing spontaneously egalitarian or good about human collective existence. From this point of view, the book accuses radical democrats of pernicious romanticism; the slow, meticulous work of organizational design and maintenance is the true centre of popular power.

Keywords: Hobbes, Spinoza, potentia, popular power, democracy, radical democracy, repressive egalitarianism, civic strengthening, multitude, sleeping sovereign

Chapter 1: Introduction

Abstract: This chapter lays out two contemporary radical democratic theories of popular power with conceptual frames drawn from early modern philosophy, and it foreshadows an alternative theory of popular power to overcome their shortcomings. The contemporary theories are exemplified by the work of Tuck and Negri. Tuck promotes Hobbes's idea of a 'sleeping sovereign' as an absolute democratic sovereign, cutting through the ordinary workings of government. Alternatively, Negri promotes Spinoza's idea of an insurgent popular multitude as an irresistible democratic force disrupting any settled institutional regime. The chapter then indicates some reasons for dissatisfaction with radical democratic theories of popular power, and foreshadows the alternative theory that will be put forward and defended through the course of the book. It sketches how this alternative theory emerges from a new interpretation of the political philosophies of Hobbes and Spinoza, and in particular, of their conceptions of power as *potentia*.

Keywords: radical democracy, sleeping sovereign, multitude, popular power, *potentia*, Hobbes, Spinoza

Chapter 2: Relational power

Abstract: This chapter analyzes Hobbes's theory of individual human power (*potentia*), and its transformation across his works. It argues that Hobbes's early works offer an account of *potentia* reflecting an intuitive common sense that an individual's power lies in the faculties or capacities that they possess. It claims that such a conception still bears the marks of scholasticism, and it illustrates this point against a stylised presentation of Aquinas's

conception of *potentia*. By contrast, the chapter argues that on Hobbes's later account, individual *potentia* is irreducibly relational; with the corollary that *potentia* cannot be identified in abstraction from actual social life. This change belatedly extends the anti-scholasticism of Hobbes's natural science into his science of human beings.

Keywords: *potentia*, Hobbes, Aquinas, faculties, scholasticism, relational power

Chapter 3: Juridical politics

Abstract: This chapter sketches Hobbes's early view of human collective power, arguing that he conceives of this power in exclusively juridical terms. Hobbes's most obvious account of collective power is his theory of the sovereign state (or commonwealth, *civitas*), which possesses power as authority, *potestas*. The holder of *potestas* could be a popular sleeping sovereign, a more traditional ruling assembly, or a head of state, but in all cases the *potestas* itself can only arise when the powers of the individual members of the population are brought together in formal juridical union. This chapter argues that in Hobbes's early view, there is no other kind of collective power; it offers no conceptual rubric to conceive of informal or emergent collective human power. This view is characterized as neoscholastic; the conceptual limitation of the neoscholastic view is undergirded by a practical confidence that informal collectivities will not be robust or politically troubling.

Keywords: collective power, authority, *potestas*, *potentia*, juridical power, sleeping sovereign, scholasticism, Hobbes

Chapter 4: The political problem

Abstract: This chapter argues that Hobbes's late view of human collective power, unlike the early view, is able to grasp informal and emergent collective power. Hobbes's later works, with their new relational conception of *potentia*, offer both theoretical resources to conceive informal collective power distinct from the state, and also analytical reasons to expect such power to be politically troubling. The 'political problem' emerges: in order to achieve the concrete power sufficient to uphold its absolute authority (*potestas*), the state needs to harness or tame the informal collective powers within the populace. The chapter argues that the political problem explains the absence of the 'sleeping sovereign', so central to the radical democratic interpretation of Hobbes, from Hobbes's later writings. But informal collective power cannot necessarily be celebrated as a welcome popular insurgency against excessive state power: for its characteristic inner structure is complex oligarchic allegiance rather than equal horizontal affiliation.

Keywords: collective power, informal collective power, concrete power, *potestas*, *potentia*, sleeping sovereign, the political problem, informal oligarchy, Hobbes

Chapter 5: Repressive egalitarianism

Abstract: This chapter sketches Hobbes's solution to the political problem, and interprets its meaning and significance for the question of popular power. Hobbes's preferred model of politics, 'repressive egalitarianism', overcomes the political problem by breaking down the power blocs of the multitude into disempowered equality. The result is practically workable, but highly ambivalent to contemporary sensibilities. On the one hand, its elimination of informal oligarchy grounds its claim to meaningfully express popular power; the chapter offers a novel interpretation of Hobbes's famous hostility to democratic assembly in light of this problem of informal oligarchy. But on the other hand, the resultant fragmented polity is unable to resist sovereign overreach.

Keywords: repressive egalitarianism, the political problem, informal oligarchy, *potentia*, *potestas*, popular power, democracy, Hobbes

Chapter 6: Ethics and efficacy

Abstract: This chapter schematizes two broad interpretive approaches to Spinoza's political philosophy, both of which agree that Spinoza's concept of power as *potentia* combines efficacy and ethical direction. Supposedly, the distinctive contribution of Spinoza's political philosophy is the idea of a concrete *potentia* of the popular multitude that constitutes a normatively appealing limit on sovereign power, a limit that juridical projections of *potestas* ignore at their peril. Radicals conceive popular power as a prepolitical possession of a virtuous multitude which tends to disrupt oppressive forms of politics; 'constitutionalists' claim that only political orders taking a good democratic form can endure. But against the sunny romanticism of these interpretations' conceptions of popular power, the chapter poses three Hobbesian problems: the problem of the multitude's inner oligarchy; the problem of non-ideal endurance; and the problem of democracy's perverse effects.

Keywords: Spinoza, *potentia*, *potestas*, popular power, multitude, informal oligarchy, democracy, radical democracy

Chapter 7: The power of producing effects

Abstract: This chapter establishes a new interpretation of Spinoza's political conception of *potentia*, from within his broader metaphysical framework. Centrally, the chapter distinguishes between, on the one hand, *potentia operandi* (power of producing effects, for better or for worse, with no particular connection to virtue), which is similar to Hobbes's notion of power; and on the other hand, *potentia agendi* (power of acting), associated with a thing's essence and virtue. An entity may be extremely powerful in the first sense without being powerful in the second sense. Politically, this manifests as a distinction between merely having right and power, versus an being in control of one's own right (being *sui juris*). *Sui juris* status is normatively desirable, but in this chapter the relation (and possible divergence) between the *sui juris* status of a political collectivity and the *sui juris* status of the members making up that collectivity is not yet established.

Keywords: Spinoza, *potentia*, *potentia agendi*, *potentia operandi*, *sui juris*, collective power

Chapter 8: Nature's indifference

Abstract: This chapter argues that in Spinoza's philosophy, popular movements do not necessarily testify to an underlying popular power driving political life; nor is efficacious political power necessarily popular. First, it argues that a collectivity's own proper power, its power *sui juris*, is not some underlying disposition waiting to be expressed, but rather is manifested in the actual effects it durably produces. Correspondingly, it is a mistake to take social movements challenging oligarchy as exemplars of the power of the people, unless and until they durably consolidate an egalitarian social order. Second, it argues that within Spinoza's metaphysics, non-ideal regimes may well endure, either due to the support of an external power, or from their own power, but where that power is internally structured in an oligarchic or repressive manner. In sum, Spinoza accepts Chapter 6's first two Hobbesian problems, and acknowledges the all-too-common divergence between ethics and efficacy in politics.

Keywords: Spinoza, *sui juris*, popular power, collective power, social movements, radical democracy

Chapter 9: Civic strengthening

Abstract: This chapter establishes a neo-Spinozist criterion of popular power, whereby power is judged by the systematic effects and outcomes of a political order; and popularity lies in the degree to which those effects and outcomes durably uphold equality (glossed as mutual

independence of citizens) and participation. I provide a taxonomy of organisational elements which might best address the third Hobbesian problem—the problem of democracy's perverse effects—not through Hobbesian repression and fragmentation, but through empowering the citizenry and encouraging the growth of non-oligarchic collective formations in the social body. In this frame, both social movements and popular plebiscites are decentred: they are no longer the exemplary expression of popular power as per the radical democrats, but rather, they are partial elements within a larger political ecology which may or may not have an overall popular character. Popular power emerges as a difficult political achievement stabilised by good institutional design.

Keywords: Spinoza, democracy, civic strengthening, popular power, informal oligarchy