Sandra Leonie Field introduces her recent book, *Potentia*, to begin this online colloquium.

Online Colloquium (1): Introduction to *Potentia*

This online colloquium has been established to discuss Sandra Leonie Field*'s recent book,* Potentia: Hobbes and Spinoza on Power and Popular Politics*. We begin with an introduction to the text by Asst Prof Field herself, which will be followed by weekly responses from Alissa MacMillan, Christopher Holman, Justin Steinberg, and finally a reply by Sandra Field. Many thanks to Oxford University Press for supporting this colloquium.*

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We live in an age of growing dissatisfaction with the standard operations of representative democracy. The solution, according to a long radical democratic tradition, is the unmediated power of the people. Mass plebiscites and mass protest movements are celebrated as the quintessential expressions of popular power, and this power promises to transcend ordinary institutional politics. But the outcomes of 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.

In my new book *Potentia*, I argue that the very meaning of popular power needs to be rethought.[1] The book offers a detailed study of the political philosophies of Thomas Hobbes and Benedict de Spinoza, focusing on their concept of power as *potentia*, concrete power, rather than power as *potestas*, authorized power. Specifically, the book's argument turns on a new interpretation of Hobbesian/Spinozist collective *potentia* as a capacity that is dynamically constituted in a web of actual human relations. The measure of a collectivity's *potentia* will be its actual characteristic effects and outcomes over time. But this means that far from popular power being the inherently egalitarian substrate of human collective existence, on this Hobbesian/Spinozist view popular power is a difficult achievement. Collective power is not necessarily popular, for there may be hostility or hierarchy in the relations between a group's members. Nor is collective power necessarily particularly powerful, for collective action may only have wavering or evanescent effects. Thus I propose a revisionist characterization of popular power: a political phenomenon can to 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). Where radical democrats interpret Hobbes's 'sleeping sovereign' or Spinoza's 'multitude' as foundational instances of unmediated popular power, I argue that for both Hobbes and Spinoza, true popular power is achieved through the slow, meticulous work of organizational design and maintenance. Between Hobbes's commitment to repressing private power and Spinoza's exploration of civic strengthening, I draw on early modern understandings of popular power to provide a new lens for thinking about the risks and promise of democracy.

Let me say a little more about (i) the motivating problem of the book; (ii) its core textual and conceptual claims; and (iii) its upshot, for early modern political philosophy and for democratic theory.

(i) The motivating problem

I establish my new conception of popular power against the alternatives posed by two broad radical traditions that celebrate popular power: the American public law tradition, and the European post-Marxist tradition.

First, standing as a representative of the American public law tradition, Richard Tuck's *The Sleeping Sovereign* revives Hobbesian absolute democracy as a model worthy of our attention in the present.[2] He grants that Hobbes may have disliked democratic *government*, but Tuck focuses instead on Hobbes's notion of democracy as a form of absolute *sovereignty*, with the whole populace speaking its voice through pure non-deliberative plebiscitary voting. Parliaments and congresses can carry out quotidian governance, but from time to time the 'sleeping sovereign' should wake up and express the will of 'we the people'.

Second, standing as a representative of the European post-Marxist tradition, Antonio Negri's immensely influential *Empire–Multitude–Commonwealth* series (with Hardt) has popularized a conception of neo-Spinozist radical insurgent democracy.[3] Negri draws on Spinoza's notion of the 'multitude', as the pre- or extra-institutional collective mass of society, as the source of all political power (the '*potentia multitudinis*'). When social movements or protest movements press claims, they actualize a form of democracy more authentic than any authorized representative or institution.

Taking plebiscites and social movements as canonical instances of popular power seems to me to raise many difficulties. I worry about their *popularity.* Schumpeter gives a sharp characterization of what is wrong, especially with plebiscites: he argues that the people's will is the product rather than the driver of the political process (consider the famously emotive and misleading advertising in the leadup to the Brexit referendum).[4] Popular movements commonly compete amongst themselves in the public sphere: how can a single side really justify its claim to speak for the *demos*?

I also worry about the *power* of canonical instances of popular power. How much influence do plebiscites and social movements have on the day-to-day operation of governance? Furthermore, isn't it paradoxical to count a polity which is basically oligarchic but occasionally convulsed by popular plebiscitary decision or by mass protest as better expressing the power of the people than a well-ordered polity where the common good is served in a more systematic if more boring way?

In public life, it is common to credit plebiscites and social movements as manifesting the power of the people. When these plebiscites and movements lead to unjust, irrational, or evanescent political outcomes, people may struggle to accommodate their intuitive normative commitments to democracy with the disappointing reality. In my book, I take Schumpeter's worries seriously, but my response is fundamentally anti-Schumpeterian. Rather than abandoning the very idea of popular power, I put forward a new and better conception.

(ii) The core textual and conceptual claims

The book proceeds by way of a detailed study of the political philosophies of Thomas Hobbes and Benedict de Spinoza: in particular, their respective concepts of power *potentia*, concrete power, rather than power *potestas*, authorized power. I agree with radical democrats that these early modern thinkers are relevant for thinking about popular power: but in my argument, this is not because of their support for the radical view, but because of the resources they offer to critique it.

I start by contextualizing the concept of *potentia* within its overwhelmingly dominant frame of reference in the early modern period: scholasticism. On the scholastic view, a thing's power identifies its own proper nature. At least in natural entities where free will does not intervene, this nature tends to be expressed for the most part. It offers an explanation of phenomena that is simultaneously descriptive and normative: the natural world is understood as a domain of proper entities endowed with natural and proper tendencies.

In the first half of the book, Chapters 2 through 5, I discuss Hobbes. I argue that Hobbes's understanding of *potentia* undergoes a striking development between his early and late works, with significant ramifications for his science of politics. Undeniably, the tumultuous political events of the period during which he was writing would have provided external impetus for shifts in his political analysis; but this book's contribution is to trace the conceptual transformations within which the shifting political analysis finds its voice. On the early scholastic-influenced view, individual human power *potentia* is understood as human faculties, which are more or less equal in all adults. Individual humans can properly combine their powers together only as a formal union, because any informal association lacks a unifying principle. This neatly meshes with Hobbes's juridical theory of state authority *potestas*, which receives a *potentia* commensurate to its *potestas* in virtue of the covenantal combination of individual *potentiae*. But on the later view, reflecting the new mechanistic science that seeks to eliminate the explanatory appeal to inherent dispositional powers, individual human *potentia* is understood as whatever means a person may have to pursue their ends, including the assistance or deference of other people. As such, human *potentia* is relational and actual, and subject to great inequalities. Furthermore, individual human powers can accumulate into relatively stable informal allegiances and social groupings, endowed with their own power, even without any formal union. These private power blocs may sometimes be appealing, but more likely they will be oligarchic and objectionable. The new conception of *potentia* sits uncomfortably with the juridical theory of absolute state *potestas*, because in the face of competition from private informal powers in the political domain, the state may not have *potentia* commensurate to its *potestas*: call this mismatch 'the political problem'. The political problem can be solved only by looking beneath the juridical order of *potestas* to consider the concrete determinants of a stable collective power *potentia* of the populace.

In the light of Hobbes's changing understanding of *potentia*, it becomes easy to see why Tuck's preferred plebiscitary model of sleeping sovereignty only features in Hobbes's earlier text, *De Cive*, and is dropped in *Leviathan*. First, sovereignty separate from government is likely to have very little power *potentia*. The real seat of power *potentia* is the dense circuits of allegiance and deference that structure the quotidian functioning of the society. A sovereign standing separate from this structure but occasionally rising up to issue a ruling can make only a minor impact on the everyday production of effects in society, even if its ruling is respected; but even worse, such a sovereign gravely risks encountering the political problem, as it may find that much of the society has stronger allegiance to the government. Second, the claim of plebiscitary voting to give radical expression to the popular voice is weak: for without addressing the private powers in society, a vote tends to relay those unequal background conditions.

What might solve the political problem? I characterize Hobbes's proposal as repressive egalitarianism: the common good is achieved by trying to improve the political and moral judgement of the sovereign, and at the same time protecting the sovereign from the distorting

pressure of formal and informal power blocs within society. In the face of private power, the appropriate response is to crush it, to break collective formations within the populace in favour of a fragmented equality of all subjects. Hobbes argues that governance will better promote the common good when it takes a less participatory form; he worries that democracy may undermine the common good and lead to division. But if there must be popular political participation, if there must be a democratic assembly as sovereign, then it is especially important to repress informal powers that might seek to capture the democratic process. I characterize Hobbes's democratic repressive egalitarianism as a certain minimal expression of popular power: it is a durable institutional form that strives to eliminate unequal influence.

In the second half of the book, Chapters 6 through 9, I turn to Spinoza. Spinoza's concept of power *potentia* is central to his philosophical system, yet it remains elusive and difficult to characterize. In his *magnum opus*, the *Ethics*, the power *potentia* of any thing is linked to its essence and virtue; in particular, for humans, *potentia* is linked to ethics. At the same time, *potentia* appears to relate to a more ordinary meaning of power as efficacy or causality. This combination of normative and descriptive elements is apparently similar to that of scholastic natural science. But applied to human affairs, the combination yields implausible results. The power of the multitude is supposed both to tend towards virtue and also to be efficacious, but surely there are cases where efficacy does not align with virtue. What of the sorry history of human oppression and injustice? Interpreters—whether radical democrats, or equally the more mainstream interpreters whom I will label 'constitutionalists'—tend to square this circle by echoing Seneca's dictum that tyrants never last long. They presume that unappealing political regimes will be transient, and claim that democracy is the inner truth of every successful regime.

Rather than defending the alleged rapprochement of efficacy and ethics in Spinoza's conception of power, to the contrary I explore their divergence. In the face of the democratic complacency of standard interpretations of Spinoza, I press Spinoza's philosophy for a response to three Hobbesian worries: first, the problem of the multitude's inner oligarchy; second, the problem of nonideal endurance; and third, the problem of democracy's perverse effects. Determining Spinoza's response demands a systematic reconstruction of his concept of power. In fact, I argue that Spinoza has two clearly distinct senses of *potentia*. On the one hand, there is the power to produce effects (*potentia operandi*); on the other hand there is the power of acting (*potentia agendi*): the difference is between an individual producing effects in general, versus an individual producing effects that can be understood through the individual's own nature. Individuals can have a high degree of *potentia operandi* despite a low degree of *potentia agendi*: as, for example, a state under colonial rule, or an irascible individual whose partner calms the other's outbursts.

Building on this distinction, I offer a systematic reconstruction of Spinoza's politics that acknowledges its deep antinomianism. An individual's right and a state's right are coextensive with their *potentia operandi*, which is their power of producing effects of whatever sort, for better or for worse. Granted, only in those cases where they act from their own proper power (*potentia agendi*) alone are they in control of their own right (*sui juris*). This consideration of being *sui juris* (both the state itself being *sui juris*, and individuals within the state being *sui juris*) constitutes the ethical element of Spinoza's political philosophy, and it is undeniably important. But my analysis emphasizes that the ethical element is only one component of a larger analysis of political power.

This reconstruction of Spinoza's politics enables me to argue that Spinoza can and must accept my three Hobbesian problems. I argue that Spinoza accepts the first Hobbesian problem, the problem of the multitude's inner oligarchy. *Potentia operandi* is very similar to the late Hobbesian *potentia*; thus, the Spinozist multitude tends to feature Hobbesian oligarchic informal power blocs. I paint radical democratic Spinozists as neo-scholastics: for they understand the multitude's active power as a normatively appealing disposition that tends increasingly to express itself through history. But for Spinoza, unlike the scholastics, all power is fully actualized, and a multitude has precisely the degree of power that it expresses at any given time. If a multitude is not horizontal and equal, then it lacks the power to be so. Nor even does the existence of egalitarian and inclusive social movements establish the underlying goodness of the multitude. I argue that an entity's action is determined by its own active power alone (it is *sui juris*) when it maintains itself homeostatically. Thus, a multitude's power *sui juris* cannot be established by appeal to behaviour shaped by its opposition to the state. A multitude *sui juris* must have established the forms of self-regulation to maintain itself over time, and this will mean establishing an institutional structure. The multitude *sui juris* amounts to a Hobbesian state that has solved the political problem: a state that has established a configuration of individual *potentiae* that can hold itself together over time.

Next, I argue that Spinoza accepts the second Hobbesian problem: the problem of nonideal endurance. Allegedly Spinoza shows that the only durable independent states (the only states that have solved the Hobbesian political problem) are those that have good institutions, fitting with the intuitive desiderata of a normatively appealing democracy. Radical and constitutionalist interpretations alike insist that, for Spinoza as for Seneca, tyrannies never last long: great political power presupposes a deep ethical structure to the political order. To the contrary, I argue that a state can be durable in non-democratic ways, whether due to the stabilizing pressure of external forces, or due to well-crafted internal structures of dependency: the challenge for politics is not only for a state to achieve durability and address the Hobbesian political problem, but to do so in a way that more robustly expresses popular power.

In Chapter 9, I draw together the various argumentative threads of the book to propose a neo-Spinozist criterion of popular power. First, as to power: I propose that a collectivity expresses its power to the degree it is *sui juris*, or in other words, to the degree it homeostatically maintains itself and produces characteristic effects. Effects that either are produced sporadically or erratically or are produced durably but only due to pressure from an external force (for instance, under the tutelage of a colonial power) attest less to the collective's own power. Next, as to popularity: I propose that a collectivity's power counts as popular if it effectively self-regulates itself in accord with a fundamental principle of equality and participation. A collectivity producing hierarchized dependency amongst its members counts to that extent as less popular. What regime might meet this two-part criterion of popular power? I argue that Spinoza takes very seriously the problem of democracy's perverse effects (the third Hobbesian problem); but whereas the Hobbesian solution is repressive egalitarianism, I characterize Spinoza's solution as civic strengthening. Hobbes views all collective organization as a force of oligarchy and therefore seeks to individualize the multitude and fragment its collectivities as much as possible. By contrast, Spinoza seeks to encourage sociable and civic collective forms, and diminish the passions that entrench problematic oligarchies. Once the use of egalitarian organizational mechanisms such as sortition breaks the perverse incentives for oligarchic consolidation, the possibility emerges

for formal and informal counterpowers to be welcomed as a beneficial part of a political system's self-regulation.

(iii) The upshot for early modern philosophy and for democratic theory

The book poses a challenge to certain commonplaces in the Hobbes literature. First, the book defends the systemic significance and philosophical appeal of Hobbes's theory of power (*potentia*), in contrast to the conventional focus on his theories of rights, duties, authority (*potestas*), and rational action. Second, the book makes a novel contribution to the lively debate about Hobbes's relation to democracy, in particular arguing against taking the 'sleeping sovereign' as the key to Hobbesian democracy. Third, the book advances a novel characterization of Hobbes's theoretical development, centring on the gradual elimination of scholastic remnants in his conception of political power.

Beyond the Hobbes literature, the book attempts to dislodge the persistent and often reductive presentation of the relation between Hobbes and Spinoza. Spinozists tend confidently to position Hobbes as the 'bad guy' versus Spinoza as the 'good guy', or in more scholarly terms, they tend to criticize Hobbes as excessively 'juridical', to be saved by Spinoza's 'power' approach. But in my book, I believe they are revealed to have more in common in their conception of politics than is usually granted.

Furthermore, I hope that the substantial view that I develop from Hobbesian and Spinozist resources is valuable for democratic theory. I believe that my new criterion for a political phenomenon to count as an expression of political power provides a solution to my starting puzzle, and promises a way out of disturbing oscillations between faith in and disappointment with democracy. For on the view that the book develops, a formal system of democracy may or may not express popular power; nor do plebiscites or social movements automatically do so. Rather, the degree of popular power in a system depends on its concrete production of egalitarian effects durably over time. Plebiscites and social movements are no longer conceived as definitive or privileged expressions of popular power. Rather, they are viewed as potentially valuable elements within a broader vision of democracy.

Asst Prof Sandra Field (Yale-NUS College)

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[2] Richard Tuck, *The Sleeping Sovereign: The Invention of Modern Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 121–142.

[3] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004); *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2009).

[4] Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 256–328.