



## What's in a name? How a democracy becomes an aristocracy

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What do you call a democracy that depends on the exclusion of whole groups from political participation? Gaia/Wikipedia Commons, CC BY-SA

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Is there something about the deep logic of democracy that destines it to succeed in the world? Democracy, the form of politics that includes everyone as equals – does it perhaps suit human nature better than the alternatives? After all, surely any person who is excluded from the decision-making in a society will be more liable to rise up against it.

From ancient thinkers like Seneca to contemporary thinkers like Francis Fukuyama, we can see some version of this line of thought. Seneca thought that tyrannies could never last long; Fukuyama famously argued that liberal democracy is the end of history.

I want to focus instead on the person credited with giving the most direct and uncompromising statement of this thought: Benedict de Spinoza.

For centuries, “democracy” was a term of abuse, understood as a dangerous form of mob rule. Spinoza

was one of the first in the history of modern political thought to celebrate democracy.

Living in the 17th-century Dutch Republic, amid political turmoil in his own country, and witnessing the disorders across the channel in England, Spinoza was intensely interested in the concrete, material basis for peace.

He argues that monarchies are flawed political orders because they fail to harness the power of the people. Out of a well-founded fear of being overthrown, they oppress their subjects. The subjects, hating their king, have no loyalty and obey only out of fear.

Also, even the most virtuous king will have difficulty making wise and constant decisions that everyone can respect and uphold. A monarchy can only improve itself by approximating a democracy: instituting a representative assembly to which the king must defer.

But surely an even more direct way to harness the power of the people is not to have a king at all and to simply organise society as a democracy.

Democracies directly engage their citizens' loyalty by politically involving them. Having diverse voices in their collective decision-making then allows better decisions to be made.

## **Managing inclusion and exclusion**

Thus, Spinoza celebrates democracy and criticises monarchy. On this basis, he is hailed as a democrat and the originator of a radical, materialist conception of democracy, grounded in the power of the people.

But we should be careful here. Between monarchy as rule of the one and democracy as rule of the many, there is an intermediate option: aristocracy, or rule of the few.

Spinoza's view of aristocracy should give pause to radical democrats. He does not see a historical movement towards democracy, nor does he see the superiority of democracy as written into human nature.

To be sure, politically including everyone, as in a democracy, can harness the power of the people. But Spinoza's analysis of the commoners within an aristocracy shows the power of the people can equally be harnessed by political exclusion, so long as the depoliticised acquiescence of those excluded commoners is secured.

## **Everyone's equal except new arrivals**

Spinoza remarks that people generally conceive of themselves as equals and therefore resist political inequality. However, he also tells us a historical story of how this self-conception might be disrupted.

Suppose a population settles in a new place. Nobody wants to be subordinated to anyone else, so they view themselves as equals and organise themselves as a democracy.



Spinoza was the one of the first to celebrate democracy as a material basis for peace. Wikipedia Commons

Later, immigrants arrive. The locals, Spinoza writes:

*... think it unfair that foreigners who come to join them should have equal rights in a state which they have won for themselves by their toil and at cost of their blood.*

Do the immigrants object? No, says Spinoza:

*Nor do the foreigners themselves make any objection to this, having come to settle there not with view to being rulers but to promote their private interests, and they are quite happy provided they are granted freedom to transact their own business in security.*

The regime is transformed into an aristocracy, with the immigrants as the commoners excluded from political participation.

The crucial thing to note is that the power of the commoners is harnessed to the aristocracy. They comply with the laws of the country and contribute to its flourishing, not because they are politically included, but because they are content with their private economic freedoms. In other words, their depoliticised acquiescence is secured.

Most immigrants to the US want nothing more than a shot at the American Dream.

## **An unequal order can be stable**

Spinoza believes that an unequal political order can be stable. This is because a well-organised aristocracy will have a robust collective decision-making process in its political assembly (thus not being fickle like the rule of a king) and procedures to ensure that, despite their political inequality, the commoners have legal equality and do not suffer abuse.

This example shows that the desire and demand for political equality is not a human universal. Rather, it can be quelled or extinguished under certain circumstances, such as when it is balanced against other desires and expectations.

Spinoza's story fairly transparently reflects his understanding of the history of Venice. In Spinoza's time, many writers viewed the aristocratic Venetian republic as the exemplar of good, peaceful and harmonious political order.

So Spinoza may well make a striking new move in the history of political thought by defending the idea of a good democratic regime. But he does not radically reject the common sense of political thought in his period. To the contrary, he provides a theoretical frame for understanding the real possibility of good aristocratic regimes.

The lesson is not that all aristocracies will be as good as Venice. A poorly organised aristocracy will face rebellion from its disgruntled commoners.

But if the material contentment and basic dignity of the commoners are upheld and their expectations carefully managed, an aristocracy can harness the power of the people just as well as a democracy.

## Democracy can be hollowed out

Despite the prevalence of democracy today, the phenomenon of depoliticised acquiescence should not be unfamiliar to contemporary eyes.

For example, the United States is formally democratic. Nonetheless, it features two significant forms of political exclusion: migrant populations (legal and illegal) excluded from franchise; and a large proportion of the eligible voting population who (are encouraged to) self-exclude by not voting.

From voter ID laws to literacy tests such as this one from 1964, the right to vote in the US remains threatened.

These excluded groups are mostly depoliticised: they are not politically involved, do not seek to make political claim on a larger share of the benefits of social co-operation, and do not mount a serious challenge to the broad stability of the political order or to popular compliance with its laws and institutions.

The predictable result is that they face persistently unequal outcomes in wealth, health and other indicators.

Bringing my Spinozist frame to bear on this phenomenon, we can view immigrants and non-voters as latter-day commoners, whose behaviour reflects their depoliticised acquiescence. When their disadvantage becomes extreme, then they may become politicised and rebellious. Yet so long as this does not happen and they remain depoliticised, their unequal consideration in public policy is unchallenged.

The idea that human nature has some special affinity with democracy as a regime of political inclusion is too rosy. We need to recognise that human nature can equally be channelled into an exclusive kind of democracy.

Contemporary democracy contains within itself impulses towards inclusion, but also impulses towards exclusion. Aristocratic democracy (to use a historical term which sounds strange to contemporary ears) is a real possibility. If we are not attentive, it can insidiously empty out the substantive promise of democratic rule by the people.



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