

Violenta imperia nemo continuit diu

Spinoza and the Revolutionary Laws of Human Nature

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1. Introduction

It is common to observe that Spinoza has no sympathy for revolution. In support of this contention, commentators point to his several warnings about the futility of insurrections, to his critique of the protracted turmoil in England,¹ and to his several remarks about the terrifying masses, who are all too willing to shed blood.² With or without impeaching his credentials as the intellectual forefather of the radical Enlightenment, most find that the pessimism Spinoza exhibits about the possibility of radical regime change (TTP 18 10) implies a condemnation of revolution in general.³ This strikes me as hasty for a couple of reasons. Firstly, Spinoza does not use the word “revolution” in the political sense, nor could he have done so. It was rarely used to refer to political transformation in the 1600s, and was perhaps first used to refer to a specific event in reference to the Glorious Revolution in 1688, eleven years following Spinoza’s death. Whereas today revolution typically refers to an insurrectionary movement under the banner of universal freedom, the “Glorious Revolution” was the celebratory name given to the events that restored the English monarchy. Secondly, and more importantly, as Hannah Arendt remarks, “revolutions are more than successful insurrections.”⁴ Insurrection and regime change can just as easily be conservative or reactionary as revolutionary, and thus Spinoza’s views on these phenomena are not necessarily the appropriate place to discover his position on the question of revolutionary change.

Of course, we must then be clear about what revolutionary change is. According to Arendt, “Only where [the] pathos of novelty is present and where novelty is connected with the idea of freedom are we entitled

to speak of revolution.”⁵ Revolution, for Arendt, is associated with a recilinear as opposed to a cyclical view of time. The ancients and medievals understood change to be natural and inevitable, but also repetitive and cyclical, bound to the laws of generation and corruption governing all natural things. Revolution, in the sense of a radical rupture with the past, is, on her account, a distinctively modern phenomenon that depends on a view of history for which radical novelty is not only possible, but can be initiated by human beings themselves. Revolution, in this sense, is conceivable only when humans come to see themselves as the authors of their destiny, as the architects of their way of life, whose medium of existence is not the rigid lawfulness of the cosmos, but freedom itself. On this understanding of revolution, it is unclear whether Spinoza is among “the last of the medievals” or “the first of the moderns.” It would be unsurprising if Spinoza were a cusp figure who, like Machiavelli, was both ahead of his time and bound to a classical perspective, such that he would be “fully convinced that experience has revealed every conceivable form of commonwealth”⁶ and that “the nature of men” is constant and everywhere the same (TP 1 7, 5 2, 7 27).

Yet, if we understand revolutionary transformation not in terms of radical novelty and rupture, but in the terms of Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*, I think we will find in Spinoza an ardent revolutionary spirit. For Marx and Engels, revolutionary political transformation is the kind of change that forges an increasingly common interest.⁷ The ultimate revolutionary movement is the one that organizes the interests of its constituents into an effective unity, such that each and every one, while striving for himself, brings about those effects that benefit others as well. This is a plausible way to understand Spinoza’s frequent assertion that his political principles are guided by the aim of constituting a commonwealth that is guided “as if by one mind” (TP 6 1). And, thus, it is in this sense that Spinoza may be seen to outline a revolutionary politics. We may justifiably see in Spinoza a modern tendency, on Arendt’s account, since he advocates political and institutional forms insofar as they support and amplify human freedom. Yet, this freedom is less a radical power of invention, and more a power to form an idea of one’s own welfare that harmonizes with the general welfare and then to act according to it. Spinoza’s dictates of practical reason, on my view, anticipate Marx and Engels, since political freedom is greater insofar as what is represented as the dominant interest generates a truly common interest, which Spinoza envisions as a “union or harmony of minds” (TP 6 4).

It may seem that I am simply skirting the concern raised by those who cite Spinoza's grim view of insurrection. Spinoza, some might be concerned, offers nothing like a right to resist tyranny. He notes that "a people have often been able to change tyrants but are never able to get rid of them" (TTP 18 7) and thus such attempts tend to be "foolish" (TP 5 7). Although Spinoza repeatedly remarks that toppling tyrants and ruining the state is typically disastrous, he observes just as often that the laws of human nature are such that the ruin of any particular tyrannical state is inevitable. Oppressive circumstances give rise to insurrection no less certainly than the earth revolves around the sun. Spinoza invokes revolution in the astronomical sense of irresistible rotation,⁸ but he grounds this change in the iron law of the *conatus*, the striving to persist in and to enhance one's existence (EIIIpost6–9). There is, then, a sense in which Spinoza identifies the laws of human nature themselves as revolutionary. All natural beings desire to persevere in their being, and doing so effectively, according to the laws of one's nature, is what Spinoza calls "freedom." Spinoza maintains consistently that the commonwealth only endures as long as its constituents vividly imagine it to be a source of their power and freedom. Thus, to invoke Marx and Engels again, if the ideas of the ruling class appear to be alien or hostile to the ideas and aims of the many, according to Spinoza, "they cannot help but wish [it] every calamity and inflict it themselves when they can" (TTP 5 8). Thus, although Spinoza does not praise insurrections, he warns his readers that they cannot escape them as long as the irrepressible passion for freedom is disregarded.

In what follows, I will substantiate the argument that there are at least two senses in which Spinoza's principles support revolutionary change. I will begin with a quick survey of his concerns with the problem of insurrection. I will proceed to show that if political programs can be called revolutionary, insofar as freedom is their motivation and justification, and insofar as freedom implies an expansion of the scope of the general interest to the whole political body, Spinoza ought to be called a revolutionary. Finally, I will contend that even if he does not praise mass insurrection, he finds its guarantee in the laws of human nature itself, which cannot tolerate tyranny. And, thus, it is in a revolutionary vein that Spinoza cites Seneca repeatedly: *violenta imperia nemo continuit diu* (TTP 5 8, 16 9).

2. Failed Uprisings

Spinoza observes that philosophers who attempt to write political theory only ever succeed in composing satire (TP 1 1). Nevertheless, he makes no claims of revolutionary novelty himself. Rather, he claims to

take his cues from statesmen and political practice (TP 1 2), and to apply a mathematician's discipline to a careful observation of human nature toward the end of deducing principles of effective political organization.

In turning my attention to political theory it was not my purpose to suggest anything that is novel or unheard of, but only to demonstrate by sure and conclusive reasoning such things as are in closest agreement with practice, deducing them from human nature as it really is. And in order to enquire into matters relevant to this branch of knowledge in the same unfettered spirit as is habitually shown in mathematical studies . . . I have regarded human affects such as love, hatred, anger, envy, pride, pity, and other agitations of the mind not as vices but as properties pertaining to it in the same way as heat, cold, ~~atmosphere~~, storm, thunder, and such pertain to the nature of the atmosphere. (TP 1 4)

In parallel with his *Ethics*, Spinoza invokes the attitude of the mathematician when promising to analyze human affects (EIIIpref). It requires a tranquility of mind to find in a history replete with quarrels, rebellion, and war the pleasure of understanding human properties, tendencies, and "laws." Spinoza presumes that humans are everywhere the same in that we are universally "subject to passions" (TP 1 5; EIVp4), and thereby both enabled and constrained by our environment.⁹ How we behave, whether we tend toward violence or obedience, reflects not our caste or class but the character of our commonwealths (TP 5 2). Spinoza thereby rejects the idea that some people are barbarous by nature while others are noble and refined: "[A]ll men share in one and the same nature; it is power and culture that mislead us" (TP 7 27). From this presumption Spinoza can say that, although history yields infinitely many shapes of human organization, "experience has revealed every conceivable form of commonwealth" (TP 1 3) and sufficient data to deduce the "natural foundation of the state" from the "nature and condition of men in general" (TP 1 7).

Consideration of human nature suggests to Spinoza that insurrections typically fail to bring about a better situation. The universal subjection of humans to passions and the influence of external causes is such that our agency is severely constrained by our histories, acquired dispositions, and the powers and pleasures available in our social milieus.¹⁰ Thus, from the same rule that entails that rebellion is caused by a poorly organized commonwealth, it follows that those rebellions are typically destructive rather than liberating. Let us consider this principle more carefully. According to Spinoza:

It is certain that rebellions, wars, and contempt for or violation of the laws are to be attributed not so much to the wickedness of sub-

jects as to the faulty organization of the state. Men are not born citizens but are made so. Furthermore men's natural passions are everywhere the same; so if wickedness is more prevalent and wrongdoing more common in one commonwealth than in another, one can be sure that this is because the former has not done enough to promote harmony and has not framed its laws with sufficient forethought. (TP 5 2)

Because citizens have been, in his terms, "made" in a corrosive environment that encourages wrongdoing, division, and antagonism, one can see "how foolish [*imprudenter*] are the attempts so often made to get rid of a tyrant while yet the causes that have made the prince a tyrant cannot be removed" (TP 5 7). Machiavelli teaches us that the causes of tyranny "become the more firmly established as the prince is given more grounds for fear" (*ibid.*).

Insurrectionary violence frequently produces a vicious cycle. Citizens subject to oppression are typically "misled"; that is, they are prevented from developing the resources to judge what is to their advantage, or to do the arduous work required to bring about a more enabling situation. They are typically unable to see the web of causal relations that holds in place, not only the tyrant (and his henchmen), but also the desires, passions, and circumstances that call for and sustain tyranny. They are corrupted by their own suffering and driven, not by knowledge of what is good, but by fear of pain and death, and by a desperate desire to escape their current reality. Likewise, the prince, who is installed as a result of insurrectionary efforts to negate the source of their oppression, is burdened by the living memory of what the violent masses can do, while also being vulnerable to the disgraced allies of the former ruler. Such a prince, even with the best intentions, is unlikely to be able to train his mind on the general welfare. Instead, he is haunted by danger on all sides, and especially by the image of his own people's bloody rage. As Spinoza presses, "[f]or how will he inevitably regard citizens whose hands are stained with royal blood, citizens glorying in parricide as in a noble act, an act which cannot fail to be an ominous example for him?" (TTP 18 7).

Spinoza observes not only that it is exceedingly difficult to overcome a history of violence, but, again in the vein of Machiavelli, that change must respect the habitual constitution of a people. Those accustomed to republican self-rule will never tolerate a monarch, and those habituated to following a king's decrees will require nothing less than a collective transubstantiation in order to become capable of governing themselves (TTP 18 6–7). Thus, Spinoza arrives at the general maxim: "The form of each state must necessarily be retained and cannot be changed without risking the total ruin of the state" (TTP 18 10).

It should be noted, however, that Spinoza issues these statements in the mode of a warning: He observes that it is exceedingly “dangerous” (TTP 18 7) to depose a monarch, and that changing the form from democracy to monarchy, or the reverse, entails great “risk” (TTP 18 10). Likewise it is frequently “imprudent” to get rid of a tyrant. None of these claims are absolute imperatives. These are prudential maxims meant to guide those seeking to transform the causes of tyranny. When he speaks in the prescriptive mode, he says that the “contract or laws whereby a people transfers its right to one council or one man should undoubtedly be violated when the general welfare is violated” (TP 4 6; trans. mod.). Yet he notes that the power to name the general welfare cannot rest in the “private individual,” for, if it did, law would have no binding power. Instead, the best commonwealth should establish provisions by which critique of the rationality of its laws is built into its regular functioning.¹¹ The best state gives as little cause for insurrection as possible, because it installs mechanisms for its rational reconstruction and for the participation and education of as many constituents as its form allows (TP 7 27, 29).

In this section, I showed that Spinoza, indeed, has a grim view of the ability of insurrections to overcome the suffering that inspires them. From this observation of human nature, however, Spinoza certainly does not arrive at anti-revolutionary principles of government; far from it. In the following section, I seek to show that it is respect for the difficulty of constituting freedom among those habituated to slavery that guides his principles, especially in his understudied *Political Treatise*. And it is his hope for the progressive, albeit gradual, liberation of the entire multitude that makes him a revolutionary political thinker.¹²

3. Animorum Unione

According to Arendt, “the aim of revolution was, and always has been, freedom.”¹³ If Spinoza has a claim to being among the “first of the moderns,” it is because, as Steven Smith observes, he is the first major canonized thinker in the modern period to defend democracy as the best form of government.¹⁴ He defends it on the grounds that it best accords with the natural freedom belonging to man (TTP 16 8), an interpretation of which I will offer below. He might also be said to be modern because, like Hobbes and Descartes, he does not recognize any intrinsic differences between people and thus furnishes metaphysical bases for equality.¹⁵ It is not just that Spinoza prefers the form of government that best accords with natural freedom; it is also the case that his recommendations for any form of government whatsoever are animated by the imperative to maximize the power of the commonwealth by uni-

fyng its constituents into “one mind.” I will defend the view that this process of unification expresses his view of freedom, which is intrinsically revolutionary in the sense identified by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*. No matter what form of government Spinoza discusses, he aims, as Balibar argues, to democratize it, to amplify the power of the many through those institutions that enable as many as possible to exercise reason—to think and act out of the pooled resources of the commonwealth.¹⁶

In the *Ethics*, freedom is closely aligned with reason. We reason when our minds are the “adequate causes” of their ideas. That is, when an idea can be explained by the resources proper to a particular mind, then that individual can be called free, active, and rational.¹⁷ Similarly, Spinoza defines “virtue” as man’s power to bring about certain things “which can be understood through the laws of his nature alone” (EIVdef8). Importantly, one’s power to determine oneself rather than suffer the haphazard effects of determination by external causes is owed to what Balibar describes as the “transindividual” properties of the mind.¹⁸ Although the word “transindividual” might sound peculiar to some, this idea should not be surprising in reference to Spinoza’s notion of reason. He describes the “common notions” that are “the foundations of our reasoning” (EIIp40s1), as “those things which are common to all, and which are equally in the part and in the whole” (EIIp38c). All men have adequate ideas of the common notions because they share certain properties with all other beings in nature. Because an individual forms an adequate idea of what it shares with particular bodies, it also forms local common notions with subsets of natural beings (EIIp39). “From this it follows that the mind is more capable of perceiving many things adequately as its body has more in common with other bodies” (EIIp39c). The foundations of our reasoning, then, are owed to our shared properties and are expanded the more we encounter beings with which we share, or come to share, these properties. Individual virtue, then, depends upon common resources and is enhanced the more one cultivates or encounters common resources. Thus, although adequate ideas follow from one’s nature and are proper to her mind, privileged sources of rational ideas are those that extend beyond her particularity and express her connection to others.

One might expect rationality to follow from what is universal and thus be extra-individual, but we also find an affirmation of the transindividual character of agency in Spinoza’s *conatus* principle, which describes the striving to persevere in being peculiar to each and every singular being in nature. “So the power of each thing, or the striving by which it (*either alone or with others*) does anything, or strives to do anything . . . is nothing but the given, or actual essence of the thing itself”

(EIIIp7def).¹⁹ Something can be explained through a being's singular essence, or by one's nature alone, so long as it follows from what lies in us *and* what we have in common with others. Self-determination, or freedom, then, is increased the more we can "join forces" with others (EIVp35s). Accordingly, Spinoza affirms that nothing is more useful to man than man, and that we ought to strive such that "all should so agree in all things that the minds and bodies of all would compose, as it were, one mind and one body; that all should so strive together . . . that all, together, should seek the common advantage of all" (EIVp18s).

Joining together to form a common body, with a common mind, and a common project of perseverance would generate the greatest powers of reason and maximize the freedom of each.²⁰ Such a project, Spinoza laments frequently, is incredibly arduous, if not impossible: "It rarely happens that men live according to the guidance of reason. Instead, *their lives are so constituted* that they are usually envious and burdensome to one another" (EIVp35s; emphasis added). Perhaps Spinoza's pessimism about the ability to live according to reason prompts commentators like Steven B. Smith to conclude that, for Spinoza, "[t]he exemplary life culminates in the life of the free person engaged in the solitary and virtually continual contemplation of God and the world . . . whose thoughts and actions stem . . . from feelings of love and friendship."²¹ Although the image of the solitary sage contemplating God—animated only by love and friendship—ignores the sociality that such feelings of camaraderie presuppose, the not uncommon insistence that Spinozan freedom can best be secured in isolation fails to make sense of the persistent ethical vision of union found in his political writings. Moreover, Spinoza notes that the failure to live according to reason follows from how our lives are typically "constituted." Spinoza's political principles are guided precisely by an effort to constitute human lives otherwise. Thus, in his *Political Treatise*, Spinoza declares the project of unification on rational premises to be its guiding aim: "The body of the state must be guided as if by a single mind" (TP 3 5).

The unification of the commonwealth echoes Spinoza's description in the *Ethics* of the rational wish to combine the totality of humanity into a single mind and body. In both cases, it is reason that makes possible the union of minds that Spinoza advocates.

The commonwealth that is based on reason and directed by reason is most powerful and most in control of its own right. For the right of a commonwealth is determined by the power of a people that is guided as though by a single mind. But the union of minds could in no way be conceived unless the chief aim of the commonwealth is identical with that which sound reason teaches us is for the good of all men. (TP 3 7)

The *Political Treatise* seeks to convince its readers that a strong and enduring commonwealth is one that is “defined by the corporate power of the people” (TP 3 9) and composed of restraints that compel its ministers to uphold the public trust “whether they are guided by passion or reason” (TP 1 6). The art of government becomes the art of building institutions that inoculate citizens and statesmen against the enchantment of the Sirens’ song (TP 7 1) and thus enable and constrain as many as possible to live “as reason prescribes” (TP 3 6).

The logic of the prescriptions emerges, in Balibar’s terms, as a “theory of democratization, which is valid for every regime.”²² Some commentators have puzzled over the shift in tone from the *Theological-Political Treatise* to the *Political Treatise*. According to some, Spinoza abandons his call for liberation from arbitrary state authority and resigns himself to a realist analysis of power in his more dispassionate tract.²³ Yet, with Balibar, I find in the principles outlined for each commonwealth a consistent concern with the project of unification, which can only be achieved by empowering as many people as possible to participate in the processes of legislation and government. The theory of democratization, then, is an institutional theory empowering the many to think and act from common resources. It does not necessarily express respect for certain modern democratic principles—such as equality before the law—but rather affirms, in whatever regime, that “the people’s welfare [*salus*] is the highest law” (TP 7 5). Observation of that rule is visible in Spinoza’s frequent council for large deliberative assemblies and for passing only those laws that garner significant support. Such institutional features enable the generation of peace, understood as a harmony of minds, which also coheres with Spinoza’s notion of freedom as an effect that enables combination.

Importantly, the unity Spinoza advocates is not a passive submission to a common rule of life, but the active production of a shared striving. Such sharing, as Filippo del Lucchese rightly insists, in no way precludes conflict.²⁴ Spinoza remarks that some enduring monarchies appear peaceful, but they are in actuality deserts, populated by slaves too diminished to overcome their desolate condition. “For peace is not just the absence of war, but a virtue which comes from strength of mind” (TP 5 4). Such strength of mind and social harmony is more likely to be found in commonwealths that resemble, according to Spinoza, quarrelsome families (TP 6 4). The best state provides mechanisms for productive disputes, because simple obedience is insufficient for a vibrant commonwealth. Even in monarchy, “the king’s sword or right is in reality the will of the people” (TP 7 25) and “men, endowed with reason, can never give up their right so completely as to cease to be men and to be accounted as sheep” (TP 7 25). Although the aim of

every form of government, according to Spinoza, ought to be the constitution of *una mente*, “men should be governed in such a way that they do not see themselves as being governed but as living according to their temperament and by their own free decision” (TP 10 8; trans. mod.). Common purpose is only possible in a commonwealth that produces virtuous individuals, that is, individuals who pursue their interests as their own: “When each man most seeks his own advantage for himself, then men are most useful to one another.”²⁵

In a similar vein, Marx and Engels describe revolutionary change as the incorporation of increasingly many diverse interests into the common interest. A historical movement is revolutionary insofar as what is represented as the general welfare succeeds in expressing the interests of more and more constituents of the society in question.

For each new class which puts itself in the place of one ruling before it, is compelled . . . to represent its interest as the common interest of all the members of society, that is, expressed in ideal form: it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones. The class making a revolution appears from the very start, if only because it is opposed to a class, not as a class but as the representative of the whole of society; it appears as the whole mass of society confronting the one ruling class.²⁶

These remarks expose how the universal representation of the general welfare can conceal its particular class interest, but the emerging class meets the definition of being revolutionary only when its interest is *better* connected to general concerns than the previous one. “Every new class . . . achieves its hegemony *only* on a broader basis than that of the class ruling previously.”²⁷ Revolutionary change refers to the institution of a stable new social and political basis rather than to an ephemeral eruption, or a displacement of rulers through insurrection. The stability of revolutionary change is owed to its generalizing character. It aligns more and more members and groups with the common welfare by actually linking the concrete conditions of their well-being. It is not by submerging the interests of the many into a dominant one that a group gains its revolutionary power. Rather, what makes an incipient power revolutionary is its ability to express, in Spinozan terms, the common properties of those many interests.²⁸

Although Spinoza does not obviously call for a militant uprising of the oppressed on behalf of a classless society, he is concerned with establishing the concrete conditions by which each member of the *civitas* will be psychically and physically invested in the welfare of all. In a monarchy, for example, he suggests that immovable property be held in common so that “the danger from war is practically the same for all”

(TP 7 8), and thus each and every one will defend the soil as his own. If a commonwealth cannot find ways to coordinate the diverse interests of its people, it will sow the seeds of its undoing. “Since the right of the commonwealth is defined by the common power of the multitude, undoubtedly the power of the commonwealth and its right is to that extent diminished, as it affords reasons for many to unite in a conspiracy” (TP 3 9; trans. mod.).

In this section, I have sought to establish the basis for what I am calling Spinoza’s “revolutionary counsel”: Create a single mind among constituents by democratizing institutions and social conditions, thereby knitting together the individual and the general welfare. This is revolutionary in that it involves a gradual expansion of the common interest through the establishment of genuinely common grounds of perseverance and mutual power. In the following section, I offer further justification for calling this advice revolutionary, since, as Spinoza emphasizes, failing to provide a real basis for harmony is sure to invite insurrection.

4. Revolutionary Human Nature

Although Spinoza himself frequently refers to the “laws of human nature,” it is awkward to speak of “human nature” in his philosophy. A “nature” typically implies an essential feature that might define a group. In order to define a group this feature must be predicable of each of its members, without being predicable of any non-member. For a philosopher like Descartes, all humans can exercise reason and free will, and no other created being can do so.²⁹ Spinoza, by contrast, never identifies any feature that is exclusive to human beings, since the foundations of reason exist in all natural beings. I thus agree with commentators who maintain that Spinoza does not have a metaphysical concept of human nature, understood as a human essence.³⁰ Nevertheless, he claims to deduce his political principles from a scientific study of “human nature as it really is” (TP 1 4). We are alerted to the fact that this nature is not necessarily exclusive to human beings, however, when he writes:

I should like to point out that all those things I have demonstrated follow from the most essential feature of human nature in whatever way it may be considered, namely, from the universal striving of all men to preserve themselves. This striving is inherent in all men, whether ignorant or wise. (TP 3 18)

He could have added that this striving inheres in all beings, even those we would call “inanimate.”³¹

In the *Theological-Political Treatise*, this striving is first related to all of nature, then to big fish eating smaller fish, and finally to individual things of whatever kind. There, he refers to the *conatus* principle as “the supreme law of nature,” namely “that each thing strives to persist in its own state as far as it can” (TTP 16 2). From this follows “a universal law of human nature that no one neglects anything that they deem good unless they hope for a greater good or fear a greater loss, and no one puts up with anything bad except to avoid something worse or because he hopes for something better” (TTP 16 6). The laws of human nature might reflect some complicated imaginative responses, but they follow from the same principle that causes tiny fish to swim in magnificent schools that bewilder their predators. The durability of a commonwealth reflects the ironclad law of the *conatus*: Forms of association last as long as they appear to their members to be in the interest of those members.

Spinoza’s social contract is less a juridical expression of rational concord among equally valid perspectives than an expression of a common imaginative perception of what is conducive to persevering in being. In Spinoza’s words, “[w]e conclude from this that any agreement can have force only if it is in our interest, and when it is not in our interest, the agreement fails and remains void” (TTP 16 7). Thus, although Spinoza does not herald a right to resist tyranny, he finds that state power must always respect this law in order to endure; that is, it must always appear to act in the interest of its constituents. Moreover, the most effective way to appear to regard the common welfare as the highest law, Spinoza contends, is to actually do so.³² He is perhaps knowingly overstating the issue when he observes, “it can very rarely happen that sovereigns issue totally absurd commands. To protect their position and retain power, they are very much obliged to work for the common good and direct all things by the dictate of reason” (TTP 16 9). To which he adds, in what might be considered an admonishing tone, “for no one has maintained a violent government for long” (ibid.).

The phrase “the laws of human nature” frequently appears in the context of identifying the limits of sovereignty. For example,

There will never be a sovereign power that can accomplish whatever it pleases. In vain would a sovereign command a subject to hate someone who had made himself agreeable by an act of kindness or to love someone who had injured him, or forbid him to take offence at insults or free himself from fear, or many other such things that follow from the *laws of human nature*. (TTP 17 1; emphasis added)

These “laws of human nature” include psychological generalizations that ought to be taken into account in ordering a commonwealth. Such

generalizations likewise typically refer to the inability of sovereigns to manipulate their constituents past a certain point, beyond which the ruin of the state is all but assured. The laws of human nature underline the irreducibility of human striving, and the certainty of resistance to intolerable oppression.³³

Although the human being is not a robust metaphysical category for Spinoza—indeed, he advances one of the most powerful critiques of human exceptionalism in the history of Western thought—the *conatus* reflected in the laws of human nature contains the seeds of revolution. It is the yearning not only to live but to live well that sets a limit to every system of coercion. As Spinoza writes, “human nature does not allow itself to be absolutely compelled” (TTP 5 8). When subject to a violent regime, a people “cannot help but rejoice when their ruler suffers pain or loss . . . they cannot help but wish him every calamity and inflict it themselves when they can” (ibid.).

Yet, it is not only the exercise of overt violence in the form of threats, brutal punishment, and the arbitrary taking of life that will come up against the laws of human nature. Spinoza identifies what we today might call “structural violence” as a cause of “major upheaval” (TTP 17 4).

Everyone knows what wrongdoing people are often moved to commit because they cannot stand their present situation and desire major upheaval, how blind anger and resentment of their poverty prompt men to act, and how much these things occupy and agitate their minds. To anticipate all this and construct a state that affords no opportunity for trouble-making, to organize everything in such a way that each person, of whatever character, prefers public right to private advantage, this is the task, this is the toil. The necessity for this has compelled people to devise many stratagems. But they have never succeeded in devising a form of government that was not in greater danger from its own citizens than from foreign foes, and which was not more fearful of the former than of the latter. (TTP 17 4)

Spinoza regularly invokes this fear that a state necessarily has vis-à-vis its own people. This fear, he suggests, ought to **constrain** a state **in an effort** to safeguard its reputation as an agent for the common good.³⁴

Appearing to represent the common good, however, entails not only promising a people’s survival or protection from the greatest evils, but also respecting characteristic human aspirations. “So when we say that the best state is one where men pass their lives in harmony, I am speaking of a human life, which is characterized not just by the circulation of blood and other features common to all animals, but especially by reason, the true virtue and life of the mind” (TP 5 5). Invocations of human nature in Spinoza’s text serve as a rallying cry for a govern-



ment animated by true freedom as the collective constitution of reason and the good life. Many commentators find that Spinoza's *Ethics* aims at private virtue and his politics only at *ersatz* freedom in the form of obedience to the most basic moral precepts. Yet, we can discern in his mantras of the one mind, his admonitions about the corrosive effects of fear and hatred, and his affirmation of the irrepressible human striving to enjoy powerful minds and well-nourished bodies, the outlines of a revolutionary manifesto.

NOTES

1. Benedict de Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. Jonathan Israel and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), chap. 18, ¶8; henceforth TTP, followed by chapter and paragraph numbers.
2. Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, in *The Collected Works*, vol. 1, trans. and ed. Edwin M. Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), bk. 4, prop. 54, scholium to prop. 54; henceforth E, followed by book and either proposition, corollary, definition, demonstration, scholium, preface, postulate, or appendix number.
3. Although some recent commentators frequently refer to his *ideas* as revolutionary in the sense that they provoked a radical paradigm shift, they treat Spinoza as radical or revolutionary in the scientific rather than the political sense (see Jonathan Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750–1790* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011]). Nevertheless, Israel claims that his ideas inspired others to political revolution, and yet Spinoza scholars remark more often upon his political conservatism (see Omri Boehm, review of *Democratic Enlightenment*, by Jonathan Israel, *Notre Dame Philosophical Review* [February 2011]: 1066 and Michael Rosenthal's observation in this volume that "there is little or nothing that [Spinoza] says in favor of radical political change" (Michael A. Rosenthal, "The Siren Song of Revolution: Spinoza on the Art of Political Change," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 34:1 [2013], p. **insert page ##**). The Marxist tradition of Spinoza interpretation, however, more frequently allies his scientific radicalism with political radicalism (see, for example, Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster [New York: Verso, 1970] and Antonio Negri, *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*, trans. Maurizia Boscagli [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999]). This tradition, however, remains marginal in Anglophone philosophy.
4. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 24.
5. *Ibid.*

6. Benedict de Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), chap. 1, §3; henceforth TP, followed by chapter and section numbers.
7. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, trans. Clemens Dutt, William Lough, and Charles P. Magill, and ed. Christopher J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1970), pp. 65–6.
8. Cf. Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 37.
9. See, for example, EIVapp7.
10. See Genevieve Lloyd, “Dominance and Difference,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Benedict de Spinoza*, ed. Moira Gatens (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), p. 37.
11. TTP 20 7; TP passim. This claim is owed to Erik Stephenson’s dissertation, Erik Stephenson, “Spinoza and the Ethics of Political Resistance” (Ph.D. diss., McGill University, 2011).
12. It must be admitted, however, that Spinoza tends to represent that multitude as exclusively male.
13. Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 1.
14. Steven B. Smith, *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 22, 131.
15. There is not space to address this now, but I will briefly note that the basis for equality in Spinoza is arguably his doctrine of common notions, and this is certainly a problematic one, for several reasons that I hope to discuss in a different paper. Moreover, for Spinoza, the metaphysical basis for equality does not require a state to formally recognize it (see TP 11 3–4).
16. Étienne Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, trans. Peter Snowdon (New York: Verso, 1998), p. 121.
17. See EIIIdef1.
18. Étienne Balibar, “Spinoza: From Individuality to Transindividuality,” *Mededelingen vanwege het Spinozahuis* 71 (1997), pp. 3–36.
19. Balibar observes something similar in Balibar, “Spinoza: From Individuality to Transindividuality,” p. 24.
20. It should be noted, however, that to be united by what is in common is not necessarily to be rendered identical or homogenous. Although common notions are the same, the individuals that “agree in nature” or “power” are not thereby dissolved into a higher order individual. Spinoza observes that we “agree” (from the Latin *convenio*, *convenire*, meaning to come together) in nature insofar as we agree in power (EIVp32d), which means only that our powers combine to produce single effects, but not necessarily that they lose their singular quality as distinct expressions of nature’s power.
21. Smith, *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity*, p. 138.



22. Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, p. 121.
23. For example, see Lewis S. Feuer, *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1987).
24. Filippo Del Lucchese, *Conflict, Power, and Multitude in Machiavelli and Spinoza: Tumult and Indignation* (New York: Continuum, 2009).
25. EIVp35c2. This should reinforce my claim that commonality should not be understood as homogeneity or identity.
26. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, pp. 65–6.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 66; emphasis added.
28. See Marx’s description of the Paris Commune: “The multiplicity of interpretations to which the Commune has been subjected, and the multiplicity of interests which construed it in their favor, show that it was a thoroughly expansive political form, while all the previous forms of government had been emphatically repressive,” Karl Marx, *Civil War in France: The Paris Commune* (New York: International Publishers, 1940), p. 78.
29. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, in *Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Duglad Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 20.
30. See, for example, Lee Rice for a (somewhat outdated but nevertheless very useful) survey of this question, “Tanquam Naturae Humanae Exemplar: Spinoza on Human Nature,” *The Modern Schoolman* 68:4 (1991), pp. 291–303.
31. Spinoza, however, does not view anything to be “inanimate.” See EIIIp13s.
32. See, for example, TP 4 4.
33. When I presented this paper at the Arendt-Shürmann Symposium in Political Philosophy, an anthropologist in the audience was alarmed that I would be promoting a concept of human nature given the radical diversity of human ways of life. Without being able to do full justice to her concerns, I will note two things: (1) Spinoza’s idea of human nature does not require that there is a universal feature of human beings that cannot be predicated of nonhuman beings; it is not, in contemporary parlance, an essentialist concept of human nature; and (2) the rhetorical appeal of a common human nature in Spinoza’s time is very different than it is in ours. Thinkers like Hobbes, Descartes, and Spinoza, albeit on different metaphysical grounds, were arguing against long-standing beliefs in natural human hierarchy, and thus furnishing grounds for egalitarianism. We now recognize serious dangers to unitary concepts of human nature, but I do think, properly understood, Spinoza’s metaphysical view avoids them. I argue for the virtues of his peculiar anthropology throughout my book, Hasana Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).
34. For further analysis of this fear, see Étienne Balibar, “Spinoza, the Anti-Orwell: The Fear of the Masses,” *Rethinking Marxism* 2:3 (1989), pp. 104–39.

