The Fickle Multitude: Spinoza and the Problem of Global Democracy*

Jonathan Havercroft
University of Oklahoma

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On August 19th, 1672, an angry mob cornered the former Grand Pensionary of the United Province, Johan de Witt and his brother Cornelius at the Kastelnij, the civil jail of The Hague. Cornelius de Witt had just been sentenced to exile from the Netherlands for conspiring to assassinate the newly appointed Prince William of Orange. While Johan de Witt was attempting to escort his brother from the jail, the mob chased the brothers back inside. With the brothers under siege, a rumor swept through the crowd that a gang of looters partisan to the de Witt brothers was about to invade The Hague. The rumor whipped the crowd into a frenzy and they stormed the jail, capturing Cornelius and Johan, and dragging them out into the street and towards the jail’s scaffold. Cornelius was bludgeoned and stabbed to death by the muskets, swords, and pikes of the crowd. Johan was killed by a pistol shot. The crowd cheered on as the local burghers continued to fire volleys into the bodies of the dead brothers. Next the mob dragged the bodies and hanged them by their feet from the scaffold. As the civic guard and the local burghers who had participated in the murder marched off, the mob proceeded to storm the scaffold. They stripped the brothers’ bodies, cut off their genitals and limbs, and tore out their hearts and entrails. Members of the mob speared the various body parts on quills. Some body parts were sold off as “souvenirs.” Others body parts were roasted and eaten.

The philosopher Benedict de Spinoza lived only a short distance from the Kastelnij. While Spinoza had supported a more radical version of democracy than the moderate republicanism of the de Witt brothers, “as a practical matter, he supported the Grand Pensionary in his limited practical goals of defending a secular and relatively tolerant state.” In response to the violence, Spinoza attempted to place a sign in his front yard (only a short distance from the scene of the crime) condemning the mob as *ultimi barbarorum* — “You are
the ultimate barbarians.” Spinoza’s landlord, fearing for his tenant’s life, managed to
dissuade Spinoza from displaying a sign that would surely incite the mob to further
violence.”

This episode illustrates that Spinoza was all too familiar with the “fickle dispositions
of the multitude” which he argues was “governed solely by emotions, not by reason.”
Indeed, within Spinoza’s writings the multitude occupies an ambivalent position. On the one
hand it is prone to being governed by emotions – particularly fear – that can tear societies
into factions and lead to mob violence, as was illustrated most clearly by the deaths of the de
Witt brothers. In the *Ethics*, when discussing “weak-minded men [who are] all equally proud,
ashamed of nothing, and afraid of nothing” he went so far as to conclude “The mob [*vulgus]*
is terrifying, if unafraid.” Conversely, when the multitude acts through the institutions of a
democratic state it is powerful and promotes the freedom of both individuals as well as the
state as a whole. It is worth remembering Spinoza’s ambivalence towards the multitude in
light of recent attempts by scholars – particularly on the left – to revive the concept of the
multitude as a concept for radical emancipatory politics.

Spinoza’s ambivalence about both the power as well as the reasonableness of the
multitude is significant in light of recent attempts to revive both this concept as well as
Spinoza’s political project on the part of the left. Since the late 1960s the philosophy of
Benedict de Spinoza has enjoyed a significant revival amongst new left continental political
theorists. There are a number of aspects of Spinoza’s philosophy that philosophers such as
Louis Althusser, Étienne Balibar, Gilles Deleuze, Antonio Negri, Alexander Macherey and
Paolo Virno have found particularly attractive. First, Althusser and his followers have
interpreted Spinoza’s writings as providing a wholly materialistic theory of ideology.
Because Spinoza’s theory of substance and the attributes rejected the Cartesian divide of
substances into mind and matter, many 20th century theorists saw Spinoza’s metaphysics as a possible way of overcoming the debates over the relationship between discourse and materiality that have plagued leftist thought.iii A second aspect of Spinoza’s thought that has been appealing to thinkers on the left is Spinoza’s critique of liberalism from within liberal discourse. While Spinoza’s political writings in the Political Treatise and the Theologico-Political Treatise at first glance seem to be a standard 17th century social contract theory along the lines of Hobbes, Locke, or Pufendorf, many of Spinoza’s 20th century readers have noted some significant ways in which Spinoza modifies liberal contract theory by rejecting mind/body dualism, the idea of free will and a voluntaristic social contract.iv Finally, these thinkers have been drawn to the possibility that within Spinozist metaphysics there is a non-dialectical theory of causation.v Most significantly, Hardt and Negri have drawn on the left’s revival of Spinoza to develop an alternative to Marx’s vision of communist revolution. Whereas for Marx global capitalism was a necessary stage that world history must pass through in order for the communist revolution to take place, Hardt and Negri point to a Spinozistic materialism to argue that the multitude constitutes itself, and as such it does not require any contradiction within Capitalism or Empire to overthrow Empire.vi

In response to these recent readings of Spinoza’s metaphysical and political works, I read the concept of the multitude as occupying a far more ambivalent place in Spinoza’s thought. He celebrates the multitude as capable of liberating people from the bondage of sectarian religious and political conflicts, yet he is also concerned about the multitude’s tendency to violence and terror when its political actions are governed by fear or other irrational affects. It is my contention that Hardt and Negri miss these more ambiguous features of Spinoza’s concept of the multitude because in their recovery of the concept they have ignored some of the fundamental features of the multitude’s structure. These
oversights are significant for two reasons. First, these oversights neglect some of the aspects of the multitude that Spinoza felt were necessary for both its constitution and its operation. As such, the multitude may not be able to exist or operate in the way that Hardt and Negri want it to. Second, my alternate interpretation of Spinoza’s multitude will lead to a different conclusion as to how collective democratic political action could operate on a global level. While Hardt and Negri draw on the multitude to provide a theory of global agency without any institutions, I contend that Spinoza’s multitude requires a strong centralized sovereign state to maximize the freedom and power of the multitude. So while Hardt and Negri are correct that Spinoza’s concept of the multitude is useful for conceptualizing contemporary global politics, they have misinterpreted some fundamental aspects of Spinoza’s concept of the multitude. Consequently, my interpretation raises important questions about what global political order could and should look like.

My analysis of Spinoza’s concept of the multitude will consist of four steps. The first three parts of this essay involve an analysis of the three features of the multitude – namely singularity, constituent power, and immanence – that Hardt and Negri identify as most salutary. I engage in a careful analysis of these three features to develop an alternate understanding of what the multitude is, how it comes into existence and how it operates. In the final section I develop the implications of this alternate interpretation of the multitude for global political order. Whereas Hardt and Negri call for a global constituent power, they believe that a global state is neither necessary nor desirable; I contend that if a global multitude were to come into existence it would require a global democratic state. Yet, such a global democratic state would be vulnerable to many of the very criticisms that initially inspired Hardt and Negri’s project. As such, a confrontation between these two versions of
the multitude – Spinoza’s and Hardt and Negri’s re-appropriation – will help clarify some of the challenges and opportunities in the development of models of cosmopolitan democracy.

**Part 1: Singularity**

According to Hardt and Negri, one of the defining features of modern political thought is the tendency of political theorists to understand politics in dualistic terms and then to propose state sovereignty as the means of mediating conflicts between the binaries constituted through this dualistic thinking. Much of what they term “postmodern” theory is focused on identifying how these binaries are constituted within political, literary, scientific, and philosophical discourses and how these binaries lead to exclusionary and hierarchical political practices. The tensions constituted by these binaries are often at the root of racial, gendered, sexual, and nationalist struggles. Often one of the two terms of the binary is associated with the Self or in-group, whereas the other term of the binary is associated with the Other or out-group. Within the modern political tradition, the institution of sovereignty engages in a set of practices such as boundary drawing and law making that favour one of the terms within these racial, gendered, sexual, etc. binaries. Postmodern theorists have attempted to deconstruct these boundaries through a politics of difference that affirms hybrid identities as opposed to the rigid essentialist identities that postmodern theorists also tend to associate with the dualisms of modern discourse. While affirming the validity of the postmodern critique, Hardt and Negri argue that postmodern theorists have been unable to translate this critique into an emancipatory politics. Part of the reason for this failure, Hardt and Negri believe, is because the very hybrid identities that postmodern theorists celebrate have in fact become the means by which Empire constitutes and reinforces its rule. As an alternative, Hardt and Negri argue that the multitude, because its logic of identity
operates through a grammar of singularity as opposed to the grammar of binary self/other identity constitution associated with modern political discourse, is a sounder basis for liberatory political praxis. For Hardt and Negri, political singularities, such as the multitude, are capable of acting as one, yet this collective actor is capable of existing and acting in such a way that it does not do violence to the unique identities of each of its constituent elements. As such, Hardt and Negri see singularities such as the multitude as a way of overcoming many of the binary oppositions that have plagued contemporary debates over identity politics and multiculturalism. Of particular importance for Hardt and Negri is the fact that the multitude would exist as a global political actor, encompassing all humans, thereby able to overcome self/other identity formation because there would effectively be no one outside of the multitude. While they are correct that Spinoza saw the multitude as a singularity that did not erase the particular identities of its members, they are incorrect that Spinoza felt a multitude could exist without an Other.

Spinoza defined singularities, or finite modes, as “the affections of substance, or that which is in another through which it is also conceived.” In Spinoza’s metaphysics every singularity is a composite of smaller modes. Modes come into existence when an external force acts on a set of other smaller modes and causes these modes to combine together into a single larger mode. Each mode is composed of a great number of smaller modes. The smallest possible physical modes – what Spinoza calls simple bodies - are distinguished from each other by motion and rest. When a set of simple bodies is constrained by other modes this set of simple bodies becomes a larger individual mode. So long as these smaller modes maintain their relation to each other of motion and rest the larger mode will continue to exist. Even if some of the simple bodies that constitute the mode break off from the mode, the mode will continue to exist so long as the general relation of motion and rest between
the simple bodies is maintained.\footnote{The particular relations of movement and rest of simple bodies that constitute a mode are that mode’s essence.} The multitude is a mode. When individuals come together into a multitude they act as one. The multitude will continue to exist regardless of whether or not individuals break off from the multitude as a result of death or expulsion from the body politic. The multitude will continue to exist so long as it maintains its essence – so long as it maintains the general relationship of motion and rest between its constituent members.\footnote{It comes into being in the same way as all of Spinoza’s singularities: through external forces compelling all the people in a given society to act together. As Warren Montag has observed, unlike Spinoza’s social contract contemporaries such as Locke and Hobbes, there is no strict separation of society and nature in Spinoza’s political thought.} For Spinoza, the state of nature is the condition humans find themselves in when their actions are wholly governed by their negative passions. The human tendency to be governed by negative affects such as fear and hatred pits individuals against each other and makes it difficult for them to secure their own existence. The only way that the negative affects that pull people apart can be overcome is if they encounter a greater fear that compels individuals to form compacts for their mutual protection.\footnote{Out of fear, individuals “come together and unite their strength.”} Despite the fact that individuals may feel compelled to create a compact for their mutual protection, the individual humans create the multitude. As with the mode of an individual human being, external forces may have compelled its constituent elements to unite, but once the multitude comes into existence it will strive to preserve itself.

While Spinoza’s concept of singularity does provide a model for a unified social entity composed of distinct social elements – a key aspect of the singularity of Hardt and Negri’s multitude – there are some important differences in the singularity of Spinoza’s multitude and the singularity of Hardt and Negri’s multitude. For Hardt and Negri the
multitude is constituted by the biopower of Empire, but it is capable of existing apart from Empire. The political objective of their project is for the multitude to overthrow Empire and govern itself freely. In contrast, Spinoza’s multitude is first constituted by individuals’ fear of a violent death. While fear is what brings the multitude into existence, it is only capable of properly sustaining itself within a state properly set up to promote freedom. Furthermore the multitude is always at risk of degenerating through fear or a lack of freedom into a state of tyranny or even back into anarchy. While Spinoza never wrote about a possible global polity, it is reasonable to assume that the same conditions he considered necessary for sustaining a sovereign state would also be necessary to sustain a cosmopolitan order. In particular, outside forces must act upon individuals to drive them together into the multitude. This factor considerably complicates Hardt and Negri’s use of Spinozistic singularity as a means of avoiding self/other identity constitution. Spinoza’s multitude cannot constitute itself. It is brought into existence by external forces. The general insecurity in the state of nature initially drives individuals together into a multitude. Yet, once in a civil state, the multitude fears only two things: the power of the Sovereign, and the threat from all other states, which Spinoza describes as “natural enemies.” These two fears keep the multitude together. Yet both of these fears are predicated on “self/other” relationships, in which the multitude’s identity is constituted through a process of differentiation. Therefore, Spinoza’s multitude relies on the very binary logic that Hardt and Negri are trying to displace through using the language of the multitude.

**Part 2: Constituent Power**

Hardt and Negri believe that modern sovereignty is based on an instrumental concept of power in which the sovereign exercises power over its subjects. In a certain sense, this theory of power is echoed in Dahl’s “first face of power,” wherein power is
defined as “the capacity of A to get B to do something that B would not otherwise do.” As an alternative, Hardt and Negri suggest that what is novel about the multitude is its basis in constituent power. They trace this understanding of power to the republican tradition of political theory from Machiavelli through the U.S. Founding Fathers. In this tradition, “power can be constituted by a whole series of powers that regulate themselves and arrange themselves in networks.” Rather than power as one object acting upon another object, constituent power is “a product of an internal and immanent social dynamic.” According to Hardt and Negri, the concept of constituent power originated in Machiavelli’s understanding of Roman republicanism. Machiavelli saw the city-state as generated through the tumultuous political conflict of its citizens. The political and constitutional struggles between the different factions within a city – most notably between the people and the nobles – actually created the basis for the city’s stability – by placing a check on corruption – and enabled its expansion – by encouraging foreign conquest as a means of alleviate domestic political tension. For Hardt and Negri, constituent power refers to the capacity of a political entity to constitute itself through its internal political struggles. One of the features in the Republican tradition of constituent power that Hardt and Negri identify is its agonistic nature. It should be noted that they elide agonism and republicanism in manner that theorists of both persuasions would find problematic. The term ‘agonistic’ politics comes from the Greek work for athletic struggle or contest. It aims to emphasize the central role of struggle in politics thereby challenging the assumptions of more consensus-based approaches to politics, such as those associated with deliberative democracy. Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault and their followers tend to be most associated with this approach to politics. Conversely, contemporary republicans tend to argue that a citizen’s liberty can only be protected through participation in political deliberation.
understand freedom as non-domination as opposed to the liberals to equation of freedom with non-interference. However, republicans celebrate civic virtue as an ideal capable of uniting the body politic, whereas agonistic thinkers are skeptical of any attempt to use an ideal to create consensus, as it would put an end to the contestations and struggles that are the essence of politics and freedom.

Despite these important differences between republicanism and agonism, Hardt and Negri’s central point is that liberalism lacks a theory of constituent power, whereas such a theory is present in both agonistic and republican traditions. They identify within the writings of both Machiavelli and the U.S. Founding Fathers a system of checks and balances within a republican constitution that subdivides “power without negating its unity.” While Hardt and Negri argue that these two features of constituent power – its immanent social dynamic and its agonistic character – are both found within the Republican tradition, they also list Spinoza as a theorist of constituent power. On this front Hardt and Negri’s interpretation of Spinoza is only half correct. While Spinoza’s understanding of political power – or as he calls it potestas – is based on an immanent social dynamic, Spinoza sees this dynamic as promoting rational consensus within the state, as opposed to the agonistic view of politics celebrated by Hardt and Negri.

In the original Latin versions of his works Spinoza used two different words when discussing power – potestas and potentia. Potestas roughly translates as authority, control, or sovereignty. Potentia on the other hand refers to power, force, or efficacy. While other European languages have distinct correlates to these two words – pouvoir and puissance in French, Macht and Vermögen in German – potestas and potentia both correlate to power in English. In Savage Anomaly Antonio Negri argues that in order to understand the full significance of Spinoza’s political theory it is necessary to understand how these two
different senses of power operate in the text. xxxiii These two senses of power do not simply refer to two different capabilities of subjects; they refer to two different forms of power, capacity and effectiveness as such. Throughout Spinoza’s writings there are used as ontological notions. Within the context of Spinoza’s political writings this distinction between potentia and potestas refers to two different forms of political organization. When used within the political context potestas refers to a system where the transfer of rights and power by individuals to a sovereign leads to an alienation of the rights of individuals – the best example of this would be Hobbes’ social contract. Conversely, potentia – the theory of political power defended by Spinoza – refers to a political system wherein individuals actually gain their freedom by transferring all of their power to the sovereign. Because the sovereign’s power is constituted out of the power of each of its individual members, Spinoza argues that this form of polity is a democracy. In a democracy the people create the sovereign “if each individual hands over the whole of his power to the body politic.” xxxiv Because all the subjects of the state constitute the sovereign, each subject has an equal say in the decisions made by the sovereign.

Negri describes the difference between potentia and potestas in slightly different terms. Michale Hardt (in his translator’s preface to Savage Anomaly) observes that for Negri, “Power [potestas] denotes the centralized, mediating, transcendental force of command, whereas power [potentia] is the local, immediate, actual force of constitution.” xxxv For Negri the distinction between these two types of power can be seen operating in political antagonisms between capitalist relations of production and proletarian productive forces and clashes between the state and the multitude. The chief difference between Hardt and Negri’s reading of the potentia/potestas distinction and my own is that whereas they believe Spinoza has provided a model for political organization unmediated by the state, I contend that in
Spinoza’s thought even the more democratic concept of *potentia* still requires the state’s mediating influence. In Spinoza’s vision of the democratic state, the state mediates the *potentia* of the popular sovereign through the generation of rational consensus among the members of the multitude. As such, Spinoza’s understanding of democracy is decidedly un-agonistic. Whereas in more agonistic theories of democracy the equal participation of all individuals in a democracy’s decision making process leads to productive tumult and “relations of adversarial respect,”xxxvi Spinoza believed that democracy actually diminished conflict.

Spinoza’s claim that democracy diminishes conflict between citizens rests on his conception of freedom. Spinoza defines freedom and bondage as two different mental states. A person in bondage has his actions caused by external affects such as the passions. A person is more susceptible to passions the less he or she knows the cause of things. The person in bondage is a reactive individual, one whose actions are simply responses to external stimuli over which he or she has no control. Spinoza argues that one can attain freedom by using the faculty of reason.xxxvii Through reason the individual can learn the real causes of the affects acting on him or her. The rational individual is less prone to passions, and can act based on the information received by external stimuli rather than be affected by the stimuli. The more an individual uses his or her faculty of reason, the more likely he or she will be author of his or her own actions, and the more power he or she will have.

The ability to exercise freedom in this way is best accomplished in a democratic state. While Spinoza does believe that it is possible for individuals to cultivate their faculties of reason in a monarchy — so long as the monarch permits the freedom to philosophize — Spinoza believes that democracies will create the best conditions in which individuals can reason. Aristocracies and monarchies prevented individuals from fully developing their
faculties of reason because the subjects living in these types of states lived in fear of the power of the sovereign. Individuals living under these regime types are conditioned to react to their emotions rather than to cultivate their faculty of reason. Spinoza thus observed “that commonwealth, whose peace depends upon the sluggishness of its subjects, that are led about like sheep, to learn but slavery, may more properly be called a desert than a commonwealth.”

Tyrannical forms of government, by depriving citizens of their ability to exercise their faculties of reason, end up depriving their subjects of individual freedom. Spinoza held that participation in the process of government makes individuals freer by requiring them to develop their capacities for reason. As individuals’ reasoning faculties improve through active participation in law making, these individuals also tend to agree more and come into less conflict, because “insofar as men live according to the guidance of reason, they must always agree amongst themselves, q.e.d.”

A democratic state is a more tranquil state because individuals will come to consensus on political issues when they use the faculty of reason. As such, Spinoza’s theory of democracy is far removed from the republican and agonistic traditions that celebrate democracy’s agonistic character. On this matter, Spinoza falls more into the camp of a Rousseau where a democratic expression of the rational deliberations of a state’s citizens should lead to consensus. So, in a Spinozistic state constituent power rather than promoting difference has a doubly homogenizing tendency. First, through the process of participating in a democracy, Spinoza believed that subjects would start to think more and more alike as they developed their faculties of reason.

Second, Spinoza felt that as subjects became freer – in the sense of stronger in their capacity to exercise reason – consensus in political debates would increase because all individuals using their faculties of reason would logically come to agreement. This means that Spinoza’s theory of constituent power differs sharply from the theory of constituent
power in Hardt and Negri. In Spinoza tumult and conflict in a polity is a sign of the weakening of constituent power. Spinoza believes that the ultimate purpose of a democracy is to foster the conditions for free discussion of ideas in the hope that such discussions will lead to rational consensus and a more powerful (in the sense of potentia) state. Conversely, in Hardt and Negri’s theory of constituent power, conflict of interest actually constitutes the power of the people, making it possible for the multitude to govern as a collectivity, without erasing the differences between its constituent elements. For Spinoza, conflicts and disagreements within the multitude would be a sign of its weakening power that he believes would pave the way for tyranny. Spinoza’s multitude — when it is properly guided by reason — will erase the differences among its constituent members, thereby undercutting one of the primary reasons that Hardt and Negri turned to the multitude in the first place: to provide a model of collective agency that preserves difference.

Part 3 Immanence

Hardt and Negri associate the doctrine of immanence with the anti-humanist movement in French philosophy in the 1960s (normally associated with Althusser and Foucault). The anti-humanist movement was opposed to any attempts to conceptualize the human subject apart from the laws of nature. Both Foucault and Althusser criticized social scientists who theorized the subject as a self-conscious agent acting independently from social forces and structures. Hardt and Negri argue that Spinoza’s critique of the free will provides a philosophical precursor to the anti-humanist and structuralist thought of the 1960s and 1970s. Specifically, they equate Spinoza’s statement in the Ethics that “The will cannot be called a free cause, but only a necessary one” with this anti-humanist ethos. Spinoza rejects the liberal tendency to equate the capacity of individuals to make choices free from
external coercion because it rests on the erroneous doctrine that individuals have a free will. He contends that this doctrine of the free will that underpins liberal notions of freedom rests on the false belief that humans exist apart from nature. While Hardt and Negri have followed Spinoza’s critique of the free will, they have neglected the political implications of Spinoza’s reworking of the liberal conception of freedom. Hard and Negri misidentify the political implications of Spinoza’s doctrine of immanent freedom as the negation of political organization. It is my contention that Spinoza’s critique of the free will – and with it the liberal equation of freedom with un-coerced choice – also involves a commitment to a particular type of political organization – a free republican state – because Spinoza believed that the exercise of immanent freedom is only possible within such a state. To understand why Spinoza felt that a republican state was necessary to the maintenance of individual liberty, we must look at the unique way in which Spinoza used the term “freedom.”

Even though Spinoza rejected outright the possibility of a free will for individual subjects, all of his writings strongly defended freedom. Yet, this theory of freedom is not one in which the individual is free to choose his own course of action. Rather, freedom for Spinoza meant living “according to the dictates of reason alone.” This understanding of freedom is closely related to his concept of conatus – striving to persevere in one’s existence. According to Spinoza each mode’s essence is constituted by this conatus. This striving to preserve ones existence demands that each mode seek out whatever is necessary to maintain one’s power of existing. In liberal understandings of freedom – particularly in the writings of Hobbes – an individual’s striving for his or her own advantage actually limits the freedom of action of others and – when taken to extremes – leads to the dissolution of society. Yet Spinoza maintains that such social strife is in fact the result of people striving out of ignorance – individuals pursue things that weaken their power to preserve their
existence rather than strengthen it. By developing their faculties of reason, individuals end up increasing their ability to strive for those things that increase their power to preserve their existence and as such are freer according to Spinoza. Unlike liberal theories of freedom, which emphasizes an individual’s freedom of choice and freedom from external interference, Spinoza offers a theory of freedom as striving to preserve one’s essence by pursuing only those ends that increase one’s power to act. Stuart Hampshire has argued that Spinoza’s theory of freedom – unlike its liberal counterpart - can provide a justification for making the “freedom of the individual as the supreme goal for political action.” Each individual – according to the laws of nature – is trying to assert his thought and action. Therefore political systems that deprive or frustrate individuals in their striving towards this end are violating the essence of the individual.

For this reason, Spinoza argues that his rational conceptualization of freedom was best realized within what he termed a free state. This is the type of freedom that Spinoza believed was produced through a strong popular sovereign imposing order in society and using its power to compel the subjects of a state to obey the sovereign’s commands. From the liberal perspective, this use of freedom may seem like a perversion because it invokes the absolute power of the sovereign to coerce its citizens as a kind of freedom. Indeed, some of Spinoza’s more liberal commentators such as Lewis Feuer have seen this definition of freedom as a dangerous authoritarian element that runs through Spinoza’s thought. However, if this use of freedom is read not as a normative definition of how states ought to be organized but as an empirical understanding of how states produce the conditions in which subjects are free to pursue their interests while only coming into minimal conflict with others, then the authoritarian concerns of readers such as Feuer seem unwarranted. Feuer’s confusion seems to arise because he equates the freedom Spinoza is discussing with a
“negative freedom” — a freedom from constraints. A closer reading of Spinoza’s theory of freedom reveals that he is actually defending an immanent freedom — whereby an individual’s actions still occur out of necessity, but the cause of the action is free because it is rational.¹

Immanent freedom expresses itself in both the freedom of the state as a whole and in the freedom of the individual to think and act in an undistorted way because he or she is free from fear and superstition. To understand how this immanent theory of freedom expresses itself in a Spinozistic democracy we must first look at Spinoza’s theory that the absolute power of the sovereign and the absolute freedom of the subject were in a process of reciprocal limitation — that neither could exist without the other and that each limited the other from overstepping its bounds. Spinoza believes that there are limits to how much power a sovereign could ever hope to exercise over its subjects. These effective limits on the power of the sovereign are best explored by looking at how Spinoza reconciles the sovereignty of the state with the freedom of the individual. Hobbes is willing to make the tradeoff between individual freedom and sovereign authority to the extent that the power of the sovereign could minimize the harm that completely unconstrained subjects could do to each other. Spinoza, on the other hand, sought to reframe the discussion so that sovereignty and individual freedom were not necessarily in conflict with each other. Spinoza’s starting point is quite similar to Hobbes’s. Like Hobbes, Spinoza was prepared to concede that the sovereign power of the state is absolute, and that the absolute power of the sovereign is the only way to prevent a society from fragmenting into chaos and disorder. However, Spinoza argued that the best possible way for a state to guarantee its stability is by allowing its citizens the greatest amount of freedom of thought and expression possible. As Balibar has argued, at first glance these two principles — the absolutism of the sovereign and
democratic freedom of the individual – seem contradictory.\textsuperscript{li} Spinoza’s way of reconciling this tension is by drawing a sharp distinction between the motive behind an action and the act itself.

As long as an individual’s actions obey the commands of the sovereign, then the individual is free to say or do what he wishes. The power of the sovereign can compel the individual to act in accordance with the laws the sovereign has enacted. This has two consequences. First, the sovereign – not the individual acting – is the author of all actions by citizens that conform to the law. As Spinoza observes, “so long as a man acts in obedience to the laws of his rulers, he in nowise contravenes his reason, for in obedience to reason he transferred the right of controlling his actions from his own hands to theirs.”\textsuperscript{lii} Second, the individual is free to think or say whatever he wishes so long as the words are not seditious. Spinoza excludes seditious statements because “certain words are actions,” and those actions, if they threaten the power of the sovereign, become forms of disobedience. Spinoza considered opinions such as “a man who holds that the supreme power has no rights over him, or that promises ought not to be kept, or that everyone ought to live as he pleases” dangerous because they could undermine the social contract.\textsuperscript{liii} Yet aside from acts of sedition statements, Spinoza held that in a free republic each individual should be free to say whatever he wishes.

Spinoza saw individual freedom and sovereign power in a process of reciprocal limitation.\textsuperscript{liv} The state’s sovereign authority is limited by the practical consequences of oppressing individual opinion too harshly. The more violently a state represses its citizenry, the more likely the subjects will resist the sovereign’s authority.\textsuperscript{lv} The fact that a sovereign can retain power only so long as its actions do not provoke a backlash by its subjects places a practical limit on the amount of power a state can wield over its populace. Conversely, the
multiplicity of opinions expressed in a state faces a practical limit when the diversity of opinions threatens the integrity of the state. Spinoza believed that a uniformity of views within a state is impossible because individuals will form radically different opinions based on subjects’ radically different experiences. The state cannot impose one ideology from above, Spinoza believed, because such an imposition will lead to a revolt that would undermine the sovereign's power. Conversely, the state cannot permit rival centers of opposition to emerge because these rival centers would also divide the sovereign's authority, thereby threatening the integrity of the state. Because imposing opinions and tolerating an organized center of opposition both threaten the state’s survival, Spinoza believed that there is only one possible solution: states must retain rights over controlling individual actions, but permit individuals to hold and freely express their opinions within the limits, as stated above.

Ultimately, Spinoza’s theory of political immanence – with its doctrine of the reciprocal limitation of absolute power and absolute freedom – offers a deeper theory of the constitution of polities than Hardt and Negri’s doctrine of the multitude. Hardt and Negri see Empire as an obstacle to human emancipation that must be overthrown. Their reading of this aspect of Spinoza follows in the tradition of Althusser, Balibar and Macherey who all read Spinoza as celebrating the multitude as a collective agent capable of revolutionary change in the tradition of Marx and Lenin. Spinoza, conversely, would see Empire as political apparatus whose power should be strengthened in order to increase the freedom – and power – of the multitude. This is the point at which the two theories of multitude would part ways. Unlike Hardt and Negri, Spinoza would suggest strengthening Empire and creating an absolute global (democratic) state. But some of the powers that Spinoza might entrust to this global sovereign – most notably the power to dictate the official religions and doctrines of this state – would be intolerable from our late modern perspectives. That being
said, it was precisely this type of unity of action that Spinoza thought was necessary to maintain and strengthen the power of the multitude.

Part 4: The Multitude and Global Political Order

My reading of Spinoza’s concept of the multitude points to three problems in using it as a concept for thinking about global political movements. First, as both Spinoza’s writings and the story of the mob violence at the Kastelnij with which I began this article illustrate, the multitude is easily torn asunder by religious upheaval and political divisions. These tendencies are a result of the multitude lacking power and freedom, which Spinoza equates with the multitude’s actions being governed by negative affects such as fear and sadness, rather than reason and the positive affects of joy. Spinoza’s solution to the fickleness of the multitude is for the state to develop institutions that prevent people from acting in ways that promote fear and sadness and encourage people to act in ways that promote joy and reason. One example of this was Spinoza’s call in the *Theologico-Political Treatise* for the state to develop a single religion, based upon his rationalist interpretation of the Bible, that would emphasize the simple moral teachings of religion but not promote doctrines that he considered mere superstition. This, for obvious reasons, is not likely to be tolerated in a global political order: which religion would be the dominant one, what would happen to the adherents of other religions who refused to convert? Yet Spinoza’s broader point is that institutions of the state should be designed to promote greater powers of reason in the people, thereby making the multitude freer, more powerful and less subject to negative affects such as fear and sadness that promote mob violence and can tear the multitude apart.

Spinoza’s overall objective in promoting the joy and reason of the multitude also runs counter to Hardt and Negri’s initial reasons for turning to the multitude as a potentially
useful concept for global collective political action. As the state compels its subjects to act in ways that make them less prone to fear and superstition and more amenable to joy and reason, Spinoza’s hope is that they will think and act more and more alike. Hardt and Negri turned to the multitude as a concept that respected difference while maintaining political unity. Yet, Spinoza’s objective was precisely the opposite of Hardt and Negri’s objective: for Spinoza social unity and peace should follow from making people more similar, whereas for Hardt and Negri the multitude is constituted through its differences. Yet, this aspect of Spinoza’s thought leaves his concept of the multitude vulnerable to precisely the postmodern critiques that Hardt and Negri cite as the impetus for their turning to Spinoza’s concept of the multitude. Without explaining how they would modify Spinoza’s original concept, it is unclear that the multitude is up to the task the Hardt and Negri have set for it.

Second, the need for the multitude to be constituted by an external threat means that something would be needed to drive a global polity together. In Hardt and Negri’s work the amorphous concepts of “Empire” and “war” occupy these oppositional role. But, it is not clear from Hardt and Negri’s description of “Empire” or “war” how these concept would instill enough fear in people to drive them together. One scenario (popularized in science fictions) would be an alien race posing a threat to Earth that drives the people of Earth to compose themselves into a single people for their own self-preservation. Aside from the folly of waiting around for little green creatures with ill intent or an asteroid – never a sound basis for a political theory – what this meme does point to is a deeper belief that communities tend to be cultivated through an “us” vs. “them” dynamic. Indeed, in 20th century political theory several prominent political theorists have made similar arguments that a world state is impossible because a community always needs an Other to constitute and maintain its identity. Yet, this is not quite Spinoza’s point. He believes that it is fear,
not an Other, that drives individuals into a multitude. While some types of fear are
dangerous and can easily be exploited by cynical elites to rule over the multitude — as the
case of the de Witt brothers illustrates — Spinoza felt that one particular type of fear — the
fear of the sovereign’s power — was actually necessary. Fear of the sovereign’s power was
sufficient to counteract the numerous lesser fears that tend to drive the multitude apart.
Furthermore, this fear creates the conditions that make the flourishing of reason and
positive affects such as joy possible. While the most obvious source of this type of fear
would be from an Other who posed an existential threat sufficient enough to drive people
together, it is possible that other threats not grounded in a Self/Other identity struggle could
provide the fear necessary to constitute a global political order. For example, the fear of the
consequences of global warming combined with the realization that a collective action
problem existing between states precludes the possibility of solving that problem might
provide impetus for people to form a global polity. Daniel Deudney, who argues that the
threat from nuclear terrorism is so severe that states will be compelled to create a global
polity that has a monopoly on nuclear weapons and other instruments of mass violence,
provides another example. What ties the “Mars attacks” scenario, global warming and the
threat of nuclear annihilation together is that they all use the fear of global annihilation to
drive individuals together into a global multitude that can provide for their security. This
element of an existential threat is under theorized in Hardt and Negri’s account of the
constitution of the global multitude. Without a more fully developed account of how global
threats such as Empire or war would drive people together, it is unclear how their global
multitude would come into being.

Third, Spinoza’s doctrine of immanent freedom complicates Hardt and Negri’s call
for a self-governing multitude. In Spinoza’s account of the multitude, the existence of a
powerful state is what makes a powerful and free multitude possible through the process of reciprocal limitation. Sovereignty is not an obstacle to the multitude’s freedom. According to Spinoza, sovereignty is what creates the conditions for a rational, powerful and free multitude to flourish. Consequently, from Spinoza’s perspective the withering away of the state that Hardt and Negri call for in their works would actually make the multitude less free. Instead, a Spinozistic theory of global democracy would rely upon an all-powerful (popular) sovereign governing a total global state.

The implications of Spinoza’s concept of the multitude for global political order, then, are quite different than the ones with which Hardt and Negri provide us. In short, while Hardt and Negri were right to revive the concept of the multitude as a means to conceptualize contemporary global collective action, their neglect of these fundamental aspects of Spinoza’s original theory of the multitude has left the concept stillborn. Hardt and Negri provide no clear means for the multitude to constitute itself, and their suspicion of all political institutions leaves the multitude with no means to sustain itself. My interpretation of Spinoza suggests that an external threat is required to drive the people together into a global multitude. This multitude would call into power a popular sovereign that would then reform the global political institutions and place them under global democratic control. Over time this global democratic polity would make its citizens more rational by eliminating the material causes of fear that lead to tumult and encouraging the development of the faculty of reason within the citizenry through the promotion of free discussion of ideas.

A possible model for this would be the European Union. Initially formed in response to the threat from the Soviet Union, it continues to thrive in the absence of its initial cause. A Spinozist might argue that over time the people are becoming more rational through the use of reason and more “European.” There is of course a danger in such models
of global states. For example, a global sovereign may become a global despot. But Spinoza’s model of reciprocal limitation may provide a sufficient check to this global state. Ultimately though, Spinoza’s commitment to the Enlightenment values of rationalism, official state religion, and political unity leave him open the very “postmodern” critiques that Hardt and Negri initially turn to Spinoza to try to resolve. In particular, conservatives, postmoderns and communitarians are likely to be skeptical of making rational consensus the basis of a global political order (or any political order for that matter). The same conservatives, communitarians and postmoderns would also object to the strong homogenizing tendency within Spinoza’s model of politics. So ultimately, Spinoza’s theory of the multitude may not be particularly useful for thinking about global political order unless it can be reworked to include a more sophisticated account of how a global multitude would come into being, and how such a global order could accommodate religious and cultural diversity.

While Hardt and Negri do claim that they have provided us with a model that can answer these critiques, their discussion of the multitude side steps the important questions about the constitution of the multitude, its regular operation and how it would check abuses of power. Conversely, Spinoza’s account of the multitude addresses these three issues, but his answers are problematic in light of the various critiques of the enlightenment project of the last fifty-plus years. My reading of Spinoza’s concept of the multitude then leaves us at an impasse. On the one hand we have an account of global democracy that fails to address some of the fundamental issues that any adequate democratic theory must take into account. On the other hand we have an account that addresses many of the architectonic aspects that a global theory of democracy must take into account, yet the answers Spinoza provides us with may not be able to withstand the charge that such a global political order would only achieve peace and freedom by erasing difference. Yet this impasse is an important one
because it draws our attention to three of the fundamental problems facing any attempt to think about democracy on a global scale. First, there is what Shapiro and Hacker-Cordón refer to democracy’s “chicken-and-egg problem”: democracies rest on a principle of the rule of the majority, yet it is impossible to determine who that majority is democratically? “Questions relating to boundaries and membership seem in an important sense prior to democratic decision-making, yet paradoxically they cry out for democratic resolution.”

While at first glance a global democratic theory seems to side step such debates by opening its membership to everyone and extending its borders across the globe, this still neglects the crucial issue of how such a global people would be able to legitimate itself. This is a problem that neither Hardt and Negri nor Spinoza address in their respective theories of the multitude. Hardt and Negri side step the question by saying that the multitude constitutes itself (while remaining vague on exactly how this self-constitution will take place) whereas Spinoza’s theory of the multitude provides a means of constitution, but under contemporary global conditions it is unclear what would constitute the existential threat that would drive the entire world into a global multitude. Second, Hardt and Negri and Spinoza offer two different versions of how the multitude comes to decisions. On Hardt and Negri’s account it is the agonistic struggle within the multitude that drives the multitude towards action. Conversely, Spinoza describes the multitude’s decisions as based on rational consensus. As such, a central axis of debate over theories of global democracy will be: should democracies strive for rational consensus among its members or is contestation and political struggle within a democracy necessary for the maintenance of democratic freedom? Third, Hardt and Negri portray the multitude as the means to realize a global anarchism wherein collective action takes place spontaneously on a global scale without any political institutions. Conversely, Spinoza maintains that collective action requires the mediation of the state to
both constitute and sustain the multitude. As such any theory of global democracy needs to take seriously questions of whether or not global institutions are necessary, and if they are necessary how should those institutions be designed.

Despite this impasse, reading Spinoza’s concept of the multitude with and against Hardt and Negri’s conceptualization is useful for two reasons. First, this theoretical impasse at the very least clarifies what a theory of global democracy that draws on the concept of the multitude must address. Second, Spinoza’s account of the multitude is notable because it provides a different reason for cosmopolitanism than most other accounts. Too often theorists turn to cosmopolitanism for reactive reasons: to address an intractable problem — such as war, global poverty, human rights abuses, environmental degradation, etc. — that they equate with the problematic structure of the sovereign state. Spinoza’s reason for embracing a democratic state grounded on the concept of the multitude provides a positive reason for people to embrace a global state. Spinoza’s defense of democracy was grounded in his belief that a well-governed multitude increases human freedom and power, and the greater the number of people who joined a free multitude the freer and more powerful that multitude became. Consequently, a global democratic state – if properly organized – would maximize human power and freedom.

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4 ———, "The Ethics," in *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, ed. Edwin Curley (Princeton, N.J: Princeton New Jersey Press, 1994), IV P54 S, 228. When citing *The Ethics* I will follow the standard citation format of Spinoza scholars: I provide the book number in roman numerals followed by the Proposition in Arabic numerals and then whether it is a demonstration (D), definition (def.), scholium (S) or appendix (App.) This passage further underscores Spinoza’s ambivalence about the multitude. While praising individuals who are able to overcome fear, Spinoza observes that prophets have often used fear as a means to pacify and govern the masses. While Spinoza’s preference is for a rational multitude that is free of fear, he also expresses concern
that an irrational multitude without fear could be quite dangerous. Spinoza tends to use vulgus when describing the masses when governed by fear and multitude when describing the masses governed by reason.

* See for instance his contrast between the free multitude and a conquered multitude in *Political Treatise* v. 5, 314-5.


‡ Althusser, "The Only Materialist Tradition, Part I: Spinoza."


†† For an account of Spinoza as a liberal democrat that is sensitive to Spinoza’s critique of the free will see Steven B. Smith, "What Kind of Democrat Was Spinoza?" *Political Theory* 33, no. 1 (2005).


†‡ With the exception of Jean-François Lyotard, most of the theorists that Hardt and Negri label “postmodern” would not use this label. That being said, it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the subtle but important differences between the post-modern, post-structuralist and difference theorists that Hardt and Negri have grouped together under this label. For the sake of clarity I have opted to use Hardt and Negri’s label “postmodern” as my primary concern is to contrast Hardt and Negri’s description “postmodernism” with Spinoza’s arguments on identity and difference.


‡§‡ Spinoza, "The Ethics," 85, I, D5.

‡§§ Ibid., 126-7. II P13 I.4-7. Spinoza actually carefully outlines a number of different circumstances where a mode may gain or lose the simple bodies that constitute it. Throughout all of these examples Spinoza maintains that the mode continues to exist, regardless of changes in the simple bodies that constitute it, so long as the same relation of movement and rest between the simple bodies continues to exist.

‡¶‡ Liberal interpreters of Spinoza have tended to miss this connection between Spinoza’s metaphysics and his politics. For instance, Den Uyl has argued that Spinoza is a methodological individualist akin to Adam Smith who explains social phenomena in terms of the activities and relationships among individual agents. Den Uyl argues that, for Spinoza, institutions such as the state do not represent emergent individuals; they simply represent a more efficient use of the powers possessed by individuals who are members of the institution. However, when Spinoza’s discussion of the multitude is read in conjunction with Spinoza’s metaphysics, this liberal interpretation is not tenable. For an elaboration of this interpretation see Den Uyl, *Power, State, and Freedom, 70*. Malcom Bull, "The Limits of Multitude," *New Left Review*, no. 35 (2005), makes a similar link between the multitude and Adam Smith’s “invisible hand argument. In what follows I demonstrate how such an interpretation is not plausible, given Spinoza’s commitment to a metaphysics in which bodies forced together into modes always possess a conatus.


‡¶§ Ibid., II 15, 296-7.

‡¶¶¶ Ibid., II 13, 296-7.
Spinoza had very little to say about international relations. His one substantive discussion of state-to-state relations equates relations between states to relations between individuals in the state of nature. He argues that states have the right to do whatever is in their power, and that states should feel bound by contracts with other states only so long as the contract is to its advantage. Benedict de Spinoza, "A Political Treatise," in A Theologico-Political Treatise and a Political Treatise, ed. R.H.M. Elwes (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1951), III 11-14 306-7.

In this respect the multitude is not self-constituting. The origin of the state is not a significant problem for Spinoza. In The Theologico-Political Treatise and The Political Treatise Spinoza spends most of his time explaining how easy it is for individuals to break contracts when they are no longer to their advantage. In The Ethics Spinoza only briefly comments that in order for the state to come into existence it must counter the fear that drives men apart with a greater fear that drives men together. Unlike the social contract theories of Spinoza’s contemporaries, Spinoza does not consider the origin of the state to be a terribly important problem. Spinoza, "The Ethics," IV 36 S2, 219-21. Spinoza, "A Theologico-Political. Treatise," 208. Spinoza, "A Political Treatise," 316.

In this respect, Spinoza’s model for the constitution of political order is actually quite similar to the one that Malcolm Bull (drawing on Sartre) proposes as an alternative to the multitude in Malcolm Bull, "States of Failure," New Left Review 40 (2006): 16.


Hardt and Negri, Empire, 162.

Ibid.

Hardt and Negri, Empire, 162.


xxi Hardt and Negri, Empire, 164.


xxiii Hardt defines potestia as the “local, immediate, actual force of constitution.” Ibid.

xxiv Negri, Savage Anomaly, 63.

xxv Spinoza, "A Theologico-Political Treatise," 205.

xxvi Hardt, “Translator’s Forward,” xiii

xxvii Connolly, Identity/Difference, x.


Susan James makes the perceptive point that unlike many liberal strands of political theory that try to make people more alike by giving them the same rights, Spinoza sees the task of the state to get citizens to act as if they are free thereby making citizens more rational, and by extension more similar. Susan James, "Power and Difference," The Journal of Political Philosophy 4, no. 3 (1996).

It is important to note that Spinoza felt that a state where everyone lived entirely according to the dictates of reason was not possible. In A Political Treatise I 5, 289 Spinoza chastises those that “persuade themselves, that the multitude or men distracted by politics can ever be induced to live according to the bare dictate of reason,
must be dreaming of the poetic golden age, or of a stage-play.” Though Spinoza believes such a state to be unattainable, it still operates within his political philosophy as an ideal towards which all states should strive.

xx Spinoza, "The Ethics,” I P32.
xxi Spinoza, “A Political Treatise,” 293. Here he famously observes that “most people . . . conceive of mankind in nature as of one dominion within another.”
xxii Spinoza, "The Ethics,” IVP36D.
xxv Latin American intellectuals have explored these themes in popular Hollywood films such as Independence Day, Deep Impact, Armageddon and Mars Attacks!
xxiv Both of these themes have been explored in popular Hollywood films such as Independence Day, Deep Impact, Armageddon and Mars Attacks!
xxvi Daniel H. Deudney, Bounding Power: Republican Security Theory from the Polis to the Global Village (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 244-64. Deudney discusses an earlier version of what he terms “nuclear one worldism” advanced by John Herz and Kenneth Boulding in the 1960s before proposing his model of federal republican nuclear world government as a means to address the problem of WMD Terrorism.
xxvii While Empire is clearly a state of global domination, a state of domination does not create the level of fear associated with the threat of annihilation.
xxix Ibid.