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THE LIMITS OF MULTITUDE

*How can a blind multitude, which often does not know what it wants . . .
undertake so vast and difficult an enterprise as a system of legislation?*

Rousseau, *The Social Contract*

*The worst of all the multitude
Did something for the common good*

Mandeville, *The Grumbling Hive*

WITHIN CONTEMPORARY RADICAL politics, there are a lot of questions to which there are many possible answers, and one question to which there is none. There are innumerable blueprints for utopian futures that are, in varying degrees, egalitarian, cosmopolitan, ecologically sustainable, and locally responsive, but no solution to the most intractable problem of all: who is going to make it happen?

Almost all the agencies through which political change was effected in the twentieth century have either disappeared or been seriously weakened. Of these, the most powerful was the Communist state, responsible, in agrarian societies, both for gruesome repression and for dramatic improvements in human well-being. Within industrialized nations, Communist and social democratic parties, and for a period even the Democratic Party in the United States, intermittently succeeded in achieving significant social and economic reforms, of which the enduring legacy is the welfare state; in this regard, they were aided by the trade unions, which simultaneously brought about a partial redistribution of wealth. In their turn, party and union provided (often unwillingly) the institutional and rhetorical matrix for fluid social movements of much greater ambition and inventiveness.

How the achievements of these actors are judged is now, in a sense, irrelevant, for almost all have ceased to be effective political agents.

The Communist state has disappeared; political parties of the left have become virtually indistinguishable from those of the right both in policy, and perhaps more importantly, in their social constituency and sources of funding; trade unions are in long-term decline, and movements for peace, racial and sexual equality have all but petered out, not because any of their long-term objectives were realized, but because they are unable to mobilize support.

Without these agents there appear to be only two forces capable of shaping the contemporary world: market globalization propelled by governments and multinational corporations, and populist reactions that seek to assert national or communal sovereignty. The same actors are frequently involved in both, oscillating between spectacular but sporadic manifestations of the collective will—the British fuel protests of 2000; 9/11; the us invasion of Afghanistan; the global demonstrations against the Iraq war; the ‘No’ votes against the European constitution—and the continuation of social and economic practices that undermine their efficacy: unquenchable demand keeps fuel prices high; the thirst for technological modernity erodes traditional values; resistance to taxation and the draft cripples us foreign policy, just as civil obedience undermines the anti-war campaign, and daily participation in a pan-European economy weakens the ‘No’ votes. But the two are, in fact, related, in that it is the unwillingness of populations to accept the emergent properties of their own habitual behaviour that necessitates the dramatic protests in the first place. All agents seem trapped within this cycle of unintended effect and ineffectual intent—both the market itself and the inchoate nationalisms and fundamentalisms that seek to control it.

Multitude against the people

Within this landscape, a new political agent has been identified—a potential alternative both to the global market and to the populist responses to it. According to Hardt and Negri, the only basis today for ‘political action aimed at transformation and liberation’ is the multitude, conceived as ‘all those who work under the rule of capital and thus potentially as the class of those who refuse the rule of capital’.¹ However, the multitude is primarily defined not by its rejection of the market, but by its distance from the fictive unities of populism:

¹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude*, London 2004, pp. 99, 106.

The multitude is a multiplicity, a plane of singularities, an open set of relations, which is not homogeneous or identical with itself and bears an indistinct, inclusive relation to those outside of it. The people, in contrast, tends toward identity and homogeneity internally while posing its difference from and excluding what remains outside of it. Whereas the multitude is an inconclusive constituent relation, the people is a constituted synthesis that is prepared for sovereignty. The people provides a single will and action that is independent of and often in conflict with the various wills and actions of the multitude. Every nation must make the multitude into a people.²

This reaffirmation of the potentialities of the multitude is presented by Paolo Virno as a reversal of the multitude's historic defeat in the political struggles of the seventeenth century, when the choice between 'people' and 'multitude' was 'forged in the fires of intense clashes'. Multitude was the 'losing term', and the bourgeois state was founded on its repression. The multitude and the people therefore become mutually exclusive possibilities: 'if there are people, there is no multitude; if there is a multitude, there are no people'.³

In this narrative (also shared, to differing extents, by Balibar and Montag) Hobbes emerges as 'the Marx of the bourgeoisie', so 'haunted by the fear of the masses and their natural tendency to subversion' that he came to 'detest' the multitude.⁴ For him, the multitude is little more than 'a regurgitation of the "state of nature" in civil society'. It 'shuns political unity, resists authority, does not enter into lasting agreements, never attains the *status* of a juridical person because it never transfers its own natural rights to the sovereign'.⁵ Hobbes's successor in formulating the ideology of the state against the multitude was Rousseau, for whom 'the unity of the people can be created only through an operation of representation that separates it from the multitude'.⁶

Against this victorious tradition, there is only Spinoza, in whose work there is 'nothing of Hobbes or Rousseau' and who stands 'opposed to

² *Multitude*, p. 103.

³ Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, New York 2004, pp. 21, 23.

⁴ Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly*, Minneapolis 1991, p. 19; Etienne Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas*, London 1994, p. 16; Virno, *Grammar*, p. 22. See also Warren Montag, *Bodies, Masses, Power*, London 1999 and Negri, *Subversive Spinoza*, Manchester 2005; Balibar's *Spinoza and Politics*, London 1998, provides a more balanced account.

⁵ Virno, *Grammar*, p. 23.

⁶ *Multitude*, pp. 242–3.

Hobbes's doctrine at nearly every point'.⁷ For Hobbes, 'unanimity is the essence of the political machine . . . For Spinoza unanimity is a problem'.⁸ In Spinoza's thought, 'the *multitudo* indicates a *plurality which persists as such* . . . without converging into a One . . . a permanent form, not an episodic or interstitial form'.⁹ His conception of the multitude therefore effectively 'banishes sovereignty from politics', creating in its stead 'a politics of permanent revolution . . . in which social stability must always be re-created through a constant reorganization of corporeal life, by means of a perpetual mass mobilization'.¹⁰

People or faction

The basis for this revolutionary rhetoric is a close but highly tendentious reading of texts in seventeenth-century political theory. For while it is true that Hobbes makes a distinction between the people and the multitude, the way in which he does so is highly specific, and immediately raises difficulties that he cannot completely resolve. As Hobbes acknowledges, both words are potentially ambiguous.

The word people hath a double signification. In one sense it signifieth only a number of men, distinguished by the place of their habitation . . . which is no more, but the multitude of those particular persons that inhabit those regions . . . In another sense, it signifieth a person civil, that is to say, either one man, or one council, in the will whereof is included and involved the will of every one in particular.¹¹

Similarly:

Because multitude is a collective word, it is understood to signify more than one object, so that a multitude of men is the same as many men. Because the word is grammatically singular, it also signifies one thing, namely a multitude.¹²

⁷ Negri, *Savage Anomaly*, p. 199; Montag, *Bodies*, p. 92.

⁸ Balibar, *Masses*, p. 17.

⁹ Virno, *Grammar*, p. 21.

¹⁰ *Multitude*, p. 340 and Montag, *Bodies*, pp. 84–5.

¹¹ Hobbes, *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic* [1650] 21.11, ed. J. C. A. Gaskin, Oxford 1994.

¹² Hobbes, *De Cive* [1642], 6.1. All quotations from *De Cive* are from the edition translated and edited by Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne as *On the Citizen*, Cambridge 1998; I have consistently substituted 'multitude' for 'crowd' as the translation of *multitudo*.

Hobbes seeks to resolve the confusion by using the word multitude to refer to a plurality of individuals in the same place, and the word people to refer to a civil person. However, the distinction is trickier than it might appear, for the people and the multitude are not distinct or opposing forces; they are actually the same individuals: 'the nature of a commonwealth is that a multitude of citizens both exercises power and is subject to power, but in different senses'. When exercising power, 'the multitude is united into a body politic, and thereby are a people'; but when something is done 'by a people as subjects', it is, in effect, done 'by many individuals at the same time', i.e. by a 'multitude'.¹³

The basis of this definition is agency. For Hobbes, the crucial distinction is that which determines whether an action is performed by a multitude of individuals acting separately or by a people collectively acting as one person. This depends neither on the nature of the action, nor on the number and identity of those responsible for it (which may be identical in both cases) but rather on the way in which agency can be ascribed. A multitude cannot 'make a promise or an agreement, acquire or transfer a right, do, have, possess, and so on, except separately or as individuals'.¹⁴ In contrast: 'A *people* is a single entity, with a *single will*: you can attribute *an act* to it'.¹⁵ According to Hobbes, although a multitude of individuals may act individually, they cannot be said to act collectively unless they have actually agreed to do so beforehand. Hence the need for a contract between the individuals who comprise the multitude. Their actions can only count as the act of one person 'if the same multitude individually agree that the will of some one man or the consenting wills of a majority of themselves is to be taken as the will of all'.¹⁶

In the *Leviathan*, Hobbes presents this agreement as akin to that in which someone acts as a legal proxy for another. The multitude becomes a people when every individual contracts with every other individual to make the same person (either an individual or a meeting) their legal representative: 'A Multitude of men, are made *One Person*, when they are by one man, or one Person, represented . . . Every man giving their common Representer, Authority from himself in particular; and owning all the actions the Representer doth'.¹⁷

¹³ *Elements*, 21.11 and *De Cive*, 6.1.

¹⁴ *De Cive*, 6.1.

¹⁵ *De Cive*, 12.8.

¹⁶ *De Cive*, 6.1.

¹⁷ Hobbes, *Leviathan* [1651], ed. Richard Tuck, Cambridge 1991, p. 114.

For Hobbes, therefore, the multitude exists in three distinct moments: before the contract, when there is a multitude and no people; in the contract, where the multitude becomes a people insofar as it decides to whom sovereignty should be given; and after the contract, when a proxy has been designated, and the designated proxy is now the people, and multitude itself just a multitude once more. Multitude and people only exist alongside each other during one of these moments. Prior to the formation of a commonwealth the people does not exist; later, in the contract, insofar as the multitude is the people, the multitude does not exist (and vice versa); only after the multitude, as the people, has transferred sovereign power, does it once again lapse into being 'a disorganized multitude', while the people is now the individual or collective proxy to whom that power has been transferred.¹⁸ Thus,

In every commonwealth the *People* Reigns; for even in *Monarchies* the *People* exercises power; for the *people* wills through the will of *one man*. But the citizens, i.e. the subjects are a *multitude*. In a *Democracy* and in an *Aristocracy* the citizens are a *multitude*, but the *council* is the *people*; in a *Monarchy* the subjects are a *multitude*, and (paradoxically) the King is the *people*.¹⁹

However, were it to be the case that the multitude did not designate a proxy, and everyone became a member of a democratic council, then the multitude would continue to be the people *qua* sovereign body and a multitude *qua* subjects.

It is wrong to claim that Hobbes's multitude shuns political unity, resists authority, or does not enter into lasting agreements. According to Hobbes, it is the multitude who enter into lasting agreements (with one another as individuals) to create the people. The multitude cannot be 'that which does not make itself fit to become people', for it may itself become the people. Hobbes is not opposed to the multitude, but the simulacrum of the people represented by the faction, a multitude that thinks it is a people when it is not:

By *FACTION* I mean a multitude of citizens, united either by agreements with each other or by the power of one man, without authority from the holder or holders of sovereign power. A *faction* is like a commonwealth within the commonwealth; for just as a commonwealth comes into being by men's union in a natural state, so a faction comes into being by a new union of citizens.²⁰

¹⁸ *De Cive*, 7.II.

¹⁹ *De Cive*, 12.8.

²⁰ *De Cive*, 13.13.

The parallels are too close for comfort. A people and a faction are formed in precisely the same way: the only difference between them is that whereas the former is comprised of the multitude in the state of nature, the latter is comprised of the multitude as citizens. There is nothing to distinguish a faction from a people save that the people already exists, and in a democracy, the existence of a people, as opposed to a multitude, continues ‘only so long as a certain time and place is publicly known and appointed, on which those who so wish may convene’.²¹ No wonder, as Hobbes had complained in the *Elements*, that groups of like-minded persons are prone to ‘calling by the name of people any multitude of his own faction’.²²

Res publica res populi

Although it would be impossible to learn this from the work of Negri, Balibar, Montag or Virno, Hobbes’s distinction between the people and the multitude was far from original. In Cicero’s dialogue, *The Republic*, Scipio defines a commonwealth as ‘the property of a people’ [*res publica res populi*]. But, he continues, ‘a people is not any collection of human beings, but an assemblage of people in large numbers [*coetus multitudinis*] associated in an agreement with respect to justice and a partnership for the common good’.²³ This definition was picked up by Augustine in book 19 of the *City of God*: ‘A people he defined as a numerous gathering united in fellowship by a common sense of right and a community of interest’.²⁴

Had the Roman state ever actually met these criteria? In Cicero’s definition the gathered multitude had to have two things to qualify as a people: *consensus iuris*, agreement about the law, and *communio utilitatis*, common interest. Augustine focused on the first of these. A *consensus iuris* ought to mean that all received their due, but if the true God did not receive his due, there was no justice, and if there was no justice there was no people, and ‘if no people, then no people’s estate, but a nondescript mob [*qualiscumque multitudinis*] unworthy of the name of people’. By its own definition, the Roman state had never existed: there was no Roman people, just a rabble. Empire and multitude were identical; the *populus Dei* was the only true people.

²¹ *De Cive*, 7.5.

²³ Cicero, *The Republic*, I.39.

²² *Elements*, 27.4.

²⁴ Augustine, *City of God*, 19.21.

Having made his point, Augustine then provides a less exacting account of the distinction between a people and a multitude: 'A people is a large gathering [*coetus multitudinis*] of rational beings united in fellowship by their agreement about the objects of their love'.²⁵ Unworthy as the objects of its veneration had been, perhaps the Roman people had existed after all. Elsewhere, Augustine offers a still more elastic definition: 'Grant a point of unity, and a *populus* exists; take that unity away, and it is a mob [*turba*]. For what is a mob except a confused multitude [*multitudo turbata*]?'²⁶

The *populus/multitudo* distinction and the role of *ius* and *utilitas* in constituting a *populus* were frequently discussed in medieval political theory, particularly after Aristotle's *Politics* was translated in the thirteenth century.²⁷ In book three, Aristotle had distinguished between the various forms of good and bad government in terms of whether they served the common interest or their own private advantage. So, 'when the multitude govern the state with a view to the common advantage', that government qualified as a 'polity', or, as the commentary by Thomas Aquinas and Peter of Auvergne put it, *respublica*, as opposed to merely being a democracy governing in the interests of the mob.²⁸

Although it was not directly juxtaposed with Cicero's or Augustine's definitions of the state, Aristotle's *Politics* served to shift the emphasis from *ius* to *utilitas*, and from the distinction between the one and the many to that between the many and the few. From the latter perspective, the political potential of the multitude looked more promising. Aristotle had suggested that there were some respects in which the rule of the multitude was preferable to that of the few, and Marsilius of Padua pressed home the point that 'the common utility of a law is better known by the entire multitude'.²⁹ No one appears to have asked whether the unity needed for *consensus iuris* was equally essential for *communio utilitatis*,

²⁵ *City of God*, 19.24.

²⁶ Augustine, *Sermo* 103, quoted in J. D. Adams, *The "Populus" of Augustine and Jerome: a study in the patristic sense of community*, New Haven 1971, p. 35.

²⁷ See M. S. Kempshall, 'De re publica 1.39 in Medieval and Renaissance Political Thought', in J. G. F. Powell and J. A. North, eds, *Cicero's Republic*, London 2001, pp. 99–135.

²⁸ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1279a, tr. Benjamin Jowett, Oxford 1905; Thomas Aquinas, *In libros politicorum Aristotelis expositio*, ed. Raimondo Spiazzi, Rome 1951, p. 139.

²⁹ Marsilius of Padua, *Defensor Pacis* [1324], 1.12.5, tr. Alan Gewirth, New York 1956.

but the terms of the debate had changed in such a way that the question could be raised.

Unity

What is the essence of the state? When is a multitude a people and when is it not? These are questions in the alchemy of the political, and in the tradition derived from Cicero and Augustine, the answer is always unity. Multitude and people are mutually exclusive terms only because they represent different potentialities within the constitutional history of the same aggregation of persons. If there is unity, there is no plurality; if there is plurality, no unity.

For Spinoza, there is never a choice between people and multitude. He does not use the vocabulary of the *populus/multitudo* distinction in either the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* or the *Tractatus Politicus*. But the opposition between plurality and unity is common to both, and in both cases, Spinoza insists upon the necessity of unity for the formation and maintenance of the state. In the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* Spinoza describes a social contract of the Hobbesian type in which ‘each individual hands over the whole of his power to the body politic’, which then possesses ‘sovereign natural right over all things’.³⁰ In the *Tractatus Politicus*, however, there is no transfer, and the multitude retains its natural right. In place of the transfer to a single sovereign body, ‘the right of the commonwealth is determined by the power of the multitude, which is led, as it were, by one mind’.³¹ It is through this unanimity that the multitude achieves *consensus iuris*: ‘when men have *iura communia*, and all are guided as if by one mind’.³²

It might be argued that even though the multitude is of one mind, it is still a multitude and so the right of the commonwealth is determined by the aggregated right of multiple individuals rather than by their unity. But Spinoza is at pains to emphasize that there is a distinction between

³⁰ Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise* [1670], tr. R. H. M. Elwes, New York 1951, p. 205; henceforward TTP.

³¹ Spinoza, *Political Treatise* [1677], 3.7, tr. R. H. M. Elwes, New York 1951; henceforward TP. Balibar reviews interpretations of this phrase (which first appears at TP 3.2) in ‘Potentia multitudinis, quae una veluti mente ducitur’ in Marcel Senn and Manfred Walther, eds, *Ethik, Recht und Politik bei Spinoza*, Zürich 2001, pp. 105–37.

³² TP, 2.16.

men acting together as individuals, in which case their collective right is the sum of their individual right, and men coming together as one, in which case they have more than the sum of their individual right, for 'if two come together and unite their strength, they have jointly more power, and consequently more right over nature than both of them separately'.³³ Similarly, so long as men are in the state of nature, their natural right is merely hypothetical, and it is only when united, as if of one mind, that men provide for one another the collective physical security that allows them to possess natural right as individuals: 'And if this is why the schoolmen want to call man a sociable animal—I mean because men in the state of nature can hardly be independent—I have nothing to say against them.'³⁴

The tradition to which Spinoza refers derives from Aristotle, who maintained that:

The state is by nature clearly prior to the family and to the individual, since the whole is of necessity prior to the part . . . The proof that the state is a creation of nature and prior to the individual is that the individual, when isolated, is not self-sufficing; and therefore he is like a part in relation to the whole.³⁵

Spinoza also emphasizes the priority of the whole to the part when making a distinction between a multiplicity of individuals acting as individuals, and the multitude acting as if of one mind. Although he refers to the former as individuals and the latter as the multitude (rather than, as Hobbes had done, the former as the multitude, and the latter as the people) the substance of the distinction is the same: 'the right of the supreme authorities is nothing less than simple natural right, limited, indeed, by the power, not of every individual, but of the multitude, which is guided, as it were, by one mind'.³⁶

In other words, it is not the sum of individual natural right that limits (and, by implication, constitutes) the right of the commonwealth. It is the multitude *qua* unit, not the multitude *qua* individuals, that constitutes and limits that right. The point is made in similar terms in microcosm when Spinoza later describes the functioning of an aristocracy where sovereignty resides with a council of patricians:

supreme authority of this dominion rests with this council as a whole, not with every individual member of it (for otherwise it would be but the

³³ TP, 2.I3.

³⁴ TP, 2.I5.

³⁵ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a.

³⁶ TP, 3.2.

gathering of an undisciplined mob [*nam alias coetus esset inordinatae multitudinis*]). It is, therefore, necessary that all the patricians be so bound by the laws as to form, as it were, one body governed by one mind.³⁷

The '*coetus multitudinis*' is not, for Spinoza, any more than it is for Cicero or Augustine, the bearer of right, unless it is united: '*una veluti mente*'.

Rather than maintaining that 'the multitude is a multiplicity' or 'a plurality which persists as such', Spinoza only ascribes a positive political role to it when it is one, i.e. when it is a people in all but name. He does not attribute the right of the commonwealth to the power of the multitude as a plurality of individual wills, but to the power of the multitude 'led as it were by one mind'. And the right of the commonwealth diminishes in direct proportion to the degree that such unity is not maintained. Without unity the multitude would barely even possess right individually, but without multiplicity nothing would be lost, for multiplicity signifies weakness rather than strength, an incapacity to act rather than the power of acting.

For Hobbes, the essential characteristic of the multitude is always its plurality, in that when it is unified and sovereign it ceases to be a multitude and becomes a people. According to Spinoza: a multitude is always a multitude, even when it is united and sovereign. But the fact that he does not make the verbal distinction does not mean that he denies to the multitude those qualities that Hobbes thinks make it a people. For Spinoza, had he used these terms, the people is a moment of the multitude, a moment he wants to last forever.

Reason

The primary difference between Hobbes and Spinoza is to be found not in their divergent approach to the question of plurality and unity in relation to sovereignty, but rather in their account of the conditions that make unity possible. Spinoza repeatedly insists that the multitude can be one only if guided by reason:

For the right of the commonwealth is determined by the power of the multitude, which is led, as it were, by one mind. But this unity of mind can in no

³⁷ TP, 8.19.

wise be conceived, unless the commonwealth pursues chiefly the very end, which sound reason teaches is to the interest [*utile*] of all men.³⁸

Sovereignty is impossible without unity, and unity is impossible without reason, for 'it is impossible for a multitude to be guided, as it were, by one mind, as under dominion is required, unless it has laws ordained according to the dictate of reason'.³⁹

Spinoza here continues to follow the logic of the part and the whole. As he explained in a letter of 1665, 'On the question of whole and parts, I consider things as parts of a whole to the extent that their natures adapt themselves to one another so that they are in the closest possible agreement.'⁴⁰ Applied to humanity this carried the implication that men are parts of a social whole only to the extent that they follow reason, for as he explained in the *Ethics*, 'Insofar as men are subject to passions, they cannot be said to agree in nature', and 'only insofar as men live according to the guidance of reason, must they always agree in nature'.⁴¹

But there is an apparently insuperable problem here, for 'such as persuade themselves that the multitude . . . 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'.⁴² Indeed, as Spinoza had complained in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, 'The fickle disposition of the multitude almost reduces those who have experience of it to despair, for it is governed solely by emotions, not by reason'.⁴³ And in fact it is not even reason that impels men to seek society, for 'a multitude comes together, and wishes to be guided, as it were, by one mind, not at the suggestion of reason but of some common passion'—hope, fear, or vengeance.⁴⁴

So how is it possible for the 'fickle multitude', who are governed by emotions, to be united by reason? The problem had already been discussed by Aristotle and his medieval commentators. As Peter of Auvergne emphasized, the multitude has a double aspect. On the one hand, there is a bestial multitude in which no one has reason; on the other, a multitude where all have some share in reason and are therefore also amenable to

³⁸ TP, 3.7.

³⁹ TP, 2.21.

⁴⁰ Spinoza, *Letters*, xxxii.

⁴¹ Spinoza, *Ethics* [1677], 4.p32 and 4.p35, tr. Edwin Curley, London 1996.

⁴² TP, 1.5.

⁴³ TTP, p. 216.

⁴⁴ TP, 6.1.

rational persuasion. In the former case, the multitude is unfit to rule, but in the latter, the rule of the multitude is actually better than that of a few wise individuals.⁴⁵

Aristotle had explained that as the multitude coheres, individual emotions cancel one another out, and reasonable judgements prevail. Whereas ‘the individual is liable to be overcome by anger or by some other passion . . . it is hardly to be supposed that a great number of persons would all get into a passion and go wrong at the same moment’. So ‘although individually they may be worse judges than those who have special knowledge—as a body they are as good or better’.⁴⁶ According to Aristotle, this is the chief argument in favour of the view that ‘the multitude ought to be supreme rather than the few . . . for the many, of whom each individual is but an ordinary person, when they meet together may very likely be better than the few good, if regarded not individually but collectively . . . For each individual among the many has a share of virtue and prudence, and when they meet together they become in a manner one man, who has many feet, and hands and senses; that is a figure of their mind and disposition’.⁴⁷

Spinoza rehearses this argument in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, where he suggests that in a democracy, irrational commands are less to be feared than in other forms of government because ‘it is almost impossible that the majority of a people, especially if it be a large one, should agree in an irrational design’. Indeed, Spinoza sees this principle as being intrinsic to the nature of democracy, for ‘the basis and aim of a democracy is to avoid the desires as irrational, and to bring men as far as possible under the control of reason’.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Aquinas, *In libros politicorum*, p. 151. Aquinas’s commentary (which his pupil Peter of Auvergne takes up at the end of 3.6) was routinely published with Latin translations of the *Politics* well into the seventeenth century (e.g. the Paris edition of 1645). It is quite likely that Spinoza, who read Aristotle in Latin, was acquainted with the *Politics* through such an edition.

⁴⁶ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1286a and 1282a. For a contemporary discussion of this phenomenon, see James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds*, London 2004.

⁴⁷ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1281a–b. In the Latin edition cited above this was translated as ‘et fieri congregatorum quasi unum hominem multitudinem multorum pedum et multarum manuum et multos sensus habentem sic et quae circa mores et circa intellectum’, p. 146.

⁴⁸ TTP, p. 206.

In the *Tractatus Politicus*, this is the rationale for the expansion of the numbers on a council; for ‘the dominion conferred upon a large enough council is absolute, or approaches nearest to the absolute. For if there be an absolute dominion, it is, in fact, that which is held by an entire multitude’.⁴⁹ Spinoza’s argument for the expansion of the decision-making process to accommodate the entire irrational multitude is a function, not of his respect for the judgement of the individuals who comprise the multitude, but of the belief that as the numbers involved increase, so too will the reliance on reason and thus the possibility of unity.

While a few are deciding everything in conformity with their own passions only, liberty and the general good are lost. For men’s natural abilities are too dull to see through everything at once; but by consulting, listening, and debating, they grow more acute, and while they are trying all means, they at last discover those which they want, which all approve, but no one would have thought of in the first place.⁵⁰

The multitude are of one mind, not through affective imitation, but only insofar as they are guided by reason. And it is through their aggregation that reason prevails.

Utility

According to Hobbes, there are some societies that do ‘govern themselves in multitude’ and cohere without a contract in the way that Spinoza implies,⁵¹ but they are animal societies not human ones.

Among the animals which Aristotle calls political he counts not only *Man* but many others too, including the *Ant*, the *Bee*, etc. For although they are devoid of reason, which would enable them to make agreements and submit to government, still by their consenting, i.e. by desiring and avoiding the same objects, they so direct their actions to a common end that their swarms are not disturbed by sedition. Yet their swarms are still not *commonwealths*, and so the animals themselves should not be called *political*; for their government is only an accord, or many wills with one object, not (as a commonwealth needs) one will.⁵²

In Hobbes’s view, bees and ants achieve concord by ‘desiring and avoiding the same objects’, rather like the ancient Romans who, in Augustine’s

⁴⁹ TP, 8.3.

⁵¹ *Elements*, 19.5.

⁵⁰ TP, 9.14.

⁵² *De Cive*, 5.5.

account, achieved a form of statehood by virtue of prizing the same things. What social animals lack is unity of the will.

An *accord* between several parties, i.e. an association formed only for mutual aid, does not afford to the parties . . . the *laws of nature* . . . (An *accord* of several persons . . . consists only in their all directing their actions to the same end and to a *common good*.) But something more is needed, an element of fear, to prevent an accord on peace and mutual assistance for a *common good* from collapsing in discord when a *private good* subsequently comes into conflict with the *common good*.⁵³

Here, Hobbes argues that *communio utilitatis* is not enough either. Even if the multitude is working together for the common good, they still need *consensus iuris*, in order to resolve the disputes that inevitably arise when private advantage does not coincide with the public good. Ants and bees differ from human beings in this respect, for ‘amongst these creatures the Common good differeth not from the Private; and being by nature enclined to their private, they procure thereby the common benefit’.⁵⁴

For Hobbes, it is only the absence of reason that allows public and private goods to coincide, for unlike rational beings, social animals are not given to comparing themselves with others, and arguing about what is really in the common interest. In contrast, Spinoza argues that men are incapable of agreement just insofar as they are governed by passions, and that it is through reason that private and public goods coincide. His thinking on this point emerges most clearly in the *Ethics*, where he states that ‘since reason demands nothing contrary to Nature, it demands that everyone love himself, seek his own advantage’, and that it is ‘when each man most seeks his own advantage for himself . . . [that] . . . men are most useful to one another’.⁵⁵ It is in this regard that man is truly a social animal and achieves the unity, as if of one mind, to which Spinoza repeatedly refers in the *Tractatus Politicus*:

Man, I say, can wish for nothing more helpful to the preservation of his being than that all should so agree in all things that the minds and bodies of all would compose, as it were, one mind [*unam quasi mentem*] and one body; that all should strive together, as far as they can, to preserve their being; and that all, together, should seek for themselves the common advantage [*commune utile*] of all.⁵⁶

⁵³ *De Cive*, 5.4.

⁵⁴ *Leviathan*, p. 119.

⁵⁵ *Ethics*, 4.P18.S, and 4.P35.C2.

⁵⁶ *Ethics*, 4.P18.S; cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1281a at note 47 above.

To Hobbes's 'man is wolf to man', Spinoza responds 'man is god to man'—but only because, like the wolf, he is a 'social animal'.

The paradox is a reminder that insofar as Spinoza's political philosophy differs from that of Hobbes, it is due to his reworking of three Aristotelian themes: man is a social animal, always part of a whole; the many are more rational than the few; the state is a union for common benefit. Whereas Aristotle made no connection between these points, Spinoza starts to thread them together. Because man is a social animal, people seek association; through association they gain access to a rationality they would not possess as individuals or in smaller groups; this rationality is the source of common utility, for 'insofar as men live according to the guidance of reason, they must do only those things that are good for human nature, and hence, for each man'.⁵⁷ The passions foster sociability; sociability rationality, and rationality utility. And so it is necessarily the case that as the commonwealth approaches the rule of the multitude (who, by virtue of their numbers, are more likely to embody reason), the private good approximates more closely to the public.

Nowhere in this sequence is there any mention of a contract, or need to mention one. Although Spinoza insists on unity in both the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* and the *Tractatus Politicus*, somewhere between the two he must have realized that the account of reason given in the *Ethics* made the contract superfluous, for the multitude could be of one mind without having decided to be so. Unintentionally, Spinoza had opened the way for accounts of the state that dispensed not only with the contract but with the inter-subjective unity of reason as well.

The invisible hand

Such accounts were not long in coming. Mandeville's claim that 'The worst of all the Multitude/ Did something for the Common Good' is, it is now apparent, doubly provocative. That the worst members of society should be making a contribution to its welfare is obviously surprising, but even the claim that the multitude *qua* multitude act for the common good undermines the long tradition in which it was, by definition, the people not the multitude who promote the common good.

⁵⁷ *Ethics*, 4.p35.

However, Mandeville has his own paradoxical version of the people/multitude distinction:

I hope that the reader knows that by society I understand a body politic, in which man . . . is become a disciplined creature that can find his own ends in labouring for others, and where under one head or other form of government each member is rendered subservient to the whole, and all of them by cunning management are made to act as one. For if by society we only mean a number of people, that without rule or government should keep together out of a natural affection to their species or love of company, such as a herd of cows or a flock of sheep, then there is not in the world a more unfit creature for society than man.⁵⁸

The implied distinction here is between those animals that are truly political, and those that are merely aggregated. But Mandeville does not suppose that the former constitute a body politic because they have made a contract with one another. Instead, he ridicules the idea that 'two or three hundred single savages . . . could ever establish a society, and be united into one body'. Society as a whole developed from pre-existing forms of sociability, which were the product not of 'the good and amiable, but the bad and hateful qualities of man'.⁵⁹

Mandeville's point is that sociability is in fact an emergent property of individualism, the body politic an unforeseen consequence of vice. Humankind could not remain a leaderless flock even if it wanted to. But in place of Spinoza's reason, he substitutes pride as the instrument through which individual desires converge for the common interest. There is 'no other quality so beneficial', for with men, 'the more their pride and vanity are displayed . . . the more capable they must be of being raised into large and vastly numerous societies'.⁶⁰ The worst of all the multitude do not just do something for the common good, they do the most.

Mandeville's favourite example is the way in which the ostentation of the few provides employment for the many, and in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith restates Mandeville's argument: despite their 'natural selfishness and rapacity', the rich, whose sole end is 'the gratification of their own vain and insatiable desires', employ the labour of thousands, and are led 'by an invisible hand to . . . without intending

⁵⁸ Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees* [1714], Oxford 1924, vol. 1, p. 347.

⁵⁹ Mandeville, *Fable*, vol. 2, p. 132; vol. 1, p. 344.

⁶⁰ Mandeville, *Fable*, vol. 1, pp. 124, 346–7.

it, without knowing it, advance the interest of society'.⁶¹ Not just the imprudent rich, but, in *The Wealth of Nations*, other economic actors, too, like the merchant who prefers domestic to foreign investment, are 'in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention'.⁶²

Smith himself does not seem to have attached much significance to the term, but others realized that the 'invisible hand' potentially offered an explanation not only for the economic order of society, but the political as well:

The governments which the world has hitherto seen, have seldom or never taken their rise from deep-laid schemes of human policy. In every state of society which has yet existed, the multitude has, in general, acted from the immediate impulse of passion, or from the pressure of their wants and necessities; and, therefore, what we commonly call the political order, is, at least in a great measure, the result of the passions and wants of man, combined with the circumstances of his situation; or, in other words, it is chiefly the result of the wisdom of nature. So beautifully, indeed, do these passions and circumstances act in subservience to her designs, and so invariably have they been found, in the history of past ages, to conduct him in time to certain beneficial arrangements, that we can hardly bring ourselves to believe that the end was not foreseen by those engaged in the pursuit. Even in those rude periods, when, like the lower animals, he follows blindly his instinctive principles of action, he is led by an invisible hand, and contributes his share to the execution of a plan, of the nature and advantages of which he has no conception. The operations of the bee, when it begins, for the first time, to form its cell, convey to us a striking image of the efforts of unenlightened Man, in conducting the operations of an infant government.⁶³

Hayek? No, Dugald Stewart, Smith's pupil and biographer, and the first to acknowledge Smith's dependence on Mandeville. Here, Rousseau's question about the 'blind multitude' receives its answer—an answer with which Spinoza could not have disagreed.

General intellect versus general will

For those, like Rousseau, who think that even though private and public interests sometimes coincide, there can be no enduring harmony

⁶¹ Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* [1759], London 1976, pp. 184–5.

⁶² Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* [1776], Book 4, chapter 2.

⁶³ Dugald Stewart, *Collected Works*, vol. 2, Edinburgh 1854, p. 248.

between the two, some sort of distinction between the will of all (represented by the sum of private interests) and the general will (that is in the common interest) will always be necessary.⁶⁴ But for those who can see the workings of an invisible hand, this dichotomy represents a 'false alternative between the rule of one and chaos'.⁶⁵ Rousseau may consider the will of all to be 'an incoherent cacophony', but as 'the plural expression of the entire population' it is, Hardt and Negri suggest, more like 'an orchestra with no conductor—an orchestra that through constant communication determines its own beat and would be thrown off and silenced only by the imposition of a conductor's central authority'.⁶⁶

Like that of their predecessors, Hardt and Negri's model of 'the collective intelligence that can emerge from the communication and co-operation of a varied multiplicity' comes from the natural world. Taking up 'the notion of the swarm from the collective behaviour of social animals, such as ants, bees, and termites, to investigate multi-agent-distributed systems of intelligence', they focus on the multitude's 'swarm intelligence'; its ability to make 'swarm music' without a conductor or a centre that dictates order.⁶⁷ On this account,

Just as the multitude produces in common, just as it produces the common, it can produce political decisions . . . What the multitude produces is not just goods and services; the multitude also and most importantly produces co-operation, communication, forms of life, and social relationships. The economic production of the multitude, in other words, is not only a *model* for political decision-making but also tends itself to *become* political decision-making'.⁶⁸

In the work of Virno, this common production is expressed in the opposition between the general will and the general intellect: 'The One of the multitude, then, is not the One of the people. The multitude does not converge into a *volonté générale* for one simple reason: because it already has access to a *general intellect*.'⁶⁹ Developed from Marx's passing reference to the moment when 'general social knowledge has become a *direct force of production*',⁷⁰ the general intellect is presented as 'the know-how on which social productivity relies . . . [this does] not necessarily mean

⁶⁴ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 2.1 and 2.3.

⁶⁵ *Multitude*, p. 329.

⁶⁷ *Multitude*, pp. 91–3.

⁶⁹ Virno, *Grammar*, p. 42.

⁶⁶ *Multitude*, pp. 242, 338.

⁶⁸ *Multitude*, p. 339.

⁷⁰ Marx, *Grundrisse*, London 1973, p. 706.

the aggregate of knowledge acquired by the species, but the *faculty* of thinking; potential as such, not its countless particular realizations.⁷¹

If this sounds suspiciously like ‘tacit knowledge’ as it appears in the writings of Michael Polanyi and Hayek, the affinity is unsurprising, for multitude itself is what they would have termed ‘a polycentric order’ within which ‘actions are determined by the relation and mutual adjustment to each other of the elements of which it consists’.⁷² For Hardt and Negri too, the model for such an order is the brain, where ‘there is no one that makes a decision . . . but rather a swarm, a multitude that acts in concert’.⁷³ In both cases, the resulting patterns are the accumulated problem-solving techniques of the species, ‘our habits and skills, our emotional attitudes, our tools, and our institutions’, or, as Virno puts it, our ‘imagination, ethical propensities, mindsets, and “linguistic games”’.⁷⁴ For Hardt and Negri, ‘habit is the common in practice: the common that we continually produce and the common that serves as the basis of our actions’.⁷⁵

If the multitude is a polycentric order, swarm intelligence an invisible hand, and the general intellect a form of tacit knowledge, these are not coincidental affinities (or products of a wholesale borrowing from Hayek) but the direct result of Negri’s adherence to those aspects of Spinoza’s thought that lead away from Hobbes. From Cicero onwards, it was axiomatic that only when unified into a people could a multitude become a political agent. Spinoza does not fundamentally dissent, but he nevertheless draws together a variety of Aristotelian themes to articulate an interpretation of unity that does not depend on the conscious agreement of all involved. Insofar as Spinoza differs from Hobbes, his thought leads to Mandeville, Smith, Stewart and Hayek.

The multitude is not a new political agent invented by Spinoza, or the losing side in the political struggles of the seventeenth century; it was always the raw material of the political. The only question was: how could the multitude become an agent? Only two answers are offered

⁷¹ Virno, *Grammar*, pp. 64, 66.

⁷² Friedrich Hayek, *Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics*, London 1967, p. 73.

⁷³ *Multitude*, p. 337.

⁷⁴ Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, London 1960, p. 26; Virno, *Grammar*, p. 106.

⁷⁵ *Multitude*, p. 197.

by the tradition of which Spinoza forms a part, and within which his thought is a watershed: either the multitude is united and acts as a single agent, or the multitude remains disparate and uncoordinated, but nevertheless acts collectively through the working of an invisible hand.

Contemporary champions of the multitude remain trapped within this history, committed to a position that is ultimately either Hobbesian or Hayekian. Seeking a route out of the impasse posed by the global market and its reactive populisms, they have retraced the path that led to it. The difficulty comes from starting with the multitude as an aggregation of individuals, and then proceeding to dichotomize the one and the many. Agency is then transformed into a choice between general will or general intellect, state or society. Rather than being an agent of limitless potential, the multitude contracts political possibility to the primitivisms of the security state and the free market. Within contemporary politics, the problem of agency demands a more complex resolution.