Martin Saar, *Die Immanenz der Macht. Politische Theorie nach Spinoza* [The immanence of power. Political theory after/according to Spinoza], Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Wissenschaft, Frankfurt a/M 2013, €22,00, 9783518296547.

Why should someone interested in a theoretical account or critical examination of modern society, its forms of government, its conflicts, and its struggle with democracy and freedom, read Spinoza these days? Is Spinoza's work of any interest, apart from its historical significance? Without doubt, his thought has been a major impulse to a way of thinking and living that has shaped the modernisation of society and politics. Jonathan Israel (*Radical Enlightenment* or *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy*), to name only one historian, has made Spinoza's historical impact clear enough. But the question remains whether this way of thinking could still help us. In his book, Martin Saar tries to convince his reader that Spinoza has much more to offer us today, especially with regards to our conception of power. His task is made easier, because others have preceded him in this attempt. In the sixties and seventies, first of all in France, we witness a revival of interest in Spinoza's philosophy, in which the concept of power (*potentia*) receives privileged attention. Two names have to be remembered, Gilles Deleuze and Alexandre Matheron, whose publications in 1968 and 1969 respectively had a huge impact on the way Spinoza would come to be studied the next decades. This was especially so in Italy where Antonio Negri, in his *L'anomalia selvaggia* (1981), initiated a radical criticism of political power, referring to Spinoza as his source, and using the slogan '*potentia* against *potestas*' as an indication of his intellectual and political programme. In the same period, Michel Foucault makes a similar turn, shifting his attention from state power and sovereignty to a 'microphysics of power' (field of forces). Saar shows that this reorientation to a new way of thinking power, inspired by Spinoza's works, cannot be narrowed down to a small circle of adherents, political philosophers and/or political activists. In addition to Foucault, we see many others in the field of political science and democratic theory move in the same direction. Most of the time, Spinoza's thoughts do not play a significant role in these debates, at least not explicitly, and often he is not even mentioned. Saar's book demonstrates that by taking seriously the basics of Spinozism, we can clarify the principles at stake in this recent transformation in how we think about power, politics, government, and democracy. Of course, he does not pretend that in Spinoza we find a fully elaborated theory of power, let alone a sociological analysis of politics that has any value today. It is a matter of basic principles. By first giving a detailed reconstruction of Spinoza's thought on power in both of his political

works, the *Theological-political treatise* (1670) and the *Political treatise* (1675-1676, posthumous published), and in what is considered his main work, the *Ethics* (also published after Spinoza's death in 1677), Saar is able to give an in-depth analysis of contemporary thought revealing how similar the dynamics of the concepts is.

For Saar, the conceptual turn initiated by Spinoza, is particularly significant as an argument for another approach to political reality. From Spinoza's perspective, politics cannot be grasped if we take its completion in a stable social order, established rights, and clear identities as the point of departure. Instead, we should start from the plurality and diversity of 'pre-social' forces and powers that will eventually change into something like a coherent social and political reality. In our narrative of society, we have to make a turn 'from identity to difference' (as Urs Stäheli puts it). Spinoza's social ontology changes our description of society from one that operates in terms of unities and states of affairs into one that operates in terms of a dynamics in which constellations of forces emerge, remain in shape, and finally dissolve. In other words, his political theory does not start from the premise of established order and from a symbolically mediated concept of power, as is given in a society's self-legitimation. He tries to understand the constitution of society as the result of a more or less contingent interplay of forces. Although Spinoza, as Saar correctly admits, is a rationalistic philosopher who favours a stable political order and believes that reason can be of great help in achieving this end, or can even direct human beings towards this goal, his ontology makes clear that reality is not reasonable in itself. To understand the power of political institutions we cannot start with their legitimacy or their reasonableness, the legal and institutional definitions or self-descriptions of their power. The constitution of these institutions starts from outside: the process set about by thousands and thousands of daily acts in which people shape their relations. This involves conflicts, but also cooperation and, eventually, stable political order. This social ontology has a remarkable outcome. It presupposes that political institutions, whatever their forms, are fundamentally democratic. Here, 'democratic' is not taken in the sense of formal decision making procedures (civil rights, elections, parliament, and so on), but in the sense of the real power of the multitude of citizens, the *potentia multitudinis*, as it is called in Spinoza's political works (originally written in Latin). Political power, so goes the first principle of Spinoza's political thought, stands or falls with (or is determined by) the constituting power of the multitude, the 'power of the people'.

The key concepts here are *potentia* and *potestas*, and what is maybe more important is the tension between these concepts. Power understood as effective capacity, a qualitative and constituting force, is called *potentia*, as can be seen, for example, in the capacity to walk, to

talk or to think. Any symbolically mediated order in which people are ruled by other people is called *potestas*, as can be seen, for example, in parental power, state power or the judiciary. It is not merely a quantitative and uneven relation of forces in which the one is stronger than the other, but a relation that is unequal because of the different symbolical connotations involved. It is especially this tension between a naturalistic or ontological concept of power and a symbolically mediated or, eventually, institutional concept of power that Saar thinks is at stake in contemporary discussions in political philosophy and the political sciences. In his reconstruction of Spinoza's thought, Saar makes use of recent studies in this field – apart from Matheron and Deleuze, he also discusses Balibar, Bartuschat, Gatens, James, Moreau, and Walther. After showing how this tension between *potentia* and *potestas* returns in the thought of Althusser, Deleuze, Foucault, Arendt, Negri, Agamben, Lefort, Connolly, and Butler, to name the most important contemporary thinkers he refers to, he demonstrates how present-day discussions in political science on the topic of *governmentality* and *governance* also concentrates on this same tension. Two main themes in Spinoza's philosophy get special attention. Firstly, Saar stresses Spinoza's thesis of the importance of affects and imagination in human life and society. Secondly, as was already mentioned, the crux of Spinoza's political thought is the concept of democracy taken as the constituting power of the multitude.

A major obstacle in seeing the importance of Spinoza's thought in this respect probably lies in doubts one may have about the relevance of an ontological theory of power. Saar thinks it inevitable to make at least some assumptions about the nature of being, of being alive, and especially of being together (social ontology). The book's title refers to the key concepts of Spinoza's ontology, two of his main metaphysical premises. The first key concept is 'immanence,' which stands for a concept of reality that does not appeal to transcendent principles, but instead intends to explain reality from within. Reality emerges from itself (*causa sui*), and hence must be conceived through itself, as the definitions in the first book of the *Ethics* make clear. One can be critical about how consistent Spinoza has been in the further elaboration of this first principle, and even about the chance that such an 'immanentism' can ever be achieved in a convincing way today or in the future. This metaphysical principle can, however, be easily connected to the theoretical axiom of self-organisation or *autopoiesis*. Spinoza used it in his naturalistic ontology, but also and maybe more fruitfully in his analysis of political reality. The ontological principle reappears in his concept of society that, as was already indicated, does not start from its established order (*potestas*), but tries to take as its point of departure the interplay of forces within a group of people as constitutive for the establishment of political order (*potentia*). The second key

concept, therefore, is 'power'. The traditional ontology of *potentia* is rooted in Aristotle's doctrine of a teleological *dynamis* and elaborated in scholastic philosophy in a doctrine of 'being possible' as one of the modes of being. Although Saar seems to have no interest in this background, the idea of reality as contingency must be traced back to this doctrine. It is against this scenery that Spinoza's concept of power, or in general a modern concept of power, takes shape as a prominence of the actualistic and activist aspects of potentiality (*potentia activa*). Emphasis lies on the actualisation of potentialities, potentialities becoming real, that is human capacities becoming real forces in reality. The *potentia* of a human being, or any natural creature, may have more or less reality. Hence, what becomes manifest in reality may fluctuate.

Spinoza's ontology of power is a dynamic, non-teleological theory of power that can be summarised in three theorems. First of all, there is a multiplicity of capacities and forces in society, which can converge with one another in collaboration or oppose each other in conflict. This determines whether society tends in the direction of a stable or an instable order, or even disorder. Secondly, certain possibilities or capacities will be actualised whereas other will not or not fully. In another constellation of forces this may change, and what was not developed first, then becomes possible. Spinoza breaks with the traditional, static concept of society and paves the way for a theory of the dynamics of society, of society as (the result of) a process – though this process is not necessarily progressive. Thirdly, the interplay of forces may take forms that are more or less stable, depending on the convergence of the actualisation of people's capacities. For a longer period, these forms may formalise and stabilise the interaction between people. Then political and legal institutions and practices will appear on the stage of society. When pointing to a difference between his and Hobbes's political thought, Spinoza writes in a note to his *Theological-political treatise* that for him the state of nature never ends, even when political order is established. This is the reason that political theory cannot start from the institutional level, but must always focus on the dynamics of society, the interplay of forces. *Potestas* will never abolish *potentia*: ontology must precede political theory. Nevertheless, Spinoza thinks a political order that guarantees peace, security, freedom, and welfare for its citizens is possible. History proves this by 'good practices'. It is possible under the condition that the multitude is, as Spinoza puts it, in some way led by one spirit.

In this respect, Spinoza breaks away in a fundamental and explicit manner from the traditional Aristotelian and medieval world view. In classical metaphysics, matter and the operation of things in this world depend on *a priori* given forms and ends. The world can and

should be read against the background of a transcendent design, a pre-established order. This idea is turned upside down in Spinoza's ontology of 'immanence'. From now on, forms and ends can be conceived through the operations of the material world. Again, it can be questioned whether this approach leads to a consistent and convincing new ontology, but the reason for the rupture with the traditional view is clear. Teleology gives an a priori legitimacy to institutions and social order, whereas in the modern view society is the contingent result of people acting. And what is more important, the decisive issue in this turn is still present in contemporary political thought. Here we find the dichotomy between approaches starting from ends, forms, and normative principles, and theories starting from dynamic processes that organise themselves. It is exactly on this point, that Spinoza's thought could serve to clarify present-day controversies.

Saar extracts from Spinoza's ontological argument three important points. The first one appears in his extensive and critical review of Antonio Negri's reading of Spinoza that resulted in a political theory which plays off the power of the *multitude* against the *empire* of sovereign states in a world market dominated by capitalism. According to Saar's criticism, Negri unjustifiably turns the creative theoretical principle of the tension between *potentia* and *potestas*, the tension between the dynamic play of forces within society, a multiplicity of possibilities, on the one hand, and social and political order on the other hand, into an opposition between the world of possibilities implied by *potentia* and institutionalized power as such (*potestas*). Negri's reading of Spinoza is not only flawed in this respect, but it fails as a political theory by becoming polemical, partisan, and even moralistic. The task is to understand and gather insights into the dependence of political institutions and political power on the forces and possibilities of society. Negri's analysis may be of importance when it comes to a critique of the myth of the coincidence of political order and society, but he throws out the baby with the bath water. No political movement can escape institutional forms. Spinoza however also shows that no political institution will ever succeed in representing the whole of the social interplay of forces. Negri cannot bear the ambivalence of power, that is, the contingency in the dynamics of the power game, and wants to escape from it. He wants to escape from reality and cannot fully grasp the implications of Spinoza's ontology of power. He is forced then to make a split between a pernicious *potestas* (a demonised power) and a promising *potentia* – namely, forms of collective power that promise an escape from power.

The second point concerns the affinity between Spinoza's thoughts on government and current debates on governmentality and governance. Spinoza's reflections are part of a general tendency towards new forms of government that emerges in seventeenth-century

Europe. They take their distance from government by command and obedience (traditional sovereignty), and embrace a conception of government as the efficient management of people and goods based on the recognition that people and goods have a life of their own. The idea that the exercise of power by governors should reckon with the totality of society's potentialities and forces is rooted in this tendency: the acceptance of the positive reality of government's 'other'. In Spinoza's thought, we see a recognition (and a justification) of what modern sociology has depicted as the functional differentiation of society. The concept of *potestas* refers to a particular relation of forces that is, on the one hand, symbolically mediated (for example, by a depiction of the legitimacy of political power) and, on the other hand, not necessarily successful. As Saar puts it, power and freedom are interconnected. In fact, power is not opposed to freedom, but is nothing else but freedom, or at least is a condition of freedom. Political order is a specific expression of the freedom or lack of freedom, of the empowerment or powerlessness of people. According to Saar, government becomes reflective because the freedom of the citizens is not so much the limitation of government, as the condition of its efficiency. Spinoza's famous defence of the freedom of expression of opinions, for example, does not appeal to 'human rights', but takes into account that government is not able to determine the opinions, let alone the thoughts, of people. The power to think (and to speak) is a reality with its own force which a government has to deal with. The point is that government should be aware of what its power is amidst the totality of social forces. The exercise of power must take account of counterforces and escape routes. There is no such thing as absolute power. Contrary to the political discourse of his time, which tended to focus on symbolically mediated power (its politico-theological and legal forms) and endorse the myth of absolute power or sovereignty, Spinoza opens up a new perspective in which any institutionalized power is delivered to the contingency of society's forces.

From this follows a third point: the fragility of democracy. Spinoza's concept of democracy is unique above all because he does not restrict himself to the usual division of forms of government (monarchy, aristocracy, democracy), but makes democracy the foundation of any form of government. Every society is in essence a democracy, although it may not necessarily take the political form of a democracy, that is, actual government by the people or by a representation of the people (*potestas multitudinis*, so to speak). What it means is that it depends on the particular condition of the power of the multitude (*potentia multitudinis*) whether a specific political order is probable or improbable, possible or impossible. The power of the multitude in this sense is of a 'spontaneous' and 'anarchic' nature, but no less formative and decisive. The power of the multitude is irresistible if the

great majority of the citizens are unanimous in what they consider a just order of society. A free people, as Spinoza notes, will only be satisfied with a government that rules within the limits of reason and leaves enough room for people to live their own lives. However, collective power is at its heights only in cases where there is a unity of will and in cases where there is a well-educated people. Therefore, a realistic concept of democracy in this sense has to take into account all forms of discord among citizens and all expressions of people's affective life that do not correspond to what could be seen as reasonable. These factors of discord and affective life, which are obviously interconnected, weaken the power of the multitude. It facilitates government to divide and rule, and to play with (or even trigger) people's emotions. Spinoza was very keen on pointing to the politics of fear, a forceful alliance between a certain Christian political theology and a monarchy that seeks to turn its citizens into slaves.

Against this policy as an outcome of the impotence of the multitude, Spinoza pleads in favour of 'a policy of truth', as Saar calls it. Such a policy requires that citizens and governors (or politicians) share a realistic account of their respective forces, of their (limited) possibilities, and of the probability of stable political forms enabled by this particular interplay of forces, leading eventually to a safe, free and prosperous society. A 'policy of the truth' by a government must also take into account the history of the people and the cultural traditions of its citizens. Power always moves within the borders of its symbolic mediation. In people's minds, power is always imagined, shaped as it is by the ever-changing configuration of their affective life and their reasonableness. The truth of the (social) ontology of power is that society is a self-organizing system that is able to construct itself by depending on the way people imagine and understand the role they play in it. Spinoza belongs among the first thinkers who formulated a non-normative liberal policy, based on the recognition of the self-organizing possibilities of the multitude. This principle, as Saar's clear and profound book convincingly shows, is still a productive contribution to contemporary discussions of politics, power, and democracy.

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