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### Journal Item

How to cite:

Prokhovnik, Raia (2009). 'Men are not born fit for citizenship, but must be made so': Spinoza and citizenship. *Citizenship Studies*, 13(4) pp. 413–429.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:  
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/13621020903011237>

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# 'Men are not born fit for citizenship, but must be made so': Spinoza and citizenship

## *Thinking Citizenship Series*

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**DOI:** 10.1080/13621020903011237

## Abstract

The modern conception of citizenship contains often unacknowledged key background assumptions - about the role of rights in citizenship, about the citizen modelled on a liberal autonomous and rational individual, and about the equality of citizens within a democratic state. Spinoza's political works give us a useful perspective on the historicity of these assumptions. Whereas the modern conception is abstract, universalist, and depoliticised, Spinoza's sense of the citizen's belonging is adamantly specific, particularist, and political, and offers a way forward for rethinking citizenship. The key concepts of freedom and republicanism are analysed, and a political reading is developed of Spinoza's view of citizenship in terms of a way of conducting politics.

**Keywords:** citizenship; politics; subjectivity; social construction; practice

## Introduction

The modern conception of citizenship, broadly speaking, contains often unacknowledged key background assumptions - about the role of rights in citizenship, about the citizen being modelled on a liberal autonomous and rational individual, and about the equality of citizens within a democratic state. Looking at Spinoza's political works, the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (TTP, originally published in 1670) and *Tractatus Politicus* (TP, published posthumously in 1677), [1](#) gives us a useful perspective on the historicity of these assumptions. It is only after Spinoza's time that the modern view of citizenship developed, with its Enlightenment view of subjectivity and its location in the context of the emergence of the modern nation state. It is only after Spinoza's time that the key moments of the modern liberal and republican conceptions of citizenship occurred - including Locke's *Second treatise* and the Glorious Revolution on the liberal side and Rousseau's *Social contract* and the French Revolution on the republican side.

Spinoza's political experience was of a polity which was not yet a modern state (in our inherited dominant narrative of an emerging modern state in a teleology of state superiority and progress), a European *Rechtstaat* based not just on the rule of law but on the idea of the rule of law in a constitutional state as a moral principle governing social and political order. The kind of citizenship based on a thin and legalistic conception which developed with the *Rechtstaat* state idea post-dates Spinoza's experience. Spinoza understood citizenship, then, to take place in a polity which was not a modern state. The seventeenth-century United Provinces [2](#) also differs from a modern territorial nation-state in the context of the modern national/international dichotomy, which only in the eighteenth century became the dominant way of conceiving home-foreign relations. The United Provinces did not form a nation in terms of having a stable territory or a homogeneous language, religion or ethnic background. The northern Netherlanders nevertheless clearly shared a political society and culture and a relatively stable sense of the terms of contestation in political

debate, or what Spinoza refers to as 'the national manners' (TP, p. 351).

The starkest contrast between the modern version of citizenship and Spinoza's view, which underpins these differences, is that the modern conception is abstract, universalist, and depoliticised in character whereas Spinoza's sense of the citizen's belonging is adamantly specific, particularist, and political. In rethinking citizenship for the twenty-first century elements of Spinoza's conception offer a promising way forward, both in terms of thinking through an alternative to the problems associated with a self-proclaimed universalist conception of citizenship (its ethnocentric and Eurocentric basis, its inability to fully take into account local practices and conditions, its pre-political character), and in terms of thinking citizenship beyond the modern state (especially, for instance, in relation to the European Union). This is a form of citizenship which is pertinent to today's multiple and separate but overlapping and sometimes shifting identities - for instance as members of a city, a region, a nation, a state, Europe, and of religious and other identities.

Spinoza's theory, then, also contains a conception of citizenship from which we can profit, one which is embedded in particular community such that subjectivity is relational and intersubjective, and grounded in the customary historical 'privileges' of one's city or province, a particular way of conducting politics, and located within a flourishing system of non-nation-state-based polycentric aristocratic government. It draws on local conditions in the United Provinces, and is proudly based on customary practices and tradition,<sup>3</sup> affirming a social constructionist version of citizenship. Spinoza expresses a strong desire to model his vision of a 'free state' on the political practice of the country in which he was born and lived all his life. His philosophical perspective did not rule out but went hand in hand with an engagement with Dutch politics. The distinctive slippage from conceptual point to local historical example which characterises his political works is in line with the Dutch elevation of practice over theory. Lloyd and Gatens (1999, p. 128) confirm that, 'normativity, for Spinoza, is grounded in the judgements of political powers and institutions, including the historical legacy of past institutions that are continuous with those in the present'. Deleuze (1990, p. 16) highlights the importance of practice in Spinoza's philosophy as a whole, and contends that in 'Spinoza's thought, life is not an idea, a matter of theory. It is a way of being'.

Spinoza does not theorise citizenship in either political treatise. He sometimes refers explicitly to citizens, often using the term interchangeably with the term 'subjects', and also speaks of 'private persons', 'men', 'fellows', 'the people', 'individuals', 'fellow men', 'the populace', 'the multitude'. It is clear that many of these usages in context are used as alternatives to 'citizen'. Light is thrown on this crucial looseness of usage in two of Spinoza's statements about citizenship which are worth highlighting. In his second political treatise Spinoza does make a point of defining and distinguishing citizens and subjects in the following manner (TP, p. 301), although this distinction is not one he adheres to systematically, and the sharp differentiation he draws in this passage goes against the tenor of the rest of the interchangeable usage in the two political treatises:

Under every dominion the state is said to be Civil; but the entire body subject to a dominion is called a Commonwealth, and the general business of the dominion, subject to the direction of him that holds it, has the name of Affairs of State. Next we call men Citizens, as far as they enjoy by the civil law all the advantages of the commonwealth, and Subjects, as far as they are bound to obey its ordinances or laws. Lastly...of the civil state, there are three kinds - democracy, aristocracy and monarchy.

Spinoza's main and crucial purpose here is to underline his binary divide between *civil* forms of government and theocracy. He reaffirms that all three forms of government described are civil forms of government; theocracy is ruled out. The TTP establishes the philosophical claim that the political domain is properly governed by natural reason rather than theological authority and the argument for the strict separation between truths gained from religious knowledge and from natural reason, and the TP is a desecralised account of politics and government. The enormously controversial force of the argument was to segregate religious knowledge and authority away from the arena of political society, and to establish natural reason as the proper guide in the public domain. Spinoza's aim was

to set out the grounds for analysing politics, government and the political community in civil and not religious terms. Malcolm notes that the 'anti-clerical, tolerationist, republican writings of the 1660s form the main background to Spinoza's political works' (Malcolm [1991](#), p. 551). Spinoza's relaxed approach to the citizen/subject distinction is also partly due to his sense of the underlying work that the category of citizenship does in a civil society. In a modern liberal state citizenship provides an essential bulwark against the encroachment of state power, whereas for Spinoza it is the self-government of the dominion that is being celebrated and from which flows the benefits of liberty to citizens/subjects.

In another passage, in which Spinoza expresses the anti-theocratic view more clearly, he states that 'men are not born fit for citizenship, but must be made so' (TP, p. 313). While later theorists such as Nietzsche and Foucault would identify the 'making' of citizens with the disciplining of bodies, Spinoza's target is a different one. Contained in this statement is the sense of what we would call social constructionism, the political (open-ended, contestable and conflictual) rather than necessary, merely natural, or 'given' dimension of shared life in a commonwealth. Social constructionism in this political reading has five features. It is reflected in the achieved distinctiveness of civil over theocratic forms of government; the crucial significance of attending to the particular form of traditional practice; the profoundly relational and intersubjective character of social experience; the importance of setting down strong institutional foundations for a robust civil society through 'balance' and 'proportion'; and the weight placed by Spinoza on formulating political concepts like citizenship in accordance with reason (which in Spinoza's view coincides, in any specific country being discussed, with its sound practice and its traditions) rather than religious doctrine or natural law. In making this statement Spinoza is also advertising his close alignment to the position of one side in contemporary local political struggles.

Spinoza was prompted to write his political theory not just as an extension of his philosophical disposition and his reading of other political theorists, but also by the political turmoil of the United Provinces in which he lived.<sup>4</sup> Curley confirms that the reason Spinoza put the *Ethics* to one side to write the TTP has 'much to do with the political and social conditions in the Netherlands at that time' (Curley in Spinoza [1985](#), p. 350). [Klever](#) describes Spinoza as one 'who so loved his country and its much-praised freedom' (1996, p. 45), and observes that 'Amsterdam... was a positive example in the eyes of Spinoza' (p. 38). Because of Spinoza's attachment to the strong and particular identity of the Dutch case, it makes sense to explore Spinoza's intended meaning in terms of his political society and culture. What is being developed here is a political reading of Spinoza, bringing out the importance of politics for him. For Spinoza, citizenship follows from living in a civil society, not from pre-political rights. One's citizenship attests to one's living in a dominion which employs *persuasie* (the Dutch practice of resolving differences politically, in practical and pragmatic negotiation through the art of compromise and consensus-building, in a spirit of tolerance of contestation between legitimate interests in the public domain), rather than by inherited hierarchical status or by the application of moral or religious injunction.

However, Spinoza's contribution to the political culture of the United Provinces, while extensive and serious, appears in important ways as that of an outsider to the real issues of political life, as he wrote from a perspective that was outside both the university establishment and the ruling regent class. And while he was seen as lending support to De Witt's republican government, in particular through his published interventions, the publication of the TTP in 1670 was regarded as untimely, and the TP in 1677 was too late to prevent De Witt's vision of 'True Liberty' being overpowered.

In order to understand the meaning that citizenship had for Spinoza, we need to explore the categories of freedom and republicanism, and consider through them what political subjectivity entailed for him. Spinoza is not talking about disaggregated modern liberal rational autonomous pre-political individuals but about a sense of subjectivity arising from being a member of a specific social and civil body. For Spinoza, we are constructively constituted in relations, in intersubjectivity. The starting point for subjectivity is necessarily shared values and customs, the particular and contextual. Spinoza's conception contains a richer understanding of subjectivity and citizenship than

does the modern liberal notion, of the social glue that binds individuals as citizens, of the role of political culture in people's lives. This does not necessarily lead to conservatism or a denial of individuality for Spinoza, but to reform built on an awareness of the background out of which it grew, even though there is a strong predisposition not to make those assumptions explicit, and in the context of a political culture in which *persuasie* is crucial.

Spinoza is in favour of promoting the citizens' 'free judgment' (understood, as we shall see, as compliance with reason), rather than with fostering their widespread political participation. He is also keen on the freedom of the dominion (free from foreign interference as well as from religious leaders), and on the compulsory political duties of the (aristocratic) rulers, both in making and implementing policy and in terms of negotiating differences recognised and respected as intractable between the provinces. So Spinoza is not describing modern multicultural and social identity difference, but differences arising out of settled regional loyalties and local traditions. Citizens' or subjects' rights are safeguarded primarily for Spinoza by their belonging to polities which have a settled and workable framework of practices, traditions, and privileges. Citizenship is not meaningfully the granting of a formal, legal, status nor set of formal, thin legal rights (and especially not in the later modern sense), but is secure inclusion and belonging within an elaborated set of practices and values in which one can live a good life.

## Freedom

The modern view regards the individual freedom to hold and claim rights, primarily individual but possibly also group rights, as a key indicator of meaningful citizenship and a crucial vehicle for extending citizenship. Spinoza subscribes to a richly textured and multifaceted but largely positive conception of liberty in which the notion of rights (and certainly the modern liberal meaning) is largely absent. The complex meaning of his theorisation of liberty comprehends four closely related elements. These are personal freedom to explore the love of God, religious toleration, the self-government or liberty of the commonwealth to govern itself, and recognition of claims made on the basis of the traditional privileges of specific cities. Spinoza's understanding of liberty also crucially involves consideration of his particular conceptions of reason, democracy and aristocracy, and of equality and inequality.

Spinoza's account of liberty can be seen as demonstrating a continuum across his major works of the range and significance of his preoccupation with the concept. The account of liberty focuses in turn on the possibility of human freedom in the *Ethics*, through the relationship between God and man; on this possibility in a political setting in the TTP; and on the possibility of the political liberty of the dominion in the TP. Spinoza argues that where there is the liberty of the free state, there is the opportunity for personal (religious) freedom. The meaning of both parts of what Spinoza is linking here is greatly enriched in terms of the Dutch tradition of religious toleration and what was understood by political independence, and make a great deal of sense when viewed as a self-conscious contribution to that tradition.

Spinoza's argument for the individual's development of personal freedom is the subject of the *Ethics*. It is a freedom that derives from the importance of understanding man's place in nature as always already socialised. To consider oneself apart from the rest of nature is to ignore one's potential and powers in relation to one's society and polity. In the TTP Spinoza argues specifically that 'this same liberty can and should be accorded with safety to the state and the magisterial authority - in fact, that it cannot be withheld without great danger to peace and detriment to the community' (p. 60). Personal religious freedom and political self-government are the strongest, and inter-linked, meanings of liberty in Spinoza. Liberty is primarily for Spinoza a moral quality exercised by spiritual and rational persons and by dominions, a freedom and necessity to pursue the love of God and a freedom of the commonwealth to govern itself.

Spinoza is committed to the view in the TTP that man's aim is ultimately religious, but that it requires the necessary

*political* context which enables that aim to flourish. The commonwealth which allows man to pursue a life devoted to 'the knowledge and love of God' (TTP, p. 60) and personal virtue in blessedness, that is, happiness or human flourishing - man's highest goal - is a polity which has a sophisticated understanding of religious toleration, and so necessarily has sovereign power and authority in both civil and religious affairs. The sovereign's laws in both areas override any other law, and so dictate the terms of civil religious pluralism, though not, of course, of faith. The resonance of Spinoza's argument concerning personal freedom is clearly present when he goes on to argue that 'the ultimate aim of government is not to rule, or restrain, by fear, nor to exact obedience, but contrariwise, to free every man from fear, that he may live in all possible security'. The 'true aim of government is liberty' (TTP, pp. 258-259). Spinoza makes a similar point in the TP when he argues that, 'the quality of the state of any dominion is easily perceived from the end of the civil state, which end is nothing else but peace and security of life'. It follows that 'that dominion is the best, where men pass their lives in unity, and the laws are kept unbroken' (TP, p. 313). Spinoza demonstrates that his deep interest in politics and political arrangements follows directly from his philosophical position outlined in the *Ethics*, and that political life has an irreducibly ethical and social dimension.

Thus Spinoza does not start with the modern liberal individualist view of man, whereby man is first encountered as a purely pre-political individual, with natural rights, and for whom negative liberty is then required to make the quality of his life in a social organisation acceptable. Spinoza's man is born into a moral and social world, one that is shaped by a particular history, customs and practices. Although Spinoza does posit a state of nature along Hobbesian lines in the TTP (pp. 201-205), this device does not play a major role in his argument.

Jonathan Israel usefully compares Spinoza's view of toleration with Locke's position. Locke saw toleration in terms of 'freedom of worship and the peaceful coexistence of dissenting Churches alongside each national, or public, Church' (Israel 2001, p. 265). Israel argues that '[p]recisely because it is a theological conception, Locke's toleration is grudging, on doctrinal grounds, in according toleration to some groups' (those belonging to 'organised, permitted congregations') and 'emphatic in denying toleration to others' (agnostics, deists, atheists). Moreover Locke equivocated over whether toleration should be extended to Catholics. Spinoza belonged to a more radical school of thought which called for 'freedom of thought and expression, including the expression of ideas incompatible with the core tenets of revealed religion upheld by the Churches' (Israel 2001, pp. 265-266). For Spinoza freedom of worship was a secondary matter, and 'toleration has primarily to do with individual freedom, not a coexistence of Churches, and still less the freedom of ecclesiastical structure to increase their followings' (Israel 2001, p. 266). [Israel](#) observes that the 'gulf separating Locke's and Spinoza's conceptions of toleration, originating in Locke's concern for saving souls and Spinoza's for ensuring individual freedom', is 'widened further by Spinoza's anxiety to whittle down ecclesiastical power' in government (2001, p. 267).

Spinoza (1632-1677) was born in Amsterdam and lived all his life in Holland. The legal position of Jews in Holland was precarious, with residence rights only introduced in 1657, and then on condition that the Jewish community would undertake the internal control of heresy (Feldman [1982](#), p. 3). In 1660 the momentous step was taken by the Sephardic community, acting with the authority of the Amsterdam law, to physically expel Spinoza from Amsterdam for persistent heresy.<sup>5</sup> Although Spinoza abandoned his belief in the orthodox Jewish religion, he retained his Marrano status in Holland and could never become or be regarded by others as a full Dutch citizen. [Boxer](#) notes (1965, p. 145) that it was not until 1796 that Dutch Jews received full citizenship rights, and [Gullan-Whur](#) registers (1998, p. 73) that 'Jews were forbidden to marry Dutch citizens, and the granting of Dutch citizenship to them in 1657 for the purposes of free passage while trading or travelling did not alter this ruling'. Such pieces of evidence indicate the limits of religious toleration policies in the United Provinces. Spinoza benefited from the Dutch culture of toleration towards Marranos, but he was forever an outsider within.

Spinoza's defence of liberty and toleration, and arguments against governing by fear, take on new force in the light of the sharp increase in government censorship in the mid-1670s under William III's 'Orangist offensive'.<sup>6</sup> The bans included Spinoza's own TTP and the works of other Dutch authors as well as Hobbes's *Leviathan*. The bans extended

to the removal of a liberal academic from his chair in Leiden (van Bunge [1999](#), p. 26), as part of the climate in which the teaching of the radical Cartesian doctrine was prohibited in an attempt to stem the intellectual revolution that was taking place (Israel [2001](#), p. 29).

The Dutch tradition of identifying the privileges and ancient liberties of cities and provinces, as set out in law, as a means of ensuring the political liberty of self-government, and the normative value attached to practice, are endorsed by Spinoza and linked to his own argument about personal freedom. The key to a free dominion being able to weather the condition of conflict and discord that inevitably characterises political life, and to being able to endure over time, does not lie in only one form of government. Spinoza is committed to a detailed correspondence between the levels of personal freedom and self-government. But Spinoza does *not* claim that the development of personal freedom corresponds to the individual's *political* liberty, through participation for instance. The political liberty upon which Spinoza focuses characterises not the political individual but the commonwealth, the public domain, which requires self-government in order to ensure the continuity, persistence and stability of the polity. The liberty of subjects in civil society is guaranteed by the state, by its being self-governing, which ensures peace, and by having proper 'foundations' which protect the state against corruption.

Northern Netherlanders in the different provinces and towns shared a highly developed sense of the power and freedom of people as a polity rather than simply as individuals. They protected their power tenaciously, and justified it with what seemed to them unassailable arguments in terms of freedom as ancient privileges, specific immunities, charters granted, ancient rights, legitimated by customary usage and historical tradition rather than by abstract warrant. Because this was the *status quo*, one which had always been so back into the mists of time, real or imagined, was in itself more than sufficient reason in their eyes for it to continue. The privileges performed four functions in Dutch politics. They were 'charters [which] functioned as constitutional guarantees of liberty', with the States<sup>7</sup> assemblies 'presented as [their] virtuous guardians' (Van Gelderen [1999](#), p. 192). Here the privileges acted as a buffer between local and overlord power, and meant that habitually the provinces effectively governed themselves.

They also structured 'the administration of justice and local government', and each 'province and each city had its own form of government, often set out in charters that limited the power of the sovereign and guaranteed, in varying degrees, the conduct of government and justice by persons chosen from the local people' (Woltjer [1975](#), p. 21). Moreover, these privileges were not 'rights of one town at another's cost', for 'they ran in parallel for all towns and provinces alike. That is why towns and provinces could unite in the defence of these privileges' (Woltjer [1975](#), p. 22).

Thirdly, as Van Gelderen notes ([1999](#), p. 191), the charters 'played a major role in the formulation and codification of political rights and duties', and that accumulated together, the privileges 'began to form a sort of "implicit constitution"'. The protection of privileges had been the basis of old claims of resistance against the Spanish as well as of new claims in the Dutch Republic asserting provincial sovereignty. Under the Dutch Republic, the idea that the privileges were symbolic in forming a default constitution was a claim that was constantly reasserted until it became accepted as a fact.

Fourthly, the privileges stood for shared assumptions about the way politics was done. Woltjer (1975, p. 25) makes a strong case that during the Revolt against the Spanish and subsequently in the Dutch Republic, the language of privileges provided 'a legitimate basis for action'. Claims made about them change and strengthen over time, but the power of the new claim depended upon the denial that it was innovative. Boone and Prak ([1995](#), p. 128) capture well the way in which the new claims made about the privileges were at the same time deeply conservative and very radical. All innovation in politics had to be justified by demonstrating its conformity with traditional practice. The privileges remained a disaggregated collection of symbols but the claims made on their behalf were not only symbolic. They referred to concrete issues of self-government in the 'real' world.

## Reason

Reason is a complex subject in Spinoza's political theory. The role of reason for man and in commonwealths also employs the correspondence between personal freedom and political liberty, and because it is grounded in this way does not have the 'objective' and universal quality associated in the modern conception with Kant's formulation. In his chapter on natural right in the TP, Spinoza outlines the crucial nexus between necessitated nature, freedom and reason, which defines man's natural rights. But Spinoza is careful to underline that while reason is solely responsible for leading to 'truth and wisdom' (TTP, p. 134), 'we cannot perceive by the natural light of reason that simple obedience is the path of salvation' (TTP, p. 198): this is 'taught by revelation only that it is so by the special grace of God, which our reason cannot attain' (TTP, p. 198). Reason leads to personal freedom or 'freedom of mind' which is equated with blessedness (*Ethics*, p. 203), which is described as 'not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself!' (*Ethics*, p. 22). Reason for Spinoza is also a procedural reason, or reasoning, as in Hobbes, when he says 'it is reason's own law, to choose the less of two evils; and accordingly we may conclude, that no one is acting against the dictate of his own reason, so far as he does what by the law of the commonwealth is to be done' (TP, p. 303).

A crucial part of Spinoza's argument is that man is determined by having a nature according to which he must operate. He does not have the free will to operate other than by his nature. Man, like God, 'operates according to the necessity of his own nature'. Thus the 'free judgment' that Spinoza extols is a free exercise of liberty in accordance with reason, as well as a religious freedom that ties in with his notion of religious toleration. For Spinoza it is vitally important not to 'confound liberty with contingency' (TP, p. 294). Man is not free 'not to exist or not to use his reason, but only in so far as he preserves the power of existing and operating according to the laws of human nature'. The more free a man is, the more he will use reason and choose good over evil. Liberty 'does not take away the necessity of acting, but supposes it' (TP, p. 294). The heart of Spinoza's argument is the notion that a man is most free when he is most led by reason, because reason is consonant with his nature and freedom is identified, by Spinoza, with what is most necessitated (TP, p. 295, TTP, p. 200). This point leads to Blom's assessment of the 'ambiguous foundation of Spinoza's republicanism: it is about freedom, but mostly about determinism' (Blom [1995](#), p. 233).

When Spinoza argues that reason ought also to be the guiding influence for commonwealths as well as for individuals, he again equates reason and liberty. He contends 'that state is the freest whose laws are founded on sound reason, so that every member of it may, if he will, be free; that is, live with full consent under the entire guidance of reason' (TTP, p. 206). And the 'sound reason' of commonwealths comes from its habitual tried and tested practices and foundations, and not from foreign interventions, religion, or abstract self-proclaimed moral absolutes.

## Democracy and aristocracy

We have seen that Spinoza argues that there are three types of 'free dominion' or civil form of government in which citizenship is meaningful. When Spinoza contends in the TTP that democracy is the best and most natural form of government,<sup>8</sup> this is not in contradiction of the statement about the triad of civil forms of commonwealth and he is not undertaking a modern eulogising of democracy. Spinoza is extending the logic of his correspondence between personal freedom and the political liberty of the commonwealth, in that 'man is then most independent, when he is most led by reason... in consequence... that commonwealth is most powerful and most independent, which is founded and guided by reason' (TP, p. 313). Spinoza's understanding of democracy is, from our point of view, turned on its head. Democracy is, 'of all forms of government the most natural, and the most consonant with individual



liberty' (TTP, p. 207), for 'in a democracy... men with one consent agree to live according to the dictates of reason' (TTP, p. 247), and 'everyone is bound to obey it in all things' (TTP, p. 205). In other words, in a democracy all men are, as equals, most fully bound (by consent, as part of the sovereign), and so are in this sense most free. The match between members of the polity, reason, sovereignty, and liberty is most 'absolute'. This does not turn subjects into slaves, for a 'slave is he who is led away by his pleasures', whereas men in a democracy live 'with free consent under the entire guidance of reason' (TTP, p. 206).

Spinoza's analysis also trades on the understanding of traditional practice as upheld by the Dutch, for a commonwealth guided by reason will be one which recognises and acts upon its own nature - its own customs and laws - and which 'lays the foundations' (TP, p. 379) that will preserve its nature and its liberty. As Spinoza remarks, 'he who studies to avoid the inconveniences, to which a dominion is liable, must apply remedies that suit its nature, and can be derived from its own foundations' (TP, p. 379). Spinoza's understanding of reason is therefore dramatically different from Hobbes's and from other political thinkers for whom reason is opposed to custom and tradition.

In any case Spinoza's estimation of democracy was greatly reduced between 1670 and 1677. Feuer ([1978](#), pp. 65-66) argues that the TP remained incomplete because Spinoza lost confidence in democracy. In the TP he argues that an aristocracy (especially of a province in which sovereignty is shared between independent cities and with a weak confederal institution) can also, through the mechanisms of central role of the 'sufficiently large council' and the accuracy of the 'proportion' of patricians to commoners which sets firm 'foundations', also attain the kind of 'absoluteness' which made democracy pre-eminent. Spinoza (TP, p. 297) now argues that,

he holds dominion, to whom are entrusted by common consent affairs of state - such as the laying down, interpretation, and abrogation of laws, the fortification of cities, deciding on war and peace, etc. But if this charge belong to a council, composed of the general multitude, then the dominion is called a democracy; if the council be composed of certain chosen persons, it is an aristocracy; and if, lastly, the care of affairs of state and, consequently, the dominion rest with one man, then it has the name of monarchy.

An aristocratic dominion is Spinoza's mature preference (Steinberg [2008](#), p. 249) because it acknowledges most effectively the greatest power of the council - to govern and also to choose its own members. It is apparent from Spinoza's argument throughout the TP that his central concern is to promote the power of this supreme council. Van Deursen's description of how important to the Dutch was the practice in politics of 'meeting in council', is very pertinent to the discussion of Spinoza's approach to politics. The interests of provincial autonomy led to *persuasie* and the development of a political structure that inhibited the individual concentration of power. As a result, says van Deursen, it 'was normal to give authority not to a person, but to a council' (van Deursen [1999](#), p. 149). Spinoza's clear preference for an aristocracy of several cities, his distrust of the centralised power of a monarch, and his provision that even in a monarchy the council plays a decisive role, all recall the Dutch habit of 'meeting in council'. The correspondence Spinoza understands as operating between individual liberty and the self-governing, independent commonwealth is also extended into the notion of citizenship. In one of his chapters on aristocracy in the TP Spinoza several times refers to the citizenship of towns within a province (TP, pp. 366, 370-371, 377).

The three alternatives of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy differ essentially only in the institutional balance by which they organise the polity. Subjects retain the same natural rights, liberty and freedom of worship, whichever of the three models of free dominion they live in. Democracy does not extend and develop rights and liberties, or the importance of political debate, more than other forms of government. Furthermore, democracy can legitimately be severely limited by qualification restrictions (for instance, of age or money contribution), such that the supreme council might be smaller in a democracy than in an aristocracy (TP, p. 385), and so resemble what we would call an aristocracy. Spinoza's definition of selection for aristocratic government is similarly strange to a modern audience, since he asserts that patricians are chosen by the supreme council, supposedly on merit, and are accountable to those

that chose them.

Aristocratic government for Spinoza follows local practice in the northern Netherlands and refers to 'certain persons chosen [by election or nomination] out of the multitude, whom we shall henceforth call patricians' (TP, p. 345), also known as regents or the *regenten*, for a certain period of office or for their lifetime but such posts could not be inherited. The patricians were an elite group of rulers (legislators and administrators) and magistrates selected from the urban economic class of prominent maritime and land-based merchants and commercial traders within their city or province. In Spinoza's preferred aristocratic dominion regents and magistrates are obliged to carry out public service, for the most part the unglamorous work of sustaining the ongoing political organisation, stability and well-being of the dominion. Councillors, according to Spinoza, should be subject to heavy fines for non-attendance (TP, p. 355) - such fines are necessary, he maintains, since it would be in councillors' own self-interest to give first priority to their own private, probably merchant and trading interests.

Thus Spinoza's conditions for aristocratic and democratic government are in important respects exactly the opposite of our modern definitions. But both of his definitions make sense when they are set against the thriving practice and provisions of De Witt's regent republicanism in the Dutch 'golden age'. According to Spinoza's definition, modern representative democracy would be regarded as an aristocracy because our legislative bodies, let alone our governments are, like his definition of aristocracy, 'composed of certain chosen persons' (TP, p. 345).

Spinoza is defending not the democratic form of government, but politics as a public domain of debate. For Spinoza, dominions are good or bad according to the ability of the design of their institutional arrangements to promote and protect the liberty of citizens and the self-government of the commonwealth, not according to their alignment with modern democracy. In contrast with our modern conflation of 'politics' and 'democratic politics', the high importance Spinoza attaches to political debate, *persuasie*, and the council as the highest organ of government, is quite separate for him from the issue of whether a democratic or an aristocratic structure of government is to be preferred.

## Equality

Spinoza does not subscribe to a modern conception of equality. In the TTP he argues that all men are equal in that for each of them natural right is coextensive with power (TTP, p. 200), they all possess the capacity for natural reason (as described above), and democracy is most natural because in it men are most equal (as described above). All men are equally bound not to commit treason (TTP, p. 209), and 'to love their neighbour as themselves' (TTP, p. 210). At the same time, Spinoza sees no contradiction in distrusting the masses (TP, p. 288), expressing his distaste for the 'fickle disposition of the multitude... governed solely by emotions, not by reason... easily corrupted' (TTP, p. 216), and in justifying inequalities, including the exclusion of women from citizenship on account of their 'natural' inequality (TP, pp. 386-387). It is clear from the publication of the TTP and TP in Latin rather than in the vernacular that Spinoza had no intention of appealing to the masses to endorse his political views.

However, the change in his views from the TTP to the TP shows a sharp decline in his confidence in the mass of the population to govern or to exercise reason. In the first place, Spinoza accents in the TP that the political liberty of the commonwealth needs to be protected from the corrupting influence of man's natural rights, not wholly given up in civil society (TP, p. 313), reasoning that, 'however they be associated, and bound together by laws' (TP, p. 351), the passionate and corrupting side of man's nature remains a threat to the dominion. Now the individuals who make up the dominion are categorised as patricians, subjects or foreigners. There is to be equality between patricians (TP, p. 354), but remarkably Spinoza discerns nothing unfair in regarding subjects who are not patricians in the same class as foreigners, contending that 'all but the patricians are foreigners' (TP, p. 350).

In the second place Spinoza bluntly describes the inequality between citizens and their polity (city), and between cities within a province (TP, p. 371), drawing an analogy between the two. Spinoza notes that 'he who seeks equality between unequals, seeks an absurdity' (TP, p. 371). Instead of a notion of abstract equality Spinoza determines that these relationships are based on the connection between right and power, so that 'every city has so much more right than a private man, as it excels him in power' (TP, p. 371). Indeed, Spinoza turns the notion of equality as we understand it on its head, when he adds that '[c]itizens, indeed, are rightly esteemed equal, because the power of each, compared with that of the whole dominion, is of no account' (TP, p. 371). Furthermore, the right of the city over the individual is vested in the patricians alone (TP, p. 371). Patricians ought to be equal with each other, because the supreme authority of the dominion 'rests with this council as a whole, not with every individual member of it' (TP, p. 353), whereas the commons or multitude has no necessarily equal footing, even with each other. Spinoza's discussion of the relationship between cities in an aristocracy - of their unequal power, that cities must be able to 'yet remain, as far as possible, independent', and that patricians 'have supreme right over their own city' (TP, p. 371) - accurately describes the letter and the spirit of De Witt's republic and the peculiarly Dutch suppression of central power.

The way in which Spinoza can argue that individuals all have natural right but are unequal and that cities are autonomous and unequal, such that their inequality does not modify their independence nor imply loss of liberty, would be seen as problematic in the framework of other political theorists such as Hobbes. But it makes perfect sense for Spinoza precisely because it mirrors the political practice of the United Provinces of which he approved.

Thirdly, Spinoza argues at length in the TP for a notion of balance and proportion in and between cities and between provinces in a confederal dominion which is based on justified inequalities. In both liberal and modern republican theories, citizenship regulates relations between rulers and ruled, and in the republican ideal citizenship also defines the relationship between the ruled as equals. Spinoza's conception of citizenship shows a marked absence of these features, but while he is no radical egalitarian, the notion of balance and proportion is something of an alternative and is a crucial category in his political theory, playing an important role in the *Ethics* (Israel [2001](#), pp. 234-235) as well as in the TTP (p. 200) and TP. For Spinoza 'balance' does not refer to a compromise between extremes that leads to a principle of tolerance, nor establish a mean or middle point, for there is no sense in Spinoza of the central way being the best, and unequal power relations, for instance, between the provinces of the United Provinces, do not strike him as unfair. For Spinoza the metaphors of 'balance' and 'proportion' are used to refer to equilibrium, to express both inequality and the key to harmony in a dominion because they reflect the correct amount of right a city or council should be assigned. The critical point for Spinoza is that when a fitting proportion creates balance, movement is suspended in dynamic tension, of partners poised in relationship, in balance rather than equal with one another. For him this constructive tension of balance is a principle of anti-corruption, not of tolerance. For example, a balanced council is one which is too small to fall into factions or parties, and yet small enough to prevent it reverting to the multitude. Balance between a group of people or competing interests is achieved through proportion, and a balanced institution of government or politics represents a group of people, not necessarily in an electoral sense but as a constituency nevertheless. Between cities the proportion is a given, whereas between a council and its city the proportion is deliberately calculated and implemented (TP, p. 372).

The strengthening of Spinoza's views on equality and inequality between the TTP and the TP may be related to the catastrophic political upheavals of 1672. The French invasion of the United Provinces, the downfall and assassination of De Witt, and the re-emergence of the political power of the House of Orange, all signified the end of the republican experiment. Elwes graphically describes the personal impact on Spinoza of the violence of the mob that killed De Witt. The 'shameful massacre of the brothers De Witt by an infatuated mob brought Spinoza into close and painful contact with the passions seething round him'. Elwes continues that '[f]or once his philosophic calm was broken' and 'he was only by force prevented from rushing forth into the streets at the peril of his life, and proclaiming his abhorrence of the crime' (Elwes [1951](#), p. xvii).

# Republicanism

The modern notion of citizenship builds upon historical republican and liberal traditions. Republicanism is an important concept for Spinoza, but his view differs from the dominant form co-opted into the mainstream discussion of modern citizenship. Spinoza, living in the republicanism of the United Provinces in its spectacularly successful 'golden age', puts forward a distinctive understanding of a republic which is self-consciously allied to the practice of the Dutch Republic (TTP, p. 6). It was primarily local and particularistic and does not refer to a *moral* ideal of self-government nor to the notion of civic participation as in the mainstream republican tradition. While Spinoza occasionally referred to the 'republic' he, in common with others in the Dutch Republic, shied away from arguing for one in a positive sense, since that would be to seem to endorse innovation. Spinoza shared the determination to conduct politics through language that preserved 'the old freedom and the old political order' (Van Gelderen 1990, p. 218). His republicanism attests to the diversity of republican practice and theorising. It was a continuing anomaly from the developing norm of powerful centralising, unitary and at times absolutist territorial states like France and England, and Spinoza and the Netherlanders shared a very distinctive insularity in only seeking legitimation for their republicanism from their own local tradition.<sup>9</sup>

Dutch republicanism emerged as the outcome of a defence of a distinctive way of doing politics. Spinoza's republicanism, in the Dutch context, involves at its heart an understanding of the value given to a bundle of meanings of liberty. It meant tenaciously reasserted local and particularistic self-government among strong independent municipal town councils and provincial States assemblies; where political authority is shared between the States of the provinces, the towns, and the States General, in a distributed pattern of sovereignty, within an equilibrated political structure of a decentralised balance of regional complementarity held in dynamic tension but with a Hollandcentric focus, expressed in the loosest of polycentric confederal alliances; the political dominance of the political elite of urban municipal and provincial regent oligarchies of the independent provinces and towns throughout the United Provinces; not attached to a centralising trend or territory with a fixed boundary, where notions of exclusive territorial authority and the impersonal rule of a state bureaucracy do not apply; a traditionalist practice and an implicit constitutionalism as a set of claims about the defence of privileges; a propensity against theorising practice too closely and leaving the mismatch between theory and practice and the constitutional situation deliberately fruitfully ambiguous; and De Witt's 'True Liberty' policy - none of which figure in the abstract definition of 'classical republicanism'. The Dutch Republic was also a secular dominion in that church and state were never fused but toleration and freedom of worship were practiced. The organisation of the Reformed Church was province-based and it did not become a national established institution, nor endorsed with special status by the States General.

Maintaining a way of doing politics was a crucial feature of Dutch republicanism in two ways. The Dutch sought to defend a political tradition, a political practice and a Dutch mentality they valued highly, and the features of Dutch republicanism were a contingent and unruly mixture, the product of accident rather than design. Rather than streamline its unintended provisions in radical and innovative constitutional and institutional reform, the Dutch preferred to make the mixture work through concrete political bargaining.

De Witt's 'True Liberty' perspective was an ideological statement of republican self-government, a vibrantly successful practice whose central purpose and significance was to underline the extreme insularity and particularist and separatist disposition shared by the provinces and cities. It was also an international relations strategy and an economic plan, about seeking to remain at peace with warlike neighbours in the international politics of Europe, not least in order to maintain Holland-centricity, since favouring Holland's commercial and trading interests required peace to flourish, and promoting economic prosperity more generally. It was also a tolerationist policy towards the ongoing Remonstrant Counter-Remonstrant confrontation,<sup>10</sup> and towards refugees and minority religious belief more widely. Kossmann makes the important point that what was new with 'True Liberty' (*ware vrijheid*) was the

addition, in the 1650s, of a fourth element in the Dutch understanding of liberty, 'the conviction that the independent, federal and tolerant state should have a clearly defined republican form of government if it wished to be truly free' (Kossmann [1991](#), p. 286).

Spinoza's republicanism is best understood through several crucial links with the De Witt regime which can be seen as central to its composition - Spinoza's defence of the De Witt regime's republican settlement, his deeply engaged criticisms of that regime, and the ways in which he was out of step with mainstream Dutch republicanism. The importance of these links is part of what is meant by presenting a 'political' reading of Spinoza's political works. Spinoza's direct criticisms of De Witt's regime centred on the increasingly closed composition of the *regenten* and their growing aristocratisation. The specific reforms he proposed amount to a set of decentralising measures, in line with the ethos of the 'Republics of the Seven Provinces'.

## Conclusion

A political reading of Spinoza's view of citizenship in terms of a way of conducting politics, throws into relief the depoliticised modern idea of citizenship we have inherited, and reinvests citizenship with political meaning. Unlike the modern conception, Spinoza's view of citizenship does not posit a rights-based form of citizenship, which tends to be pre-political and universal and lends itself to a form of naturalism in a *Rechtstaat* legal framework, modelling the subjectivity of the citizen on a liberal autonomous and rational individual, nor identifying democracy and political participation as key means of enacting the equality of citizens. Spinoza's statement that 'men are not born fit for citizenship, but must be made so' (TP, p. 313) sums up his view that citizens/subjects interact with one another politically (in a realm of contestation where the outcome is not known in advance); that they are formed and constituted in social inter-relationship; that they are members of a civil (created, achieved) as opposed to theocratic (following in a necessary manner from a religious doctrine) form of government (of which there are three kinds); that the criterion for civil government is reason; that reason is secular (and here Spinoza does share with the modern notion the sense that citizenship operates in a secular sphere according to reason, even if the definition of reason is different) and accords with the settled practices and traditions of a stable country; that a civil form of government will have a strong institutional design based on proportion and balance; and that the United Provinces of his day was a prime example of such a civil state.

In the Dutch context, the political reading accentuates the strategies that were such a distinctive feature of the political culture of the Dutch Republic and Spinoza's reading of it. Spinoza defends the thriving context of politics and citizenship at city and province levels (and so his conception of citizenship contains a stronger sense than the modern one of active citizenship in *local* politics), and advocates the suppression of central state activity. It stresses the role in the political life of the country of shared assumptions drawn from political tradition and practice about how to conduct politics in terms of ongoing elaborate, dynamic and delicate negotiation of 'provisionality and contingency' (Williams [2007](#), p. 351) through the mechanisms of debate, *persuasie*, and 'acting in council', based in the end on the economic and political autonomy of individual cities, balancing provincial particularism with toleration and consensus-building, and overcoming systemic tensions through concrete political bargaining instead of abstract theorising. Politics here is the activity of dealing with the issues and problems that legitimately and reasonably arise to disturb that balance, in order to ensure its perpetuation. The United Provinces were 'notoriously the most decentralised polity in Europe', [Speck](#) argues (1995, p. 175), and the art of compromise developed in part to avoid the intervention of central authorities such as the army, and so to 'contain conflict within the locality'.

The 'political' reading of Spinoza's political theory is also designed to enrich the view of him as a philosopher. In recent years the narrowly metaphysical interest in the *Ethics* has been supplemented, by writers like Lloyd ([1994](#), [1996](#)), Gatens ([1996a](#), [1996b](#)), Lloyd and Gatens ([1999](#)), Balibar ([1998](#)), and Williams ([2007](#)) with a growing interest in the rich ethical, ontological and epistemological theories of the *Ethics*, and their political implications.

A political reading, further, underlines the value of understanding Spinoza's theory in relation to its links with De Witt's 'True Liberty' regime. Spinoza's republicanism was ultimately about defending the public domain and seeking to update the Dutch way of doing politics. Spinoza endorses the concept of balance, which operated between the seven provinces, resulting in a polycentric, confederated alliance and provincial self-government, such that no province could assume absolute power over the others. This balance guaranteed provincial and so municipal autonomy to a very high degree indeed. He follows the Dutch understanding of the paramount sovereignty of individual provincial assemblies with their crucial sources of power, in a way which, from our point of view, radically reconceives centre-periphery relations, such that the centre is in an important sense suppressed, or alternatively multiple centres cohere around a central periphery. Bargaining and balance were also key ways Spinoza acknowledged to address the contingent and unruly mixture of features of republicanism and the deliberately ambiguous constitutional relationship of constructive tension between provinces and the United Provinces as a whole. Blom (2002, p. 97) observes that throughout the two centuries of the Dutch Republic, the terms liberty and republic had a persistently 'contested character', and 'functioned as the foci of discussion rather than as a source of agreed principles'. Spinoza wishes to reaffirm the power of the city councils and provincial States in a pattern of distributed sovereignty, without setting up an explicit constitution above them in which ultimate sovereignty would be vested. Spinoza's contribution to Dutch political debate here is that he seeks to articulate these principles of de facto constitutionalism.

Spinoza is committed to an understanding of citizenship in terms of the political liberty of an independent, tolerant, isolationist, traditionalist, self-governing, confederal, particularist, trading republic that practised persuasion, based on the polycentric pluralism provided by the cities, a privileges-led view of the constitution, and an anti-individualistic understanding of political life. This understanding coincides at every point with that promoted by the Dutch in the 1650s and 1660s. The jeopardy to liberty which Spinoza perceived came not from the threat of big government (as in the liberal case) but from the fierce religious wrangling of the Remonstrants and Counter-Remonstrants which spilled over into civil politics, and from the monarchical ambitions of the House of Orange.

## Notes

1. References are to the unabridged [Elwes](#) translation of 1951. The benefit of the Shirley translation's modern updating of the language comes at the cost of some of the nuances of the earlier translation.
2. The term 'Dutch Republic' refers specifically to its use during the two centuries spanning the period from the Treaty of Munster in 1648 to the mid-nineteenth century, in line with the usage of the inhabitants of the northern Netherlands themselves. Several modern commentators use 'Dutch Republic' to refer to the United Provinces from various dates going back to 1579. A related problem concerns the most accurate description of the commonwealth of the United Provinces after 1648. Thus 'Dutch Republic' and 'United Provinces' overlap, while 'northern Netherlands' and the 'Seven Provinces' can also be used. Roughly speaking what is now commonly known as 'Holland' was in Spinoza's time the United Provinces, one of the provinces of which was Holland.
3. The presumption of many commentators that Spinoza's political theory for the most part follows that of Hobbes, underestimates the crucial dimension of social practice in Spinoza's conception of governing. Den Uyl (1983), Lloyd and Gatens (1999), Montag (1999), Bodeker (2002), Blom (1995), and Wernham (1958, pp. 35-36), all outline a

much more richly-textured picture of Spinoza's theory.

4. The focus of attention on Spinoza in this essay does not replace a comprehensive discussion of Spinoza's political philosophy (see den Uyl [1983](#), Montag [1999](#)), the links with the *Ethics* (see Lloyd [1996](#), Lloyd and Gatens [1999](#)), nor a detailed outline of Spinoza's radical theology (Yovel [1989](#), Smith [1997](#)).

5. On Spinoza's Jewish Marrano status, see Yovel ([1989](#)), Prokhovnik ([2004](#)).

6. A longstanding tension existed between the office of 'Stadholder', historically associated with the House of Orange, and the States and States General, since the Stadholderate was strategically significant as, [Speck](#) notes (1995, p. 174), 'the one agency which had the potential to focus authority at the centre rather than the peripheries'. From 1579 the Stadholder was an agent of the States, although he could be appointed captain-general of the army by the States General. There were also two important 'Stadholderless' periods, the first of which, between 1650 and 1672, largely coincided with De Witt's republican government.

7. 'States General' (or 'Estates General') and 'States' refer to the political assemblies of the United Provinces and of the separate provinces respectively. These councils combined some legislative and executive functions, but do not correspond fully to parliamentary and prime ministerial duties. Price ([1994](#), p. 211) describes the States General as 'a conference of ambassadors from separate countries rather than a parliament'.

8. Some commentators (Wernham [1958](#), p. 28, Hampshire [1962](#), p. 208, Den Uyl and Warner [1987](#), p. 292, Negri [1991](#), p. xviii, Harris [1992](#), p. 104, Curley [1996](#), p. 317) read through a modern lens Spinoza's comment in the TP that democracy is the 'perfectly absolute dominion' (TP, p. 385) as his simply reiterating his praise of democracy in the TTP (pp. 205-206, 263).

9. These themes are elaborated in Prokhovnik ([2004](#)).

10. The struggle between liberal Calvinist Remonstrant and strict Calvinist Counter-Remonstrant factions is significant because of the complex mapping of disputes arising from religious differences on to political sources of contestation.

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