

The Continuity of Political Power and the Function of Democracy in Benedictus de Spinoza's Political Thought

Spinoza Siyasal Düşüncesinde Siyasal İktidarın Sürekliliği ve Demokrasinin İşlevi

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Abstract: This article examines the conditions necessary for the continued existence of political power amid changing power relations over time, within the framework of Spinoza's concept of democracy. Unlike those who view Spinoza as a normative advocate of democracy, this article argues that he adopts a functionalist approach. For Spinoza, democracy is a system in which the power of the people is organized most effectively to ensure the continuity of political authority. This system depends on rational laws, well-structured citizen participation, and the rational regulation of power relations. Spinoza presents democracy as a means by which political power can endure through the regulation of passions and the enforcement of common reason. The challenge of transforming ordinary people into rational citizens highlights that Spinoza's idea of democracy remains an ideal and underscores the impossibility of political power achieving absolute permanence.

Keywords: Politics, power, democracy, Spinoza, people.

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Introduction

Power is both a force and a relation of influence between bodies. For Spinoza, political power must be understood in terms of collective action and the shifting relations that constitute it. Institutionalized authority (*potestas*) and the capacity of the social body to act (*potentia*) are fundamental dimensions of political life. Sovereignty is therefore not independent of the actual power of individuals acting together as a multitude (*multitudo*). In this framework, Spinoza treats democracy as the political arrangement in which the relation between *potentia* and *potestas* is most explicitly organized.

This article argues that Spinoza's emphasis on democracy should not be interpreted as a normative endorsement, but rather as a functional and rational response to the problem of political continuity. Spinoza presents democracy as a way for political power to stabilize itself over time, providing mechanisms to manage conflict and coordinate collective forces. This does not imply an idealized view of the people's rationality. On the contrary, Spinoza's account of human behavior, already developed in the *Theological-Political Treatise* (2010), situates political life within the framework of *conatus* and the persistence of passions. The multitude is not simply a negative force to be overcome, but the immanent source of political power itself. The central task of democratic authority, in this sense, is to secure the conditions under which common reason can be institutionally sustained. Yet Spinoza remains aware of the difficulty of cultivating stable civic dispositions, – given the tendency of the masses toward intellectual inertia (Plato, 2012; Seneca, 2017). As a result, the collective capacity to organize political life through participation and institutional order remains fragile (Negri, 2014; Field, 2020, p. 19). For this reason, political power – including democratic power – always remains vulnerable to corruption and collapse.

In the literature, Spinoza is often regarded as one of the first major philosophers to develop a systematic account of democracy (Den Uyl, 1983; Israel, 2023). Some interpretations therefore portray him as a normative advocate of democracy, treating it as the morally or politically superior regime. For example, Jonathan Israel emphasizes Spinoza's articulation of democratic principles in an early modern context (Israel, 2023). In this



framework, citizen participation in government guided by common reason is essential. According to Israel, Spinoza advocates democracy and opposes both divine authority and the rule of kings and aristocrats (Israel, 2023). Similarly, Steven Nadler (2018) highlights the normative force of Spinoza's defense of freedom of expression.

This article argues that Spinoza does not defend democracy as an absolute value, but rather approaches it as part of a broader strategy through which political authority seeks to endure. This perspective aligns with interpretations that treat Spinoza's democracy not as an ideal model but as a political reality shaped by tensions between institutional stability and the power of the multitude (Balibar, 2008; Del Lucchese, 2016). As Antonio Negri (1999, 2004) notes, Spinoza's philosophy, which emphasizes the cooperation of the multitude in organizing the political system, differs from traditional forms of power that suppress the creative power of the individual by affirming the productive power of both the individual and the multitude. Because of this distinction, Negri uses Spinoza's democracy to justify a radical democracy based on equality and horizontal relations. On the other hand, Etienne Balibar argues that Spinoza's democracy, as a state of being, is not an ideal for Spinoza but a complex process (Balibar, 2008). As Balibar notes, Spinoza analyzes the conditions of democracy rather than defending it as an absolute value, drawing attention to the tensions between the ideal of democratic administration and the will to preserve political power.

Accordingly, the article investigates the following question: Why does Spinoza's thought, which does not rely on normative ideals, place democracy at the center of political organization? It argues that Spinoza affirms democracy not from an ethical standpoint, but in terms of the continuity of political power. Democracy is a functional arrangement that institutionally organizes the *potentia* of the multitude to secure the persistence of political authority (*potestas*). Rather than serving as a moral ideal, democracy functions primarily as a mechanism by which political power gains stability.

For Spinoza, democracy should not be seen as the only regime in which human dignity is realized, but as the form of political organization that most effectively incorporates the collective power relations constituting sovereignty. In this framework, rights are not moral entitlements but



expressions of the capacity to act. Since human life is defined by activity and striving, political forms are never static; they are continually forming and transforming. Democracy, therefore, is part of the broader process of political organization through which regimes emerge, endure, and decay, rather than a fixed or timeless model of rule.

Concepts such as “citizen” and “people” – that is, the unity of citizens – are not immutable categories but historically contingent constructs whose scope and meaning shift over time. These shifts are shaped by the affective dynamics of the multitude, which oscillates between fear and hope in efforts to secure collective existence. In this sense, Spinozian democracy is not a completed or fully transparent form of popular self-rule, but a fragile arrangement exposed to the instability of mass behavior and ongoing tensions between authority and collective power. Democracy’s openness, therefore, is not absolute but relative, depending on the extent to which individuals can govern themselves through reason and shared institutions. Yet such civic capacities remain rare and unevenly distributed, marking the limits of democratic stability in Spinoza’s thought. Rather than presenting democracy as an ideal to be realized, Spinoza treats it as a political process whose endurance depends on the precarious organization of the multitude’s power.

The Individual and Political Society

For Spinoza, each person acts according to principles rooted in human nature. The body, which forms the basis of one’s awareness of oneself and others, bears the marks of changes produced by encounters with other bodies (Deleuze, 2013, p. 92; Gatens & Lloyd, 1999, p. 23). At the center of human existence is the effort to preserve one’s being (*conatus*), through which individuals seek to maintain and increase their power to act (Spinoza, 2012, p. 215; 2009, p. 18). Politics arises from this condition, as human life necessarily develops within relationships with others.

Spinoza argues that the ideas of “good” and “evil” do not express fixed moral values but depend on how individuals experience pleasure and pain in relation to their own striving. People desire what they consider beneficial and avoid what they see as harmful (Spinoza, 2012, p. 213). For this reason, human behavior is shaped mainly by passions rather than reason. Because most individuals are guided primarily by passions, political order



cannot rely on rational agreement alone. Institutions must therefore work with affects, especially fear and hope, to secure collective stability (Spinoza, 2009, 2012; Rosen, 2022, p. 484).

Politics, which is possible within the framework of social life, involves preventing people from being completely carried away by their emotions and enabling them to regulate their emotions. Regulating emotions is necessary for the functioning of the mind and is also required for people to live together. To live together in peace, people must promise not to do anything that harms another person's existence (Spinoza, 2012, p. 227). A society in which this guarantee is provided according to various principles constitutes a political society.

In traditional political philosophy, human nature is often devalued because passion predominates over reason (Rosen, 2022, p. 479; Ayalon, 2023, p. 8). However, for Spinoza, a political society becomes possible when people pool their power. Individual power arises when it is organized around subjective feelings and desires. People acquire power by affirming their nature. To understand human nature is to know it well. For reason to regulate emotions, emotions must be fully recognized. A person who does not fully recognize their feelings is dominated by them and does not know what they are doing or why. A person ruled by reason, however, acts primarily in accordance with their striving and desires (Spinoza, 2012, p. 249). For Spinoza, freedom involves acting under the guidance of reason, yet political arrangements must account for the fact that most individuals remain driven by their emotions. This tension is central to the problem of political continuity.

The Problem of the Continuity of Power in the Political Society

In establishing a political order, individual retains a certain autonomy, and this autonomy cannot be fully converted into the security of the community (Rosen, 2022, p. 480). Human beings are always susceptible to deception (Spinoza, 2009, p. 18), so political power is continually at risk of weakening. The issue of the continuity of political power therefore overlaps with the question of the most stable form of government. This problem of continuity leads Spinoza to compare regimes – monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy – as alternative institutional mechanisms for stabilizing political life (Spinoza, 2009; Matheron, 1969).



The point at which the continuity of political power is threatened is understood as the moment when the regime becomes a tyranny. Tyranny refers to maintaining power through practices that undermine the peace and freedom of citizens (Spinoza, 2009, p. 12). In the *Political Treatise* (2009), which considers this situation a form of political corruption, the problem of continuity is addressed through the analysis of such corruption. According to Spinoza, an established state can endure, and thus avoid corruption, only if power does not depend on a few individuals and remains independent of the personalities of particular administrators (Spinoza, 2009, p. 14). Following Niccolò Machiavelli, Spinoza notes that those who remove a tyrant without eliminating the causes that produced tyranny act with serious imprudence (Spinoza, 2009, p. 40).

Ensuring the continuity of political power also requires securing the conditions for freedom. When power is concentrated in the hands of one person, political life tends toward domination rather than freedom. The conditions for peace consist of unity of minds, order, and stability, not merely the absence of war (Spinoza, 2009, p. 42). In a stable political organization of power, however, there is no single center of authority. Therefore, “there is no single person with a shining face to whom people can turn. To solve problems, one must turn to the law, and accordingly a reorganization takes place” (Spinoza, 2009, p. 108).

The source of power, or public power, must be understood through the common nature of human beings and the general human condition (Spinoza, 2009, p. 14). Obedience is possible because political authority appeals to the desire for self-preservation, linking individual interest to the endurance of public power (Spinoza, 2010, p. 285; Rosen, 2022, p. 485). Spinoza presents life within the state as a form of rational organization. Obeying the law in society is rational because the law embodies the common decision of all who make up political society and therefore binds everyone (Spinoza, 2009, p. 22). The sovereign’s power must be exercised through a stable legal order, as the endurance of government depends on the regular functioning of institutions rather than on arbitrary command (Spinoza, 2009, p. 36–38).

Problems in political government arise when peace and order are not sufficiently secured, institutions fail to function adequately, and the



conditions of citizenship are weakened (Spinoza, 2009, p. 38). If citizens in a political government do not abide by the law, it may be because those in power do not consistently act in accordance with the decisions they establish. Obedience is defined as “an unchangeable will to do what is necessary according to the general law of the city” (Spinoza, 2009, p. 38). The sovereign, who does not possess unlimited or arbitrary rights, must therefore limit decisions to maintain the continuity of political authority and prevent disorder.

The obedience of individuals to the laws reflects the obedience of the state, which enacts these laws, to the same legal framework. Spinoza argues that human nature “always seeks with the greatest zeal that which is useful to it; the laws which it considers right are those which it considers necessary for the preservation and increase of its welfare; thus it defends the cause of another to the extent that it believes it strengthens its own position” (Spinoza, 2009, p. 55). As long as there is harmony between the decisions and practices of political power and the interests of individuals, it makes little difference to people whether power is organized as a monarchy, aristocracy, or democracy (Spinoza, 2009, p. 55).

People support the decisions of political society and the law because they consider their own interests. The fact that people feel the need to unite does not necessarily make them subjects of unlimited power. Spinoza treats freedom as a fundamental concept that shapes the continuity of political power. The question of freedom, which applies to every form of government, remains an experiential problem for each regime (Balibar, 2008). As Spinoza writes, “humans are free insofar as they have the power to exist and act in accordance with the laws of their natures” (Spinoza, 2009, p. 18). How individual freedom is organized thus becomes a basic principle of the political unity, and the continuity of political power depends on the extent to which this principle is realized in practice.

For the security of the political body, Spinoza argues that “it does not matter what the motives of those who govern it are, as long as they govern well. For freedom of the heart and courage are special virtues, while the virtue of the state is security” (Spinoza, 2009, p.14). Political power is produced through reason. The continuity of political power, which is created by the people and therefore takes institutional form, depends on its



grounding in the rule of reason. The reason invoked in the establishment of political power is common reason rather than individual reason. Common reason, which may be evaluated within the framework of the third of Spinoza's three modes of knowledge, becomes conceivable when the human mind arrives at common concepts. Through these common concepts of reason, people recognize similarities across different ideas (Deleuze, 2011, p.89; James, 2023; Lloyd, 2024, p.54).

The political power enabled by this understanding depends on people recognizing the necessity of living according to the rules of reason. People's adherence to this necessity partly relies on the impersonal nature of the political power. Even for the endurance of monarchy, which appears centered on the monarch, there must be a correlation between the power of the king and the power of the people (Spinoza, 2009, p. 69). The continuity of power depends on its distribution. This principle also applies to aristocracy (Lambert, 2021, p. 151). An aristocracy based on several cities rather than a single city will endure longer. Therefore, political power must be distributed within society (Balibar, 2008, p. 77). As Spinoza notes, freedom "does not abolish the necessity of action, but on the contrary makes it visible" (Spinoza, 2009, p. 20). The power distributed in society is shaped by the power of the people, insofar as this collective capacity is brought into political organization.

Spinoza bases his political philosophy on human temperament and the dynamics of the multitude. He maintains that politics involves organizing collective life by regulating individuals' passions and interests. Political power endures as long as the political order provides conditions of freedom and security for individuals. In this context, Spinoza argues that an individual's attachment to the political order is directly related to its structure. The stability and continuity of political power depend on the extent to which individuals participate in this order through reason and support its maintenance over time.

Democracy as a Possibility for the Continuity of Political Power

Spinoza, who analyzes various forms of political power organization, gives particular attention to democracy (Levene, 2004, p. 142). For the purposes of this article, Spinoza's conception of democracy is significant primarily in relation to the continuity of political power. In this context, some



authors consider Spinoza “the first philosopher to write a systematic defense of democracy” (Den Uyl, 1983, p. 157; Rosen, 2022, p. 477). This claim is often linked to the view that democracy is the form of government in which collective power and common decision-making are most directly institutionalized. Therefore, democracy is especially relevant to the persistence and stability of political power.

According to Spinoza, in a monarchy, power concentrated in a single individual is structurally insufficient to incorporate the plurality of the social body. Its reliance on councils reveals the limits of personal sovereignty and exposes monarchy to recurrent instability. Aristocracy also struggles to mediate the conflict between ruling elites and the multitude, whose passions and interests continually pressure the regime from below. For Spinoza, democracy is the form of government that most directly integrates this dynamic by organizing the collective power of the multitude within political institutions. For this reason, Spinoza attributes to democracy a particular rational and structural advantage compared to other regimes (Matheron, 1969, p. 359). Democracy is “a community of people who collectively have the greatest right to everything that is within their power” (Spinoza, 2012, p. 235). It places collective action at the center of the development of individual capacities and forms political relations on this basis, a dimension that Negri interprets as opening the possibility of escaping forms of subjection embedded in existing social relations (Negri, 1999, p. 20). Political unity and political power emerge together with the power of individuals and develop as individual power develops (Negri, 1999, p. 20). Because political unity is never permanent, democracy remains tied to the ongoing institutionalization of participation as a condition of continuity.

For Spinoza, right refers to the capacity to act and think, always limited by the power of others (Balibar, 2008). Democracy can be understood as a political organization that recognizes these power relations and is shaped by their ongoing interaction. Thus, democracy designates not only a regime type but also a process through which collective power becomes politically organized (Negri, 2004; Balibar, 2008, p. 150). Democracy is not a condition in which antagonism between individuals disappears, but rather a more complex organization of antagonisms. As Negri notes, “the relationship between the exercise of power and the expression of



consensus is not smoothed into a synthesis of power. It is an open relationship” (Negri, 2004, p. 111). Individuals encounter decisions made by political power through institutions, participate in regulating their implementation, and may modify their effects over time (Balibar, 2008, p. 149). For Spinoza, the regime that most effectively connects individual security with institutional stability provides the conditions for political persistence (Spinoza, 2009; Balibar, 2008, p. 86). The continuity of power is thus related to the coordination between individual passions and state structures. Because the endurance of political power depends on the relationship between individuals and political authority, it is closely connected to democratic organization.

The heterogeneity that characterizes the state of nature is not abolished with the establishment of the state. Instead, political order must organize this persistent difference. In this respect, democracy may be understood as a regime whose structure remains responsive to the plurality of human types. It can be seen as reproducing certain features of the state of nature within an institutional framework rather than eliminating them. As Rosen argues, democracy does not suppress this heterogeneity but makes it governable within political life (Rosen, 2022, p. 487). Institutions express this process of rationalization: they constitute the political form through which the collective power of the multitude is organized (Rosen, 2022, p. 488).

Democracy, composed of legislative, executive, and judicial branches, requires laws that define voter qualifications (Rosen, 2022, p. 488). These legal frameworks also determine who is eligible to participate in elections. In this context, the stability of democratic political administration is closely tied to the mechanisms for selecting administrators. Changes in electoral structures may reduce political contestation and result in more homogeneous representation. As the representative capacity of the system declines, the institutional functions of the legislative branch may weaken, followed by changes in the functioning of the executive. These developments may also be accompanied by shifts in the judicial sphere. Corruption, which signals the dissolution of institutions, can be understood as the weakening of the link between state power and the regulation of private



interests (Matheron, 1969, p. 385). In this respect, corruption is inseparable from the institutional organization of political life.

Politics addresses the asymmetry between individual vulnerability and the disproportionate power of the state. Democracy is a form of government in which this organizational capacity is mediated through institutional mechanisms and legal definitions. By incorporating the people into the structure of authority, democracy is especially relevant to the problem of the continuity of political power, which depends not only on external conditions but also on the internal relations through which political authority is reproduced.

Democracy, understood as a political arrangement that stabilizes power, also has certain vulnerabilities, like other forms of government (Israel, 2023, p. 482). According to Spinoza, the power of political society partly depends on citizens who act according to shared rational principles. However, such citizens are relatively rare (Spinoza, 2009, p. 43). Spinoza attributes a capacity for self-government to the people (Suvin, 2021, p. 124), but this capacity is mainly found in individuals who manage to act as rational citizens, a success that occurs only intermittently. In democratic systems, citizens are expected to align with the common interest as rationality requires. However, they remain subject to the general conditions of human nature, where individual motives and passions often exert greater influence than rational judgment (Israel, 2023, p. 482). In this context, passions can create tensions with the requirements of collective stability, while reason serves as the principle that regulates these tensions. The emergence of rational citizens is closely connected to the institutional conditions that shape political life. Preventing corruption in political power and addressing conflicts between state authority and the people are therefore linked to the organization of institutional structures. Institutional arrangements influence the dispositions and capacities of individuals and the multitude that constitute the state (Spinoza, 2012).

The problem of corruption and political dissolution is closely related to how political authority is organized and, in particular, to how decisions are made and maintained. The multitude itself is an unstable form of power. It is internally divided and does not necessarily have a unified or final will. As indicated above, the persistence of political power depends



on its capacity to extend and diffuse itself, thereby increasing its effective reach. In this process, both the collective power of the multitude and the power of political authority may expand simultaneously. At this point, the question of how individual power is translated into binding decisions becomes central. Decision-making mechanisms can be structured to incorporate the power of the multitude to a significant extent. According to Spinoza, forms of government maintain their existence insofar as they succeed in organizing decision-making procedures that are not concentrated in a small number of actors. Whether in monarchy or aristocracy, political regimes tend to stabilize by integrating broader collective participation into their institutional arrangements. In this sense, Balibar suggests that regimes preserve themselves to the extent that they undergo a process of democratization, gradually transforming their internal logic toward more inclusive forms of rule (Balibar, 2008, p. 96).

In Spinoza's account, democracy is inseparable from institutions. Institutions organize the variable passions of individuals and crowds to promote political unity. The multitude can achieve coherence and decisional capacity through institutional forms that transcend the immediacy of concrete individuals (Kim, 2024, p. 281). As the crowd gains the capacity for collective self-government through these institutional structures, distinctions between different regimes may become less rigid as they converge toward democratic elements of organization (Balibar, 2008, p. 96). Decisions and orders in democratic systems are public. For Spinoza, an individual guided by reason experiences freedom as long as they live in a political society organized by a common order and collective decision-making (Spinoza, 2012, p. 253).

In Spinoza's view, a person who seeks to preserve their existence according to the order of their own reason acts freely. There is a close connection between rational freedom and the conditions that enable political power to maintain continuity. When the decisions of political authority reflect the common interests of society, individuals are more likely to see themselves as living under conditions compatible with freedom. Because a rational individual seeks a life consistent with freedom, they tend to observe the common rights and laws of society as part of their own efforts toward self-preservation and increased capacity to act (Spinoza, 2012, p.



254). Democracy, understood as a political form that organizes individual power within collective structures, is a mode of organization in which political authority depends on the power of the multitude. In this context, the relationship between individual freedom and political power is continuously mediated by the collective dimension of social life, and the desire to live in accordance with political authority remains tied to the institutional organization of common power (Levene, 2004, p. 183).

Regarding the continuity of political power, democratization can be understood as organizing decision-making so that the reasons behind political actions are publicly intelligible and individuals can exercise their judgment in matters of common concern (Balibar, 2008, p. 150). People's understanding develops through their interactions with one another. As Alexandre Matheron notes, "only by discussing, listening, and debating each problem can they arrive at the solution that everyone favors and that no one has yet thought of" (1969, p. 365). In this framework, the operation of political power through secrecy increases its distance from those on whom it depends and may contribute to coercive forms of rule. Spinoza suggests that as administrative secrecy increases, relations of dependence and subjection also expand (Spinoza, 2009, p. 67). In this sense, secrecy may be linked to processes of political instability and dissolution. The security of political power is therefore connected to the openness of information flows among individuals and the collective body that sustains it.

Individuals who stay informed about the functioning of political authority, its decisions, and their effects maintain a closer relationship with political institutions. Individuals' attachment to institutions is partly shaped by how much these institutions continue to engage their imagination and emotional investment. Reducing the distance between institutions and individuals contributes to the relative stability of both. For this reason, institutional arrangements may be structured to allow a broad plurality of perspectives to enter decision-making processes (Balibar, 2008, p. 151). Through such plurality, individuals gain access to others' views on issues. At the same time, open communication enables the multitude on which political power rests to develop its own forms of knowledge (Tatian, 2009, p. 91). Under these conditions, the people also retain the capacity to



contest political authority when the relationship between power and collective interests becomes strained.

For both individuals and the state, rights consist of what can effectively be done and thought within a given situation (Spinoza, 2010). Rights thus refer to a capacity or power. Freedom, in this sense, designates the conditions under which an individual's capacity to act and think can be realized within a political framework. It indicates the possibility of expressing human *conatus* within a political unit. At the same time, freedom provides an affective basis through which emotional beings can maintain a stable relationship with political authority (Spinoza, 2015, p. 73). In this respect, it is linked to the regulation of negative affects, such as hatred, that may threaten the persistence of political power. The possibility of obedience to public institutions and laws, and therefore of political stability, depends on the extent to which political unity continues to engage the imagination of its members (Garver, 2014). Individuals often believe they will be stronger, safer, or more secure within political unity. Freedom supports these expectations and helps maintain political order once established. Its presence within a political entity indicates that political power, organized under the guidance of reason, is still seen by individuals as compatible with rational life.

The continuity of the institutions on which political power rests is closely connected to freedoms of thought and expression. Conversely, restricting these freedoms may create conditions in which political power becomes unstable and vulnerable to dissolution. Through such freedoms, individuals within the political unit can participate in forming collective orientations and pursue what they consider advantageous under changing circumstances. In this way, they can adapt their position within political life and may find obedience to the commands of the political unit compatible with their own striving for preservation. In Spinoza's conception of democratic political power, however, freedom does not imply boundlessness. As Spinoza writes, "the power by which each thing continues in existence is limited and is infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes" (Spinoza, 2012, p. 203). Freedom, therefore, should not be understood as the absence of determination. As Balibar notes, freedom is not opposed to determination but rather to certain forms of limitation that



reduce the capacity to act (Balibar, 2008, p. 152). Personal freedom is also linked to a broader collective project that binds individuals through critique, cooperation, and mutual support (Israel, 2023, p. 731). Freedom may thus be described as a movement in which activity increasingly prevails over passivity, and as a mode of existence consistent with *conatus*. Since the state, as an organization of political power, is itself situated within the dynamics of *conatus*, it can function as one of the frameworks through which freedom is institutionally mediated. For Spinoza, however, this mediating role of the state remains connected to processes of democratization through which collective power is organized and sustained (Balibar, 2008; 2020).

The freedom that Spinoza emphasizes in relation to the continuity of political power refers to individuals' capacity to form judgments about personal and collective life within a political framework. In this view, power does not stand above society but operates within it. It is therefore connected to freedoms of expression and debate, as well as to the ability to make political judgments in public affairs (Den Uyl, 1983, p. 100; Feuer, 1987; Israel, 2023, p. 731). Spinoza distinguishes between freedom of thought and freedom of action. While he does not consider thought inherently threatening to the persistence of political power, he regards certain forms of action as politically destabilizing. By such actions, Spinoza refers to interventions that seek to alter the existing order through affects such as anger or hostility, rather than through the rational communication of opinions (Den Uyl, 1983, p. 105). These actions go beyond defending views through reason alone and may conflict with the expectations of civic life within political society (Spinoza, 2010, pp. 285–287). They also have the capacity to directly shape the conduct of others. Individuals retain the right to express their thoughts and may communicate them openly within the political community. Through the exchange of ideas, individuals and political society can reduce the influence of dogmatic attachments and develop forms of understanding more closely aligned with reason. The stability of a political regime depends in part on the extent to which it incorporates the diversity of individuals and dispositions within the polity. At the same time, there is a close relationship between the conditions of individual freedom and the character of sovereign power. Individual freedom is shaped



by the degree to which political authority allows space for thought and expression to remain operative within the state.

In Spinoza's framework, a democratic form of sovereign power is not merely one that allows freedom of thought and belief, but one that actively organizes the collective life of its members through institutional arrangements (Levene, 2004, p. 186). In this context, political structures are linked to maintaining a plurality of opinions within the state. For Spinoza, the transformation of opinions based on conjecture into more adequate forms of understanding occurs when philosophical reflection is protected. Within a stable political order, the space for philosophical speech can be extensive. Stanley Rosen suggests that the freedom characteristic of such a society is closely tied to the protection of philosophical discourse, rather than to unrestricted speech in general (Rosen, 2022, p. 489). From this perspective, preserving democratic arrangements is connected to maintaining the conditions under which philosophy can continue to operate publicly. Philosophical speech, in this sense, refers to the articulation and defense of opinions through reasoned argument.

The concept of the multitude emerges as a collective subject that discusses and expresses its views. In Negri's interpretation, the multitude forms the basis of democracy and is described as "the universality of human" (Negri, 2004, p. 13). As Negri states, "the autonomy of the political is based on the autonomy of a collective subject" (Negri, 2004, p. 21). In a democracy grounded in the multitude, power is "the product of a process that aims at collective organization and is constantly reopened by the power of the multitude" (Negri, 2004, p. 22). Democracy, understood as a political form in which people express themselves, can be seen as a mode of political immediacy – that is, a form in which political expression remains closely tied to collective life (Negri, 2004, p. 13). In this framework, democracy differs from models of politics structured around the transfer of sovereignty or the renunciation of natural right (Akal, 2023, p. 123). Instead, it is connected to the continued presence of natural right as a constitutive element of political organization. From this perspective, democracy is associated with institutional and collective conditions that may limit the transformation of political power into tyrannical forms while sustaining the relative peace and security of citizens. In contrast to freedom



of thought and expression, freedom of action concerns the ways individuals carry out their movements and practices in the external world. Since all things remain subject to natural laws and necessity, freedom of action is also conditioned by these constraints. Individuals manifest their actions under particular circumstances and in response to them. Their activity is shaped by forms of necessity. One of the most significant necessities within political society is the regulation of interests among individuals. To reduce mutual harm, individuals are required to recognize the rights of others within a shared political framework. The state, as the embodiment of collective decision-making, organizes conditions under which individuals may act without undermining one another. In this respect, political authority may limit freedom of action according to the requirements of collective stability.

In a democracy, the exercise of power and the production of legitimacy are closely connected. For this reason, democracy is often associated with more stable conditions of peace, security, and freedom in political life (Negri, 2004, p. 25). In this context, power is shaped through democratic procedures rather than resting solely on personal authority. A central characteristic of democratic political power is the recognition of individual rights, which serve both as a limit on political authority and as one of its sources. As Spinoza writes, “no one has the hereditary right to be elected and appointed to public office. No one can assert his rights better than in a democracy” (Spinoza, 2009, p. 109). Individuals who possess rights and participate in political society are a key element of democratic organization. In Spinoza’s account, freedom refers primarily to the capacity to live according to one’s own reason. He argues, “the task of the state cannot be to transform people from rational beings into savages, but to give them the opportunity to develop their minds and bodies in their own way in order to ensure the free use of reason. In this sense, the purpose of the state is freedom” (Spinoza, 2010). Spinoza defines democracy as “a form of government in which everyone subject to the laws of the land can live honorably, without being under the sovereignty of another, has the right to be elected to a supreme assembly and to hold public office” (Spinoza, 2009, p. 110). Within this framework, sovereignty is not located in a single ruler but belongs to society itself. Society, as a collective body, can be understood as



organized through shared forms of rationality that emerge in the interactions among citizens (Israel, 2023, p. 738). Partnerships and political cooperation develop through the ways individuals live together and respond to one another within common institutions. In this respect, compromise becomes possible insofar as individuals are guided by reason, since this guidance allows them to understand their own nature and coordinate their actions accordingly (Lloyd, 2024, p. 93).

Spinoza's account of democracy is based on a restricted definition of political membership, limited to those subject to the laws in force within a given territory and who participate in the administration of that political order (Canaslan, 2019, p. 216). In this sense, Spinoza's conception of democracy does not extend political inclusion to foreigners. This limitation also applies to other groups whose legal or social status prevents them from being regarded as fully autonomous political subjects. In Spinoza's framework, equality within democracy is defined primarily as equality among citizens, rather than as a universal principle applicable to all individuals. For example, Spinoza explicitly excludes women from democratic participation on the grounds that they are positioned in relations of dependency under husbands or masters. Similarly, children are excluded because they remain under the authority of parents, guardians, or other supervisory figures. Individuals who do not conform to the legal and moral standards recognized by the political community—such as those who commit crimes or are considered to live in ways judged incompatible with civic order—are also denied participation in democratic governance (Spinoza, 2009, p. 110). Within this structure, the individuals who constitute “the people” are understood as forming an integral part of the state, just as the state is constituted through these individuals and their collective organization (Lambert, 2021, p. 148).

Democracy, in principle, affirms the equal right of individuals to judge and participate in collective decision-making. However, Spinoza maintains a distinction between those he considers fully capable of exercising this capacity and those he does not, often associating this difference with the separation between philosophers and ordinary people (Strauss, 1959, p. 28). Within this framework, Spinoza's political theory also reflects exclusionary assumptions about women. He does not regard women as possessing the



same political autonomy that democratic organization is expected to secure for men. As a result, women are placed outside the sphere of political resilience and participation that democracy is meant to provide. The socially and legally “dependent” status attributed to women functions, in Spinoza’s account, as a basis for their exclusion from the political domain (Lord, 2011, p. 1087). This exclusion is linked to an understanding of gender relations in which women are assumed to remain within structures of male authority, rather than as fully independent political subjects (Dişci, 2021). Thus, even though Spinoza conceptualizes democracy as a regime grounded in human sovereignty, his model of democratic citizenship remains restricted by hierarchical distinctions that limit the scope of political inclusion.

Conclusion

This article proposes interpreting democracy not as a normative ideal but as a functional strategy for maintaining the continuity of political power, aiming to contribute to Spinoza studies from this perspective. It argues that democracy is emphasized in Spinoza’s thought because it offers the possibility of effectively managing diverse elements of power. Democracy, which does not eliminate tensions among the various powers within society, is presented by Spinoza as a political form capable of making such tensions governable. The direct participation of citizens forms the basis of democratic organization. However, the continuity and stable functioning of established political power remain closely connected, in Spinoza’s account, to the dispositions and conduct of those who make up the citizen body.

Concerns about the volatility of popular judgment and collective passions are a recurring theme in the history of Western political thought. Spinoza similarly highlights the extent to which political life is shaped by affects rather than by reason alone. From this perspective, democracy cannot be understood as fully escaping the cyclical transformations of regimes. Conflicts among individuals, whose judgments are often guided by partial perceptions and immediate interests, may easily intensify within political society. In such moments, the multitude may become inclined to seek a figure capable of restoring unity and security. This dynamic suggests that, in Spinoza’s framework, democracy remains structurally exposed to the



possibility of degeneration, as the demand for stability can open the way to forms of concentrated authority. In this sense, the democratic order continues to carry within itself the risk of sliding toward tyranny.

Although Spinoza affirms democracy, he emphasizes that its continuity cannot be assumed and that democratic arrangements remain structurally exposed to instability. The persistence of democracy depends on both the character of the citizenry and the institutional forms through which political power is organized. When institutions weaken and collective political life becomes less oriented toward rational deliberation, the coherence of the democratic order may also diminish. Over time, such conditions can give rise to crises of political authority. In this sense, democracy secures the continuity of political power only insofar as it is supported by administrators capable of maintaining institutional stability and by citizens whose participation sustains the common order. This indicates that the democratic form, while privileged by Spinoza, remains dependent on conditions that are not always fully realized. The political model proposed by Spinoza presupposes a society that, at least to a significant degree, acts under the guidance of reason. Yet the affects and passions of individuals and the multitude often limit the extent to which common rationality can consistently prevail in political life. For this reason, Spinoza's account of democracy also engages with themes present in classical political philosophy, particularly the difficulties involved in collective self-government. However, this does not result in a rejection of democracy. On the contrary, Spinoza seeks to address its vulnerabilities through rational political design. For this reason, he assigns particular importance to institutionalization within political society, viewing stable institutions as the primary means through which democratic power can endure.

Spinoza's understanding of democracy emphasizes the direct participation of the people in governance, while also recognizing that democratic life can persist only if it continually renews itself according to the tendencies and affects of the multitude. Democracy remains viable as long as it can recognize and respond to the tensions and contradictions within its own structure. However, when the continuity of institutional organization cannot be maintained, the collective capacity of the people to participate in governance may gradually diminish, making democratic arrangements



vulnerable to more concentrated and restrictive forms of political authority. Spinoza's democratic thought situates democracy within its historical and social conditions, addressing both its endurance and the fragilities that accompany it. In Spinoza's account, democracy is not a simple solution but a political form that combines significant stabilizing potential with structural vulnerabilities inherent in its operation.

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Öz: Bu makalede, zaman içinde değişen güç ilişkileri karşısında bir siyasi iktidarın varlığını sürdürmesinin koşulları Spinoza'nın demokrasi fikri bağlamında analiz edilecektir. Spinoza'yı demokrasinin normatif bir savunucusu olarak görenlerin aksine, bu makale onun demokrasiyle işlevselci bir ilişki kurduğunu savunmaktadır. Spinoza için demokrasi, siyasi gücün sürekliliğini sağlamak için halkın



gücünün en etkili şekilde organize edildiği bir sistemdir. Bu sistem, rasyonel yasalar, iyi yapılandırılmış vatandaş katılımı ve iktidar ilişkilerinin rasyonel düzenlenmesi ilkelerine dayanmaktadır. Spinoza, demokrasiyi, tutkuları düzenleyerek ve ortak aklın üstünlüğünü uygulayarak siyasi bir gücün hayatta kalabileceği bir araç haline getirir. Sıradan insanları rasyonel vatandaşlara dönüştürmenin zorluğu, Spinoza'nın demokrasi fikrinin bir ideal olmaya devam ettiğine ve siyasi iktidarın mutlak sonsuzluğa ulaşmasının imkansızlığına işaret eder.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Siyaset, iktidar, demokrasi, Spinoza, halk.

