

## Disagreement in the political philosophy of Spinoza and Rancière<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract:

In this paper I examine the concept of disagreement in the political philosophies of Baruch Spinoza and contemporary French philosopher Jacques Rancière. Rancière understands disagreement to be an emancipating form of dissent and assertion of equality by an excluded part of society. Spinoza, by contrast, understands disagreement to be a divergence from rational agreement that arises from differences of experience and feeling: in particular, our differing feelings of inequality. I consider disagreement in the context of the UK referendum on membership of the EU, and the election of Donald Trump to the US Presidency (both 2016). I suggest that the bad social feeling that followed these events reveals disagreement in Spinoza's sense rather than Rancière's: we should interpret them not as potentially progressive revolts of the excluded, but as the effects of divergent experience and feeling that are likely to divide us still further.

### *I. Introduction*

A few weeks after the referendum on Britain's membership of the EU,<sup>2</sup> I overheard a colleague say 'the working class shouldn't be allowed to vote. They're not intelligent enough.' Though the comment was made in jest, the serious sentiment behind it was not uncommon. In the days and weeks following the referendum, educated people expressed the view that the referendum was won by people who are stupid and ill-informed, who don't know what's good for them, and who didn't think through the implications of their vote. A more moderate variant, which quickly became the consensus view, presented the EU referendum result as the uprising of a group of people 'long neglected' and 'excluded from politics'. A standard narrative emerged about these people's feelings of being excluded from, and unbenefited by, globalization.<sup>3</sup> The same responses dominated after Donald Trump won

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<sup>2</sup> On 23 June 2016, UK voters were asked whether the UK should leave or remain in the European Union. 52% voted to leave.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., The Economist (2016). The data suggest that this is an over-simplification. 17.4 million people voted to leave the EU. The poorest voters (household income of less than £20,000 per year) were much likelier to vote Leave (Goodwin and Heath 2016), but the result could not have come about without a significant proportion of higher-income voters voting for it (Dorling 2016, Runciman 2016). More significant than income were educational experience and age, with the non-university-educated and over-55s likeliest to vote Leave (Goodwin and Heath 2016). Political engagement was less significant: those who said they pay a great deal of attention to politics were evenly divided between Leave and Remain, while those who said they pay little attention to politics were only 58% for Leave (Ashcroft 2016).

the US Presidency a few months later: the educated felt outraged at the capacity of the less-educated to vote against the interests of their country and the world, and were told that this situation was explained by poorer people feeling ‘left behind’.<sup>4</sup> A story has been concocted that blames the irrational poor and explains away their motivations, ignoring the sizeable proportions of middle- and higher-income voters whose support was crucial for both the Trump and Brexit victories.

This characterization shows how little we have moved beyond the anxieties of early modern political discourse. That the rational governance to which the social contract gives way can be disrupted by the irrational feelings of ‘the people’ – leading to revolution and anarchy – is the worry that suffuses the political philosophy of Hobbes and Spinoza. This counter-rational force is seen as a potentiality by contemporary continental philosophers (Hardt and Negri 2000, for example) who uphold the capacity of ‘the people’ or ‘the multitude’ to effect meaningful political change. According to one such philosopher, Jacques Rancière, what is at stake both in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and today is a challenge to the political order of parts and wholes. A well-ordered community is a whole consisting of subordinate parts. The social contract expresses each part’s willingness to be a part, and to be a member of larger parts identified by function, wealth, age, and so on. But in the political moment, some part identifies itself with the whole: with ‘the people’ as such. This move disrupts the order of parts and wholes, bringing dissent to community consensus, with emancipatory potential.

Rancière has a restrictive notion of politics: what we ordinarily think of as politics – ‘the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution’ – he calls ‘the police’ (1999, p. 28). *Policing*, a term Rancière borrows from Foucault, is the practice of governing and maintaining the well-ordered community by keeping each ‘part’ in its assigned place in the whole.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, *politics* exists only in moments of geometrical distortion, when a part of society identifies itself with the whole. This is not a matter of one part taking power from another, but of refusing to be a part, thereby exposing the flaws in the existing social order. He cites the example of Jeanne Deroin who, in attempting to vote in a French election in 1849, revealed the contradiction between the law of universal suffrage and the exclusion of women from voting. She asserted that women are not a ‘part’ of the people that can be excluded or included according to the rules of the current government, but that prior to any rules, women *are* the people. It is not a matter of demanding equal rights for the excluded part, but of asserting that the excluded part is not a ‘part’ at all. Rancière calls this assertion *disagreement* (*la mésentente*). This is not a dispute between rational positions or an objection to particular laws. It is declining to agree about what constitutes social order; dissent over the logic of parts and wholes that underlies the notion of political community. To be a part of a whole means that one can be counted or not counted, included or excluded, and identified with certain roles according to the social order (that is, the ‘police order’). Disagreement is a rejection of countable, identifiable parthood.

Disagreement is a rejection of the political logic of parts and wholes that came to prominence in early modern philosophy. Spinoza, like Hobbes, understands the political community to be a whole made up of identifiable parts, and justice to be the proportionate

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<sup>4</sup> Again, we should be sceptical of this view: 48-49% of those who earn more than \$100,000 per year voted for Trump (a greater proportion than the 46% of all voters who voted for Trump); 41-42% of those who earn less than \$50,000 did (Huang *et al.* 2016).

<sup>5</sup> I will use this term in Rancière’s sense throughout this paper. ‘The police’ and ‘police order’ do not refer to law enforcement officials or to militarization, but to the entire structure that determines and organizes people’s roles, powers, and capacities within society, with both positive and negative effects. For further elucidation of this term, see May (2008), pp. 41-3.

distribution of rights to those parts. For Rancière, this makes Spinoza continuous with a tradition that suppresses disagreement in the interests of the police order and consensus. Indeed, Spinoza's concept of political community is based on the *agreeing* (*convenire*) of similar beings with similar levels of rationality. Yet like Rancière, Spinoza thinks *disagreeing* (*discrepare*) is an ineliminable element of politics that shapes our political actuality. For Spinoza as for Rancière, disagreement consists in a rejection of one's parthood. But for Spinoza, this does not emancipate us from socially constrictive identities; rather, it locks us into them and isolates us from others. Disagreement is caused by differences in experience and feeling, differences that are exacerbated by inequality and that lead to political rejectionism and non-cooperation.

In what follows, I will elaborate on Rancière's sense of disagreement as emancipatory dissent from the political logic of parts and wholes, and Spinoza's sense of disagreement as anti-social divergence over what is differently experienced and felt. Although these thinkers have different views about the value of disagreement to politics, they have similar ways of framing disagreement as originating in inequality, as involving the rejection of parthood, and as revealing itself in 'bad social feeling'. I will suggest that the bad social feeling that followed the Brexit and Trump victories reveals disagreement in Spinoza's sense rather than Rancière's. That is, we should interpret these events not as potentially progressive revolts of the excluded, but as the effects of divergent experience and feeling that are likely to divide us and diminish our communities still further.

## II. *Rancière: disagreement as dissent*

To understand what motivates Rancière's belief in the emancipatory potential of disagreement, we need briefly to follow the historical narrative he offers for the concept's emergence. Rancière is interested in the concepts and forces that have made political philosophy and contemporary politics what they are. He follows Michel Foucault in offering a genealogy of political thought, leading him to see the history of political philosophy, starting with Aristotle, as a suppression of politics.<sup>6</sup>

Democracy, according to Aristotle, gives power to those who 'though free, are not men of wealth and standing, [and] have no claim to goodness or excellence in anything' (1962, III.11, cf. III.8).<sup>7</sup> Rancière interprets this origin story of democratic freedom as follows. After debt slavery was abolished in Athens, freedom had to be attributed to a group of people of no account: debtors, that is, people without wealth or civic virtue who were without 'value'. These people, who had no proper entitlement to freedom according to the prevailing law of the oligarchy – people who were not counted as part of the community – were henceforth free. This move forced a gap between wealth and domination. The wealthy, who previously ruled, were now the part of the community distinguished by their wealth, whereas the poor were the part distinguished by nothing but their freedom. This had two effects. First, the question arose of who legitimately governs – the question of Aristotle's *Politics*. Second, the poor became a 'part' whose distinguishing feature, freedom, is actually universal to all people. This allowed the poor to reject their parthood and identify with the whole; to assert that they are the *demos* (Rancière 1999, p. 8). Thus the mere 'people', those of no account, became 'the people' in the sense of the community as such. A specific *part*, the part that has no legitimate part in the community, became identified with the *whole* community. The contentiousness of the excluded part claiming identification with the whole, is what politics is, for Rancière. Before this event, there is no politics, only domination and

<sup>6</sup> My account of Rancière is necessarily condensed. For a clear introduction to his political thought, see May (2008).

<sup>7</sup> References to Aristotle's *Politics* are to book and chapter number.

revolt. After this event politics exists in those moments where a part of society – a part that is normally excluded from political community – rejects the parthood assigned to it by the police order and identifies with the whole. Jeanne Deroin, as mentioned earlier, rejected the notion that women are an includable or excludable *part* of the people and asserted that women *are* the people.<sup>8</sup> Similarly Rosa Parks, in refusing to give up her bus seat to a white person, rejected the police order that made black people a *part* of the whole that could be included or excluded from it.

Rancière believes that political community is wrongly understood as a whole of parts, precisely because this results in ‘a part that has no part’. He claims that ‘there is politics when there is a part of those who have no part’ (1999, p. 11). In other words, politics happens when those who are not counted interrupt the police order by rejecting their parthood and asserting their equality to the whole. Thus ‘political community’ always carries connotations both of inequality and of the potential for emancipation from it. Insofar as a community is *political*, it contains the inequalities and exclusions that give rise to disagreement; but in disagreement the original, anarchic equality of human beings is asserted. This is *the equality of anyone to anyone else*.

Rancière’s ‘equality’ is not the ‘arithmetical equality’ of the marketplace (and of utilitarian ethics) which takes each person to be of equivalent value to, and exchangeable with, every other. Nor does Rancière uphold the ‘geometrical equality’ that grounds Aristotle’s view that each person is valued in proportion to his value for the community.<sup>9</sup> Both these definitions refer equality to the calculation of value, based on countable parts of a whole. For Rancière, countability is what underlies all police orders that deal in the inclusion and exclusion of parts. He wants to rehabilitate equality ‘that suspends simple arithmetic without setting up any kind of geometry. This equality is simply the equality of anyone at all with anyone else’ (1999, p. 15).

At first glance this notion of equality looks simplistic. Indeed, it looks just like the arithmetical equality he claims to reject. Evidently drawing on Rousseau, Rancière understands equality to be embedded in human relationality rather than arithmetical equivalence. Specifically, equality is an aspect of our capacity to speak and understand: it is already present in the ‘power of reasoned speech’ through which Aristotle defines the political animal (1962, I.2). Our capacity to understand one another is presupposed in all human relations, including relations of dominance. For a master to subjugate a slave, the slave must be deemed capable of understanding the master’s commands. This confers on them a basic equality of understanding. Indeed, Aristotle’s definition of the ‘natural slave’ is one who ‘participates in the reasoning faculty so far as to understand but not so as to possess it’ (1962, I.5). *Equality of understanding* is therefore already presupposed in the domination of the Athenian slaves, and in all police orders:

There is order in society because some people command and others obey, but in order to obey an order at least two things are required: you must understand the order and you must understand that you must obey it. And to do that, you must already be the equal of the person who is ordering you. It is this equality that gnaws away at any natural order. (Rancière 1999, p. 16)

It is this equality that surfaces in the event of politics, the moment in which the ‘part that has no part’ asserts that *it is* the people. The poor or disenfranchised assert an equality that pertains to them as beings who speak and understand, but that has been denied them by the

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<sup>8</sup> This does not mean that ‘the people’ consists (or should consist) exclusively of women. Nor does it mean that ‘women should be recognized to be part of the people’, which asserts precisely the logic that the political event denies. ‘Women are the people’ indicates a rejection of parthood and of one’s identification with it, and an assertion that this group of people – *any* group of people – are simply the *demos*.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Justice is equality, but not for all persons, only for those that are equal’ (Aristotle 1962, III.9).

police order that assigns them to the part of society deemed unequal to political discourse. Equality is asserted ‘as a dispute over wrongful exclusion from the order of political speech’ (Corcoran, in Rancière 2015, p. 7).

From that moment of Athenian democracy, *anyone at all* is entitled to speak, even someone with no qualification to do so. If anyone at all, even a freed slave, is equal to anyone else in speech and understanding, then every social order – every police order – is contingent. According to Rancière, Hobbes reveals the contingency of police order when he claims that the ‘natural’ relationship between human beings (in the state of nature) is a war of all against all, a state of *equality* in which anyone might dominate or kill anyone else (Hobbes 1971, pp. 183-6). To gain security, that equality must be given up. Any police order could replace it, so long as it replaces natural equality with political inequality (the authority of some over others). The sovereign’s principal anxiety is that the natural equality of anyone with anyone else could reassert itself at any time. But the inequalities in any police order are possible only on the basis of this natural equality. ‘Politics occurs because, or when, the natural order of the shepherd kings, the warlords, or property owners is interrupted by a freedom that crops up and makes real the ultimate equality on which any social order rests’ (Rancière 1999, p. 16). This equality cannot be granted by governments or enshrined in constitutions, because it is already there, in the mutuality of understanding and speech, as the condition of possibility of any kind of governance.

A political event, then, involves disagreement, and disagreement involves the assertion of natural equality. Politics happens rarely, for Rancière, because most of the time, the police order – whatever it happens to be – prevails. When politics does occur, it is unsettling, because disagreement is dissensus: the disruption of the consensus (agreement, contract) of the social order, and the disruption of the ‘community of sense experience’ (Rancière 1999, p. 58). In other words, a political event involves *bad social feeling*: it disrupts our *feeling* of community agreement and our ‘sense experience’ of what it is to identify with either a part of the community or its whole. The assertion of equality disrupts sameness, for it disrupts our sense that ‘we all feel the same way’. It disrupts identity, for disagreement involves dis-identification with one’s ‘part’ and its assigned properties. It is through these disruptions, breaks in group identities, and bad feeling that equality is asserted. ‘The essence of equality is [...] not so much to unify as to declassify’ (Rancière 1995, pp. 32-3). Equality is the affirmation of a common capacity (for understanding) between beings who are different and who refuse to identify themselves or others through any signifiers of ‘parthood’ (such as religion, race, or class).

Were the votes for Brexit and Trump *political* events, in Rancière’s sense? Politicians on both the right and the left attributed the results to ‘neglected’ voters who had spoken as ‘the people’. The mainstream media portrayed both outcomes as revolts by members of an excluded part against the political systems believed to cause their exclusion. Some writers explicitly claimed an opportunity for emancipation from the neoliberalist order (for example, Žižek 2016). If we understand the ‘excluded part’ here to be the economically disadvantaged, we must reject this characterization, since (as noted above) neither result was caused exclusively by this part. But arguably, the ‘excluded part’ could be more broadly defined to cover all those who felt politically marginalized; furthermore, disagreement is not the exclusive preserve of the oppressed. It may be expressed by anyone. Indeed, for members of politically ‘included’ parts to stand in solidarity with the ‘excluded’ could be a political act of dis-identification (May 2008, pp. 55-6). Either the Leave or Trump vote would be a political event in Rancière’s terms if – and only if – it involved voters dis-identifying with their ‘part’ and asserting equality.

But neither event did that. In neither case did voters break with the identity of the part to assert ‘the equality of anyone with anyone else’. Quite the contrary: both events involved

an entrenchment of identities of nation, class, race, and educational background, with each part proclaiming its parthood and asserting its superiority to the others.<sup>10</sup> ‘A dissensus [...] consists in challenging the very logic of counting that marks out some bodies as political beings in possession of speech and consigns others to the mere emitting of noise’ (Corcoran, in Rancière 2005, p. 5); in both the EU referendum and the 2016 US election, each side saw the other as ‘emitters of noise’, and neither acted to assert equality of understanding. *Political* events reveal existing inequalities and enable people (even if only temporarily) to refuse the identities assigned to them by the police order. *These* events revealed existing inequalities – especially of education – to be decisive factors of classification but, rather than freeing anyone from the identity of their part, served to push each part further into itself and away from the other (see Runciman 2016).

The EU referendum and the US election were posed and effected by the governing (‘police’) orders of each country, and further entrenched the divisions that characterize those orders. As Rancière has stated (2016), the vote for Brexit was an effect of policing: the exercises and exchanges of power that constitute the governance and management of people, that serve to solidify the part-whole logic, and that cause people further to identify with the ‘part’ to which they have been consigned. The US election was no different. Thus, even if either vote involved an element of ‘revolt’ by an excluded part against the status quo, neither was a *political* event in Rancière’s terms. Both events reinforced, rather than challenged, the notion that people belong to parts of a whole, much less emancipated anyone from consignment to those parts.

### *III. Spinoza: disagreement as divergence*

Spinoza would be equally inimical to interpreting the events of 2016 as emancipatory revolts. But on what grounds? It would be easy to use Spinoza to attribute the Brexit and Trump victories to the irrationality of ignorant voters. Spinoza’s view about the political potency of the masses is in line with others of the early modern era. Like Hobbes, he describes the masses as a threat to the stability and harmony of the state. This is largely due to their irrationality: people who have developed less reason have less understanding of what is good for them, and what they should do to realize that good. Their actions are determined by incomplete knowledge and feelings caused by experience. People who lack rationality do not act according to what is truly in their own interest and the interest of the community, but according to what they erroneously imagine will be good for themselves. Their desires and emotions lead to conflict, and their lack of autonomy means they are easily led by others.

All this detracts from community stability, as Spinoza explains:

Anyone with any experience of the capricious mind of the multitude almost despairs of it, as it is governed not by reason but by passion alone, it is precipitate in everything, and very easily corrupted by greed or good living. Each person thinks he alone knows everything and wants everything done his way and judges a thing fair or unfair, right or wrong, to the extent he believes it works for his own gain or loss. From pride they condemn their equals, and will not allow themselves to be ruled by them. Envious of a greater reputation

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<sup>10</sup> In the UK this was evident in the view of some Leave voters that the British (specifically the English) should ‘take back control’ of their country, and in the backlash against ‘experts’ (see Ashcroft 2016 and Runciman 2016). Yet it was also present in Remain voters’ disdain for the supposed ignorance of Leave voters and the characterization of the poor as a misunderstood part of society incapable of speaking for itself (see Hanley 2016). In the US election the entrenchment of identities on both sides has been blamed for Trump’s win (see Lilla 2016 and Freeman 2016).

or better fortune which are never equal for all, they wish ill towards other men and delight in that.

There is no need to survey all of this here, as everyone knows what wrongdoing people are often moved to commit because they cannot stand their present situation and desire a major upheaval, how blind anger and resentment of their poverty prompt men to act, and how much these things occupy and agitate their minds. To anticipate all this and construct a state that affords no opportunity for trouble-making, to organize everything in such a way that each person, of whatever character, prefers public right to private advantage, this is the real task, the arduous work. [No one has ever] succeeded in devising a form of government that was not in greater danger from its own citizens than from foreign foes, and which was not more fearful of the former than of the latter. (Spinoza 2007, 17:4)<sup>11</sup>

Spinoza here portrays the irrational mob as a danger to the state. Yet his understanding of the dynamics of reason and unreason in politics is far subtler than this characterization suggests. ‘Rational’ and ‘irrational’ are not polar opposites: reasoning is one of two ways of thinking which everyone does to some extent.<sup>12</sup> When we reason, we have adequate ideas of things, and deduce other adequate ideas from them. The other way of thinking, imagining, is based on experience and includes remembering, anticipating, and dreaming. From experience we have partial, confused, inadequate ideas. Since we are *affected* by the things we experience, imagining goes along with passively feeling the *affects*, also known as passions. We are made to feel the passions by our encounters with external things, and they cause us to react and behave in ways that stem only partially from our own nature. By contrast, reasoning and adequate ideas are tied to active feelings that follow from our own nature, and are therefore more autonomous.

Spinoza stresses that everyone has some adequate ideas, and everyone has experiences and feels passions. Nobody is purely rational or purely imaginative. Our minds are a ratio of adequate to inadequate ideas which changes according to our circumstances. Good circumstances (such as education, a supportive family, and a peaceful community) give us opportunities to enhance our reasoning, whereas bad circumstances (such as poverty, debt, and violence) prevent our rational development and cause us to feel stronger passions. The poor and disadvantaged are likelier to be determined by their passions, and less likely to develop much reasoning. But there is no guarantee that the privileged will become highly or consistently rational. Reasoning requires effort and discipline, and powerful emotional events such as bereavement or illness can reduce our reasoning power. Our circumstances determine our rational development, and as our lives change, our power of reasoning changes too.

‘The multitude’, therefore, is not simply an irrational mob. It is *the people*, each part of which is determined by different and changing proportions of imagining and reasoning. The problem is that developing strong reasoning is difficult and rare, so most people in a society are determined, most of the time, by their own particular experiences and passions. This leads them to disagree. Spinoza argues that ‘insofar as men are subject to passions, they cannot be said to agree in nature’, and ‘they can be contrary to one another’ (1994, IVP32, P34).<sup>13</sup> He claims that we ‘agree in nature’ only insofar as we reason (1994, IVP35). So we will find agreement where there are high levels of reasoning, and disagreement where there are low levels of reasoning and the passions are at their strongest.

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<sup>11</sup> References to Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise* are to chapter and paragraph number.

<sup>12</sup> Spinoza’s third kind of thinking, intuition, is not important to our discussion here.

<sup>13</sup> References to Spinoza’s *Ethics* are to Part number (Roman numerals) and the number of the Proposition (P; Arabic numerals), followed in some cases by Corollary (C) or Scholium (S) number.

To understand the political significance of agreement and disagreement, we need to look at Spinoza's metaphysical account of these terms. Spinoza believes people have a common human nature or essence.<sup>14</sup> He also believes that every individual strives to persevere in being what it is, and to increase its power to do so (1994, IIP7). To strive in this way is to 'seek one's advantage'. Human individuals are instantiations of human essence, which determines them to strive for the continued existence and increased power of human nature in themselves. In striving for goods that are determined by human nature, we strive for goods that are common to all human beings and we 'agree in nature' (Spinoza 1994, IVP31-37). Thus someone who is determined by his essence to seek his advantage also acts in the interests of others, and agrees with them in nature. Only reasoning enables us to understand and act according to what is essentially advantageous to us.

It follows that insofar as men live according to the guidance of reason, they must do only those things which are good for human nature, and hence, for each man, that is, those things which agree with the nature of each man. Hence, insofar as men live according to the guidance of reason, they must always agree among themselves. (Spinoza 1994, IVP35)

Things that agree with our nature – that is, highly rational human beings – are good for us, so the more rational people are, the better and more useful they are for one another (Spinoza 1994, IVP31, P37). Politically, 'agreement' means convergence on common goods and mutual aid towards achieving them, which leads to a stable, strong, and harmonious society.

Disagreement comes about when we seek our advantage from what we *imagine* and *feel* will lead to our betterment, rather than from what we rationally know will be good for our nature. Our striving for our essential advantage is derailed by what our different backgrounds and circumstances determine us to desire and do. This derailment is more powerful and long-lasting the less reason we have developed. Our thinking and acting are determined more by what we experience, and what we feel and imagine will lead to our betterment. Our different circumstances cause us to differ in our affective responses, and thus in our judgments about what is good and bad for us:

Different men can be affected differently by one and the same object, and one and the same man can be affected differently at different times by one and the same object. [...] Because each one judges from his own affect what is good and what is bad, what is better and what is worse, it follows that men can vary as much in judgment as in affect. (Spinoza 1994, IIP51)

To the extent that our experiences and feelings motivate our thinking and acting, what we strive for differs substantially. Through the different conditions of our lives and our different experiences, we can be contrary to each other and disagree in nature. Note that Spinoza distinguishes contrariety from difference (1994, IVP31C). Things are 'contrary to us' insofar as they are 'evil for us': that is, insofar as they diminish our power of acting (Spinoza 1994, IVP30). People who are 'torn by passions' can be contrary to each other and disagree in nature (Spinoza 1994, IVP33-4). Yet people can differ in ways that do not diminish one another's power: differences of belief, for example, need not cause strife as long as everyone agrees to obey the law (Spinoza 2007, ch. 20).

Politically, disagreement is destabilizing because we do not converge on common goods or help each other to achieve them. Instead, each individual strives in a different direction for what appears to be good for her, frequently leading her to conflict with the striving of others. We strive for apparent goods which seem to reflect our own experiences and satisfy our own feelings. Disagreement can cause us to desire the same scarce resource, resent those who appear to stand in our way and envy those who appear more successful.

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<sup>14</sup> As I explain in Lord (2014) pp. 62-3, I take this claim to be supported by Spinoza (1994) IP8S2 and IP17S.



Disagreement can also cause destructive *joyful* passions. The more we reflect on our differences from others – the more we consider our circumstances and striving to be distinctive – the more likely we are to affirm and love our own distinctiveness, with deleterious results:

*Joy arising from considering ourselves* is called *self-love* or *self-esteem*. And since this is renewed as often as a man considers his virtues, or his power of acting, it also happens that everyone is anxious to tell his own deeds, and show off his powers [...] and that men, for this reason, are troublesome to one another.

From this it follows that men are by nature envious, *or* are glad of their equals' weakness and saddened by their equals' virtue. For whenever anyone imagines his own actions, he is affected with joy, and with a greater joy, [...] the more he can distinguish them from others, and consider them as singular things. So everyone will have the greatest gladness from considering himself, when he considers something in himself which he denies concerning others. (Spinoza 1994, IIP55S)

Disagreement can cause us to rejoice in what we perceive to be our unique characteristics and actions. This makes us feel other powerful passions, pull further apart from others, and reject or ignore our commonalities with them. Disagreement is 'irrational' in that it arises from diminished reasoning and leads us to strive for what is not truly in our interest. Yet this is our primary mode of being. Most of us, most of the time, do not act in our own interest, although that is exactly what we imagine and joyfully affirm ourselves to be doing.

Spinoza thinks that when we agree in nature, we cohere as parts of a whole human community. In his account of the origins of the state, Spinoza indicates that in the state of nature each person is a sovereign whole, seeking only his own advantage, from a very low point of rationality (2007, ch. 16; 1994, IVP37S2). Everyone agrees to become a part of a larger whole through the social contract, and agrees to seek the advantage of the whole, either through rationally knowing that it is good, or through obedience to laws that encourage community-oriented action. Whenever we disagree in nature, we revert to thinking of ourselves as sovereign wholes. This is underwritten by Spinoza's metaphysics: everything is both a whole and a part of various greater wholes, rising in compositional complexity to the whole of nature. As he explains in a letter to Oldenburg, a thing is considered a 'part of a whole' insofar as it adapts its nature to those of other parts and they are in 'the closest possible agreement'; it is considered a whole to the extent that it resists adaptation to other things, and 'insofar as they are different from one another' (1994, pp. 82-4). What holds of physical bodies also holds of individuals. Insofar as we agree, we consider ourselves parts of a community whole; insofar as we disagree, we reject our political parthood and consider ourselves wholes in our own right.

Disagreement threatens the social order, for Spinoza as for Rancière. It causes bad social feeling. Unlike Rancière, Spinoza does not see any potential for emancipation in disagreement, but sees it as the source of a destabilizing narcissism. This is particularly apparent when we examine the passions of pride (*Superbia*) and despondency (*Abjectio*). Spinoza describes these as affects of comparison. They arise when people are driven to compare their achievements with those of others, to obsess over their uniqueness or inadequacy, and to feel themselves to be superior or inferior. In other words, pride and despondency are how we feel our inequality to others. Pride is 'thinking more highly of oneself than is just, out of love of oneself', and despondency is 'a sadness born of a man's false opinion that he is below others' (Spinoza 1994, III Definitions of the Affects XXVIII, and IVP57S). Both feelings tend to perpetuate themselves. The proud person seeks those who flatter her, loves herself all the more, and feels joy in this self-love. She is highly prone to

envy, but rejoices in feeling that she is above others. The despondent person ‘is very near the proud one’ in that he too is prone to envy, and seeks to exult over those even more despondent than himself, leading him, perversely, to feel good about his own despondency (Spinoza 1994, IVP57S). Out of all the passions, Spinoza singles out pride and despondency as indicating ‘very great ignorance of oneself’ and ‘very great weakness of mind’ (1994, IVP55-6), for the proud and despondent have no rational understanding of their true value to others, that is, their value as human beings who can agree in nature. They evaluate themselves in terms of their difference from others and take pleasure in their disagreement.

Whereas Rancière sees disagreement as the assertion of one’s equality, Spinoza sees that it can involve the perverse affirmation of one’s inequality. To disagree from pride or despondency is to assert the uniqueness of one’s experience, affects, and actions, and to feel one’s superiority or inferiority to be good and worthy of respect. These passions are likeliest to arise in societies that are highly unequal and that place value on individual achievement. Differences in power and material goods will cause pride and despondency to be keenly felt, while individualism leads people to imagine themselves as sovereign wholes with sole responsibility for their achievements or failures. This does not encourage us to agree in nature, but instead to seek to identify with others according to those non-essential characteristics we take to distinguish us. We seek to identify with those who feel similarly proud or despondent about their economic circumstances, their power or oppression, their educational achievement, religion, or nationality. We seek to associate with those who share our passions, who ‘love what we love, and hate what we hate’ (Spinoza 1994, IIP31C).

*Contra* Rancière, who takes disagreement to involve dis-identification with affective groups, Spinoza understands disagreement to cause us to identify through our affects and to feel these affects all the more strongly. Such groupings have nothing to do with our common essence, and do nothing to encourage the agreement in nature that leads to political harmony. Feeling unequal to others can lead to identity-based factions that make our societies unstable.

For Spinoza, disagreement derails us from pursuing what is truly in our interest. Worse, it leads us to take pleasure in diverging from the common human good. Bad social feeling leads to bad social effects. It leads to entrenched groups that identify on the basis not of reason, but of shared passions and feelings. Those who are subject to strong passions of pride and despondency, and who associate with others who feel the same, are likely to reject what is in their rational interest, and to take pleasure in doing so.

After the Brexit vote, commentators noted that in parts of England that had benefitted from EU funds, citizens voted strongly ‘against their own interests’ to leave the EU. Similar comments were made about working-class American Trump voters. From Spinoza’s perspective, it is not clear whether the rational interest of human nature is better served by staying in or leaving the EU, or by voting Republican or Democrat in the 2016 US election. The point is that for those on both sides who are subject to strong passions, their rational interest is entirely obscure: they act against it not because they know what it is and choose otherwise, but because their actions tend towards what they feel and imagine to be best. This can lead them to reject what is *presented* to them as being ‘in their rational self-interest’ by those with whom they do not affectively identify, and to take pleasure in this rejection.<sup>15</sup>

People who feel strong passions are determined by forces external to them. I suggest that we should understand those forces in terms of inequality and *how it makes us feel*. One of the most striking correlations with voting patterns in both cases was voters’ feelings about their lives today, in comparison to the past. 58% of Leave voters think life in Britain today is worse than 30 years ago; 78% of Trump voters believe their family financial situation is worse today than in the past. 61% of Leave voters and 63% of Trump voters think life will be

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<sup>15</sup> For some contemporary reflections on this phenomenon, see Mishra (2016) and Hanley (2016).

worse for the next generation. By contrast, just over 50% of Remain voters, and 59% of Clinton voters, think life will be better for the next generation, and 73% of Remain voters think life in Britain is better today than in the past (Ashcroft 2016; Huang *et al.* 2016). These attitudes reflect *the feeling of one's own flourishing* in comparison to how one imagines *other human flourishing*: whether one's own flourishing in the past, others' better (or worse) flourishing in the present, or one's children's flourishing in the future. In short, these attitudes reflect the comparative affects of pride and despondency. These feelings are not restricted to the poor and uneducated, but are felt by voters across all income groups.<sup>16</sup> Spinoza's point is that the more strongly these affects are felt, the more strongly people will be determined to reject their parthood. As pride and despondency become greater, the greater is our 'weakness of mind', and the greater is our disagreement as we lose sight of any basis for adapting to others as parts of a broader whole.

These effects occur particularly strongly where inequality is rife and individualism is valued. So it is not surprising that in two socially and economically unequal countries in which the ideology of individualism is held to be part of the national identity,<sup>17</sup> people voted on the basis of experience and feelings, and that people identified more with their own affectively similar groups than they did with the whole. The strong support for socially divisive measures against immigration, women's and minority rights, and greater environmental and human wellbeing is indicative of disagreement: voters rejected their parthood of a larger whole, and instead affirmed the sovereign wholeness of themselves and the group with which they share the same experiences and feelings. This reflects how the feeling of inequality can perversely lead to the affirmation of inequality, and therefore its persistence. Those who won were determined by the experience and feeling that their lives were getting worse. This despondency quickly turned into the exultation of victory, but on Spinoza's prediction, deeper despondency, and more non-cooperation, will be the outcomes.<sup>18</sup>

We in the UK and the US have experienced a great deal of bad social feeling in 2016. There is no sign that this feeling will disappear. Rancière and Spinoza give us different ways of understanding this feeling as a sign of disagreement. And both Rancière and Spinoza give us worthwhile insights into the political force of disagreement. Rancière shows us that consensus politics always involves inequality and exclusion, and is shot through with misunderstanding: there will always be breaks and disruptions that generate bad feeling, that reject the logic of consensus, and that cannot be neatly resolved in it. Rancière's view is that democracy develops and changes through these breaks, in which our equality is momentarily made present. Spinoza shows us that inequality has other, emotional effects. It causes passions which lead people to break with the whole, to regard themselves as sovereign individuals, to fail to cooperate, and, perversely, to 'fight for their servitude as if they were fighting for their own deliverance' (Spinoza 2007, Preface:7). Both thinkers show that disagreement is an unavoidable political force that disrupts the rationality of the social order. About the value and outcome of that disruption, they disagree.

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<sup>16</sup> For example, Frank (2016) attributes the Trump victory partly to the pride of Clinton supporters.

<sup>17</sup> The US and the UK have high levels of income inequality in comparison to other rich countries (Atkinson 2015, pp. 21-3). By 'the ideology of individualism' I mean the broad set of views, from Locke onwards, that takes the autonomous human individual to be the primary agent of change and locus of responsibility.

<sup>18</sup> Bregazzi (2016) and Braidotti (2016) suggest that Spinoza offers resources to remedy this state of affairs.

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