



PROCEEDINGS OF THE ARISTOTELIAN SOCIETY

CHAIRIED BY TIM CRANE
EDITED BY GUY LONGWORTH

SENATE HOUSE
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

2016-2017
138TH SESSION | VOLUME CXVII

*Disagreement in the Political Philosophy of
Spinoza and Ranciere*

BETH LORD
UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

PROCEEDINGS OF THE ARISTOTELIAN SOCIETY
138TH SESSION

ISSUE NO. 1
VOLUME CXVII
2016 - 2017

DISAGREEMENT IN THE POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF
SPINOZA AND RANCIERE

BETH LORD
UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

MONDAY, 14 NOVEMBER 2016

17.30 - 19.15

THE WOBURN SUITE
SENATE HOUSE
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON
MALET STREET
LONDON WC1E 7HU
UNITED KINGDOM

*This event is catered, free of charge &
open to the general public*

CONTACT
mail@aristoteliansociety.org.uk
www.aristoteliansociety.org.uk

© 2016 THE ARISTOTELIAN SOCIETY

B I O G R A P H Y

Beth Lord is Reader in Philosophy at the University of Aberdeen. She works on history of philosophy in the continental tradition, with a particular focus on Spinoza. Currently she is researching the concept of equality in Spinoza's texts from its geometrical origins to its metaphysical and political uses. She recently led a three-year AHRC-funded research project that investigated the relevance of Spinoza's concepts of ratio and equality to housing design. She is co-author (with Peg Rawes, Bartlett School of Architecture) of a short, open-access film on Spinoza and the UK housing crisis, *Equal by Design*, and editor of the forthcoming collection *Spinoza's Philosophy of Ratio*. Her earlier books include *Spinoza's Ethics: An Edinburgh Philosophical Guide*, and *Kant and Spinozism: Transcendental Idealism and Immanence from Jacobi to Deleuze*. She has been at Aberdeen since 2013; prior to that she worked at the University of Dundee (2004-12), and received her PhD from the University of Warwick in 2004.

E D I T O R I A L N O T E

The following paper is a draft version that can only be cited or quoted with the author's permission. The final paper will be published in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Issue No. 1, Volume CXVII (2017). Please visit the Society's website for subscription information: aristoteliansociety.org.uk.

DISAGREEMENT IN THE POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF
SPINOZA AND RANCIERE¹

BETH LORD

In this paper I examine the concept of disagreement in the political philosophies of Baruch Spinoza and contemporary French philosopher Jacques Ranciere. Ranciere understands disagreement to be a revolutionary and emancipating form of dissent from 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. I examine these two senses of disagreement in the context of the UK's 2016 referendum on membership of the EU and the response to it, concluding that Spinoza gives us better resources for understanding what happened.

I. INTRODUCTION

IN THIS PAPER I contrast an early modern philosopher, Baruch Spinoza, with a contemporary French philosopher, Jacques Ranciere. I am interested in how both philosophers use a concept of disagreement to specify the nature of politics.

I want to frame this discussion with some thoughts about the response to Brexit. A few weeks after the referendum on Britain's membership of the EU (23 June 2016), 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 a lot of 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 on both the left and the right, presented the EU referendum result as the uprising of a group of people 'long neglected', 'left behind' and 'excluded from politics'.² People as varied as Nigel Farage (who celebrated this uprising) and

1 This is a draft paper, not yet ready for publication. References and citations are not complete. Please do not cite without author's permission. I would like to thank my colleagues at Aberdeen, as well as audiences in Kyoto and London, for their responses to earlier versions of the paper.

2 The data show that this is, at best, an over-simplification. 17.4 million people voted

Christine Lagarde (who lamented it) explained the result through feelings of being excluded from, and unbenefited by, globalization. This has now become the standard narrative, blandly restated on the BBC as if it were uncontroversial. Voting to leave the EU has thus become associated with the illegitimate expression of irrationality on the one hand, and with the legitimate expression of political and economic frustration on the other. In both cases the Leave vote is characterized as arising from the feelings of a group that normally is, and perhaps ought to be, excluded from politics.

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 who uphold the capacity of ‘the people’ or ‘the multitude’ to effect meaningful political change.³ According to one such philosopher, Jacques Ranciere, what is at stake both in the 17th 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. A part of society presents itself simultaneously as a part and as the whole of society. This move disrupts the order of parts and wholes, bringing dissent to community consensus. This has emancipatory potential, to be sure, but it may also give rise to a populism that derides consensus and reason (Laclau 2005, p. 244-5).

Ranciere has a restrictive notion of politics that does not include all, or even most, struggles for power. He argues that *politics* exists only in moments of geometrical distortion, when a part of society identifies itself with

Leave. Nearly two-thirds of voters in social groups C2/DE voted Leave, but as Dorling (2016) and Runciman (2016) both stress, Brexit could not have come about without a significant proportion of the middle class voting for it. The single largest determinants of how people voted were educational experience and age, with the non-university-educated and over-55s likeliest to vote Leave (Rowntree 2016, Ashcroft 2016). As Runciman argues, the education divide reflects not a difference between ignorance and knowledge but a difference in world-view. Leave voters were far likelier to believe that life in Britain today is worse than it was 30 years ago, and that there are decreasing opportunities to succeed and to improve one’s standard of living. Political engagement was a less significant factor: 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).

3 E.g. Hardt and Negri, Zizek

the whole. This is not a matter of one part taking power from another, but of a part 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.⁴ Ranciere calls this assertion *disagreement*. This is not a disagreement between rational positions or an objection to particular laws or rules. It is declining to agree about what constitutes social order; dissent over the logic of parts and wholes that underlies the very notion of political community. To be a part of a whole means that one can be counted or not counted, included or excluded, granted or denied equality, according to the social order. Disagreement is a rejection of countable parthood, and of the identities that distinguish parts.

This all seems a long way from early modern philosophy, which is, after all, heavily invested in the political logic of parts and wholes. Spinoza, like Hobbes, understands the political community as a whole made up of identifiable parts, and understands justice to be the proportionate distribution of rights to those parts. For Ranciere, this makes Spinoza continuous with the tradition of political philosophy that suppresses disagreement in the interests of social order and consensus. Indeed, Spinoza’s concept of political community is typically understood to be based on the *agreement* of similar beings with similar levels of rationality. Contrary to the standard interpretation, I would like to suggest that like Ranciere, Spinoza thinks *disagreement* is a crucial element of politics.

For Spinoza, agreement and disagreement describe how ‘similar’ things are to each other in a metaphysical sense. Things that are ‘like’ one another (two human beings, for instance) have a common essence, and *agree* insofar as their thoughts and actions follow from that common essence. Agreement results from having true (rational) knowledge of what is good for human nature. Disagreement, by contrast, results from the inadequate knowledge and feelings that are caused in us by external causes and that

4 Hanley (2016a) makes this point: ‘Looking at the coverage of the Brexit result, we were led to believe that the population of Britain can be easily sliced into tribes. The tribes to which the writers of newspaper articles and the producers of television news belong do not have to be named – they are, simply, ‘people’. Anyone who falls outside the urban, middle-class tribe is a ‘community’ – usually identified (however erroneously) by race or religion. In the absence of anything other than token representation, people who appear to fall into these groups have to be ‘understood’, rather than making their own case on their own terms’.

affect people differently. We agree when we are similarly determined by our essence to think and act from human nature. We disagree because we are differently determined to think and act according to our material and emotional circumstances. Insofar as we agree, we rationally understand our interdependence on others and work together as parts of a whole. But insofar as we disagree, we tend to reject our parthood and consider ourselves as wholes, distinct from and unconnected to others. The rejection of parthood is, for Spinoza, not emancipating but isolating.

Since Spinoza believes that no one is immune from determination by external causes, every community involves both agreement and disagreement: convergence on what is rationally known to be good for human nature, and divergence on what is not fully understood, which is differently experienced and felt. Every community is a whole of parts that can work together, but contains the tendency of those parts to reject their parthood and regard themselves as wholes, with destabilizing consequences.

In comparing Ranciere and Spinoza in what follows, I will elaborate on these two senses of disagreement: Ranciere's sense of disagreement as a revolt against the political logic of parts and wholes, and Spinoza's sense of disagreement as divergence over what is differently experienced and felt. These senses overlap in that both involve the rejection of parthood and inequality. I will suggest that it is Spinoza's sense of disagreement that is more useful in understanding Brexit and the response to it. If we accept this, then Brexit and its aftermath are to be attributed neither to a revolt of the excluded nor to irrational voters, but to societal conditions that determine us to disagree and to feel good about the rejection of our political parthood.

II. RANCIERE: DISAGREEMENT AS DISSENT

To understand what motivates Jacques Ranciere's belief in the emancipatory potential of disagreement, we need briefly to follow the historical narrative he offers for the concept's emergence. Ranciere is interested in the concepts and forces that have made political philosophy and contemporary politics what they are. In this sense he performs a kind of genealogy upon political thought, following the path of Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault. This leads him to see the history of political philosophy as a suppression of politics, starting with Aristotle.

Democracy, according to Aristotle, gives power to those who 'though free, are not men of wealth and standing, [and] have no claim to good-

ness or excellence in anything' (Aristotle 1962, III.11, cf. III.8).⁵ Ranciere 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, i.e. 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 people'.

The people are nothing more than the undifferentiated mass of those who have no positive qualification – no wealth, no virtue – but who are nonetheless acknowledged to enjoy the same freedom as those who do. The people who make up the people are simply free *like* the rest. Now it is this simple identity with those who are otherwise superior to them in all things that gives them a specific qualification. The *demos* attributes to itself as its proper lot the equality that belongs to all citizens. In so doing, this party that is not one identifies its improper property with the exclusive principle of community and identifies its name – the name of the indistinct mass of men of no position – with the name of the community itself. (Ranciere 1999, p. 8)

Thus the mere 'people', those of no account, become 'the people' in the sense of the community as such. A specific *part*, the part that has no legitimate part in the community, becomes identified with the *whole* community. The contentiousness of the excluded part claiming identification with the whole, is what politics is, for Ranciere. Before this event, there is no politics, only domination and revolt. After this event politics exists in those moments where a part of society – a part that is normally excluded from political community – rejects its parthood 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 asserting that women *are* the people. Similarly Rosa Parks, in refusing to give up her bus seat to a white person, rejected the social order that made black people a *part* of the whole that could be included or excluded from it. Disagreement motivates the present-day Black Lives Matter movement. The American constitution makes each citizen a free and equal 'part' of the whole, but this logic results in a 'part that has no part': a part of society that might be

5 References to Aristotle's *Politics* are to book and chapter number.

included or excluded and that is actually marginalized and oppressed as a result. In rejecting this logic, Black Lives Matter asserts that black people are not a ‘part’ of the people that can be included or excluded according to the political will; black people *are* the people.⁶

Ranciere 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 social 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*.

This is where Ranciere begins to sound very like Rousseau, recalling a ‘natural’ state of equality that has been transformed and suppressed by civilization. Indeed, Ranciere implicitly posits an egalitarian state of nature, opposed to and underlying all social orders. Ranciere’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 Ranciere uphold the ‘geometrical equality’ that grounds Aristotle’s view that each person is valued in proportion to his value for the community.⁷ Both these definitions refer equality to the calculation of value, based on countable parts of a whole. For Ranciere, countability is what makes possible the 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. However, Ranciere 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 (Aristotle

6 Strictly speaking, ‘politics’ for Ranciere occurs in specific actions rather than general movements. It is also arguable that BLM does not reject black parthood/identity so much as use it to draw attention to the specific circumstances and causes of black exclusion. Nonetheless, this seems to me a pertinent example.

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

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' (Aristotle 1962, I.5). *Equality of understanding* is therefore already presupposed in the domination of the Athenian slaves, and in all social 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. (Ranciere 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 as 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 Ranciere 2015, p. 7).

From that moment of Athenian democracy, *anyone at all* can have his say, even someone with no qualification to do so. If anyone at all, even a freed slave, is equal to anyone else, then all social orders are contingent. According to Ranciere, it is Hobbes who reveals the contingency of any social 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.⁸ To gain security, that equality must be given up. The social order that replaces it could be anything at all, 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 social 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' (Ranciere 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

⁸ Hobbes Ref.

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 Ranciere, because most of the time, the social 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’ (Ranciere 1999, p. 58). In other words, political events disrupt 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. Equality is the affirmation of a common capacity (for understanding) between beings who are different and who do not identify with one another through any outward signifiers (religion, race, class).

Was the Brexit vote a political event, on Ranciere’s terms? According to the view which has become mainstream, Brexit was a revolt by members of an excluded part against the political system believed to cause their exclusion. But the Leave vote would be a political event only if it involved dis-identification with that part and the assertion of equality as a common capacity for understanding amongst heterogeneous beings. Brexit is not political, in Ranciere’s sense, for three reasons. First, even if we accept that there is an ‘excluded part’ of society consisting of those left behind by politics, it is clear that the result was not caused exclusively or even primarily by this part. Second, even if we accept that there was an element of ‘revolt’ against the status quo, it was not instigated by the excluded part itself, but made possible by the political party in power. Third, even if we accept that voting Leave was an expression of dissatisfaction with political exclusion, it did not involve breaking with the identity of the part to assert equality with the whole. What we saw instead, on both sides, was an entrenchment of identities of nation, class, and educational background, with each part proclaiming its parthood and asserting its being just as good as, or superior to, the others.⁹ This is not politics, on Ranciere’s view. Brexit did

⁹ This was evident not only in the proclamation that the British (and specifically the English) should ‘take back control’ of their country and the backlash against ‘experts’, but also in Remain voters’ disdain for the supposed ignorance and retrograde attitudes of Leave voters. ‘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; some as beings of decision and action, others as consigned to the passive sphere of reproduction; some as capable of refined sentiment and thought, others as brutish and caught up in simple survival; some as capable of thought and keeping up with the times, others as capable only of reacting to change’ (Corcoran, in Ranciere

not challenge the notion that people are or belong to parts of a whole, but reinforced it. Brexit was an effect of what Ranciere calls ‘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.

III. SPINOZA: DISAGREEMENT AS DIVERGENCE

We cannot interpret the victory of the Leave vote as disagreement in Ranciere’s sense. Spinoza may give us better resources for understanding Brexit as the outcome of disagreement.

It would be all too easy to use Spinoza to interpret Brexit as the effect of 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 reason to a lesser extent 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 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

2005, p. 5).

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)¹⁰

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 more subtle 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.¹¹ 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 fortuitous experience and includes remembering, anticipating, and dreaming. From experience we have partial, confused, inadequate ideas. Adequate ideas are tied to autonomous actions that follow from our own nature, while inadequate ideas are tied to the 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. Thoughts and actions that arise from our feelings are ‘unfree’, in the sense that they are not autonomously determined.

Spinoza stresses that everyone has some adequate ideas, and everyone has experiences and feels the 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 (education, supportive family, peaceful community) give us opportunities to enhance our reasoning, whereas bad circumstances (poverty, debt, deprivation, 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. So people’s circumstances determine their rational development, and as our lives change, our power of reasoning changes too.

10 References to Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise* are to chapter and paragraph number.

11 Spinoza in fact describes three kinds of thinking: imagination, reason, and intuition. Spinoza deals with intuition as part of his discussion of the mind’s eternity. Since it is unclear whether and how intuitive thinking takes place during our durational lives, we will not consider it here.

‘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 a high level of rationality 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 people to conflict. 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).¹² 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.

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, essence, or power (these three terms can be treated as equivalent for our purposes).¹³ He also believes that every individual, from its essence, strives to persevere in being what it is, and to increase its power (1994, IIIP7). 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. Human nature is what we have in common, so 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.

12 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.

13 This is a controversial claim which needs some support. (Refs)

Disagreement comes about when we seek our advantage from non-rational, non-essential motives. Disagreement is politically significant only between individuals who could, in principle, agree in nature. Things that have entirely different essences (a human being and a stone, for instance) disagree in nature, but not in a politically significant way. A thing whose nature is entirely different from our own neither helps nor hinders our striving for human advantage.¹⁴ Things can be ‘good or evil’ for us – that is, they can increase or diminish our power – only if they have something in common with us, but they cannot be evil for us through our commonalities (Spinoza 1994, IVP29-30). So it is not through our common essence, but through our differences in existence, that we can be contrary to each other and disagree in 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, IIIIP51)

To the extent that our experiences and feelings motivate our thinking and acting, what we strive for differs substantially.

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 all strive for uncertain goods which seem to reflect our own experience and satisfy our own emotions. Disagreement can cause sad passions of desiring the same scarce resource, resenting those who appear to stand in our way and envying those who appear more successful. But disagreement can also cause 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:

¹⁴ Spinoza uses a man and a stone as an example of two things that have nothing essential in common. Strictly speaking, however, a stone and a human being share various essential properties, and a stone can be helpful or harmful to a human being’s striving.

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. But these passions make us feel other powerful passions, pull further apart from others, and reject or ignore our commonalities with them. All this is contrary to our true advantage. 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.

Let us now turn to disagreement as the rejection of parthood, for on this, Spinoza and Ranciere concur. 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. 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 is good, or through obedience to civil 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 of parts and wholes. Everything is both a whole and a part of various greater wholes, rising in compositional complexity to the whole of nature. 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' (Spinoza 1994, pp. 82-4).¹⁵ What holds of physical bodies also holds of individuals in political communities. Insofar as we agree, we consider ourselves parts of a community whole; insofar as we disagree, we reject our political parthood and consider our-

15 This is explained in Spinoza's letter to Oldenburg of 1665 (Ep. 32).

selves wholes in our own right.

Disagreement threatens the social order, for Spinoza as for Ranciere. Unlike Ranciere, Spinoza does not see any potential for emancipation in disagreement, but sees it as the source of a dangerous narcissism that can lead to factionalist and rejectionist politics. This is particularly apparent when we examine the passions of pride and despondency. These affects 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. This leads him, perversely, to feel good about his own despondency (Spinoza 1994, IVP57S). Out of all the passions that Spinoza describes, he 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 in nature.

Ranciere sees disagreement as the assertion of one’s equality. Spinoza, by contrast, sees that it can involve the perverse affirmation of one’s inequality. To disagree from pride or despondency is to assert the superiority or inferiority of one’s experience, affects, and actions, and to feel this 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 sameness with others according to those non-essential characteristics we take to distinguish us. We seek the sameness of those who feel similarly proud or despondent about their economic circumstances, their power or oppression, their educational achievement, religion, or nationality. We seek the sameness of those who share our passions, who love what we love, and hate what we hate (Spinoza 1994, IIP31). *Contra* Ranciere, who takes disagreement to

involve dis-identification with affective groups, Spinoza understands disagreement to cause us to identify with others 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 us socially and politically unstable (cf. Gatens and Lloyd 1999).

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. And it leads us to identify with others not on the basis of reason, but on the basis of shared passions and feelings. It is in these terms that I suggest we consider the Brexit fallout.

After the vote, commentators noted that in places like Wales and the North-east that had benefitted from EU funds, citizens voted strongly ‘against their own interests’ for Leave. According to Spinoza, those who are subject to strong passions, particularly of pride and despondency, and who associate with others who feel the same, are likely to reject what appears to be in their rational interest, and to take pleasure in doing so. This was recognized by writer Pankaj Mishra shortly after the referendum:

What is self-interest in a deindustrialized country wounded by austerity, humiliated by handouts and enraged by a metropolitan elite alternating between callousness and mendacity? [...] Vulgar rationalism [cannot] cope with the possibility that now universally emergent Underground Man may take pleasure in defying his rational self-interest. (Mishra 2016, p. 13)

Similarly, in her work on the experience of social class in Britain, Lynsey Hanley describes how the working-class rejection of supposedly rational goods – including education and political participation – is experienced as a form of affirmation and resistance to middle-class values. She interprets Brexit as just such a rejectionist move (2016a, cf. Hanley 2016b).

But Brexit was not achieved exclusively or even primarily by working class voters, and disagreement is not the exclusive preserve of the disadvantaged. In Spinoza’s view, disagreement pervades society, and the rejection of parthood is a constitutive feature of political community. It occurs particularly strongly, at all levels of society, where inequality is rife and individualism is valued. So it is not surprising that in one of the most socially and economically unequal countries in the EU,¹⁶ one in which the ideology of individualism is held to be part of the national identity, that 17.4 million people voted to reject their parthood of a larger whole and

16 Ref (Equality Trust)

to affirm the sovereign wholeness of themselves and the group with which they share the same experiences and feelings. Very few could have acted in their true interest, because very few in such circumstances rationally understand what their true interest is. People who are largely determined by their experiences and feelings, and who affirm their distinctiveness and importance through associating only with their own affective groups, lack any basis for adapting to one another as parts of a whole. Remain and Leave voters perceived themselves to be moving in different directions. In this case, one group – the younger and more educated – was determined by the experience and feeling that their lives were getting better; the other, larger group – the older and less educated – was determined by the experience and feeling that their lives were getting worse.¹⁷ Despondency carried the vote, and quickly turned into politically destructive forms of exultation when it won, just as Spinoza might have predicted.

The purpose of this paper is not to make grand claims about Brexit or about our current political state of affairs. It is to draw out the ways that Ranciere and Spinoza make use of disagreement to understand political events that disturb the status quo. I have also sought to show the resonances between Ranciere's and Spinoza's thought on parthood, inequality, identity, and difference. Ranciere's analysis may appear to serve those who wish to see Brexit as a revolt of the excluded, but Brexit cannot be understood as disagreement, or even as political, on Ranciere's terms. As an event that entrenched people in the groups with which they affectively identify, it is better explained by Spinoza's sense of disagreement as experiential and affective divergence. Spinoza better helps us to understand how our current political predicament arises from the social fact of inequality.

*School of Divinity, History and Philosophy
University of Aberdeen
The Old Brewery
High Street
Aberdeen
AB24 3UB
s.b.lord@abdn.ac.uk*

17 See note 3, above.

REFERENCES

- Aristotle 1962: *The Politics*, trans. T. A. Sinclair. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Ashcroft, M. 2016: 'How the United Kingdom voted on Thursday... and why'. Lord Ashcroft Polls (24 June 2016) <http://lordashcroftpolls.com>
- Dorling, Danny 2016: 'Brexit: the decision of a divided country'. *BMJ* 354.
- Gatens, Moira, and Genevieve Lloyd 1999: *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza Past and Present*. London: Routledge.
- Hanley, Lynsey 2016a: 'Out of it'. *The Guardian* (27 September 2016), pp. 25-27.
- Hanley, Lynsey 2016b: *Respectable: the experience of class*. London: Allen Lane.
- Hobbes, Thomas, reference to be supplied.
- Joseph Rowntree Foundation, statistics on Brexit voting patterns (reference to be supplied)
- Laclau, Ernesto 2005: *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso.
- Mishra, Pankaj 2016: Excerpt in 'Where are we now? Responses to the Referendum', *London Review of Books* (14 July 2016), pp. 13-14.
- Ranciere, Jacques 1999: *Disagreement*, trans. Julie Rose. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Ranciere, Jacques 2015: *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. and introd. Steven Corcoran. London: Bloomsbury.
- Runciman, David 2016: 'Degrees of separation'. *The Guardian* (5 October 2016), pp. 31-3.
- Spinoza, Benedict de 1994: *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and other works*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Spinoza, Benedict de 2007: *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- The Equality Trust, reference to be supplied.



THE ARISTOTELIAN SOCIETY

PRESIDENT: Tim Crane (Cambridge)

PRESIDENT-ELECT: Helen Beebee (Manchester)

HONORARY DIRECTOR: Rory Madden (UCL)

EDITOR: Guy Longworth (Warwick)

LINES OF THOUGHT SERIES EDITOR: Scott Sturgeon (Oxford)

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE: Corine Besson (Sussex) / Kimberley Brownlee (Warwick)
Rowan Cruft (Stirling) / James Harris (St Andrews) / Ulrike Heuer (Leeds) / Sacha Golob (KCL)
Susan James (Birkbeck)

MANAGING EDITOR: Hannah Carnegy (UCL)

ASSISTANT EDITOR: David Harris

GRAPHIC & WEB DESIGNER: Mark Cortes Favis

ADMINISTRATOR: Josephine Salverda (UCL)