While going back to the original concept of Spinoza’s (he being the actual inventor of the concept of multitude), we notice a primary basic idea of this approach which is also inherent in the works of Negri and Hardt: Essentially, the leading line of argument points to the two-sided implication of two identities which do not necessarily appear to be mutually compatible in the first place:

\[ \text{virtus} = \text{potentia} \iff \text{civitas} = \text{multitudo} \]

In the terminology of Spinoza, this implicational formula interrelates the concepts of “virtue” and “potential” on the one hand, “citizenry” and “multitude” on the other. The respective identities of the two pairs of concepts however (always understood in terms of being a postulated ideal and thus an ethical demand rather than a concrete situation) cause various difficulties, because their realization in terms of practical daily life seems counter-intuitive and not quite a straightforward operation of illustrating an idealized principle. The underlying problem is in fact one of mediation: This is so because the implication’s identity of the left-hand side refers to individual persons while the identity of the right-hand side refers to (social) groups of persons. Hence, any practical realization of the inferred principle should operate on two different levels which are dialectically mediated, and this turns out to be the most difficult problem of any ethical approach. (In fact, as it appears, this may also pose a serious problem for the approach offered by Negri and Hardt, because making the multitude topical is only one half of the task, and perhaps it is thus that the latter’s ideas appear a little abstract from time to time.) It will be one task of this
present paper to think about a possible reconciliation of both sides of the above implicational formula.

Spinoza himself anticipated this difficulty and appealed to human reason: In the fourth part of his “Ethics” (Of Human Bondage) he writes that a person who strives for a good will also demand this good for other people the more he/she participates in the knowledge of God. (Spinoza 1999, E IV, p37) And in the second note (scholium) to that proposition he adds that it is necessary to achieve a unification of the multitude of the many within politics by means of reason: “It is necessary therefore that humans in order to be able to live in concord with one another and be helpful to each other give up their natural right and secure not to do anything in future which would impair others.” (Spinoza 1999, E IV, p37s2 – our translation) As it turns out the problem is deeply buried in the anticipation of the above proposition: To assume that a good is also something which is to be desired for all others is not only an idealistic conjecture, but poses the most central problem of ethics, until today, even after the illuminated approach by French existentialism. (Zimmermann 2002) As Spinoza has a theory of state contracts and laws in mind, he might have been too rash to assume some sort of ontological altruism where there is only the wish for individual security.

Spinoza (1994) is more precise as to his point when discussing the state in his Political Tractatus where he defines a perspective in terms of natural law such that common laws imply a restriction of personal rights according to the individual potential available. (Usually translated with “power” which is irritating due to a change in connotation: For Spinoza power is the expression of what an individual is able to do (of his/her potential); for us today what an individual is able to do does not necessarily refer to his/her potential.) Spinoza continues that hence, nobody has any right beyond what is granted to him/her by common law. (Spinoza 1994, PT II, §16) In other words: Common law is nothing but coercion after all, because it is primarily a constraint. So in order to demand a good (and to assume that it is also a good for others) entails to accept that the others do not share this assumption. This is exactly what Spinoza means when talking of the multitude: “This right [to dissent from the individual] which is defined by the potential [power] of the crowd [multitudo] is usually called sovereignty of the state, if visualized as power of government. It is
completely subjected to the person who is in charge of the state administration out of a common consent ... Is this the task of an assembly which is constituted out of the whole crowd [multitudo] we call the state ‘democracy’ ...” (Spinoza 1994, PT II, § 17 – our emphasis)

Wolfgang Bartuschat discusses this point in more detail in his introduction to the German edition of the Political Tractatus (cf. Spinoza 1994): He refers back to the “Ethics” (II, p13) where Spinoza speaks about physical bodies. Bartuschat argues that models of that kind cannot be applied to a theory of the state, because humans would not be primarily bodies but also spiritual beings (because they possess a mind). (Bartuschat, in Spinoza 1994: xvi-xvii.) This argument however is not valid anymore, because we would visualize today mind as a special case of the attribute of matter – and in fact, it is likely that Spinoza himself did not find this too alien. (Zimmermann 2000) If in particular, we visualize the world (as perceived under the attribute of matter) as a self-organized system constituted by agent systems, as we do in some more recent theories, then the state is either no artefact or the Universe is. (Zimmermann 2007)

Implicitly however, Bartuschat agrees with that, even under the perspective of Spinoza: He mentions (Bartuschat, in Spinoza 1994: xxiv-xxv) that Spinoza defines the right derived from the sovereignty of the state simply as the right which is constituted by the power (potential) of the crowd (multitudo), as we have seen above. But he also notes that while “multitudo” is the name of the actual unity of all people representing the common power of all the individuals (combined), it is not shown that such a power is possible at all. For him, this is only true for a state whose supreme power is in fact the power of the crowd. Hence, we circle around a problem of the state. In a sense, such a state is something which is still in the future, is actually hoped for (with Blochian connotations here and hence with a somewhat utopian quality). Spinoza is optimistic in the sense that he argues in favour of such a state, because as a natural object, it strives for self-preservation, and thus creates laws in order to secure this. So in the end, there is (for Spinoza as visualized within the interpretation of Bartuschat’s) a fundamental sort of agency acting!

We have here the right-hand side of the above identity implication: Provided we had such a state, then all the fear would vanish, all the citizens would be integrated in the
procedures of creating laws such that they could understand these laws as their own laws, and thus they would not have to fear them anymore. This would be indeed the real achievement of the identity of multitudo and civitas within the concept of common power. (Ibid. xxvii-xxix)

However, there remains the problem of concrete practibility: Bartuschat continues that an unrestricted form of government would be one which is controlled by the crowd itself such that the power which is issuing the laws does not act against groups which have to fear it as long as they themselves are not integrated into the process of creating law. (Ibid.: xxxiii; cf. PT VIII, 3) This is the real problem: Does integration in that sense already entail interiorization of common power for the group in question?

In his first book on Spinoza, Negri starts indeed from this juridical point of view. The important formulation is here: “Civil Right is the power [potentia] of the multitude.” (Negri 1991: 195 – our emphasis) This actually demonstrates that the constitution of collectivity as praxis has to precede the process of constituting civil right. In other words, we have to invoke the left-hand side of the aforementioned identity implication again in order to gain an understanding of the right-hand side which is topical in the discussion about the state: “We must not, therefore, look to the precepts of reason [ex rationis documentis] for the causes and natural foundations of the State, but derive them from the common nature or condition of mankind.” (TP I, 7 as quoted in Negri, loc. cit., 189) Hence, the struggle of power [potentia] against Power [potestas] is in fact defining for the problem in question. (Ibid. 196) After all, this struggle mirrors another struggle: that of the right-hand side against the left-hand side of our identity implication. A human state system is very much posed on the “edge of chaos”: “The best constitution is posed ... on the limit between civil right and the right to war: Freedom is made from the first right, and peace from the second.” (Ibid. 201)

The foundation therefore comes from the “common nature” of humans within nature. (This is indeed conformal with Spinoza’s approach which is also based on the explication of an immanent nature.) As Balibar states: “Thus, every populus is the continuous regulation of the relation that the powers [potentiae] of the multitude maintain with nature of which they form a part ...” (Balibar 1997: 184)
Negri shows that essentially, Spinoza follows his approach already laid down in the Theological-political Tractatus (Negri 1997: 220 sq., 231): Here, the concept of “multitudo” however, although being immanent, has not yet acquired an explicitly political dimension. But also here, the life of absolute government is endowed with a systole and diastole and operates on the edge of chaos. (Ibid.: 229 sq.) In theological terms it is here the place where the concept of pietas is being asked for as the desire that no subject be excluded from universality. (Nowadays we can notice, as visualized within a more political framework, that this is indeed a concept which can be usefully applied to work in daily life.) As Negri points out this is something different from any condition of mere equality which is not aim of the given project. (Negri 1999: 316) Utilizing ethics as a critical method rather than a list of purported results means that this concept of (Spinozist) ethics is near to that of Sartre and Kristeva. (Cf. ibid.: 321) Consequently, in their book on the multitude, Hardt and Negri (2005) point to models which assume creative agents and complex networks, leaving open a space of free play in which the self-reference of social systems may be able to productively unfold.

Which also implies the immanence of virtualities and utopian non-locations: It is not a coincidence that Hardt and Negri use the now fashionable concept of “matrix” in order to characterize the structure of social systems. (Ibid. 335 sq.) Indeed, in their book on the empire (2000), the category of the possible has its place within the context of virtuality and what they call the circulation of space. (Ibid. 365, 404)

Hence, coming back to our original starting position, we realize that for Hardt and Negri the organizational form of the multitude as an open communicative and cooperative network anticipates the true form of society as a participatory democracy. And it is here where their theory is most strongly influenced by Spinoza: “When Spinoza calls democracy absolute he assumes that democracy is really the basis of every society. [...] If such democratic interactions were not the basis of our living in common, then society itself would be impossible. That is why for Spinoza other forms of government are distortions or limitations of human society whereas

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1 In fact, critique applied to this approach can usually be easily refuted: see e.g. Marin Terpstra (1994) or Bartuschat (1992: 237). In particular, with a view to Hegel and Marx and their reception of Spinoza see Christopher Norris (1991: 21-53). Here again, agents are prominent (ibid. 45) and the concept of a “theoretical praxis” (in the sense of Bourdieu)(ibid. 49). See also very illuminating altogether Yirmiyahu Yovel (1994/1989).
democracy is its natural fulfillment“ (Hardt/ Negri 2005: 311). The multitude is for Negri and Hardt thus a Spinozist democratic project. This concept of democracy is radical in the sense that it visualizes democracy as only given, if all decisions are made by all, i.e. Hardt and Negri put forward a fundamental participatory vision:
“Spinoza defines democracy as the absolute form of government because in democracy all of society, the entire multitude, rules; in fact, democracy is the only form of government in which the absolute can be realized“ (Hardt/ Negri 2000: 185). So for Hardt and Negri there is not an exterior of democracy, they conceive the latter as the interior nature of society.

References


