

Extract from Ellen Meiksins Wood: 'The Dutch Republic'.¹

In 1598 the Dutch child prodigy Huig de Groot, then barely fifteen years old, accompanied the Advocate of Holland, Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, on an extraordinary embassy from the States-General of the United Provinces to the French court. The purpose of the mission was to obtain whatever assistance it could from France against military threats to the Provinces' still precarious independence and stability as a free republic. Since William I (the Silent) of Orange had led a revolt of the Netherlands against Philip II of Spain in 1568, the Netherlands had been embroiled in more or less continuous conflict. Although the Dutch Republic was declared in 1588, the so-called Eighty Years' War with Spain would end only in 1648 with the Treaty of Westphalia; and throughout that period, which saw the Republic rise to extraordinary heights of economic and cultural success, its internal political life continued to be marked by intense civil strife.

Oldenbarnevelt would play a central role in the formation of the Republic's political institutions and, as architect of the United East India Company, in its immense economic success, becoming effectively the leader of the Republic. Hugo Grotius, later known as the pioneer of international law and, according to some commentators, a major theorist of natural rights and even a founder of modern theories of natural law, began his precocious career as protege and then supporter of Oldenbarnevelt. While his close association with Oldenbarnevelt would ... end badly when they fell victim to an especially ferocious factional dispute, his political ideas were rooted from beginning to end in the politics of the Dutch Republic, its civic conflicts and its vast commercial empire. The other canonical Dutch thinker to be considered, ... Spinoza, may not have been as actively engaged in civic politics, but his political ideas are in their own distinctive way grounded in the conflicts of the Dutch Republic and its unique configuration of political and economic power.

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Just a few years after (Hugo) Grotius died, the office of stadtholder [the chief magistrate] fell vacant with the death of William II. The province of Holland, to be followed by others, chose to leave the office unfilled; and from 1650 to 1672, the so-called first 'stadtholderless' era, the urban patriciate enjoyed a period of undiminished power, under the leadership of the Grand Pensionary, Jan de Witt. It was during this period that Benedict Spinoza reached maturity. While his interventions in philosophical and theological debates were radical and profoundly controversial, he was above all a philosopher and not a political figure in the manner of Grotius. He was, nonetheless, politically engaged; and his political allegiances seem to have been with the republican elite. While he was critical of his friends and allies, those allegiances are clearly reflected in his political philosophy. De Witt himself was a friend and protector of Spinoza; and among the strongest influences on the philosopher's political ideas were members of the commercial elite and de Witt's supporters — such as Lambert van Velthuysen and the de la Court brothers — who elaborated republican ideas, especially those who, as paradoxical as it may seem, drew upon Hobbes as their principal authority.

¹ Wood, Ellen Meiksins. 'The Dutch Republic' in *Liberty and Property: A Social History of Western Political Thought from Renaissance to Enlightenment*, London and New York: Verso, 2012, pp. 110 and 131-133.

Spinoza was born in Amsterdam in 1632, the son of a Portuguese Jewish merchant whose family had taken refuge in the Netherlands. Benedict was well schooled in Judaism and may even have been educated for the rabbinate. Yet he was soon excommunicated from the Jewish community, as well as denounced by the Catholic Church, no doubt for ideas that foreshadowed his great work, the *Ethics*. He would establish connections with freethinking Protestants, who had come under the philosophical influence of Descartes and included precisely the kinds of Cartesian republicans who brought Hobbesian ideas to the Netherlands. Although he would manage to shock even those like Velthuysen, who had begun by supporting Spinoza's philosophical ventures, there is no mistaking his affinities, political no less than philosophical, with those Cartesian circles. In 1672, the Germans and French invaded the Netherlands, de Witt was assassinated, and the Orangist faction restored the office of stadtholder, establishing a regime — with the support of popular forces — under which Spinoza would continue to feel threatened until his death in 1677.

Spinoza began in 1663 with reflections on Descartes' philosophy but soon went on to elaborate his own distinctive views. In the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* of 1670, he laid out a provocative attack on the kind of reactionary Protestantism that supported the House of Orange, at a time when religious and republican liberties were under threat. Like others among his Cartesian republican associates, he promoted religious toleration; and like them, he called for the freedom of philosophy, as distinct from theology, even in interpretation of the Bible — which, in Dutch confessional disputes, had clear political implications. But he followed these principles to their limits in ways his friends were not always willing to do. Ultimately it would be Velthuysen, at first a friend and collaborator on the question of religion and philosophy, who would denounce Spinoza as an outright atheist.

The guiding principle of Spinoza's philosophy, which is elaborated in his *Ethics*, was the unity of God and nature. To speak of a transcendent creator who by his own will and for his own purposes forged the universe seemed meaningless to the philosopher. There is one single reality, which we can call nature; and if God is its cause, he is an immanent cause, not standing outside nature but acting as the principle of nature unfolding its immanent necessities. Arcane debates have raged about whether this makes Spinoza a pantheist or even an atheist; but one thing remains certain: Spinoza had gone further than anyone else in the Western philosophical canon in denying any form of transcendence beyond or alien to nature or any dualism of matter and spirit. Humanity belongs to nature too; and, just as all of nature is a unique and single substance, there is no meaningful way to speak of a division in humanity between mind or spirit and matter. At the same time, our participation in this unique and single reality allows for real human knowledge. The material complexities of the human body are expressed in a complex and uniquely human capacity for apprehending the single reality of which the human being is an integral part. While as natural beings we are driven by our passions, having a unique capacity to know and understand the forces that drive us, we need not be slaves to our passions, or indeed to uncritical and unreflective adherence to religion, and can live a free life in accordance with reason. We shall see how these principles are reflected in Spinoza's views on the ideal polity. ...