

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE POLITICS OF THE PASSIONS

... to organise a state in such a way as leaves no place for wrongdoing, or better still, to frame such a constitution that every man, whatever be his character, will set public right before private advantage, this is the task, this the toil.<sup>1</sup>

A few months before Spinoza passed away, on 21 February 1677, the Dutch philosopher was visited in The Hague by a young and ambitious German diplomat by the name of Leibniz. According to Leibniz, Spinoza, 'said to me that on the day of the massacre of the De Witts'—who, as will be only too familiar, in August 1672 were lynched in The Hague by a furious mob, panicking after the French had invaded the Republic—'he wanted to go out at night and post a placard near the site of the massacre, reading *ultimi barbarorum*. But his host locked the house to keep him from going out, for he would be exposed to being torn to pieces'.<sup>2</sup>

This is one of the very few, if not the only reliable account we have of an instance in Spinoza's life where he appears to have lost control over his passions. According to Jean-Maximilien Lucas, probably the earliest biographer of Spinoza, 'he shed tears when he saw his fellow-citizens rend to pieces one who was a father to them all, and although he knew better than anybody what men are capable of, he could not but shudder at that cruel sight.' But soon, the story continues, Spinoza regained his posture, commenting 'Of what use would wisdom be to us if after falling into the passions of the people we had not the strength to raise ourselves by our own efforts?'<sup>3</sup>

From Spinoza's own perspective, however, this comment should not be read as an expression of shame on the part of a man usually in full control of himself, for according to Spinoza's *E*, there is nothing to be ashamed of once we acknowledge the *causes* of our behaviour. Instead of judging human conduct, we should try to *understand* it. In the *TP*, Spinoza specifically declares to:

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<sup>1</sup> Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, 252–253.

<sup>2</sup> Nadler, *Spinoza*, 306.

<sup>3</sup> Gullan-Whur, *Within Reason*, 248.

have taken great care to understand human actions, and not to deride, deplore, or denounce them. I have therefore regarded human passions (...) not as vices of human nature, but rather as properties which belong to it in the same way as heat, cold, storm, thunder and the like belong to the nature of the atmosphere (*TP* I, 4).<sup>4</sup>

In view of the truly horrendous nature of the events of August 1672—Johan and Cornelis de Witt were actually cannibalised, parts of Johan's body were sold as items of curiosity, and the Age of True Freedom came to an end when William III regained the stadholderate of the House of Orange—any supporter of the stadholderless regime had every right to be shocked. As a matter of fact, in view of the well-orchestrated nature of the attack on the De Witts, it would be naive to consider it the outcome of a spontaneous revolt by the common man.<sup>5</sup> This was a bloody coup and every right-minded Dutch republican was in shock, and so was Spinoza, or so it would seem. The fact that he was prepared to relate the events to Leibniz, a man he otherwise did not trust (we know Spinoza asked his friends *not* to show him manuscripts of the *E*),<sup>6</sup> seems to confirm that he did not repent his initial reaction.

### 1. *Caute: Spinoza as a 'Political Philosopher'*

But what does this event tell us about the politics of the public display of passions? Revealing though it may seem, there are at least two important reasons to be sceptical about its relevance. To begin with, it is still far from clear how Spinoza should be related to the flourishing enterprise commonly referred to as the History of Political Thought. So far, the two main authorities of this relatively recent discipline have hardly dealt with the author of the *TTP* (1670) and *TP* (1677). Neither John Pocock nor Quentin Skinner has given his writings much thought, and recent surveys such as Iain Hampsher-Monk's also ignore the Dutch philosopher.<sup>7</sup> The equally popular *Cambridge History of Political Thought 1450–1700* awards Spinoza a quarter of the number of pages devoted to Grotius.<sup>8</sup> The few specialists that have addressed Spinoza's political thought have done so either in

<sup>4</sup> Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, 288–289.

<sup>5</sup> Israel, *The Dutch Republic*, 796 ff.

<sup>6</sup> Spinoza, *Letters*, 330–331 (Letter 72).

<sup>7</sup> Hampsher-Monk, *A History of Modern Political Theory*.

<sup>8</sup> Burns and Goldie (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Political Thought*, 545–572.