

# King Philip II of Spain as a symbol of 'Tyranny' in Spinoza's Political Writings

Recibido: enero 25 de 2018 | Aceptado: enero 31 de 2018  
DOI: 10.17230/co-herencia.15.28.6

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**Abstract** The highly abstract style of Spinoza's philosophy has encouraged some interpretations of him as a thinker with little immediate connection with the whirl of social and cultural affairs around him. This article shows that all three major Western revolts - those of the Netherlands, Portugal and Aragon - against Philip II (his principal symbol and embodiment of tyranny, arbitrary and illicit governance, intolerance and repression of basic liberties) became in some sense internationally entwined and were intensely present in his life, which helps to understand that Spinoza was indeed a revolutionary.

**Key words:**

Philip II, tyranny, religious persecution of dissenters, revolution, historical context of Spinoza's thought.

## El rey Felipe II de España como símbolo de la tiranía en los escritos políticos de Spinoza

**Resumen** El estilo sumamente abstracto de la filosofía de Spinoza ha alentado algunas interpretaciones en las que se afirma que tenía poco contacto con el ajetreo de los asuntos sociales y culturales a su alrededor. Este artículo muestra que las tres principales revueltas en Occidente (las de Holanda, Portugal y Aragón) contra Felipe II (que para él era el principal símbolo y personificación de la tiranía, del gobierno arbitrario e ilícito, de la intolerancia y de la represión de las libertades básicas) llegaron a estar en algún sentido entrelazadas y estuvieron presentes intensamente en su vida, lo que nos ayuda a entender que Spinoza fue un auténtico revolucionario.

**Palabras clave:**

Felipe II, tiranía, persecución religiosa de los disidentes, revolución, contexto histórico del pensamiento de Spinoza.

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After sending in an army to conquer Portugal, in the year 1580, Philip II of Spain made himself also 'king of Portugal' against the wishes of most of its inhabitants. Acquiring Portugal, observed one of Philip's advisors, would be a major strategic gain, also "be the principal, most effective, and decisive instrument and remedy for the reduction of the Netherlands to obedience, as well as a useful means of controlling England" (Quoted in Parker, 1998, p. 166). Conquering Portugal was consciously viewed in Madrid as a step to gaining world mastery. Appropriately, Philip's army of invasion was commanded by the same duke of Alba who was championing a militantly intolerant, forthright Castilian imperialism more generally and had previously subjected the Low Countries to a reign of terror between 1567 and 1573, as part of a brutal and bloody drive to overwhelm the Dutch rebels, resulting in numerous Calvinists, Lutherans and other religious dissidents being brought "to all kinds of martyrdom," as Spinoza vividly expresses it, in his letter to Albert Burgh (Spinoza, 1995, p. 341).

After the battle for Lisbon, the historic liberties and privileges of Portugal, like those of Aragon subsequently, in 1591-1592, were ruthlessly suppressed by the Spanish monarch. One ominous consequence of this 1580 'revolution' in Portugal for the 'New Christians', or *conversos* of Jewish descent, was that the powers of the Inquisition in Portugal, as might have been expected, were further extended. Faced by this crisis and disaster in Portugal, and marked intensification of persecution of all New Christians that followed, neither Portuguese crypto-Jews remaining in Portugal, nor those dispersed to other lands, remained politically inert. Thanks to research in Portuguese Inquisition archives, we know Spinoza's own family figured among the active 'judaizers' in France, at Nantes, as well as in Portugal. "At Nantes, the Portuguese were divided in the late sixteenth century," as one authority has put it, "between judaisers and Catholics. Among the former was Abraham d'Espinoza, grandfather of Baruch Spinoza, the philosopher." Actually, Abraham was not Spinoza's grandfather but his great-uncle, the brother of his grandfather, Isaac d'Espinoza, who later settled in Rotterdam. But what matters is that Abraham certainly figured among the two or

three leading merchants of the ten or so Portuguese New Christian families then residing in Nantes and who, despite living outwardly as a 'New Christian', was, like all the Marranos dwelling in France's western ports at the time, an active 'judaizer' - as, presumably, he had been, earlier, in Portugal. That his crypto-Judaism remained steadfast and well-known in crypto-Jewish circles beyond France is beyond doubt because, in 1615, the heads of the Amsterdam Portuguese Jewish marriage dowry society appointed this same great-uncle, Abraham d'Espinoza, principal representative in Nantes of their organization, a certain sign of his being both a leading figure in the Nantes Portuguese community and the most active, committed crypto-judaizer among the Nantes Portuguese New Christian community. Plainly, he was viewed by the Jewish community in Holland with a confidence based on longstanding reputation and experience (Israel, 2002a, pp. 81-82).

Spinoza's paternal grand-father Michael d'Espinoza's father, in later life used the synagogue name 'Isaac de Espinoza'. We know died a practicing Jew in Rotterdam, in 1627. Known earlier as Pedro Rodriguez Spinoza, he was born around 1559, in Lisbon, but subsequently dwelt in Vidigueira (Vaz, 1982, pp. 136, 138), an inland southern Portuguese wine town, near Évora, in the Alentejo, the seigneurial rights over which had belonged to the great navigator, Vasco da Gama, and now pertained to the latter's descendants. This center of a wine-producing area was where Pedro's wife's family resided (ibid; Revah, 1995, p. 169; Borges, 2002, p. 125). This lady, Spinoza's paternal grand-mother, was named Mor Alvares; her own grandfather, Manoel Alvares, had been arrested by the Inquisition in Vidigueira together with several other relatives, in 1570 (Borges, 2002, p. 127). Several of her cousins had been burnt for judaizing in the Évora *Auto-da-fe* of 1574. A later round of arrests, towards the end of Philip II's reign, landed more family members, including Spinoza's maternal great-grandfather, Gabriel Alvares, secretary of an orphanage and a local tax-collector, in prison in 1597, along with two sons and other relatives who were then tortured and stripped of their possessions. Several relatives, including Pedro Rodríguez Espinoza (alias Isaac de Spinoza), fleeing Portugal, in

1597, joined family members who had previously managed to settle in Nantes.

Michael d’Espinoza, Spinoza’s father was born in Vidigueira around 1587; he left Portugal at around the age of ten when his father departed for France, in 1597 (Revah, 1995, pp. 127-128). The Spinoza family, dwelling ostensibly as New Christians at Nantes, belonged consequently to an international Marrano diaspora, a far-flung network that constituted one of the most dispersed and yet socially cohesive religious and cultural groupings of the early modern Atlantic world. The Nantes Portuguese New Christian community remained extremely small throughout this period apparently never rising above ten or a dozen families. Like the community at Rouen, it remained sharply divided between judaizers and pro-Spanish Catholics until the 1620s but then, the dialectic lapsed. From the 1630s - perhaps owing to the transfer of the Spinoza family to Holland- the Nantes crypto-Jewish element withered away; the remaining Nantes Portuguese opted for a Catholic future (Israel, 2002a, pp. 256-257).

The subversion practiced by these Portuguese New Christians living at Nantes was religious, international and also political. During the 1580s and 1590s, many Portuguese exiles lent their support to Dom Antonio, Prior of Crato (Koen, 1967, pp. 111-112). Proclaimed ‘king of Portugal,’ in Lisbon, on 23 June 1580, before Alba’s army arrived, amid great popular fervour aroused by general fear of Castilian domination, Dom Antonio’s regime in Portugal had lasted, just a few weeks. After Alba’s victory, all of Portugal and its colonies had submitted to Philip and Spanish dominance except for the Azores where the local governor held out for the pretender, Dom Antonio (Gómez-Centurión, 1988, p. 181). Dom Antonio himself was by no means inclined to abandon the struggle: he managed to escape, reach France, and eventually organize a sizeable force of 58 vessels and some 6,000 men, mostly French; fitted out in and supplied from Nantes with the help of Portuguese (judaizing) merchants there. He sailed with this fleet in the summer of 1582 to the Azores then still defying Philip II in his name (Martin & Parker, 1988, p. 94; Parker, 1998, p. 167). In the Azores, he was enthusiastically

acknowledged and actually reigned as 'king of Portugal' in Terceira, from July to November 1582. However, his fleet, supplied from Nantes, was beaten by a Spanish *armada*, sent from Cadiz, in a battle off the island of São Miguel, in late July 1582. Terceira was then conquered by Spanish troops, in the summer of 1583. But Dom Antonio, chief focus of Portuguese revolutionary subversion throughout the Atlantic world, eluded Philip's clutches yet again, escaping once more to France with a few supporters.

The Portuguese diaspora's support for Dom Antonio's cause developed into what was, at the time, a well-known international panorama of political subversion obvious to everyone, not least Philip himself, and frequently noted by his diplomats. Reports from Venice during the late 1580s, indicated that Dom Antonio was seeking to form an alliance with the Ottoman Turks to enlarge further his growing list of alliances with Philip's enemies - headed by the Dutch rebels and Queen Elizabeth of England besides Henri IV of France. 'Cada dia se descubren nuevos judíos que vienen de Portugal' [every day new Jews are discovered coming from Portugal] commented the Spanish ambassador in Venice, in July 1590, "y todos ellos son apasionadissimos por don Antonio de Portugal que parece que viene esta plaga de rebellion con la judería" [and all of them are extremely passionate for Don Antonio of Portugal so that it seems this plague of rebellion comes with Judaism] (Quoted Ruspio, 2006, p. 78). The same envoy mentioned this subversive phenomenon involving Jews and New Christians again a few weeks later, explaining that at Venice both the Portuguese who had returned to Judaism and lived in the ghetto, and those still living outwardly as 'Christians', were ardent supporters of Dom Antonio's subversive movement working for him as spies and agents as well as financial backers and suppliers (Ruspio, 2006, p. 79).

Nantes and its vicinity proved pivotal to Dom Antonio's tenuous but vital communications with Portugal and the Azores and retained a special importance for the Portuguese Atlantic anti-Habsburg revolution. In 1584, despite being continually harassed and threatened by agents and supporters of Philip and the French Catholic League, Dom Antonio resided for a time in the castle of

Sarzeau, four miles south of Vannes, close to Nantes, and during 1585 was, for some months, in Nantes itself, orchestrating his flagging cause in Portugal and the Azores and issuing letters of marque, for fees (and a cut of the proceeds), licensing French and English privateers in his 'royal' name, to raid shipping belonging to subjects of Philip II. Receiving and sending out messengers, Dom Antonio built a complex web of negotiations with Queen Elizabeth, William the Silent and after William was assassinated, in July 1584, at Philip's instigation -he aimed to murder also Elizabeth and Dom Antonio (Parker, 1998, 190, 360 [n. 37])- with the new Dutch leadership. Nearly trapped several times by pro-Spanish Leaguers in western France, in August 1585 Dom Antonio fled, via La Rochelle, for England where Queen Elizabeth offered him refuge. Already his ally at a distance, the notorious former royal sectary at the Escorial, Antonio Pérez, another fugitive from Philip's rule, became personally acquainted with Portugal's greatest rebel against Philip's global monarchy, in the summer of 1593. Pérez and Dom Antonio encountered each other at that point simultaneously quartered at the same place in England, at Windsor. The symbolic embodiment of Portuguese anti-Spanish insurgency, Dom Antonio, later returned and died in France, in 1595, ending what his adherents called his fifteen-year 'reign' (1580-1595). In his claims to the Portuguese throne (which were supported by the Dutch States-General and by William the Silent's successor as Stadholder, Prince Maurits), he was succeeded by his illegitimate heir, Emmanuel van Portugal (c. 1588-1636), who at an early age had married a daughter of William the Silent, Countess Emilia of Nassau (d. 1629), who converted to Catholicism as part of her new Portuguese courtly role; this 'royal' pair resided at the castle of Wychen, near Nijmegen, in Gelderland (Israel, 2002b, pp. 65-75, 71).

Continuing subversion and disaffection in Portugal and among the Portuguese Atlantic diaspora undoubtedly had some material effect on the course of the great events that shook world in the 1580s and 1590s. Queen Elizabeth could count, her secretary, Walsingham's, papers show, on a stream of intelligence supplied from Lisbon by Dom Antonio's supporters, including details of the

massive preparations for the great Armada against England (Parker, 1998, p. 215). Following the Armada's defeat, Walsingham, working closely with Dom Antonio's entourage, persuaded Elizabeth to send a smaller counter-armada to strike at Spain, using some of the English veterans stationed in the Netherlands, a project with which Prince Maurits and the States of Holland, guided by Oldenbarnevelt, readily co-operated. Undoubtedly, one main reason Portugal was chosen as the target was Dom Antonio's influence, and especially the pretension he worked hard to foster in English and Dutch minds that only the mere sight of an Anglo-Dutch fleet would suffice to bring the Portuguese people out again into open revolt against Philip II (Den Tex 1962, vol. 2, pp. 16, 18).

The story of Dom Antonio, the Prior of Crato, and the Portuguese revolt of 1580, then, then, is entwined with the circumstances of Spinoza's family and his own life. Spinoza himself discusses Philip II's tyranny in several places in his works, but not, however, in relation to Portugal. He refers to Philip rather in connection with the Dutch Revolt, on the one hand, and, in the *Tractatus Politicus*, the work that he left unfinished when he died, with the 'reino de Aragón'. The latter discussion constitutes a substantial passage praising the Aragonese for establishing, during the Middle Ages, a form of monarchy so prolific in constitutional checks and legal restrictions and so resistant to what Spinoza saw as the inherently negative and undesirable tendencies of monarchy and royal pretensions, as to represent the closest thing to an ideal - that is, totally emasculated - monarchy that Spinoza could conceive. So well did this medieval Spanish kingdom function that the Aragonese "continued for an incredible length of time unharmed, the king's loyalty towards his subjects being as great as theirs towards him." This happy situation changed only when the "kingdom fell by inheritance to Ferdinand of Castile, who first had the surname of Catholic; for the liberty enjoyed by the Aragonese began to displease the Castilians, who therefore ceased not to urge Ferdinand to abolish these rights." Basing himself on Antonio Pérez's account (Domínguez, 1994, pp. 174-175), Spinoza compliments Ferdinand on being wise enough not to attempt any such thing. "Accordingly, the Aragonese retained

their liberties after the time of Ferdinand, though no longer by right but by the favor of their too powerful kings, until the reign of Philip II who oppressed them with better luck, but no less cruelty, than he did the United Provinces” (Spinoza, 1958, pp. 364-365).<sup>1</sup>

Antonio Pérez’s political career and reflections offered a unique thread enabling Spinoza to tie together on the world stage the Dutch Revolt with the Portuguese revolt (1580), and the Aragonese insurrection (1591-1592), forging an exceptionally broad perspective. Pérez had studied in several universities and been Philip II’s secretary of state, in succession to his father, Gonzalo Pérez, for twelve years (1566-1578). Initially modest, he gradually gained confidence in his special position of power close to the king. As his influence grew, he began advising the king more and more forthrightly, until finally becoming too big for his boots (Kamen, 1997, pp. 212-213). The Dutch Revolt confronted the court in Madrid with a general challenge, that of how local laws, traditions and attitudes of the different realms of the empire could be integrated under the crown. Two factions evolved at court, a hardline Castilian, imperialist view, in league with militant religious intolerance, championed by the duke of Alba and his faction, the other, opposing the hard-liners and more conciliatory toward local particularist tendencies, headed first by Ruy Gomez, prince of Eboli, and afterwards by Pérez. The Madrid court factions’ rivalry was a struggle for power but also of principle with the Alba faction the more Castilian in outlook and their opponents placing more emphasis on retaining vestiges of the Dutch, Flemish, Aragonese and Portuguese constitutions, and on conciliation rather than submission (Elliott, 1963, p. 19).

No-one who has read history, remarks Spinoza, clearly alluding to Pérez who is mentioned on the same page, can be ignorant of the fact that the “good faith of advisors [of kings] has generally turned to their ruin; and so, for their own safety they need to be cunning, and not faithful.” (Spinoza, 1995, p. 334).<sup>2</sup> A copy of *Las*

1 Cfr. Domínguez, 1994, p. 175; Gascón, 2007, vol. 2, p. 42.

2 Until recently some scholars wrongly mistook the ‘Antonio Pérez’ to whom Spinoza refers for the ‘other Antonio Pérez’, a legal scholar at the University of Louvain (Leuven), author of a work entitled *Ius publicum* (1657) even though this Pérez makes no mention of Aragon or its revolt, see for instance the footnote in R. H. M. Elwes’ translation of the *Tractatus*, p. 334.

*obras y relaciones del Ant. Pérez secretario de estado , que fue del rey de España, Don Phelippe II deste nombre* [The Works and Memoranda of Antonio Pérez, former secretary of state of the king of Spain Philip II] (Geneva, 1644), a text of over a thousand pages, full of the hard-headed, cutting realism and political psychology characteristic of this author, was at the time of the philosopher's death one of only two political works published in Spanish still remaining in Spinoza's small personal library (listed as no. 96 in Offenbergs reconstruction) (Offenberg, 1973, p. 320; Blanco, 1994, p. 179; Domínguez, 1994, p. 165). Plainly, it is this work that afforded the material for his analysis of the Aragonese Revolt. Pérez's tendency to exaggerate Philip II's malign character and misdeeds and inflate his own importance (Gascón, 2007, vol. 1, pp. 28-29) did little to lessen Spinoza's approval of his commentary. For Spinoza entirely shared Pérez's post-1590 conclusions about rottenness of monarchs and the threat of royal ambition, as well as the raw mechanics of politics. For both writers, a viable theory of politics must be based on reason, nature, experience and a clear perception of the mechanics of self-interest - understanding that "ninguno fue tan amigo de su vecino", as Pérez pithily expressed it, "que no lo sea de sí más" [that no-one loves his neighbor so much that he does not love himself still more] (Domínguez, 1994, p. 169).

Pérez's fall from grace, in 1579, had coincided with a broad shift in Philip II's outlook and policies from a more cautious, inward-looking stance to a grandiose Atlantic imperialism soon to exert an immense impact on Portugal and the Portuguese New Christians (Gómez-Centurión, 1988, p. 179). Following his arrest by Philip, in connection with the murder of a courtier, Juan de Escobedo, in which the king was complicit, Pérez was imprisoned in Madrid, kept under varying degrees of custody for eleven years (1579-1590) until finally, assisted by allies, he contrived to escape to Zaragoza. Being himself Aragonese, he sought refuge in the Aragonese kingdom's famed *fueros* or historic privileges. When Philip tried to seize him, in May 1591, circumventing the *fueros*, by arresting him through the Inquisition, the only Aragonese institution not constricted by rigorous constitutional limits, there erupted an explosive local

reaction rooted in tensions over the Inquisition's exceptional powers in Aragon that had been resented for decades (Gascón, 2007, vol. 2, pp. 26-29). The prisoner was forcibly set free by a rioting mob yelling 'viva la Libertad!' The Inquisition's second attempt to apprehend the personage who was now Philip II' foremost domestic adversary, in September 1591, triggered a full-scale uprising (albeit largely confined to Zaragoza) that freed him again and sparked a short-lived armed revolt against the Castilians, enabling Pérez to escape to France, and then England, where he raised the banner of rebellion against monarchical tyranny linking his cause to that of Dom Antonio. Philip's response was to raise a Castilian army to crush this new insurrection. On entering Zaragoza, on 12 November 1591, the royal troops initiated a crack-down. Several dissident nobles were arrested and executed (Gascón, 2007, p. 27; Kamen, 1997, pp. 290-291). A defeated, cowed gathering of the Aragonese Cortes, at Tarazona, in June 1592, had to acquiesce in wide-ranging modifications to Aragon's laws aimed at suppressing further opposition and strengthening the royal prerogative.

Pérez outlived Dom Antonio by eleven years, dying in Paris, in 1611. While in England and France, he developed into the most prominent international publicist propagating political theory opposing Philip's absolutism. His terse and trenchant maxims - the favor of princes is "false, feeble, deadly, the shadow of death itself" - appealed to Spinoza as a way of appraising leading figures. He agreed with his judgments; both writers for instance admiring Ferdinand the Catholic's restraint and skill. But Pérez's writing appealed even more as a way of analyzing the mechanics of politics, as a set of general maxims summing up the reality of political life (Boyden, 1999, pp. 30, 33; Domínguez, 1994, p. 175). "Nam (ut Ant. Perezus optime notat)," remarks Spinoza at one point, "imperio absolute uti principi admodum periculosum, subditis admodum odiosum, et institutis tam divinis quam humanis adversum, ut innumera ostendunt exempla" [For as Antonio Pérez very well observes, an absolute dominion is to the prince very dangerous, to the subjects very hateful, and to the institutes of God and man alike opposed, as innumerable instances show.] (Spinoza, 1958, pp. 346-347). Spinoza is here only very slightly

altering Pérez's actual wording: "el uso del poder absolute es muy peligroso a los reyes, muy odioso a los vasallos, muy ofensivo a Dios y a la naturaleza, como lo muestran mil ejemplos" [the exercise of absolute power is very dangerous for kings, very hateful to their subjects, and very much opposed to God and nature] (Pérez, 1986, p. 208; Domínguez, 1994, p. 172). The borrowing of wording, as has been noted, is unmistakable (Pérez 1986, I, p. 168); it is also a remarkable irony that amidst one of the world's greatest texts of democratic republicanism, its author cites virtually word for word the maxim of the very personage who long served as the most intimate and devious adviser of the monarch figuring in his political philosophy as the supreme symbol of monarchical oppression, intolerance, bigotry, deceitfulness, unconstitutionality, criminality and tyranny.

The fact that all three major Western revolts against Philip II - those of the Netherlands, Portugal and Aragon - became in some sense internationally entwined was, of course, due to the contingent political circumstances of the time. But this international dimension became itself an inherent part of the legend and propaganda of the Dutch Revolt, and the legacy of Dom Antonio, and his son Emmanuel, a common thread interlinking the lives and thoughts of the Philip's and Alba's principal adversaries - William of Orange, Queen Elizabeth, Antonio Pérez, and the Prior of Crato. By the time that politics and international great power rivalry had become a key concern of Spinoza's philosophy, in the 1660s and 1670s, Louis XIV of France had, of course, long since replaced the Spanish crown as the chief threat to the Dutch Republic's interests and independence and as the chief absolutist challenge to the freedoms proclaimed by Dutch republican theorists of a radical stamp, including Spinoza. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that in Spinoza's two major political writings, Louis XIV is scarcely alluded to and Philip II remained his principal symbol and embodiment of tyranny, arbitrary and illicit governance, intolerance and repression of basic liberties. In Spinoza's thought, Philip is the very symbol of despotism thereby linking in a concrete way the destinies of his own native land and that of all his immediate forebears.

From Spinoza's perspective his family's and his former community's dogged crypto-Judaism, the tenacity of which he explained in terms of Portuguese royal policy, 'superstition' and the vehement hatred for the New Christians felt by the Old Christians, was just one among several legacies with which he was intimately familiar via his family and upbringing and also his own experience (1654-1656) as a young Sephardic merchant doing business in Amsterdam. As a youth reared in a mercantile household and intended to enter trade, and still more after his father's death, in 1654, whilst he headed the family firm in the years 1654-1656, Spinoza participated directly in a far-flung mercantile network, personally managing what still remained of his father's import-export trade with Portugal, France, Brazil, Morocco and the Canaries. Politics and international commerce was topics about which the young Spinoza undoubtedly knew a good deal. Among the earliest surviving Amsterdam notarial deeds relating to the Nantes Portuguese Jews is a power of attorney assigned by a leading Amsterdam Portuguese merchant Manoel Rodrigues Vega, to Isaac de Spinoza's brother, Manoel Rodrigues (alias Abraham) d'Espinoza of Nantes, the same who was the local representative of the dowry society, authorizing him to reclaim a cargo of textiles that had been *en route* to northern Portugal on a Dutch ship seized by Spanish troops based at the coastal town of Blauet, at the mouth of the river of that name, in Brittany. These Spaniards belonged to a force Philip II had sent to Brittany, in 1590, to lend military support to the French Catholic League in their fight to prevent the Protestant contender, Henri IV (reigned: 1589-1610) securing the French throne and were part of a sustained Spanish effort to prevent a *de facto* toleration and general Catholic-Protestant compromise being agreed on in France as a means to end the civil war there. Aiming to prevent Henri IV gaining control over the region, and assisting Dom Antonio, these troops stayed in Brittany until the end of the Spanish-French war under the Peace treaty of Verdun, in 1598, continually seeking to obstruct the French Protestants and the Portuguese New Christian community. As the personage appointed by Sephardic merchants in Holland to reclaim the seized cargo for

Rodrigues Vega, Abraham d'Espinoza beside being a staunch crypto-Jew must have been well-known among the general merchant community at Nantes, and to the town government, as someone with previous experience of legal and political dealings with local authorities, and someone with the reputation of being an opponent of the Spanish presence and the Catholic League's aims.

An interesting parallel case would arise later, in July 1651, when Spinoza's father, Michael d'Espinoza, appointed the Portuguese Marrano, Antonio Fernandes Carvajal, his agent in London, to represent him before the High Court of the Admiralty to act on his behalf in trying to reclaim two consignments of olive oil belonging to the Spinoza firm seized by English Parliamentary vessels on the high seas, at a time of dispute between England and Portugal. The olive oil was seized in peace time, prior to the onset of the First Anglo Dutch war, in 1652, from Dutch vessels, returning from Portugal "estant que les dites huiles," as this commission reads, "luy appartiennent en vraye, seule et réelle propriété sans que personne sous la couronne du Roy de Portugal ou ennemies de la République d'Angleterre en aye aucune part ni portion en quelque manière [the said oils truly belonging to him alone as real property without anyone under the crown of Portugal, or any enemy of the Republic of England having any part or portion of the oil in any way]."<sup>3</sup> Fernandes Carvajal, well-known to the Cromwellian authorities, was then political leader of the Marrano community in London, and firm opponent of Spanish power and supporter of the Portuguese revolt, as well as founder of the first Sephardic synagogue in London.

Spinoza was a hater of royal ambition and religious intolerance and needs to be viewed as a revolutionary philosopher. He began his philosophical career as a rebel against rabbinic authority. But his mature philosophy comprised a generalized assault on 'superstition', miracles, theology and ecclesiastical authority, albeit one as a rule so far abstracted from any specific context by most scholars interpreting his philosophy, that the reader unfamiliar with the context of his

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<sup>3</sup> Cfr. Gemeentearchief Amsterdam Notarial Archives vol. 967, p. 302, deed signed by Michael d'Espinoza, Amsterdam, 20 July 1651; see also Israel (2002b, pp. 133-134).

life and family might easily imagine that, for him, assailing what he considered the irrational belief-structures that dominate all human societies was as purely abstract, generalized philosophical procedure without its own cultural, religious and historical roots. Hence, we need to ask what were the specific consequences and, as he saw it, practical social benefits, likely to follow from his systematic and revolutionary assault on and sweeping rejection of ordinary people's ideas, on the multitude's prejudices and on 'superstition.' What were the effects for society generally and the Jews in particular and what were the consequences for his chosen principal ideological adversaries - Philip II, the Inquisition and Calvinist bigotry?

Spinoza evidently believed the most intractable, oppressive and troublesome malaises affecting the social world in which he lived - and which to most of us at first sight appear to be only remotely connected - could all be resolved or greatly mitigated by means of a single subversive strategy of clandestine infiltration of ideas totally destructive of how the vast majority of people think. In this sense, he was a profoundly, comprehensively revolutionary figure. Three pervasive, oppressive barriers, needed clearing away in his view- monarchy, construed by him as a highly defective system of government and pervasively damaging political ideology, secondly, religious persecution of dissenters and heretics of all kinds; and, thirdly, the proliferation of wars between the European powers which were themselves, he thought, often the outcome of royal ambition, court intrigues and misplaced religious zeal. All three forms of oppression and ways of systematically harming the common interest of humanity - royalism, war and religious zeal - had a particular connection in his time with Holland's challenge to the Spanish world empire created by the Emperor Charles V (king of Spain: 1516-1556) that reached its height under Philip II (reigned 1555-1598). All three preoccupations powerfully inflected his complex relationship to his Dutch Golden Age context on the one side and his Portuguese and Iberian background on the other.

"Spinoza has often been read as a revolutionary thinker," remarks Michael A. Rosenthal, in an important article about Spinoza's

political thought (Rosenthal, 2013, pp. 11-32).<sup>4</sup> He was right, here, although it is pertinent to add that today there are even more scholars who prefer, as he does himself, to argue that Spinoza was not actually a 'revolutionary'. In recent times, the latter has come to be the generally accepted view. For many or most scholars today, Spinoza was as a conservative thinker who was neither a democrat in any real sense, nor an egalitarian, nor a revolutionary. This conclusion seems to me profoundly wrong-headed, even something of a disaster in the study of intellectual history that not only obscures the reality of Spinoza's philosophy but seriously obstructs gaining any clear perception of those sections of the Western Enlightenment most closely entwined with the revolutionary era (1775-1848) in the Americas and Europe. To rebut what is now the prevailing view seems to me a matter of some urgency. We need to revert emphatically to the older view that Spinoza was indeed a 'revolutionary'.

Use of the term 'revolution' in relation to Spinoza's thought Rosenthal points out, is problematic since Spinoza himself and his contemporaries never used the term 'revolutio'[revolution] in anything like its modern meaning. This is indubitably true. Also, the highly abstract style of Spinoza's philosophy and his preference, in his writing, to stick to generalities rather than discuss particular things - aside from the Bible and the history of the ancient Hebrew commonwealth - have, without doubt, encouraged interpretations of him as a remote, austere thinker with little immediate connection with the whirl of social and cultural affairs around him. It is hardly surprising that he is deemed a thinker whose potentially subversive democratic political thought is too abstract, withdrawn and also secondary, or non-essential, to understanding his essential thought which are supposedly his metaphysics and his ethics.

Longstanding and widely prevalent assumptions as to Spinoza's essential remoteness and marginality to the main developments

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<sup>4</sup> Rosenthal offers as examples of writers who see Spinoza as a revolutionary Antonio Negri, and also myself and Willi Goetschel who highlights what he calls the "revolutionary power of Spinoza's thought" which "radiates forward to Moses Hess and a line of progressive thinker who -knowingly or not- discover through Heine the critical potential of Spinozist thought."

of Western political and social thought, upheld even by thinkers who were intensely preoccupied with his metaphysics such as Kant, Fichte and Hegel, as well as basic errors in historians' account of the rise of modern democratic republicanism - by this I mean Pocock's and Skinner's fundamental failure - to clearly to distinguish the intellectual character of aristocratic from democratic republicanism and reveal the basic antagonism between English gentry republicanism and democratic republicanism - have all combined, I have argued in my recent works, with mistaken interpretations of the French Revolution, to cause Spinoza to have been too long left aside by historians of political thought, especially in English-speaking countries. Over the last twenty years I have tried hard to change what I regard as a longstanding distortion and establish instead the idea that Spinoza was in reality much more of a relevant 'modern' thinker, far more a crucial founder of our modernity, intimately tied to the great revolutions of 1775-1848, and especially the democratic radicalism of Condorcet, Brissot, Paine, Volney, Destutt de Tracy, Jefferson, Miranda and Bolivar, even if his overarching impact is very rarely recognized, than were Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau - or today, even Marx 

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