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The Roots of Modern Liberalism: Tracing the Influence of Social Contract Theory

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Abstract

This paper examines the enduring influence of social contract theory on the ideological foundations of modern liberal political systems. It explores how political legitimacy and political obligation, as articulated in the early modern social contract theories of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Rousseau, have shaped contemporary liberal democracy. By advocating for a shift toward liberty and justice in an era dominated by autocratic monarchies, social contract theorists provided the intellectual framework for democratic governance. Through a critical review of secondary literature, this study evaluates the extent to which these foundational ideas continue to inform political thought and practice in liberal democracies today.

Keywords: Social contract theory, liberalism, democracy, political obligation, political legitimacy

Introduction

Social contract theory is a theoretical framework that proposes a state coming to power by civil consent (Boucher, D., & Kelly, P., 1994). Emerging in the 17th century, during an era marked by absolutist monarchies, and thus of oppression and a lack of accountability, it offered an intellectual rebellion (Held, 1977). This was preceded by the profound slumber of the Middle Ages in Europe. Although initially proposed in various forms by Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, its core premise remains unchanged: state power rests on social consent (Friend, 2025). These political theorists were pioneers in the contractarian tradition, and the ideas of following theorists too can broadly be classified under the theories of these three. This shift in thinking, of which social contract theory is a major part, would go on to ignite revolutions and inspire new political systems across the world.

The term "liberalism," from the Latin "liber" meaning "free," referred originally to the philosophy of freedom (Freeman, 2007). Even today, liberalism, as a modern political philosophy, is grounded in the pursuit of the idealistic principles of liberty, equality, justice, and fraternity in the government of society and its individuals. At the forefront of the ideological shift towards liberalism was John Locke, today hailed as the 'Father of Modern Liberalism'. His revolutionary ideas laid the foundation for our contemporary political systems. And in many other ways too, liberalism continues to shape political discourse in our societies.

Today, the tenets of liberalism form the bedrock of democratic governments across the globe. We live in a world where the struggle for political power remains ever-present and the questions of authority, governance, and the limits of state power remain ever-relevant. In such a context, social contract theory offers invaluable insights into how political systems are constructed and function today. This paper's analysis is an exploration of the ideas that have influenced the architecture of modern democracy and the very ideals we cherish as free citizens. For these reasons, this paper seeks to trace the enduring influence of social contract theory, shedding light on how ideas from the past have travelled across the arc of history and have manifested into the present.

In this article, we will specifically concentrate on how the two concepts of political legitimacy and political obligation are conceptualised in early modern social contracts and then evaluate these notions in context of modern liberal political systems. Specifically, political legitimacy and obligation are analyzed in the context of social contract theory because they are

crucial to understanding how modern political systems derive authority and maintain stability. In today's complex political landscape, these concepts help assess the legitimacy of state power and citizens' responsibilities in the face of evolving democratic norms and governance challenges.

Research Question

How has early modern social contract theory influenced the ideological underpinnings of modern liberal political systems?

Hypothesis

Social contract theory argues that the legitimacy of the state is rooted in the consent of the people, who grant the state authority to govern only through mutual agreement. Political obligation, on the other hand, is conditional upon the state's fulfillment of its fundamental duties, demanding that citizens owe allegiance to the government only if it upholds its own part of the social contract. These are the ways in which the understandings of social contract theory form the core of modern liberal political theory, and thus, form the underpinnings of liberal democratic systems.

Examining Political Legitimacy through Social Contract Theory

Political legitimacy of a state is the right of a state to govern and rule. It is the backbone of a state's authority, the foundation upon which its power rests (Müller, 2017). It is the social acceptance and confidence in the institutions that hold power over people's lives. And without it, a state's power becomes fragile, its institutions hollow, and its ability to maintain order and stability wanes away. So, this concept is not just a matter of governance; it is the pulse of political theory, a question that has reverberated through centuries of intellectual debate and societal evolution.

Historically, legitimacy was tied to divine sanction, a sacred bond that often justified the unyielding authority of monarchs. The 'doctrine of the divine right of kings' encapsulated this notion most vividly, asserting that monarchs were not merely rulers, but divinely appointed stewards of God's will on Earth. Rebellion against such a monarch was not merely a political act: it was a sin, a violation of the natural order established by the Creator (Livingstone, 2006). This principle cemented the notion that the legitimacy of the monarchical state was as sacred as the

divine will itself. Yet, as the centuries unfolded and the tides of history shifted, new voices began to challenge this view that was predominant in the ancient and medieval eras.

Thomas Hobbes (1651) challenged the ‘doctrine of divine right of kings’, despite being a monarchist himself, and subtly hinted at what we now term as ‘popular sovereignty’ through his social contract. Before the existence of monarchy, humanity was bound to the ‘state of nature’, a chaotic realm devoid of any form of government. Driven by an inherent self-interest, humans were doomed to endless conflict, and thus life in this ‘state of nature’ was nothing short of “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” Hobbes argues that the most rational assumption is that, at some distant point, individuals willingly consented to the absolute authority of a sovereign, surrendering their rights in exchange for the promise of societal order and security.

Despite being tainted by its support for absolute monarchy, Hobbes' conception of political legitimacy in the ‘Leviathan’ remains a critical foundation for liberal political theory. It hints at the role of people’s consent as central to legitimate governance. Unless individuals believe that their ancestors had collectively and willingly consented to monarchy in order to make individuals accept this form of government. This clearly demonstrates how crucial the social contract is to legitimacy, thus almost making a case for democracy in this respect. Deep down, Hobbes understands that true and valid political government can only be derived from the voice of the people who are to be governed. In this way, consent is precisely the ‘change-maker’ in a legitimate political system. However, in this theory, the ruler’s legitimacy is justified purely by its practical function of maintaining stability and security. This disregards moral values like social equality or human dignity, which are, in fact, the ideological foundation of our modern liberal political systems. There is also a striking ambiguity and uncertainty of the historical consent given by the people to monarchy at the time of the conclusion of the ‘state of nature’.

The act of consent is not explicitly given (for instance, it is not through a process like voting) and if it is, at all, the consent to monarchy only seems to be theoretical. This ambiguity seems to be due to the rather significant fact that monarchies actually began when local leaders conquered territories abroad and transferred power through inheritance (Costa, 2024). This tacitness leads to the raising of questions on Hobbes’ argument of popular sovereignty, which he believes monarchies must enjoy. The theory is inconsistent with contemporarily prevalent notions of explicit consent for political establishment. Nonetheless, it cannot be blindsided that Hobbes

did initiate the tradition of legitimacy through his introduction of the social contract, although focusing on stability and order and being rather ambiguous in his claims.

In stark contrast to Hobbes, John Locke (1689) unveils a different theory of state legitimacy. The ‘state of nature’ was not a realm of chaos, but rather an era where individuals inherently possessed ‘natural rights’ to ‘life, liberty, and property’. Yet, as disputes arose between individuals and certain anomalies threatened stability, the need for government, one founded on the consent of the ‘active citizens’, became undeniable. The very foundation of political legitimacy, according to Locke, lies in the government's unwavering duty to protect these inalienable rights. Thus, if a government fails in this mission or itself becomes the violator of its citizens' rights, it forfeits its legitimacy and must be overthrown.

Locke’s framework for legitimacy provides a foundation for constitutional government, individual rights, and political accountability. All of these principles greatly continue to shape both political thought and practice today. These ideas have helped establish the principle that political authority must be justified by its respect for individual rights and its ability to secure the socio-economic welfare of the people. When it fails to do so, the government loses its legitimacy and must be replaced. This theory remains a major influence on contemporary democratic systems and discussions of political authority. This is seen clearly in Rishi Sunak’s fears of losing in the general election in the United Kingdom in case high inflation rates persisted during his Prime Ministerial term (BBC, 2024). This was arguably what had guaranteed a loss of legitimacy of the government. This is highly characteristic of a political system based on the philosophy of liberalism, where people hold the right to choose, and thus, governments are accountable to the people.

However, the Marxist critique of Locke has been such that the ‘right to property’, one of Locke’s ‘natural rights’, is an attempt to legitimise the exploitation of the working class (Marx, 1862-1863). In post-Soviet Poland, the swift transition to private property rights led to significant wealth accumulation by a few, exacerbating economic inequality. Other arguments that fall under the Marxist, along with the postcolonial traditions of criticism have also been put forward (Cook, 2021). By framing property rights as fundamental to legitimacy, this theory can be seen as an attempt to maintain the privilege of property owners by making the protection of the ‘right to property’ a standard for the achievement of state legitimacy (Dussel, 2009). For instance, in colonial Australia, the British government's land policies, influenced by Locke's theories, facilitated the dispossession of Indigenous peoples, entrenching their marginalization (Murray,

2022). It is also important to note that Locke never specifically dealt with the role of women in the formation of society or the acquisition of legitimacy by the state. In his texts, he seemed to have escaped some of the difficulties of finding a place for women. Where Locke did speak directly about women, his ideas are consistent with the traditional views of female nature, role and status. This starkly contrasts with his larger 'individual rights' focused approach (Butler, 1978). These critiques reflect the contemporary dilemmas regarding justice and liberty that exist in modern democracies, since political legitimacy of the state is based on its commitment to both of these values. Hence, Locke's ideas of individual freedom and individual rights, while having been perpetuating social hierarchies, are a major part of the foundation of contemporary liberal political frameworks and structures.

The theory of Jean-Jaques Rousseau (1762) theory revolves around the powerful concept of the 'general will': the collective desire of the community, based on the 'common good'. For him, the social contract is not merely a pact between rulers and ruled but a profound agreement within the civil society as a whole, where individuals, in unison, submit to the 'general will'. The legitimacy of the government, then, is forged through its alignment with this general will. A government whose actions deviate from the people's general will, and fail to serve the 'common good', is thus rendered illegitimate.

Rousseau defines political legitimacy in terms of the 'general will' and popular sovereignty. These ideas lay the foundation for modern democracy. Today, legitimacy depends on the active participation of the people in the legislative process and where the majority opinion is acted upon by the government. But legitimacy here can be seen as majoritarian and potentially oppressive to those communities whose views or interests do not align with the majority's. For instance, in Hungary, anti-LGBTQ+ 'propaganda' law, which restricts the portrayal of LGBTQ+ content for minors. This law was enacted despite significant opposition from LGBTQ+ communities and human rights organizations. So, while the 'common good' is a democratic mechanism to achieve a utilitarian decision or policy, it can be weaponized, whether intentionally or unintentionally to suppress certain sections of society. In this way, a democratic order may cease to be democratic for those sections of society (Tocqueville, 1856). The danger of Rousseau's radical egalitarianism can be seen best in the example of the French Revolution, where the people seeked to establish a more liberal political system, but their revolutionary zeal led them to the infamous Reign of Terror (Townshend, 2013).

Rousseau's ideal conceptualisation of direct democracy is difficult to implement in governments for governing huge populations. In modern democracies, representative democracy has been a better way to balance inclusive popular participation with fulfilling the administrative needs of governance. Well-functioning states in today's time, like most of those in the Scandinavian Peninsula, are democracies with parliaments functioning through representation of the people through elected officials (New York Times, 2022). This raises questions about the practicality of Rousseau's model of legitimacy. It shows the difficulties of aligning it with contemporary political systems which seek to govern large populations efficiently without imposing top-down diktats (Mises, 1949). Hence, Rousseau bases state legitimacy on the execution of the 'general will' and the 'common good' through an, although sometimes impractical, direct democracy.

We have examined how social contract theory understands the political legitimacy of the state. However, it is equally essential to recognise that social contract theory brings out state legitimacy and political obligation as concepts that are mutually contingent. The rightfulness of the establishment and preservation of the state is inherently tied to whether citizens believe in, obey and uphold its laws. Conversely but similarly, citizens will not feel obliged to the state if they do not see the state as rightful. Legitimacy is the foundation upon which political obligation stands, and political obligation is what sustains and reinforces the legitimacy of the state. Hence, we shall now examine how social contract theory frames political obligation, further considering its relevance to contemporary liberalism

Examining Political Obligation through the lens of Social Contract Theory

At its heart, political obligation is the moral duty of the citizen to respect and adhere to the authority of the state (Lodge, 2020). The epitome of the most justified view of this obligation lies in social contract theory. The theory argues that political obligation arises not from blind obedience or coercion, but from a mutual, explicit agreement between individuals and the state. Citizens consent to abide by the laws of society in exchange for the state's performance of its functions as designated in the terms of the social contract.

While it has always been widely agreed by citizens and scholars that political obligation is essential for the cohesion of society, the nature and extent of this obligation is far from settled. Some theorists argue that the obligation should be, others, however, contend that when the state

fails to fulfill its part of the contract, the obligation is nullified, and rebellion is not just a 'right' but a duty. This tension between submission to authority and the right to challenge that authority continues to fuel some of the most profound debates in political thought, ultimately shaping the very nature of justice, governance, and freedom today.

Hobbes (1651) asserts that individuals have an absolute, unwavering duty to obey the sovereign, without exception, regardless of the violation of their individual rights. There is no right to revolution, so long as the sovereign upholds the people's, and thus its own, security against external dangers. Only when the sovereign fails in its fundamental duty of self-preservation does the contract break. Yet even then, society must refrain from rebellion. This is because, in Hobbes's view, an absolutist state, with all its flaws, remains far preferable to the brutal, savage chaos of the Hobbesian 'state of nature'.

By basing his theory of the social contract on a view of the 'state of nature' as an era where individuals' absolute freedom leads to constant conflict and fear, Hobbes presents a strong case for why it might be rational to maintain political obligation (Hume, 1748). Furthermore, this unconditional political obligation is relevant where centralized control and decisive leadership is efficient for governance. For instance, the current Chinese government is far more authoritarian than it is democratic in terms of the citizens' political obligations. This has proved to have created a rather conducive political environment of not only political stability but also economic development (Mitter, 2021). This authoritarianism is particularly Hobbesian and realist, as today's China is a state that seeks to maintain its own authority as an actor. While this idea of unconditional political obligation may appear attractive to more conservative regimes, modern liberal political systems are not meant to operate this way and are built on responsiveness and accountability.

However, the model provides no recourse for citizens who are subjected to unjust rule, and so this theory effectively upholds tyranny as long as the government maintains order (Rousseau, 1762). Hobbes' vision of the Leviathan seems better suited to an early modern context, where absolute monarchies were more common, rather than to today's liberal democracies. This theory put forward by Hobbes uses a fallacious process of political consent and a pessimistic view of human nature to justify the permanent and unalterable authority of the Sovereign. This associates both of these ideas to monarchy and absolute obligations. As other social contract theorists gave a more explicit social contract and an optimistic view of human nature, they were naturally led to make the case for liberal democracy and limiting political obligations. Hence, arguably, and

paradoxically enough, Hobbes' social contract theory's greatest contribution to modern liberal political systems, in this respect, is his argument in favour of monarchy.

According to Locke (1689), there exists a conditional and limited obligation to obey the state, dependent upon the government's respect for the natural rights of life, liberty, and property. Governments may breach the social contract by violating the rights of its citizens, especially through tyranny or abuse of power. In such a dire scenario, the people possess the right to dismantle the government and replace it with one that upholds and respects their natural rights, as Locke so vehemently suggests.

Locke's conception of political obligation is grounded in the protection of natural rights, a concept that has been deeply influential in liberal democratic theory and constitutionalism. The government exists not to dominate or control individuals but to protect their natural, pre-existing rights. This conceptualisation of political obligation to the state being contingent on the fulfilment of the role of the state resembles modern liberal political systems. This is for the reason that it suggests a 'give-and-take' relationship between the state and civil society. It also aligns with modern 'human rights' frameworks, as mentioned before, making this view appealing in our modern rights-based political system (Rawls, 1971). These are enshrined in international law, like in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, n.d.). When the social contract is dissolved, the people are justified in overthrowing the government. This Lockean 'right to revolution' was deeply influential in the French and the American Revolutions and the development of constitutional democracies. Hence, Locke understands political obligation to be based on the state's fulfillment of its functions and believes revolution to be justified in case individuals rights are not protected.

The concept of political obligation given by Rousseau (1762) is firmly anchored in the idea of the 'general will'. Political obligation persists only as long as the government genuinely reflects the 'general will'. Yet, if a government betrays the 'general will', it forfeits its legitimacy, and the people possess the right to revolt. This vision of revolution, according to Rousseau, is framed not as a simple swap of one ruler for another, but as a profound and transformative effort to restore the true will of the people.

By rooting political obligation to the state in its adherence to the 'general will', Rousseau offers a framework that seeks to transcend individualism and promote a more cohesive social

order. If society holds beliefs that contrast with state policies, political obligation ceases to exist. This promotes a democratic idea of the state, as understood in the 'agency theory' of government. In this theory, the state is an agent 'hired' by the people merely to perform functions that will achieve the society's collective interests. If the state is an actor with its own set of objectives, aside from the objectives of society, political obligations cease; Rousseau does not think too highly of a selfish state. Post a coup against it in 2016, the Turkish government dismissed thousands from public service, citing national security. In 2017, the Saudi Arabian monarchy also detained princes and businessmen to consolidate its power. By retaining the right to end their own political obligations to the state and to overthrow the state in case the social contract is breached, individuals are realizing their own autonomy as a civil society and their individual freedom (Mill, 1859).

In modern liberal political systems, this takes the more peaceful form of periodic elections for positions of political authority. So, officials who individuals do not want to be obliged to are elected out, and those who individuals want to obey are elected into office (Mill, 1859). For example, in 2020, Bolivian President Evo Morales was successfully elected out of office after widespread protests and a disputed election, leading to a new election where Luis Arce of the MAS party won with a clear mandate. Through the suffrage or the right to vote, individuals exercise their choices for political authority and thus choose their political obligations themselves. But this basis of political obligation can lead to tyranny, as it implies that those who disagree with the 'general will' must be compelled to conform to it (Berlin, 1958). Rousseau's notion of 'freedom' (participation in the general will) contrasts with the idea of freedom that our modern liberal political systems interpret as, which is the liberty to choose and act. His idea of it is one where individuals are forced to obey a collective will that may not align with their personal desires or beliefs. In this sense, Rousseau's theory of political obligation blurs the line between freedom and coercion; by extension, it narrows the divide between liberal democracy and authoritarianism (Arendt, 1951).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined the ideas of the foundational thinkers Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Through this, we have sought to explore how social contract theory has been providing the essential and fundamental framework for modern liberal political systems.

Hobbes connected his absolutist notion of an all-powerful sovereign to a pessimistic view of human nature. This altered the trajectory of political theory by setting the stage for and crucially aiding the birth of liberalism. Locke, on the other hand, grounded state legitimacy in the protection of 'natural rights': a cornerstone of modern liberal political systems. Rousseau, with his vision of political participation in politics and the 'general will' of society, introduced a democratic impulse that continues to reverberate through contemporary conceptions of the state.

In terms of political obligation, Hobbes posited that individuals are bound to obey laws in exchange for protection. Locke put forward the idea of political obligation being tied to the protection of the 'natural rights' of individuals. This is an enduring theme in liberal thought and theory, which particularly emphasizes the reciprocal nature of governance. Rousseau envisioned an even deeper connection between citizens and their laws. He asserted that true political obligation only arises from the 'general will' of the people in society. This resonates with the democratic ideals of participation and popular sovereignty.

Through these varied lenses, social contract theory not only theoretically defined political legitimacy and political obligation in a liberal manner but has also given shape and structure to our political systems. The core ideas that Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau put forth continue to shape and inform modern liberal political systems, even as they evolve and encounter new challenges. Their visions have deeply influenced the form and functions of contemporary political systems. This can be witnessed from the decision-making apparatus in democratic institutions (the principle of 'general will') to the development of legal frameworks that safeguard civil liberties (the idea of 'natural rights'). Moreover, the philosophical foundation they laid for politics continues to guide current debates on citizenship, rights, and the responsibilities of both the state and its citizens in every continent of the world today. In this sense, social contract theory is not a relic of the past but a living, breathing force that continues to shape and define the ways of governance and political life in the modern world.

While this paper has illuminated the foundational influence of social contract theory in the development of modern liberal political systems, it must be acknowledged that it has not addressed the evolving application of these ideas in contemporary political contexts. Future research could explore how the social contract theories of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau intersect with current challenges such as rising inequality, the expansion of democratic participation, and the increasing

role of global governance. These developments, though beyond the scope of this study, are crucial to understanding the future trajectory of liberal political thought.

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