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An Analysis of Social Contract Theories

Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau

The theory of the social contract constitutes one of the foundational frameworks of modern political philosophy. Through it, thinkers sought to explain the origins of political authority, the legitimacy of the state, and the relationship between individuals and power. Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau each developed distinct social contract theories shaped by different conceptions of **human nature**, **the state**, and **freedom**, leading to profoundly divergent political conclusions.

1. Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679)

Human Nature

Hobbes presents a profoundly pessimistic view of human nature. In the state of nature, individuals are fundamentally equal in their capacity to harm one another and are driven by self-interest, fear, and the desire for power. This equality produces mutual distrust and competition, resulting in a condition Hobbes famously describes as a **“war of all against all.”** Life in this state is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

Importantly, Hobbes does not claim that humans are morally evil by nature; rather, conflict arises inevitably from rational self-preservation in the absence of a common authority.

The State

For Hobbes, the state is an artificial construct created through a social contract among individuals who agree to surrender all their natural rights to a sovereign in exchange for security and peace. The sovereign—whether monarch or assembly—possesses **absolute and indivisible authority**. Since the sovereign is not a party to the contract, it cannot be held accountable by the people.

The primary function of the state is to maintain order and prevent a return to the state of nature. Political legitimacy is therefore grounded in the capacity to ensure security.

Freedom

Hobbes defines freedom negatively as the absence of external impediments to motion. Obedience to the sovereign does not negate freedom, as long as individuals are not physically constrained. Consequently, freedom is fully compatible with absolute political authority.

In Hobbes's theory, security takes precedence over liberty.

2. John Locke (1632–1704)

Human Nature

Locke offers a more optimistic and moral conception of human nature. In the state of nature, individuals are rational and capable of recognizing a **natural law** that teaches that all humans are equal and independent. Each person possesses natural rights to **life, liberty, and property**, which exist prior to the formation of political society.

Although generally peaceful, the state of nature is unstable due to the lack of an impartial authority to enforce the law of nature, leading to insecurity and conflict.

The State

The social contract, for Locke, establishes a government whose sole purpose is the protection of natural rights. Individuals consent to limited political authority, not absolute rule. Government power is therefore conditional and revocable.

If the state violates its trust by infringing upon natural rights, citizens retain the **right of resistance and revolution**. Sovereignty ultimately resides with the people, not the rulers.

Freedom

Lockean freedom is both natural and political. It does not mean the absence of all constraints but living under laws to which one has consented and which serve the common good. Law, far from restricting liberty, safeguards it.

However, Locke closely associates freedom with property, implicitly privileging property owners and introducing structural inequalities within his liberal framework.

For Locke, freedom is a natural right preserved through limited government.

3. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778)

Human Nature

Rousseau radically departs from Hobbes and Locke by portraying humans in the state of nature as **peaceful, compassionate, and fundamentally good**. Natural humans are driven by self-preservation and pity rather than ambition or domination.

According to Rousseau, social inequality and moral corruption emerge with the development of private property and complex social relations, not from human nature itself.

The State

Rousseau's social contract aims not merely to secure rights but to transform individuals into citizens. Through the contract, individuals collectively form a moral and political community governed by the **general will**, which represents the common interest rather than the sum of private desires.

Sovereignty belongs entirely to the people and cannot be transferred or represented. A legitimate state expresses the general will through laws that apply equally to all.

Freedom

Rousseau distinguishes between natural freedom and civil freedom. While individuals lose unrestricted natural freedom upon entering society, they gain **moral freedom**, which consists in obeying laws one has prescribed to oneself as a member of the collective.

This leads to Rousseau's most controversial claim: individuals may be "forced to be free" if they resist the general will, raising concerns about authoritarian interpretations.

For Rousseau, true freedom is collective and moral rather than individualistic.

Final Synthesis

Hobbes views political authority as a necessary solution to human insecurity; Locke conceives it as a protective mechanism for pre-existing rights; Rousseau understands it as a moral project aimed at collective self-rule. Together, these theories reveal enduring tensions between **security and liberty, individual rights and collective authority, and power and legitimacy**—tensions that continue to shape modern political thought.