

State of Nature and Political Authority: A Comparative Study of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau

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Abstract: *This study examines the notion of political power via a comparative analysis of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, emphasizing the shift from the state of nature to structured political society. It analyses how each philosopher rationalizes the legitimacy of political authority, the constraints placed upon it, and its connection to freedom and equality. Hobbes characterizes political authority as absolute, arising from fear and the imperative of security, wherein individual freedom is predominantly sacrificed to order. Locke, conversely, underscores the safeguarding of natural rights, asserting that authority is lawful solely via consent and must be constrained to guarantee the preservation of life, liberty, and property. Rousseau presents a participatory approach, contending that genuine freedom emerges when individuals collaboratively establish laws via the common will, thus guaranteeing equality and the moral legitimacy of political authority. This study compares three perspectives to demonstrate the varied philosophical underpinnings of modern political philosophy and the enduring significance of classical social contract theories in current discussions on governance, democracy, and justice. The study reveals that political authority is not consistent nor absolute; its legitimacy relies on the equilibrium of order, individual rights, and community engagement. Comprehending these divergent paradigms offers essential insights into how contemporary societies navigate the tensions among power, freedom, and equality.*

Keywords: *State of Nature, Political Authority, Social Contract, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Freedom, Equality, Legitimacy, Governance.*

1 | INTRODUCTION:

Political philosophy has focused on how political authority arises and why people submit to it. The “state of nature” imagines human life before organized political society, which helps answer this question. A

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comparison of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau shows how diverse human and natural views shape political authority theories. All three theorists employ the state of nature as a theoretical instrument, but they reach distinct conclusions concerning political power's need, shape, and limits. Hobbes saw nature as insecure and conflicted, with no central authority to govern human conduct. He memorably called it "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes, 1651/1996, p. 89). Hobbes believed that self-interest and survival motivate rivalry and terror. Since there is no power to enforce justice or rights, there is no solid idea. Individuals agree to establish a sovereign power with absolute authority to escape this situation. This social contract establishes political order, but it compels people to give up significant independence for security. Hobbes believed that peace required a strong and concentrated political authority. Locke is more enthusiastic about nature. He believes it is pre-political but not in constant confrontation. Locke claims that natural law governs people in the state of nature, which states that "no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions" (Locke, 1689/1988, p. 271). Locke believed humans are intelligent and can recognize moral duties, allowing for order without a government. Lack of an unbiased conflict resolution authority fosters uneasiness, especially regarding property rights. People consent to a government that safeguards their natural rights. Locke advocates limited government, where political authority is conditional and may be challenged if it fails. Hobbes did not.

Rousseau questions preceding theories' assumptions, offering a new perspective. He believes the state of nature is a tranquil, independent living guided by basic wants and compassion. The famous Rousseau quote "man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains" (Rousseau, 1762/2012, p. 1) suggests that social structures, not natural conditions, cause inequality and injustice. Rousseau believed private property and social structures corrupted humanity and caused injustice. His approach is to establish power and create a political society based on the "general will," where people make laws together. This authority promotes freedom and equality. Differences between these thinkers show the intricate link between human nature, freedom, and governmental authority. Locke emphasizes rights and consent, Hobbes security and order, and Rousseau equality and social freedom. These theories shape political authority based on distinct assumptions about human motivation and social organization, according to C. B. Macpherson (1962, p. 4). This shows that the condition of nature is a philosophical construct used to support political systems. Classical theories are still applicable today. Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau influence political power, individual rights, and social justice debates. Comparing their viewpoints helps us comprehend modern political thought and the ongoing power-freedom conflict. This paper examines these variances and similarities, proposing that the state of nature might help explain political authority's origins and legitimacy.

2 | THE STATE OF NATURE: DIVERGENT CONCEPTIONS OF HUMAN NATURE

The condition of nature is fundamental to political philosophy, but its meaning depends on how thinkers view human nature. A comparison of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau shows that their various assumptions about human conduct led to different pre-political visions and political power justifications. Thus, the state of nature is a theoretical construct formed by human philosophy. Hobbes has one of the most dismal views on humanity. He believes people are motivated by self-interest, fear, and power. Without a shared authority, these instincts cause perpetual conflict as people struggle for survival and domination. Hobbes famously called nature a "war of every man against every man" (Hobbes, 1651/1996, p. 88), with no security or confidence. Such a situation makes even fundamental cooperation difficult and causes dread and uncertainty. This theory holds that humans are innately conflict-prone unless restrained by a strong authority. Hobbes's view of human nature justifies a strong sovereign to maintain order. Locke's view of human nature is more balanced and positive. He believes people are intelligent and moral, even when they are self-interested. Locke believed that natural law ruled nature and taught that all people are equal and should respect each other's rights. Locke (1689/1988, p. 271) contends that reason informs everyone that no one should injure another because

to their equality and independence. This shows that humans are just and can coexist peacefully. Locke acknowledges that absence of impartial authority might lead to property disputes. Thus, his perspective of human nature is rational and self-interested, neither pessimistic nor idealistic. He advocates a minimal government that preserves natural rights rather than managing all elements of life.

Rousseau has a very different view of human nature. He counters Hobbes and Locke by saying that natural humans are simple, independent, and driven by basic needs and compassion, not violent or logical. Rousseau says that natural humans are motivated by “pity,” which prevents unnecessary harm (Rousseau, 1755/1984, p. 55). This view sees nature as tranquil and harmonious, free from modern society’s injustices and conflicts. Rousseau famously said, “nothing is so gentle as man in his primitive state” (Rousseau, 1755/1984, p. 60), highlighting human goodness. Society, especially private property and social comparison, corrupts human nature and generates inequity, according to Rousseau. The differences between these thinkers show how human nature assumptions shape political thought. Humans are competitive and dangerous to Hobbes, rational and cooperative to Locke, and naturally good but perverted by society to Rousseau. These distinctions reflect philosophical beliefs about identity, morality, and social order, according to C. B. Macpherson (1962, p. 4). The state of nature reflects each thinker’s perspective of human nature. These opposing viewpoints also affect political power. Hobbes believes humans are selfish and aggressive, hence strong authority is needed to maintain order. If people are sensible and cooperative, Locke claims, government can be limited and consent-based. If people are naturally good but corrupted by society, as Rousseau maintains, political authority must restore freedom and equality by public involvement. These findings demonstrate how human nature theories affect governance and justice. Finally, the state of nature is a useful philosophical instrument for studying human nature and its political implications. The different views of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau show how human behaviour impacts political life. Comparing these perspectives illuminates political authority and the continuous argument about freedom, equality, and order.

3 | FROM NATURE TO SOCIETY: THE LOGIC OF THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

Social contract theory seeks to explain why people develop political power and what kind of authority is justified by the transition from nature to organized political society. Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau each describe this shift differently, based on their perspectives on human nature and nature’s difficulties. All three agree that political society is founded by a contract, but their ideas differ on its logic, purpose, and outcomes.

Hobbes believed fear and security drove the transition from nature to civilization. People live in danger and uncertainty in nature without a leader. Hobbes claims that rational people consent to give up their rights to a sovereign authority to escape this situation. People consent to “confer all their power and strength upon one man, or upon one assembly of men” (Hobbes, 1651/1996, p. 120), producing a powerful state that can maintain order. Individuals collectively authorize the sovereign in this pact. The state’s authority becomes absolute, and people have few rights to fight it. Hobbes’s social contract prioritizes order and security over freedom. Locke proposes a rights-based, moderate social contract. Though he acknowledges that nature lacks impartial authority, he does not perceive it as anarchy. Instead, people build political societies to preserve their basic rights to life, liberty, and property. Locke believes the social contract creates a government that judges impartially and protects these rights. According to Locke (1689/1988, p. 350), the primary goal of commonwealths is to preserve property. Locke supports consent-based political authority, unlike Hobbes. If the government fails to protect citizens’ rights, it might be challenged or replaced. So, Locke’s contract balances authority with personal freedom and accountability.

Rethinking the social contract’s purpose and form, Rousseau gives a new perspective. He argues that the contract should maintain freedom and create a just society, rejecting older views that legitimize injustice

and dominance. Rousseau famously said, “each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will” (1762/2012, p. 20). In this approach, people turn their independence into communal self-rule. Laws must reflect the public’s broad will to be valid. By making people the law’s authors and subjects, Rousseau’s social contract reconciles individual freedom with political authority. The different logic of the transition from nature to civilization is shown by these thinkers’ distinctions. Hobbes sees the contract as a way to escape fear and establish order, Locke as a tool to safeguard rights and ensure justice, and Rousseau as a basis for equality and collective freedom. These theories shape political authority based on diverse assumptions about the individual-society relationship, according to C. B. Macpherson (1962, p. 4). This shows that the social contract is a foundation for multiple political visions. Furthermore, social contract theory is relevant beyond its historical setting. Democracy, rights, and governance issues today build on these core notions. Political philosophy continues to debate how much power the state should have and under what conditions people should obey it. Comparing Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau helps us grasp these challenges and modern political systems. Finally, the logic of the social compact explains political authority, but its meaning varies by philosophy. The passage from nature to society is a philosophical framework that represents contrasting notions about human nature, freedom, and justice. Understanding these variations allows for a more sophisticated study of political authority and legitimacy in history and today.

4 | POLITICAL AUTHORITY: ABSOLUTISM, LIBERALISM, AND POPULAR SOVEREIGNTY

Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau exhibit absolutism, liberalism, and popular sovereignty in their views on political authority. All three thinkers explain political authority’s origins using the social contract, but they differ on its nature, boundaries, and validity. Their different views of human nature, nature, and political society explain these discrepancies. Hobbes advocates absolutism, which holds that political authority must be strong, centralized, and indisputable to guarantee peace and security. He believes that people are driven by fear and self-interest, causing continual conflict. They create an absolute sovereign to escape this. Hobbes believes that dividing or challenging the sovereign’s authority will lead to chaos. He says “covenants, without the sword, are but words” (Hobbes, 1651/1996, p. 117) and that stability requires the sovereign’s authority. Laws and agreements are useless without a strong enforcement agency. People must obey the sovereign wholeheartedly, even if their decisions seem unjust. Hobbes views political authority as a necessary restraint on human behaviour, prioritizing order and security over freedom. In contrast, Locke’s liberalism limits political authority and protects individual rights. Locke believed government should protect natural rights like life, liberty, and property, not regulate them. Locke, unlike Hobbes, believes political authority is consent-based and limited. He says “the end of law is not to abolish or restrain, but to preserve and enlarge freedom” (Locke, 1689/1988, p. 306). This shows his idea that authority should serve the people rather than rule them. Locke also proposes that a government loses legitimacy and might be overthrown if it violates citizens’ rights. This notion underpins modern democracy, where authority is conditional and accountable. Thus, Locke’s liberalism balances power and freedom, keeping political authority subservient to the people.

By proposing popular sovereignty, Rousseau goes beyond absolutism and liberalism by giving the people all power. He critiques Hobbes and Locke for ignoring social inequality and dominance. Rousseau believes governmental authority must be based on the “general will,” which serves the common good rather than individual interests. Rousseau famously states that “sovereignty... cannot be represented” (1762/2012, p. 54), emphasizing the need for direct citizen participation in lawmaking. Individuals create and are subjects of political authority under this approach, preserving freedom and equality. Rousseau’s popular sovereignty promotes collective decision-making and active citizenship, making politics more participatory. Comparing these three models shows how political authority changes. Hobbes’s absolutism promotes stability through tight control, Locke’s liberalism rights and limited government, and Rousseau’s popular sovereignty equality and freedom. C. B. Macpherson argues that these theories’ authority methods differ due to historical and social issues (Macpherson,

1962, p. 4). Each paradigm solves chaos, oppression, or inequity but generates new problems about power and freedom. Modern political systems incorporate all three traditions. Hobbes says modern states need authority to maintain order, but Locke's legal and constitutional constraints apply. Democratic practices also reflect Rousseau's popular engagement and communal decision-making. This illustrates that political authority changes with social and political contexts. Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau offer three separate yet interconnected political authority theories. We learn how authority can be justified and limited by comparing absolutism, liberalism, and popular sovereignty. These viewpoints still shape modern political thought, shedding light on governance, freedom, and equality issues.

5 | FREEDOM, EQUALITY, AND THE LIMITS OF POLITICAL AUTHORITY:

The link between freedom, equality, and political authority is central to modern political philosophy, especially in Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. All three thinkers use the social compact to support political authority, but they disagree on how to reconcile individual freedom, social equality, and state power. These disagreements show different views of political order and authority boundaries. Hobbes defines freedom as the absence of external barriers to activity, which is negative. In nature, people have unlimited freedom, yet this causes insecurity and strife. Individuals surrender their independence to a sovereign authority for peace. Hobbes believes this authority must be absolute to avoid disorder. According to Hobbes (1651/1996, p. 148), a subject's freedom is in what the sovereign has authorised in restricting their acts. This means freedom only exists when the sovereign does not interfere. Hobbes believed that equality exists in the natural state when all people can damage each other, but it does not lead to justice or fairness. Instead, it emphasizes authority. Since Hobbes prioritizes order over freedom and equality, political authority has few boundaries. Locke's view of freedom and equality is more balanced and rights-based. Locke believed that people are born free and equal, with rights to life, liberty, and property. Political authority protects these rights, not restricts them. Locke asserts that individuals are naturally free, equal, and independent, and cannot be subjugated to political power without their permission (Locke, 1689/1988, p. 330). Consent is crucial to restraining political power. Locke believed government must respect natural rights, and violating them diminishes its legitimacy. All people should be treated equitably under the law through moral and legal equality. Since the state is accountable to the people and may be rejected if it becomes oppressive, political authority is clearly defined.

Rousseau links freedom, equality, and collective self-rule. He believes true freedom is the ability to make one's own laws, not only the absence of restraint. Rousseau famously said, "obedience to a law which we prescribe to ourselves is liberty" (1762/2012, p. 26). Participation in the general will and active citizenship achieve freedom. Rousseau believes that social and economic inequality undermines freedom and political legitimacy, hence equality is crucial. Rousseau requires governmental authority to represent the people's will, unlike Hobbes and Locke. Domination and inequality violate the social contract, therefore authority is only appropriate when it benefits society. The discrepancies between these thinkers show how difficult it is to balance freedom, equality, and authority. Hobbes values security and order over freedom, while Locke values freedom through limited and accountable government. However, Rousseau defines freedom as communal involvement and emphasizes equality as a political legitimacy need. Isaiah Berlin later notes that these perspectives represent various views of liberty, specifically the difference between negative and positive freedom (Berlin, 1969, p. 122). This contrast explains why these philosophers reach different authority limits conclusions. These debates still matter in politics. Modern democratic systems try to combine individual liberties with communal decision-making, reflecting Locke's liberalism and Rousseau's popular sovereignty, but Hobbes maintains that authority is needed to sustain order. Political authority must not overstep its limitations and damage the freedoms and equality it protects. Finally, comprehending political life requires knowing freedom, equality, and political authority. The differing viewpoints of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau show that this dilemma has several solutions formed by distinct philosophical assumptions. We can better grasp how to balance power, freedom, and justice in modern society by considering these perspectives.

6 | CONCLUSION:

Finally, the comparative study of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau indicates that political power is profoundly rooted in human and natural nature. Political authority and its role are explained differently by each thinker. Hobbes promotes dread, uncertainty, and ultimate authority to maintain order. In contrast, Locke emphasizes reason, natural rights, and consent-based limited government. Rousseau emphasizes equality, communal will, and the belief that full freedom requires political engagement from a critical standpoint. These contrasts show that political authority is shaped by philosophy and society. Hobbes emphasizes stability and security, Locke individual rights and accountability, and Rousseau equality and democratic involvement. They provide a comprehensive framework for comprehending current political philosophy. These principles still shape governance, democracy, and justice issues today. Modern political systems aim to reconcile authority, freedom, and equality. Politics must be powerful enough to preserve order but restrained enough to respect individual liberties and promote justice. Thus, this study indicates that political authority must be balanced between power, freedom, and equality, guided by classical and modern views.

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