

Two Visions of the Social Contract: Hobbes's Mechanical Order and Rousseau's Moral Community

Yixuan Liu

United World College Changshu China, Changshu 215556, China

Abstract: This paper compares Thomas Hobbes's and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's accounts of how society is possible. Both theorists employ the idea of the social contract, yet they arrive at almost opposite conceptions of society. For Hobbes, the state of nature is a condition of mutual fear in which life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short"; individuals therefore covenant to transfer their natural rights to an external sovereign, creating society as an artificial mechanism that suppresses conflict without changing human nature. Freedom, in this view, is negative—the absence of interference. For Rousseau, by contrast, "man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains"; society arises through an act of total alienation in which each individual submits to the general will, transforming natural man into a citizen. Society is thus an organic moral community that changes human nature, and freedom is positive—obedience to laws one has prescribed for oneself. The paper examines these differences across three dimensions: the nature of society (mechanical versus organic), the meaning of freedom (negative versus positive), and the location of sovereignty (external versus popular). It concludes that Hobbes presents society as a machine built by self-interested individuals for survival, whereas Rousseau presents it as a moral community in which people become citizens—two visions whose tension still shapes modern political life.

Keywords: social contract; sovereignty; general will; negative and positive freedom; state of nature

1. Introduction

What brought human beings, originally separated individuals, together to form what we call "society"? Both Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau attempted to answer this question. The concept of social contract was raised by both of the famous social theorists, but their understandings of what society is were almost opposite.

Hobbes, in *Leviathan*, depicted an unsettling picture, the state of nature, where the life of man is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" [1]. For the purpose of survival, they reasonably consider to give up their natural right and confer them to a common sovereign. Society was thus created as an artificial mechanism functioning to suppress conflicts and maintain order.

In his *The Social Contract*, Rousseau portrayed another picture. The Social Contract proposes the existing societies are all corrupt, because these societies are established upon deception and inequality, alienating people in the society into hypocritical, interdependent slaves. However, Rousseau believes a legitimate society could be built. The "legitimate society" is not a machine external to individuals, but a public person, which means a moral and collective body with its own life. Through social contract, the individual is transformed from a natural

man to a citizen, and what they obey is the law they prescribed for themselves as a member of the political community.

The divergence reflects the two sociologists' different answers to three fundamental questions. What is human nature? What does freedom mean? Where does the legitimacy of political authority come from?

2. Hobbes: Society as Artificial Mechanism

Hobbes' argument starts with the state of nature. Instead of an actual historical period, state of nature, in his perspective, is a thought experiment predicting what human life would be like without a government and common power. Hobbes' answer to this question is "a war of every man, against every man" [1]. He defines war in an unconventional way, asserting that war does not lie in actual conflicts, but in a continuous state when people's will to fight has been widely recognized. He uses an analogy to illustrate the state: "For as the nature of Foul weather, lyeth not in a shewre or two of rain; but in an inclination thereto of many dayes together" [1]. Although people in the state of nature may not be fighting at the moment, they could be attacked at any time, and can never relax [2].

What, then, causes this condition? Hobbes identifies three principal causes of quarrel: competition, diffidence, and glory. Competition drives people to invade for gain through violence; diffidence causes people to invade for safety; glory motivates them to invade for reputation, for a word, a smile, a different opinion, and even for their relatives, friends, or despise of their occupation [1].

Moreover, Hobbes believes that people are born equal physically and intellectually. Consequently, even the weakest are able to kill the strongest through conspiracies, or by associating with others. The equality means that when any two individuals desire the same item and they cannot own it simultaneously, they will become enemies. As a result, no one can guarantee safety in the state of nature [3].

Hobbes has a famous description of the consequence of this state:

"In such condition, there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain; and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short." [1]

The power of this paragraph lies in its logical force. It directly points out that the existence of civilization is impossible in the state of nature. When there is no society, there is no agriculture, no navigation, no building, no knowledge, no art, nothing. According to Hobbes, everything more than survival requires a common power to hold people in awe.

Reason tells people that the only way to survive is to escape the state of nature. But how is this possible? Hobbes' solution is covenant. His covenant logic is that everyone gives up his right to everything and transfers this right to a common sovereign. The sovereign can be a person or a parliament. Hobbes wrote:

"The only way to erect such a Common Power... is to conferre all their power and strength upon one Man, or upon one Assembly of men... This is more than Consent, or Concord; it is a reall Unitie of them all, in one and the same Person, made by Covenant of every man with every man." [1]

Unlike the contract between people and sovereign, this covenant here is between the people. Every person says to others, "I give my right to the sovereign, on condition that you give up your right to him as well." Since the sovereign does not contract, it is not bound by the contract.

What is repeatedly emphasized by Hobbes is that covenants are invalid without enforcement. Just as his famous saying, "And Covenants, without the Sword, are but Words, and of no strength to secure a man at all" [1]. If there is no power to enforce performance, the promises are meaningless. The logic also applies to the laws of nature. Justice, equity, and mercy, these elements of laws of nature, are useless without a power to enforce compliance. Therefore, social contract requires a sovereign armed with coercive force to stay above everyone and bind them together with fear.

In Hobbes' model, society is an artifice. It does not naturally grow up like a tree, but was created by the reason of human. Hobbes names the artifice Leviathan, a word that originally means a giant sea monster, symbolizing the power of commonwealth.

There are several key characteristics in Hobbes' understanding of society.

First and foremost, society is external to individuals. It is another thing besides the individual, like a protective device, standing above the individuals, deterring them with force, and preventing them from hurting each other. Individuals choose to enter society because they found, after calculating, that obedience to the sovereign is more beneficial than disobedience. Secondly, society does not change the human nature. Humans, in the state of nature, are selfish, fearful and power seeking. Equally, after entering the society, humans are still selfish, fearful and power seeking. Society merely suppress these impulses with stronger power, but does not eliminate them. If the sovereign loses its power, the society will immediately return to the state of war. Thirdly, the function of society is to suppress the nature of human rather than create a noble social character. What Hobbes cares is how to prevent people from killing each other, but not how to make people kinder. Society, in his mind, is more like a firewall, or a safeguarding institution.

In conclusion, Hobbes himself clearly distinguish a group of people and a society. Without the shock and awe from a common power, a group of people is disunited. They will interfere with each other due to differences of opinion, and finally be conquered by a few people who can agree together. Only when the group confer their rights to a common sovereign can they form a society.

Hobbes' model has significant advantages of its clear logic and strict system. As long as the two premises of "people are selfish" and "life without a sovereign will be a state of war" are accepted, his conclusion is almost irrefutable. His "society" is predictable and computable. As we know people will act based on self-interest, we are able to design systems taking advantage of this. The logic behind many designs of modern legal state, including constitution, law, and punishment mechanisms, is essentially Hobbesian [4].

However, there is also significant limitation in Hobbes' model. It cannot explain social solidarity. If people obey the sovereign merely out of fear, society will collapse when the fear disappears. In contrast, people in reality are willing to die for their country. They will obey rules that may not benefit them, taking on responsibilities, and showing kindness to strangers. Hobbes fails to explain where these come from. His society is a cold machine which cannot explain the human touch—people's sense of belonging and loyalty to society.

3. Rousseau: Society as Moral Community

Hobbes' starting point is selfish and mutually fearful individuals. However, the foundation of Rousseau's argument is completely different.

Unlike Hobbes who describes in detail human behavior patterns in the state of nature, Rousseau insists that man is born free, suggesting that his assumption of the state of nature is entirely different from Hobbes'. In the beginning of *The Social Contract*, he wrote:

"Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains. One believes himself the master of others, and yet is more a slave than they." [5]

According to this passage, people are born with freedom, but all existing social forms turned people into prisoners. The most ironic thing is that those who think they are dominating others are actually enslaved by the dominant relationship itself, because their identity, status, and sense of security depends on the obedience of the ruled. Rousseau discovers a fact that the existing social order itself is a chain on freedom. However, he believes that through a properly constituted social contract, a legitimate society, a society that does not oppress people, can be built. What he keeps probing is whether we can find a social form that makes social ties conditions of freedom rather than enemies of freedom.

Furthermore, Rousseau's social contract is fundamentally different from Hobbes' contract. Hobbes' contract is that everyone transfers his natural rights to an external sovereign, resulting in people exchanging rights for security. The sovereign is external to and above individuals. By contrast, Rousseau's social contract is an act of total alienation, which means everyone gives himself and all his rights to the whole community. People

lose natural liberty, the unrestricted freedom to do whatever they want, yet what they gain is civil liberty and moral liberty. More importantly, what people obey is not an external sovereign, but the law that they, as citizens, jointly participate in making. To clarify it, Rousseau wrote:

“Each of us puts his person and his full power in common under the supreme direction of the general will; and we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole.” [5]

The central concept of this passage is general will. Rousseau explicitly distinguishes between the general will and will of all, pointing out that the general will is not the sum of all individual wills. Will of all is the sum of individual preferences, focusing on private interest, but general will focuses on the common interest, which is the choice made by the people as a collective with the public interest as the starting point. Rousseau claims that the general will is always right and always tends to the public good [6].

Another crucial feature of the general will is that when you obey the general will, you are obeying yourself as a citizen rather than anyone else. Therefore, Rousseau says, if someone refuses the general will, society can force him to be free [5]. That means if a person only sees his own private desires and refuses to recognize that public interests as his own interests, society can force him to see his true will, which is the will to pursue public good as a citizen.

In Rousseau’s model, the formation of social contract is a living body. Social contract generates public person, which is called Republic or body politic by Rousseau. The body politic has its own life, will and action principle. He wrote:

“This transition from the state of nature to the civil state produces a most remarkable change in man by substituting justice for instinct in his conduct, and endowing his actions with the morality they previously lacked ... out of a stupid and bounded animal made an intelligent being and a man.” [5]

This passage shows a difference between Hobbes and Rousseau. According to Hobbes, society is external to the individual. Entering the society is like entering a protective cover, because the human nature has not changed, but their behavior has been limited. However, Rousseau believes that society was intrinsic to the individual. People change after entering society, transforming from merely a natural man to a citizen. Their sense of belonging to the society is out of fear, but because they regard society as a part of themselves.

The strength of Rousseau’s argument is it explains what Hobbes cannot explain: social solidarity. Unlike the assumption that people obey the sovereign simply because of fear suggests, people will be loyal to the society and will contribute or even sacrifice for the country. Rousseau says it is because society changes human nature. People obey the law because laws are expression of their own will, not because they are afraid of punishment. People are willing to devote themselves to the community because the community is part of themselves. If Hobbes’s society is a mechanical apparatus, Rousseau’s is like an organic, sentient body.

Nevertheless, Rousseau has a serious problem, since it is hard to clarify what the general will is. He says the general will is always right and tends to the public good. But he added that people may be blind because often do not know what is good though they want good. Therefore, a lawgiver—an extraordinary person with excellent intelligence and who can see the overall interests—need to be introduced to draft the Constitution and guide the people. However, this leads to a paradox. If the people themselves do not know what is good, then the general will is actually defined by a few people. If people need to be guided to know what their will is, is popular sovereignty still true? Who can guarantee that legislators will not disguise their will as general will? Rousseau admits this problem, yet does not give a satisfactory answer. This ambiguity has caused serious consequences in history. For example, during the French Revolution, the Jacobins claimed that they represented the general will and sent dissidents to the guillotine, which is a distortion of general will.

4. Comparative Analysis: Hobbesian Society and Rousseau’s Society

First of all, the Hobbesian society is mechanical, consist of rational calculation of individuals. Its function is to suppress conflict, but it does not change individuals. Hobbes views society as an artifice, a tool, and a device.

In contrast, Rousseau's society is organic. It generates a public person beyond individuals, functioning to create a new way to exist. Through society, people gain moral liberty and freedom. Consequently, Rousseau regards society as a body with its own life.

Second, Hobbes' freedom is negative since it is free from interference instead of active participation, while Rousseau's is positive as it is the self realization as a citizen. Hobbes understands freedom as the absence of external impediments. People in the state of nature are free, because no one restricts them; they lose freedom in civil society, but gain safety. However, freedom, in Rousseau's opinion, is obeying the law made by oneself. In the natural state, people only have natural freedom, but that is not regarded as true freedom. People in civil society have moral liberty, so they are their own master [7].

Lastly, their definitions of sovereign are different. Hobbes' sovereign stands outside the society. He holds all power, but he serves the interests of the people. If the sovereign oppresses the people, they have no right to resist, because once they resist, the society will return to a state of war. However, Rousseau's sovereign is the people themselves, and general will is the will of the sovereign. Rousseau said that sovereignty is "inalienable" and "indivisible" [5], but the sovereign needs a lawgiver to help him see the direction. There is a constant tension here, which is the will of the people and the will of the legislator must be consistent, though there is no system can guarantee such consistency.

In conclusion, both Hobbes and Rousseau tried to explain how society is possible. Hobbes' answer is that society is an artificial machine built by self interested individuals for survival; Rousseau's answer is that society is a moral community in which people transform themselves into citizens through social contracts.

Back to Rousseau's question at the beginning, "Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains." Hobbes would say that this "chain" is necessary protection, without which we can't live. Rousseau would say that this "chain" does not have to be a restriction. If it is a law made by ourselves, it will be the condition of freedom. The modern society we live in is still in the tug of these two understandings.

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