
Views of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau in the Origin of the State: A Comparative Analysis

Rudra Bahadur Pulami Magar

Central Department of Political Science, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-5425-4185>

Corresponding email: rudrajung43@gmail.com

Abstract: *From the question of the origin of the state to the broader history of human civilizations, there have been extensive debates about the organization of social life, the interpretation of rights and powers, the legitimacy of morality, and the relationship between citizens and government. This research has attempted to clarify the philosophy of the origin of the state, especially through a comparative study of the social contract theory of three prominent Western philosophers. Hobbes emphasized the need to cede all authority to the sovereign to avoid an anarchic state of nature, in which one sacrifices one's freedom for security. Locke put forward the concept of a limited state or government that preserves natural right, whereas Rousseau emphasized a state of free and equal citizens founded on the will of the people, thereby transforming the social contract into a moral principle. This research seeks to provide a current interpretation of legitimacy, state, the power structure, and civil rights by deeply philosophically analyzing these principles. This research is based on a historical-philosophical method, which uses textbooks, original articles, and critical perspectives to present a critical review. In addition, it is analyzed to what extent these ideas. It is hoped that the comparative study presented in this way will contribute to contemporary political discourse.*

Keywords: State of nature, Origin of the state, Philosophy, Legitimacy, Social contract

1. Introduction

In the long trajectory of human civilization, numerous thinkers have contributed significant theoretical perspectives on the origin of the state. According to this, it indicates whether the state originated from a divine will or power or natural hereditary tradition or from the mutual agreement among individuals. It presents a theoretical concept of what the human condition was like in a state of nature, when no formal law, no governmental power, or structured society had developed. “The contractual tradition claims that political legitimacy, power, and obligations stem from individual consent, and the state is governed only by the consent of the people”, (Olay, 2025, p. 256). In the 17th and 18th centuries, as religious authority weakened in Europe and the legitimacy of the monarch's natural right or divine right of Kings waned, philosophers such as Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau sought to

explain the justification for state power in terms of human nature, reason, and consensus. In a sense, all of them imagined a "state of nature" from which people might develop political societies. However, while they seem to agree on the social contract theory, they differed profoundly in their views on human nature and political right.

Philosopher Thomas Hobbes, in his famous work *Leviathan* (1651), presented his ideas on human nature, which is based on fear, selfishness, and insecurity. According to him, the natural state of man was one in which people were always fighting and quarreling with each other, and life was lonely, helpless, poor, ugly, cruel, and short. "Hobbesian state of nature is a condition anomic, amoral, and asocial", (Sadler, 2010, p. 4). To avoid such a chaotic situation, people surrender all their powers to a sovereign authority, which guarantees peace, and security. "The social contract theory proposed by Hobbes was to defend absolute royal power", (Zhang, 2024, p. 121). "Locke didn't conceive of a totalitarian regime", (Shiwakoti, 2076 BS, p. 204). However, due to the lack of an impartial judge, they end up entering into social contracts and establishing limited government. Rousseau expressed a different view from both of them in his work *The Social Contract* (1762). He argued that the original state of nature was peaceful, compassionate, and free, but that private property and social inequality had corrupted man. Therefore, true freedom and political legitimacy in man are achieved only through the "General will", in which each individual in society obeys the rules he has made. "An individual can resist the government but not the state", (Mahajan V. D., 2016, p. 218). "The people entrusted their executive power to their agent, the government", (Kapur A. C., 2016, p. 119). "Naturally, then, the early conception of the nature of the state as a limited city-state would modify to some extent any theories regarding its origin", (Barnes, 1924, p. 16). These three philosophical perspectives analyze the concept of the state from different angles. In Hobbes's view, the state is an absolute, focused on providing security; Locke believes that the state is a limited and constitutional government based on the protection of freedom and natural rights; while Rousseau's ideal state is based on direct democracy, where sovereignty is determined by the general will of the people. These theories are not just theoretical constructs; for the sake of theory, they emerged as a response to their time and socio-political environment and are still very relevant today in the context of statehood, legitimacy and democracy. Here, a critical comparison of the perspectives of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau is made to deeply analyze the philosophical foundations of the state and their contemporary impact.

This comparative philosophical investigation helps to clarify the theoretical foundations of political legitimacy, authority, and freedom. In today's global environment, questions about citizens' trust in accountability, and the source of legitimacy are becoming more and more profound. In such an environment, the ideas of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau are not just historical examples; they also serve as theoretical reflections on the modern state. A comparative study of the three deepens the debate on the legitimacy of modern state power, human freedom, and social

justice, which is very relevant for today's transitional democratic society. The main objectives of this research are: (1) to analyze in depth the ideas regarding origin of state (2) to identify the theoretical similarities (3) to clarify how each philosopher defines the concepts of human nature, freedom, property, and sovereignty, and (4) to assess the relevance of their ideas to modern democracy, the theory of state formation, and what is considered a source of legitimacy. Through these objectives, this article aims to highlight the relationship between philosophical reasoning and contemporary political discourse.

2. Methods and Procedures

This research has adopted a qualitative and philosophical methodology, synthesis, and axiological approach through which an attempt has been made to conduct an in-depth comparative analysis of the political ideas. Primarily, an in-depth analysis of original works written by them has been made. It mainly explains concepts such as; 'state of nature', 'social contract', 'freedom', 'universality', 'political responsibility', and 'legitimacy'. This study employs an interpretive approach attempting to clarify the internal logic, linguistic style, and elemental structure of the text. It views philosophy not just as a collection of ideas but as the result of a thought born in a social and historical situation. Similarly, a comparative approach has been used in this research, which facilitates a logical analysis of the similarities and differences. The historical context, including the political and social environment in which these philosophers produced their work, has also been incorporated in the analysis. Hobbes's thought was influenced by the horrors of the long British Civil War, while Locke advocated constitutional change; Rousseau focused on the sovereignty of the people and moral freedom. Such historical events help us understand their philosophy more deeply. This method aims to clarify the practical and ideological implications of philosophical concepts, not just limited to literal analysis.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Historical Background of Social Contract Theory

“The Political State is one of the most important social institutions ever created by man”, (Paul, 1917). The origin of the state and power remains the central topic of discussion in modern political philosophy. Although early reflections on the nature of the state can be traced back to philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle and Cicero, the systematic development of the social contract emerged mainly in the later philosophical thought. “Cicero argued that all human beings were inherently conferred laws by God, and it is these laws that should guide the human race”, (Shedeed, 2020, p. 1). The core idea of the social contract is that people create a common authority to escape the state of nature, protect and coordinate it, and for this they give up some of their freedom. Each philosopher has interpreted the natural state of man and the situation that emerges from it in different ways. Hobbes explains the justification of the state and holds that the state originated through the

establishment of a powerful sovereign power to control chaos, while Locke seems to focus on the protection of natural rights. Similarly, Rousseau proposes that a new structure of freedom and equality should be built through the overall representation of the will of the people. These same philosophical perspectives have added diverse dimensions to the concept of the state and have shaped modern political debates on issues such as social justice, freedom, and public accountability.

3.2 Hobbes's "Leviathan" and the "Fear of Anarchy"

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) in his famous work *Leviathan* (1651) portrayed the state as a powerful and omnipotent power or "Leviathan" that plays an important role in bringing society out of anarchy. According to him, individuals are free in the state of nature, this situation is considered harsh and brutish. Such control requires a social contract, according to which individual surrender all their rights to a sovereign power. In this type of Hobbesian social contract, the people do not have the right to resist; instead, stability and security are given the highest place. It can also be considered a rational contract based on self-defense and self-interest, which shows that Hobbes's concept of the state is a mixture of force, fear and rational self-interest. "All men pursue only what they perceive to be in their own individually considered best interests", (Laskar, 2013, pp. 2-7). This perspective has the potential to become the philosophical basis for totalitarianism, which could even influence modern realist political thought. "In the last hundred years for instance, to take only one example, he has been repeatedly associated with modern totalitarian politics, whether his philosophy is really totalitarian or not", (Keevak, 1998, p. 46).

3.3 Locke's Liberal State and Natural Rights

John Locke's (1632-1704) views on the state are different from Hobbes's, as being liberal and responsive to the people. He claims people are individually free, equal, and rational even in a state of nature. However, people create an institution called the state to protect their property and ensure their rights. According to Locke, the social contract limits governmental powers and the government, as a representative of the people, can justifiably be dissolved if it violates or interferes with citizen's rights. These views can be understood as reflecting possessive individualism, a perspective in which individuals property rights are regarded as paramount. His concepts of the state provide a necessary theoretical foundation for constitutionalism and democratic governance. Therefore, he is seen as the founder of modern liberal democracy. "Most political systems across the globe are developed on John Locke's philosophy of natural rights and laws to some degree", (Basilaia, 2019, p. 5).

3.4. Rousseau's Moral Contract and the General Will

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) writes in his work (1762) that creation arose from need for moral restructuring in man. According to him, initially, in the state of nature, man was; peaceful and they were regarded; equal, which began to deteriorate

with the development of the concept of property rights and the development of inequality. In this, he says that even though the people transfer power to the state, that power must always be in line with the general will of the people. “The contract is of the society, not of government, everyone is a ruler of himself” (Aondohemba, 2014, p. 38). His ideas present the high ideals of active citizenship, public participation, and political equality. Rousseau's philosophy became an inspiration for the French Revolution, and his influence can still be clearly seen in republican thought, federalism, and participatory democracy. His redefinition of character is considered a revolutionary idea in modern political philosophy. “General Will is a central term in the theory of Rousseau’s social contract”, (Economides, 2018, p. 23).

3.5 Contemporary Criticism and Comparative Outlook

These three philosophical theories cannot be viewed in a purely historical or theoretical context; since it would be counterproductive. Hobbes's philosophy is based on the context of the English Civil War; Locke's philosophy is in favor of constitutional monarchy and individual freedom; and Rousseau's philosophy stands as a supporter of a revolutionary society and state. A comparative study of these philosophical perspectives shows that the origin of the state is not simply the centralization of power, but rather the result of discussions divided on the basis of values such as human freedom, security, property ownership, equality, and morality. This certainly adds strength to the task of analyzing the plurality and timely interpretation of political philosophy.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 Social Contract and the formation of the State

All of these are considered foundational ideas, although the forms, processes, and outcomes of the social contract differ. In Hobbes' view, human nature is selfish, fearful or timid and competitive. Accordingly, the existence of the state arises here according to the need for complete control and security. “Everybody started interpreting these rights in his own way”, (Agrawal, 2004, p. 123). In his contract, he proposed limited state power and, granting rights to citizens. In Rousseau's *The Social Contract* (1762), he argues that the moral state is created by the merging of individual will with collective will. This shows that the basis of the contract, the nature of rights, and the purpose of the state differ among the same thinkers.

Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau are the main thinkers of the contract theory, who presented the concepts of the origin of the state, power, freedom, and civil rights. According to Hobbes, humans are inherently selfish and violent, due to which, in the state of nature, everyone would be at war with everyone else. To avoid a chaotic condition, people, by mutual agreement, surrender all their power to a sovereign ruler, which ensures order and security. He argues that the government is a servant of the people. Locke said that people are considered rational, free, and endowed with natural rights. According to him, people form governments through mutual

agreements to protect their lives, freedom, and property. He argues that the government is the servant of the people and if it violates their rights, the people have the right to rebel against it, that is, against the government. According to Rousseau, people were initially free and equal, but with the development of private property, inequality and slavery began among them. He considered the social contract as a means of building a society based on the will of the people or, general will and the participation of citizens. Thus, Hobbes advocated absolutism, Locke advocated constitutional government, and Rousseau advocated direct democracy. These principles are still very relevant in the debates on democracy, civil rights, and the rule of law today.

Table 1

Comparative Philosophical View on Social Contract and State Formation

Dimensions	Hobbes	Locke	Rousseau
Human Nature	Fearful, Selfish and in constant conflict	Rational, moral, equal with natural rights	Good, innocent, and corrupted by society
Nature of State	Life was nasty, short, brutish and war of all against all	Insecure but peaceful, lack of formal law and protection	Harmonious, free and unequal
Purpose	Escape chaos and secure, peace and survival	To safeguard	To achieve freedom through the collective general will
Parties to the Contract	All individuals with a strong and sovereign ruler	All individuals among themselves to form a government	All individuals with each other forming a collective will
Nature of the Contract	Total surrender to a sovereign, irrevocable	Based on the consent and mutual agreement and conditional	Creating moral and political community, voluntary
Sovereignty's Type	Absolute Sovereignty and Indivisible	Representative, Limited, Revocable	Inalienable, resides in the people as general will
Rights to Rebellion	No rebellion, since it leads back to anarchy	Yes, if government breaches trust	Yes, if general will, is betrayed
Government Form	Strong centralized power or absolute monarchy	Liberal democracy or constitutional monarchy	Republicanism, direct democracy
View on Liberty	Sacrificial for society	Inalienable, natural	Liberty based on true; obedience to people's general will
State Origin	As artificial creation by contract to avoid violence	Naturally evolved -from social co-operation	Collective and moral construction through general will

Moral Foundations	Self-preservation and fear	Reason and natural law	Public morality and civic virtue
Legacies	Foundations of legal positivism, authoritarianism	Constitutionalism and liberal democracy	Radical, participatory democracy, radical

Source: Author's development.

4.2 Theoretical approaches to Human Nature and transfer of Rights

Among the basic elements of state formation, the interpretation of human nature is considered the most decisive. In Hobbes's view, all rights must be transferred to the sovereign to avoid anarchy. He argues that all political power should be concentrated in a powerful person. Therefore, his view of the state is absolutist. On the other hand, Locke explains that humans have the ability to understand justice and rationality, due to which the government receives only limited rights on the basis of which the ruler should rule. If the government exceeds its limits, then rebellion will legitimately come to the fore. Rousseau considers man to be naturally free, innocent and moral, but society later corrupts him. Therefore, he stands in favor of moral restructuring, where civil freedom takes the form of political participation. Examining different views of philosophers regarding human nature, there are differing limits and interpretations of the transfer of rights.

However, in today's era, Hobbes's view of human nature is extremely negative, which legitimizes absolute power by completely losing individual freedom, and creates the danger of further encouraging authoritarianism. On the other hand, although Locke's ideas seem realistic, his excessive priority on property neglects the rights and participation of the poor and the non-property class. Although Rousseau's view is idealistic and morally attractive, the concept of the general will, seems extremely vague and prone to misuse, which creates the danger of creating a dictatorship of the majority.

Table 2

The Theoretical Approach to Human Nature and Transfer of Rights

Thinker	Human Nature	Transfer of Rights
Hobbes	Aggressive, Fearful, Selfish	Totally transferred to an absolute sovereign for security
Locke	Morally bound, co-operative and rational	Partially transferred, retain rights to life, property and liberty
Rousseau	Peaceful, innocent, corrupted by the society	Completely transfer to the general will for true freedom

Source: Author's development.

4.3 Contradiction between the definitions of Sovereign Power and Freedom

The views of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau on the relationship between state sovereignty and civil liberties are contradictory to each other. According to Hobbes' definition, sovereign power is absolute, final and uncontested. He argues that freedom is only exchanged for security. Locke defines freedom by stating that a person is free but only on the condition that he does not violate the freedom of others. He urges to keep the government within constitutional limits. According to Rousseau, freedom is based on participatory democracy. He argues that humans are born completely free, but later become bound by the laws of society. Therefore, in his opinion, freedom means actively participating in the political decision-making process by being integrated into the collective will of people. This shows that Hobbes believes in an absolute and only security-centered state, Locke believes in constitutional liberal democracy and Rousseau believes in an egalitarian structure with direct participation of the people or, direct democracy.

However, the definition of sovereign power is often associated with absolute and indivisible authority, which seems to be completely contradictory to the basic meaning of freedom. Sovereign powers are inherently characterized by subordination and centralized control, often exercised through restraint or coercion. In such a situation, the statement that citizens have freedom can only be true in the context where they are subject to an unbreakable power. This makes freedom not only natural but also conditional.

Table 3

Contradictions between Sovereign Power and Freedom in Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau

Thinker	Sovereign Power	Freedom	Contradiction
Hobbes	Absolute, indivisible, unquestionable	Absence of external impediments, security and freedom	Suppressed individual autonomy, Freedom is sacrificed to ensure order
Locke	Limited government by natural law and consent of the governed	Natural rights to life, property and liberty	Tension between the state authority and inalienable natural rights
Rousseau	Embodiment of the general will, vested sovereign power in the people	Obedience to the general will for true freedom	Freedom exists only with the collective submission, which may be overruled

Source: Author's development.

4.4 The influence of Philosophical Ideas on the contemporary concept of the State

The ideas are present in today's governance system, which include:

1. Hobbes's ideas have provided ideological support for the justification of emergency powers, priority to security and centralized governance. The influence of Hobbes is seen in any dictatorship or totalitarian state.
2. Locke's ideas have become a basis for liberal, constitutional government. His ideas are clearly visible in the political systems of America and Britain.
3. Rousseau's ideas have contributed to the concepts of citizen participation, direct democracy, moral leadership and equality. His ideas have given a lot of inspiration to social justice movements from the French Revolution to the present day.

Therefore, the philosophical structure of these thinkers has proven to be not only theoretical, but also a guide towards practical state-building and reform. These theories are still highly relevant to the questions of state-building, government authority, civil liberties, and political participation. Comparatively, all three philosophers highlight different dimensions of the state, such as security, freedom, and equality. Their analysis helps to deepen our understanding of the relationship between the ideological foundations of the modern state and contemporary political practice.

Philosophical ideas have had a profound influence on the concept of the modern state, leading to the development of theories of sovereignty, justice, rights, and governance. Thinkers such as Hobbes, Rousseau, and Marx pondered various forms of the state. Some advocated absolute power, while others advocated participatory rule by the people. However, since these ideas developed in specific historical, political, and cultural contexts, their universal application is problematic. Thus, while philosophical thought has made profound contributions to statecraft, it also poses additional challenges to the coherence and adaptability of the state.

Table 4

Influence of the Philosophical Ideas on the Contemporary Concept of State

Philosopher	Core Ideas	Influence	Practice
Hobbes	Social contract for the security, need strong sovereign, state of nature as chaotic	The justification of centralized power or authority and legal positivism	Authoritarian regimes like the Leviathan-like states
Locke	Limited government	It is the foundation of liberal democracy, constitutionalism, and the protection of individual rights	Implementing the US constitution, Human Rights Declaration

Rousseau	General Will, Popular Sovereignty, Freedom through collective participation	Republicanism, Direct Democracy, Civic Education, and Collective Identity	Participative Budget, Swiss referendum
Montesquieu	Check and Balance, Separation of Powers	Modern democratic institutions, Rule of Law and Balanced Governance	The USA and The French governmental Structures
Marx	Class Struggle, State as an instrument of oppression, Ultimate goal is the creation of a stateless society	Critique of Capitalist States, Socialist and the Marxist state models	The USSR, the Cuba, Marxist/inspired movements
Weber	Monopoly State or legitimate violence, bureaucracy, rational legal authority	State Authority and Legitimacy, Modern Theory for the Public Administration	Modern Welfare state, bureaucratic institutions
Hegel	Ethical and moral State, Realization of freedom through state	Nationalism, Identity Politics, State as a Moral Communities	Nationalism, state-led ethics debates

Source: Author's development.

5. Conclusion

Philosophers have deepened the philosophical debate on the origin of the state. All of them have answered the questions of what the state is, why it is needed, and how its legitimacy is established from their own perspectives. Hobbes, starting with the concept of anarchic and selfish human nature, showed the need for a powerful sovereign state which is capable of maintaining peace. Locke placed the protection of human rights at the center of state building and argued that government should operate within constitutional limits. Rousseau, on the other hand, envisioned a democratic and moral state based on collective will and citizen participation, in which freedom and equality should not be separated. Although the perspectives of these thinkers differ, they all seek to explain the origin of the state.

This study shows that the debate on the legitimacy, purpose, and structure of the state is still very relevant. Hobbes's power-centered approach provides additional strength in favor of political stability, while Locke's freedom-based approach helps lay the foundation for modern democracy. Rousseau's concept of popular participation and morality provides a rich framework so as to keep democracy alive and fair. These same ideas are at the center of reanalysis and reconsideration in the context of the current world's democratic values, state repression, the crisis of human rights, and the neglect and disobedience of the social contract. Therefore, a

comparative study of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau is not only a theoretical discussion, but also a practical guide for today's politics.

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