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Abstract

A number of professional educators have highlighted the need to apply knowledge gained from the humanities to the needs of the contemporary world. This paper proposes to show how classical texts from political philosophy from past centuries are not only relevant to modern life but have also made important contributions in shaping it. Two such works are the Leviathan of the 17th century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes and the Social Contract, a work of the 18th century French Enlightenment by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The aim of the paper is not to fashion a particular course design for teaching civic engagement. The intent is to present an amalgam, overview and discussion of key ideas from Hobbes and Rousseau that can act as a catalyst to stimulate instructors and students to apply such philosophies to modern life, for example through the use of cases, and to determine what relevance they may have to civic engagement and the duties of citizenship in the present day.

KEY WORDS: civic competence and engagement, market society, competition, power, freedom, motion, sovereignty, consent, contract, state of nature, equality, general will, pride, reason, passion

INTRODUCTION: CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

In “A Manifesto for the Humanities in a Technological Age” published in the February 13, 2004 issue of The Chronicle Review in The Chronicle of Higher Education, Cathy N. Davidson and Davis Theo Goldberg say the following about the crucial importance of humanities in the contemporary world: “The humanities provide the social and cultural contexts of the creation and application of knowledge, the critical reflections upon how knowledge is created and what its effects and implications are. The humanities promote a broad range of social and cultural literacies. They offer critical civic competencies, ways of comprehending cultural and technological values, and the worlds such values conjure; in short, ways of world making. A world without the humanities would be one in which science and technology knew no point of social reference, had lost their cultural compass and moral scope. It would be a world narrowly limited and limitlessly narrow” (p. B9, emphasis added). Seminal works from humanistic literature continue to speak with relevance in the face of the complexities we face in the contemporary world. Major works from the classical Greco-Roman tradition still speak with poignancy in the 21st century. For example, one could rightly ask how today’s world leaders measure up to Aeneas’s personal concept of pietas [dutifulness] when we consider the current crises in Iraq and the Middle East or how corporate leaders can justify their conduct when it is weighed on the scale of Cicero’s notion of honestum [virtue] or
the ethical principles elaborated by Aristotle. This paper will examine the relevance and applicability of the ideas of two modern thinkers from the 17th and 18th centuries, Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose works, the *Leviathan* (1651) and the *Social Contract* (1762) have become central to the foundation of modern political thought.

**PHILOSOPHY OF HOBBES**

Hobbes, like Spinoza and Locke in the 17th century and Rousseau and Kant in the 18th century, was part of a tradition that believed the political order is based on an original contract. Government is introduced through a general agreement and citizens are obliged to do what they have contracted to do. Hobbes’s system does not depend on renewal of popular consent; the initial act of consent is binding and forbids resistance to government. Civil society is then not something desirable for its own sake; rather, it comes into being by way of a contract human beings enter into in order to escape the dangers that threaten them in the state of nature.

Hobbes analyzed power as something we seek to understand, control and harness. His central concern was peace and, while he gave little thought to war between nations, he had overriding concerns with civil war, the avoidance of which was a major concern. The English Civil War between Charles I and Parliament was a vivid and living example of that worry. Hobbes’s political science is ambivalent and controversial because it incorporates some features that are undemocratic and others that are fundamental to democracy. On the one hand, he argues that absolute sovereignty and arbitrary power are needed to prevent civil war. On the other, he advanced many theories that became part of liberal democracy. The activity of civilization – the cultivation of the arts and sciences and the pursuit of intellectualism – is the cause of its own destruction. Humans had erroneously invested their trust in the wisdom and learning of authorities and scholars. For Hobbes, the foundation for a science of enlightenment was to distrust authority and to think for oneself. He knew this was a formidable task because humans surrender to authority out of fear of demons, ghosts and invisible powers. What Hobbes saw as the safe course was to abandon the idea of humans as spiritual beings who possessed a soul and free will and to adopt the concept that man is a machine with mechanistic appetites and passions. The state of human nature is one in which all are at war against all. Man is anti-social by nature and is driven by fear and the desire for self-preservation. One must move from that state of nature to the construction of an artificial society. The common power is the sovereign which can be a person or a body and that can be created by natural force, like war, (commonwealth by acquisition) or by consent or contract (commonwealth by institution). In an act of submission, the people authorize the sovereign to represent their wills. In turn, the sovereign is not accountable to the people and the people are not obliged to obey if the sovereign is not powerful enough to protect them. The will of the sovereign is the law and his power is absolute. Hobbes recommended absolute monarchy and condemned democratic or republican forms of government. He influenced Locke and Rousseau who adopted his idea that government is not natural or divinely ordained and that it must be created artificially by contract or consent.

Hobbes’s bold hypothesis was that the motion of individual human beings could be explained as the effects of a mechanical apparatus that consisted of sense organs, nerves, muscles, imagination, memory and reason. Thus, all human actions could be resolved into elementary motions of body which the scientist could recombine in a way that could explain everything. *Leviathan* begins with the mechanisms by which humans operate: sense, imagination, speech, reason. From there Hobbes moves on to how we behave in relation to each other. The central argument of his theory of human nature in society is found mainly in chapters 6 to 11. The first proposition is that men are moved by appetites and aversions. These are what determine our voluntary actions. First, some appetites are innate; second, appetites continually change and are different in different men; third, appetites are incessant, they operate as long as we are alive and life itself is motion; fourth, appetites are of different strengths in different men. Putting the third and fourth statements together, it follows that all men must seek incessantly to attain satisfaction of their desires, but that, since the strength of these desires differs from person to person, different people will be satisfied with different levels of power or wealth. In defining power, Hobbes says it is the means we have to obtain some future apparent good and it follows from this and from propositions three and four that every man must seek to have some power, although not everyone is motivated to seek as much power as others or to seek more than he currently has.
Appetite and desire are linked to love and hate: humans desire what they love and have an aversion for what they hate. Chapter 10 on power, worth, dignity, honor and worthiness contains ideas that are central to Hobbes’s doctrine. The two kinds of power men have are original or natural and instrumental or acquired: “Natural Power, is the eminence of the Faculties of Body, or Mind: as extraordinary Strength, Forme, Prudence, . . . Instrumentall are those Powers, which acquired by these, or by fortune, are means and Instruments to acquire more: as Riches, Reputation, Friends, and the secret working of God, which men call Good Luck. . . . The Greatest of human Powers, is that which is compounded of the powers of most men, united by consent, in one person, Naturall, or Civill, that has the use of all their Powers depending on his will; such is the Power of a Common-wealth.” Hobbes then goes on to show that power takes many different forms like having friends, riches, reputation, success, nobility or eloquence. At this point he introduces a key idea that is central to a free market society, namely, that the worth of each person is determined not by the self but by others: “The Value, or Worth of a man, is as of all other things, his Price; that is to say, so much as would be given for the use of his Power: and therefore is not absolute; but a thing dependant on the need and judgment of another. An able conductor of Souldiers, is of great Price in time of War present, or imminent; but in Peace not so. . . . And as in other things, so in men, not the seller, but the buyer determines the Price. For let a man (as most men do,) rate themselves as the highest Value they can; yet their true Value is no more than it is esteemed by others. . . . Hobbes also postulates that every man’s power resists and hinders the power of others. One man’s power may be defined as the extent to which his own exceeds that of others. The only way to acquire power is to master the powers opposed to one’s own. For Hobbes, then, a man’s value or worth is the price one is willing to pay for the use of his power. This creates a restless motion among humans described in Chapter 11: “I put for a generall inclination of all mankind, a perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power, that ceaseth onely in Death. And the cause of this, [is] because he cannot assure the power and means to live well, which he hath present, without the acquisition of more. It follows that men will seek to command, that is to transfer to themselves, the powers of other men and, to worsen matters, some men’s desires are without limit. Everyone is pulled into a constant and competitive struggle for power over others or, at least, to resist his power being taken by others. The human need for power, thus, becomes a harmful thing. Humans end up living in a state of constant fear of the power of invisible things, a state Hobbes likens to that of Prometheus: “For as Prometheus, . . . devoured in the day, as much as was repaired in the night: So that man, which looks too far before him, in the care of future time, hath his heart all the day long, gnawed on by feare of death, poverty, or other calamity; and has no repose, nor pause of his anxiety, but in sleep.”

Knowingly or not, Hobbes is using the model of a bourgeois market society in which everyone can and does continually compete for power against others. This is the natural state of man: “Hereby it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre; and such a warre, as is of every man, against every man.” Hobbes then moves from these propositions to eventually demonstrate in Part II beginning with Chapter 17 that the only way to provide a way for commodious living was for men to acknowledge a perpetual sovereign power against which each of them would be powerless. Humans must do this by consent for the sake of self-preservation and to avoid the miserable conditions of war. The laws of nature cannot suffice. There must be a visible power that keeps people in awe and fear of punishment. Hobbes enumerates reasons why certain creatures like bees and ants can live sociably; but mankind cannot do the same because of competition, envy and hatred which eventually lead to war. The only answer is the creation of a commonwealth: “The only way to erect such a Common Power, . . . is, to conforme all their power and strength upon one Man, or upon one Assembly of men, that may reduce all their Wills, by plurality of voices, unto one Will. . . . This is more than Consent, or Concord; it is a reall Unite of them all, in one and the same Person, made by Covenant of every man with every man”. The two ways of attaining the commonwealth are by natural force like war which subdues people and forces them to live that way or by voluntary consent. The first is a commonwealth by acquisition and the second is one by institution. In Chapter 18 Hobbes enumerates the specific powers the sovereign holds. In conclusion, the only reasonable thing for men to do is get out of the state of nature and hand over their rights to a sovereign: “[Hobbes] was speaking not to men in a state of nature, but to men in an imperfect political society . . . He was telling them what they must do to establish a more nearly perfect political society, one that would be permanently free from internal disturbance.”
MECHANISM AND MOTION PRIOR TO HOBBES

The idea of motion became a central feature of Hobbes’s doctrine and it enabled him to make his great innovation in the science of politics - a fact that made him one of the founders of modern liberal thought. Hobbes links freedom to motion and makes the two inseparable. The concept of humans as mechanical creatures who are in a perpetual state of motion is a key part of modern liberal thought; but its roots go back to ancient times and it needs to be placed in the context of intellectual currents like the medieval idea of the Chain of Being and the importance of motion in American culture in order to be understood in all its complexity.

While the ancients showed a preference for order and stratification, there was a liberal view among some thinkers that capitalized on the notion of movement. The pre-Socratic thinker Heraclitus emphasized that all things were in a state of flux, an idea he concretized with the famous example that no man can step into the same river twice. Roman writers like Ovid and Lucretius held similar views. The former spoke of how waters mutate when, for example, a river flows into a sea. In *De Rerum Natura (On the Nature of Things)*, Lucretius posited the idea that nothing comes from nothing. Things come into being through the random adhesion of atoms and molecules that are in constant motion. However, in general, the world of ancient Greece and Rome preferred order, stratification and orderly movement for their dependability, predictability, regularity and the fact that they gave humans guidance and functioned as an anchor. “Brownian” motion - the random movement of microscopic particles – was not seen as a good thing. For Aristotle, motion or the purpose of becoming is teleological; it is directed toward an end, as when the acorn becomes an oak. Motion in itself is unstable unless it leads a body to rest. Similarly, the Roman Stoic Seneca thought motion for its own sake made no sense and, like the Greeks, sought a proper balance between motion and rest. We trust the sun because it is motionless; a whirlwind, by contrast, is chaotic and disorderly. Plato considered social mobility destructive to the polity and Socrates rejected the idea of flux.

In the Middle Ages the concept of the Chain of Being advanced a view of motion that was similar to that of antiquity. Fixity was valued over movement. Stratification and social strata were interlocked: one was born into a particular niche and remained there for life. The feudal system was based on loyalty to one’s roots and affiliations. Daily life lacked social and physical mobility so that order, anchorage and a sense of being rooted were important. Notions of privacy and individual rights as they are known in the modern secular world did not exist. There was an organized hierarchy that mirrored the divine order. Even if there was movement in the form of wandering troubadours, crusaders and pilgrims, those who drifted were probably despised for their freedom. Acceptance and respectability in the Middle Ages required one to have roots. Movement was directed to a particular place or purpose and was usually associated with spiritual nourishment; those who were constantly on the road were not considered a proper part of medieval society and their reputations probably suffered for it. The philosopher Boethius described life with the metaphor of the Wheel of Fortune where things are based on luck and blind fortune.

MECHANISM AND MOTION: HOBBES AND HIS LEGACY IN AMERICA

Hobbes applied Galileo’s law to the motions of men, how their motions were relative to one another and how he could deduce from that what kind of government they needed to maximize their motion. A basic principle is that freedom is the lack of opposition to one’s motion: “The liberty of the man; which consisteth in this, that he finds no stop, in doing what he has the will, desire, or inclination to doe.” Motion thereby comes to play a crucial role in Hobbes’s description of the individual whom he sees as an automaton. All men are equal and their equality is tied to a mechanical concept of humanity. Humans, like a clock, have an internal mechanism to make them go. However, while we can take a clock apart to see what makes it tick, we cannot observe the internal mechanisms of a human in the same way. Yet, the mechanism is present and acts as a force to keep us in motion. The capitalist free market system gives all the opportunity to run the race of life in which all have an equal chance. Motion is perpetual and restless. It has no order, structure or limitation. It is endless and aimless and perpetually present. What becomes the hallmark of liberal society is that every individual is encouraged to pursue one’s own personal goals and do one’s own thing. The overriding theme is one of relentless motion with the objects of desire relegated to the background. Humans do not move in pursuit of a higher good; they simply move for its
Hobbes is the founder of liberalism because he believes in the supremacy of the individual and rejects the idea of a higher truth or one good. Diversity is the hallmark of liberalism. There can be as many goals as there are persons. A liberal society does not propose that there is a right or a wrong way to live or do things. For Hobbes, good, bad, right or wrong are based on the individual — what one man calls wisdom, another calls fear. He rejects the idea that the well-being of the individual is tied to the well-being of society. The whole is satisfied when individuals attain their desires. All are engaged in restless desire, although all do not desire the same thing. Some seek wealth, others knowledge. Political institutions hopefully will remove obstacles that hinder men from pursuing their individual motions. Hobbes’s sovereign maintains conditions that preserve life and motion. There is no ideal pattern to impose. Individuals are kept in place by a mechanism called government whose task is mechanical not ideological. What one “is” is defined by what one “does” in the market place and each individual can participate in the competition. Negative liberty or the absence of opposition is a truer and more humane ideal than the authoritarian concept of positive freedom. Freedom from the will of others and the ability to pursue one’s own interests must prevail.

Hobbes’s society is one of continuous competition where people are in a race to beat out their peers to whom they constantly compare themselves. Pressure and competition keep everyone in constant motion. In America, Hobbes’s view of motion became important with the shift from the traditional notion of a Chain of Being to a market society that was coupled with Protestantism and capitalism. Status formerly achieved by birth was replaced by the individual’s desire and freedom to succeed. Americans, with their proclivity for motion and desires for social mobility, provided a welcoming society for Hobbesian ideas of motion and freedom.

The legacy of Hobbes in the American way of life manifests itself in several different ways. Tocqueville spoke of American motion and agrees with Hobbes that motion is the natural state of man but also that it is a peculiarly American notion. For Tocqueville Americans are restless and like Hobbes he believes that death is the only thing that brings motion to a halt. The Hobbesian view is also reflected in the Federalists who see the large republic as a swirl of motion. The political system is described as a dynamic machine similar to Hobbes’s description of the individual. For the Federalists, size and motion generate stability. A society of moving factions achieves greater stability than one where classes are fixed and stationary. Limited terms and appointments keep the government moving.

A central part of Hobbes’s legacy in America is the attachment to movement, motion and freedom. A modern example is the automobile as a symbol of both status and liberation. Historically, the American passion for movement has also been related to the frontier and the availability of free land and space to move about. Freedom from impediments to motion was highly valued in the Federalist where Madison speaks of the need to avoid restrictions to self-interest. Modern American literature and film have furnished many examples of the value of freedom of movement and upward mobility to achieve status: the importance of the car in the Great Gatsby, the motion of the river in Huckleberry Finn, the stifling motionlessness of the Glass Menagerie, the importance of the motorcycle in the film Easy Rider are a few examples.

**POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY of ROUSSEAU**

The complexities and paradoxes of Rousseau’s political philosophy are encapsulated in his frequently quoted simple statement in Book 1 Chapter 1 of the Social Contract that: “Man is born free, and he is everywhere in chains.” Rousseau’s idea that humans are forced to be free is a perplexing oxymoron. There are at least three things to consider in reading and interpreting this capital work. First, it is impossible to discuss the Social Contract without reference to another important political treatise that preceded it, namely, the Discourse on Inequality (also called the Second Discourse). Second, Rousseau, like Hobbes, was part of a tradition that the political order and body politic are based on a contract and third, the Social Contract is a hypothetical work that portrays not a reality that is but one that should be.

Locke and Hobbes were 17th century founders of modern liberalism who propounded natural law teachings that said that human beings were not political or social by nature. They were solitary individuals who once existed in a pre-political state of nature and were actuated not by the desire for some pre-existing end in which they could attain perfection but by a passion for self-preservation. Civil society is
then not something desirable for its own sake; rather, it comes into being by way of a contract human beings enter into in order to escape the dangers that threaten them in the state of nature. The last and most radical of the theorists was Rousseau who criticized Hobbes and Locke for fostering a bourgeois mentality that undermines civic virtue. Rousseau argued that neither of these two philosophers had found the true state of nature because they took as their standard a human nature that was already corrupted by society.

Rousseau was not a partisan of moderation; he proposed both extreme individualism and extreme collectivism. Humanity’s ills did not originate with human nature or original sin but with the character of society. People are good by nature but become wicked and unhappy through society. In the Discourse on Inequality, he argues the natural goodness of humans implicitly attacking the church’s doctrine on original sin and explicitly confronting Hobbes’s teaching on the state of nature. For Rousseau a human in the state of nature is self-sufficient, devoid of language, reason and vanity and therefore lacking all the passions attributed to humans by Hobbes who makes them competitors who are in a constant state of war. But for Rousseau, there was a second side to the human condition: humans are also inclined towards solitary introspection that makes them peaceful and contented. Mutual dependence might not be a bad thing if humans were naturally social and wanted to help each other. Rousseau assumes they are selfish and that society intensifies their egoism. Society makes us exploitative. We need others more in society but we love them less. All are driven to use others knowing that others are driven to use them. Society is a community of secret enemies: it is formed and held together by the need of each individual to use others. This forces all to be deceitful and exploitative. But humans, at bottom, are good. Rousseau proposes two solutions both of which are extremes: either we make humans wholly self-concerned and directed or wholly other-concerned and directed. The second of these is the collectivist solution which is the subject of the Social Contract. With the contract one transforms selfish individuals into patriotic citizens who love and live for the community. Rousseau proposed to maximize the power of the citizenry by placing the sovereign power in the hands of the general will. Since there is no natural rule or natural law (humans are asocial by nature), humans are compelled to create the state through a social contract. The laws come from everyone and apply equally to everyone. The individualist solution is what Rousseau celebrates in works like the Confessions or the Reveries d’un promeneur solitaire but it works only for the rare, gifted individual, the philosopher or poet.

ROUSSEAU: THE DISCOURSE ON INEQUALITY, THE SOCIAL CONTRACT and HOBBES

Rousseau was at odds with the streams of Enlightenment thinking, both religious and materialistic. Diderot and others espoused Bacon’s belief in progress and that the salvation of humanity was in science. The development and organization of knowledge could improve life on earth. Science could save us. The Encyclopedia organized knowledge systematically to make humanity more perfect than it was. Rousseau attacked these Baconian notions: science was not saving us and progress was an illusion. Modern civilization had not made humans happier or more virtuous. Virtue was possible in a simple society. The sophisticated society that had developed was corrupt.

In the Discourse on Inequality, Rousseau depicts the state of nature as one of innocence, but his concept of the state of nature is hypothetical. It is not possible for us to see humans in a natural state because we are only acquainted with man in society. The primitive condition of man eludes empirical investigation. Unlike Hobbes, Rousseau rejects the adequacy of a purely materialistic and mechanistic interpretation of man. Hence, it is safe to conclude that man in this primitive state of nature was good. In a letter he sent to Christophe de Beaumont, archbishop of Paris, printed in 1763, Rousseau concludes that man is naturally good and that there is no original sin or perversity in him. The second part of the Discourse discusses the transition from the state of nature to organized society. The original founder of civil society was the man who claimed ownership of a piece of property. When property was introduced, equality disappeared. Private property gave rise to a state of war and a trail of untold evils. This form of society was like a state of war and could be compared to Hobbes’s state of nature with the difference that for Rousseau moral distinctions arise in civil society before political society is formed; for Hobbes, moral distinctions follow the covenant that establishes political society. For Rousseau, the establishment of political society, law and government became inevitable. All rushed headlong and put themselves in chains in the hope of securing liberty.
Rousseau and Hobbes believed that the state was the outcome of a covenant or agreement among men. Its purpose was to protect the people to which it owed its being and the sovereign must have enough power to provide such protection. Hobbes stood apart because he believed that sovereignty must be unified and absolute. Men must choose to be ruled or to be free – they could not be both. Rousseau accepted Hobbes’s argument that sovereignty must be absolute or nothing, but could not accept the notion that men must choose between being governed and being free. Rousseau believed that men could be free and still be members of a political society. The Social Contract could be read as an answer to Hobbes that shows that Rousseau could not accept Hobbes’s conclusion. The social contract Rousseau speaks of is not the historical contract of the Discourse on Inequality that gave the advantage to the rich, the property owners. It is a genuine and legitimate contract that benefits all because it unites liberty with law and utility with right. Rousseau not only rejects Hobbes’s claim that man must choose between being ruled and being free; he asserts that only by living in civil society can humans experience freedom in the fullest sense of the word. There is a difference with the Discourse on Inequality where he stresses the innocence and freedom of man in the state of nature, but treats it as a freedom of a crude and lesser kind. Men grew worse because societies corrupted them instead of improving them. But, paradoxically, for Rousseau it is only by leaving the state of nature and becoming members of a civil society, that humans can realize their nature as humans in the fullest sense of the word. What Rousseau believes is that the state of nature is our original state, but not our natural state because we can only realize our full nature by making a social compact and living under the law. The ambiguity is that Rousseau uses the word nature alternatively to mean what is and what should be. His solution to Hobbes’s problem is simple: humans can be ruled and free if they rule themselves. Thinkers like Hobbes rejected the idea that sovereignty was based on nature or divine right, but that it derived from the assent of the people. They also held that it was transferred from the people to the ruler through a social pact. Rousseau is original in that no such transfer should take place: sovereignty originates in the people and that is where it stays. Ruling or making laws is a function the people must retain – the sovereignty belongs to them. Rousseau distinguishes government or the executive branch from legislation, the function of making laws. Government, unlike legislation, does not have to be performed by all the people. In fact, Rousseau thinks it be best done by a limited number.

ROUSSEAU: SOVEREIGNTY AND THE GENERAL WILL, AMOUR DE SOI AND AMOUR-PROPRE, REASON AND THE PASSIONS

Sovereignty and the General Will

Rousseau summarizes his ideas on the need for a social pact succinctly in Chapter 6 of Book 1. The only way for humans to preserve and protect themselves individually and collectively is by uniting their separate powers in a combination of forces. The key is to form an association that will defend the person and goods of each member and, in which, each individual, while uniting with others, obedience no one but himself and remains as free as before. Since each associate gives himself to all, he gives himself to no one: each has the same rights over others as they have over him. One recovers the equivalent of what was lost by putting one’s person and powers under the direction of the general will. The public person formed by this union is called the state. The first and most important rule of government is to follow the general will. Rousseau draws a distinction between sovereignty and government. The sovereign is the power that possesses the right to legislate; the government’s function is executive – to administer the law. The first duty of the legislator is to make laws conform to the general will. There is a temptation to identify the general will with the voice of the people as expressed by vote, but he does not make that identification. It is not certain that the decision of an assembly will be the expression of the general will. However, it is true that when one speaks of a general will, one will tend to identify it with the decisions that come from such a body as a legislature. But it is only a tendency. Hence, the law may not necessarily be an expression of the general will. Rousseau evidently assumes that there is something higher than the State. This may be a natural moral law we have within us that conduces us to human happiness and welfare. And it takes the form of the general will in a particular political structure. The task of the legislator is to make the laws conform to the general will and the task of the citizen is to bring his own particular will into conformity with the general will. In Rousseau’s view, subjecting ourselves to the general will enhances freedom, it does not diminish it. We unite in societies to assure our freedom. The law expresses the general will inasmuch as it
represents the real will of everyone. In obeying the law we obey our own reason and judgment and follow
our own real will. In following our own judgment and will, we exercise freedom. Hence, the obedient
citizen is truly a free man because he obeys a law that expresses his own will. Each member will obey
himself alone and remain free. In the social contract each of us places his person and his power in
common under the supreme direction of the general will and each person is received as an indivisible part
of the whole. This creates a public person, a republic, a body politic. Unlike Hobbes, where individuals
agree to hand over their rights to a sovereign who stands outside of the contract, in Rousseau, the
sovereign is not separate from those who collectively make the contract; he is identical with the parties
who make the social contract. The mutual agreement between the contracting parties creates a new
moral entity that allows each member to realize himself more fully than he could in the state of nature.
The Discourse on Inequality gives the impression that for Rousseau political society is an evil, but the
Social Contract advances the idea that man’s true nature is advanced in the social order. There is not a
contradiction between the Discourse and the Contract. In the first, Rousseau is talking about reality, the
evils in society as they actually existed in France, whereas in the second, he is speaking theoretically
about how a political society ought to be. The impression given by the Discourse is that man, naturally
good, acquires moral ideas and qualities in the strict sense during a gradual process of development in
which civil society precedes the formation of organized political society. But in the Contract Rousseau
speaks as if – through the institution of political society – we pass from a non-moral state to a moral
one.

The acquisition of moral liberty in the civil state that is set up by the contract makes us masters of
ourselves. Obedience to a law that we prescribe for ourselves becomes an exercise in liberty. The
sovereign is the legislative power which is the source of the law. Each citizen serves in a dual capacity:
one is a member of the sovereign and is also a subject who is bound to obey the law the sovereign
makes. Sovereignty is inalienable and consists in the exercise if the general will. This will is inalienable,
divisible and cannot be transferred. If one divides the general will, we are left with particular wills and no
sovereignty. Thus, by the word sovereign, Rousseau means the whole body of citizens; it cannot refer to
a particular class or group. Rousseau also distinguishes between the general will and the will of all which
are two different entities. The general will only considers the general interest while the will of all also
considers private interests. The general will is always in the right but the judgment that guides it is not
always enlightened. The public wills the good it does not see. The will of all is not infallible, but the
general will is always right. It seems that out of the social contract arises a new moral being that reflects
the natural goodness Rousseau thinks is innate to humans.

How does Rousseau define liberty? He says that it consists less in doing one’s own will than in not
being subject to that of another and it also consists in not subjecting the will of others to our own. I cannot
make my will more or less important than the will of others; nor can the will of one individual be more or
less powerful than the will of others. In the social pact people enter into to form a civil society everyone
makes a total alienation of all his rights. For Rousseau this is an exchange whereby we give up our
natural rights for civil rights. In return we acquire rights that are limited but legitimate and invincible. The
rights we alienate are based on might; the ones we acquire are based on law. The statement in Book 1
chapter 7 about forcing humans to be free haunts us. Although authoritarian, it is distinct from power. It is
based on conscious and vocal assent and is presented as consistent with liberty. Rousseau is not
suggesting totalitarianism because he believes that if authority has universal and unconstrained credence
and acceptance, it has legitimacy. Rousseau does not say that we can be forced to be free in the sense
that a whole community can be forced. It is the individual who can be forced and what Rousseau is
thinking of is the occasional person who, enslaved by passions, disobeys the law or general will. The
general will is inside each person and society as a whole. The person coerced by the community is being
brought back to an awareness of his own true will. For Rousseau, the essential paradox of is that
freedom is ambiguous. What appears to be a curtailment of liberty is not curtailment at all and, thereby,
we are led into the paradoxical position of claiming that one can be forced to be free.

Amour de soi, Amour-propre, Reason and the Passions

Rousseau distinguishes between two types of pride, amour de soi and amour-propre, which are
respectively good and evil. The former is a primitive and instinctive passion that leads to self-preservation
and the notion that our first duty is to ourselves. The latter is egotism, an inducement to prefer oneself to
others. In the true state of nature egotism did not exist because primitive man did not make comparisons between himself and others. He also recognized that our passions are the chief means of our self-preservation; it is useless and absurd to try to destroy them. Moral development consists in the right direction and extension of amour de soi-meme. When we extend self-love to others it becomes virtue. Amour de soi-meme is capable of developing into love of all mankind and promotion of general happiness. Thus, morality is the unhindered development of our passions and feelings. Vice is not natural to man and is a distortion of his nature. Things that enslave and destroy us do not come from our nature, they have another source. The rise of civilization has fueled selfishness; it is best to remain close to nature and remain uncorrupted by artificial civilization.

The role of the passions in human affairs and their relationship to reason is a central theme in Rousseau's work. Apart from his contributions to political philosophy, Rousseau was one of the major 18th century writers who prepared the groundwork for the Romantic movement of the 19th century that was founded, in part, on the value and dignity of the individual and the cult of the self. Rousseau overturned the supremacy of 17th century Cartesianism had given to human reason with his famous statement in the beginning of the Confessions: "Je sentis avant de penser" [I felt before I thought]. However, given Rousseau's proclivity for paradox and ambiguity, it is not surprising that he gives significant place to both passion and reason and that the two forces complement each other, even though they are seemingly in contradiction to one another.

Rousseau offers serious criticism of liberalism's faith in reason and suspicion of passion and it is most evident in the Discourse on Inequality where he denounces the accomplishments of the "Age of Reason" and pays homage to the dictates of the heart. He goes so far as to challenge the notion that reason is the source of morality. What place Rousseau makes for passion in politics is not immediately obvious because much of his writing about passion is not explicitely linked to his discussions on politics. The question is vexing when we consider the Social Contract where he speaks with a voice that is dispassionate. Despite its tone, the work does maintain that certain kinds of passion are important for a healthy political society. It seems justifiable to assume that reason and passion are probably umbrella categories for Rousseau, but they are not mutually exclusive. To paraphrase the Discourse on Inequality, Rousseau says that human understanding owes much to the passions because it is by their activity that our reason is perfected. Hence, Rousseau routinely alternates between reason, understanding and enlightenment on the one hand, and desire, sentiment and passion on the other. Yet, passion is not always something good. In the Discourse, there are numerous references to the passions as immoderate and destructive. The passion of amour-propre in particular inspires men to do evil against one another. But Rousseau consistently praises limited and sincere passions, but is concerned about those that are immoderate or inauthentic. Praise of simple passions is a striking and pivotal feature of the Discourse. The development of reason on the other hand produces damage and regression. He challenges the argument that moral behavior depends primarily on reason. Yet, Rousseau does not make a wholesale argument against reason in the SD. It's not possible to avoid reason or retreat from it because it is developed by the passions. Reason is perfected by the passions. And conversely, the development of reason fuels the development of passions. Hence, the relationship between the two is inseparable and complex. Both have the potential to be of benefit or harm.

A juxtaposition of the Discourse on Inequality and the Social Contract shows that while the first work relies mostly on the passions, albeit without excluding reason, the second is much more dispassionate in tone and content. The Discourse is a passionate polemic that champions freedom and laments inequality and injustice in which Rousseau appeals to the imagination and empathy of the reader. On the other hand, the Social Contract is an abstract and analytical discussion of how a body politic should be. Rousseau's positions are not neutral but are expressed more objectively. He calls on logic, reason and mathematics to make his arguments, unlike the Discourse which vividly depicts emotions. In the Social Contract, Rousseau uses ratios and proportions to explain the relationships between sovereignty, government and citizens. His more dominant theme is to rise above or rule passions, appetites and inclinations. The little talk there is of passions presents them as a problem. Rousseau sees an ideal society in which justice replaces instinct, duty replaces physical impulse and right replaces appetite. Reason seems to be presented as the solution to the problem of the passions. The legislator who guides the people with the rules of society is himself guided by "a sublime reason". This is a radical departure from the emotional appeals found in the Discourse where Rousseau argues that too much reliance on reason leads us astray, but recognizes that reason and passion are inseparable and have a complex
relationship. Each work has its own perspective. In the Discourse, Rousseau examines the state of nature placed beside existing society; the Social Contract is a hypothesis that describes the ideal body politic as Rousseau envisions it. Eventually, reason becomes a necessity in political society. Passions may be appropriate to a degree, but when they become a problem, reason comes to the rescue. Yet, as Hall points out, even this explanation falls short because Rousseau realizes that nature and society are intertwined: humans create society and are created by it.

APPLICATIONS

A recent publication that applies principles of political philosophy of past thinkers to the contemporary scene that can be used as a model is Active Liberty. Interpreting Our Democratic Constitution by Associate Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer who takes as a starting point the political ideas on liberty expounded by the 19th century French writer Benjamin Constant. Liberty means two things: freedom from government coercion and freedom to participate in the government itself. Constant emphasized the differences between these two kinds of liberty which he called “liberty of the ancients” and “liberty of the moderns”. For him, the former is an active liberty because it was shared between the citizens and government and gave the former active and constant participation in collective power and the right to hold the latter responsible for their misdeeds. This sharing, Constant said, enlarged and ennobled the minds of the citizens. Ancient liberty was incomplete, however, because it failed to protect the individual from the tyranny of the majority. Constant was aware of the dangers of subjecting the individual to the unconstrained majority of the group. He argued that liberty consisted of the individual’s freedom to pursue his own interests and to be free from improper government interference. Constant said that both ancient and modern liberty are important and that we must learn to combine and balance the two. Breyer seeks to bring attention to Constant’s idea that the people have a right to active and constant participation in the collective power. To fulfill that aim the courts and judges must be aware of the constitution’s democratic nature in interpreting constitutional and statutory texts. People must develop political experience. The matter becomes one of approach, emphasis and perspective in the interpretation of law, just as a musician interprets a musical score with a particular emphasis or perspective.

One can see that this is not distant from what Hobbes and Rousseau spoke of when they stipulated the need for a contract in the body politic. It is likely that both Rousseau and Hobbes would find protection from that kind of oppression in the contracts they devised. For Rousseau it would take the form of the general will; when we obey it, we obey ourselves. For Hobbes, the citizens’ responsibility to the sovereign (whether it is an individual or an assembly) ceases when the citizens lose the protection it is obliged to provide. One could say that Breyer sees the notion of active liberty as a contract because it requires a sharing of sovereign authority among the people. It should be possible to trace a line of authority for making governmental decisions back to the people. Likewise, it is reasonable, from a historical perspective to see the American Constitution as focused on active liberty. Viewed historically, all the actions that were taken in the formation of the Constitution show a focus on active liberty as something important in itself and as a means to secure individual freedom.

In the section on applications, Breyer shows how active liberty is truly “active”, in another way: it is a living organism that must adapt itself to real situations. Some interesting examples come from speech and the First Amendment. The author points out that active liberty is at risk when law restricts speech that is directly related to the shaping of public opinion, speech that takes place in areas related to politics and policy-making be elected officials. Campaign finance is a good example of how glaring disparities can come about. Expenditures in foreign democracies are far lower than in the United States. Secondly, there is a huge gap between the amount given and the number of contributors. In 2000, 800 donors gave about $120,000 each while 99% of eligible voters gave less than $200 and 96% gave nothing. This creates the appearance that a tiny minority has undue influence and that it can possibly undermine public confidence. How do we maintain the protection the First Amendment gives us? The expenditure of money enables speech that conveys a message. If a law forbade spending money to communicate a message, it would undermine freedom of speech. To protect active liberty, we need to understand that the amendment seeks to facilitate conversation among citizens so that their participation in the electoral process will be enhanced. Hence, it becomes a matter of not just protecting individuals from government restriction of information, but also encouraging the exchange of information so that the role of citizens in shaping public opinion becomes more meaningful. In that way, we promote government that is consistent with the ideas
of Constant. However, it goes even further because one can see the First Amendment as two-pronged. It supports modern liberty in the sense that it protects the citizen’s speech from interference and, at the same time, it supports active by enhancing the involvement of citizens in government. This view of civic engagement stands in stark contradiction to later sections of the book where the author inveighs against the “textualist” or “originalist” approach to constitutional interpretation (espoused by Justice Antonin Scalia) which places the emphasis on the document as it was originally written rather than on the citizen.

CONCLUSION

Developing teaching strategies that would apply the works and ideas of Hobbes and Rousseau with the aim of promoting civic engagement and a sense or responsibility to the community would certainly require innovative thinking. And it is an exercise similar to what was done by Justice Breyer. As a first step, given the complexities of Hobbes and Rousseau and the difference in their perspectives, a good deal of time would be needed to discuss and evaluate their ideas and assess the feasibility of applying them to specific situations in the modern world. As noted above, Hobbes’s ideas on freedom, motion and market society reveal themselves in many aspects of the American cultural mindset. Rousseau is also modern in his recognition of the importance of feeling and the passions and the uniqueness and importance of the individual ego, but his thought is rife with paradox and contradiction and the Social Contract is a hypothetical work that shows what might be – not necessarily what is or even what is realistically achievable. At the practical level, the case method approach can very likely give students an opportunity to judge the validity of various cases by using the philosophical principles of both Hobbes and Rousseau as a benchmark and to determine their applicability to civic engagement.

ENDNOTES

2. Lipset, p. 132
3. Lipset, pp. 236-238
4. Lipset, pp.238-241
5. Leviathan, Introduction, pp 28-31 [give full title]
6. Leviathan, Introduction, pp. 32-33
7. Leviathan, Chapter 6, p. 119
8. Leviathan, Chapter 10, p. 150
9. Leviathan, Chapter, 10, pp. 151-152
10. Leviathan, Introduction, p. 35
11. Leviathan, Chapter, 11, p. 161
12. Leviathan, Introduction, p.37
13. Leviathan, Chapter 12, p. 169
14. Leviathan, Chapter 13, p. 185
15. *Leviathan*, Chapter 17, p. 223


18. Leviathan, Chapter 18, pp. 228-236

19. *Leviathan*, Introduction, p. 45


21. Feldman, pp. 38-44

22. *Leviathan*, Introduction, pp. 18-19

23. *Leviathan*, chapter 21, p. 262

24. See Feldman, pp. 1-13

25. Feldman, pp. 19-22


27. Feldman, pp. 14-15

28. Feldman, pp. 17-18

29. See Feldman, Chapter 3, pp. 51-90


31. Lipset, pp. 132-133

32 Lipset, pp. 263-267


34. Copleston, p. 65

35. Copleston, pp. 66-68


38. Copleston, pp. 72-74

39. Copleston, p.81-82

40. Copleston, pp. 84-87

42. *The Social Contract*, Introduction, pp. 34-35, see also Book 1, Chapters 7-8, pp. 62-65

43. Copleston, pp. 91-92

44. Copleston, p. 75

45. Copleston, p. 77


47. Hall, pp. 72-73

48. Hall, p. 74

49. Hall, p. 75

50. Hall, pp. 76-78

51. Hall, pp. 79-80


53. Breyer, pp. 15, 21, 32

54. Breyer, p. 42

55. See Breyer, pp. 42-48

56. See Breyer, pp. 115-132

**REFERENCES**


Galston, William A., Review of *Active Liberty*, *America*, February 27, 2006, pp. 25-27


Thomas Hobbes (/hˈɒbz/; 5 April 1588 – 4 December 1679), in some older texts Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury, was an English philosopher, considered to be one of the founders of modern political philosophy. Hobbes is best known for his 1651 book Leviathan, which expounded an influential formulation of social contract theory. In addition to political philosophy, Hobbes also contributed to a diverse array of other fields, including history, jurisprudence, geometry, the physics of gases, theology, ethics, and A.P. Martinich's interpretation that in Leviathan Thomas Hobbes believed that the laws of nature are the commands of God and that he did not rely on the Bible to prove this has been criticized by Greg Forster in this journal (2003). More. A.P. Martinich's interpretation that in Leviathan Thomas Hobbes believed that the laws of nature are the commands of God and that he did not rely on the Bible to prove this has been criticized by Greg Forster in this journal (2003). Hobbes's political philosophy starts from a number of premises that are supposed to be self-evident, supplemented by various observations from experience. These statements are examined critically and in their interrelatedness in order to more.