

An Analysis of Social Contract Theory: Based on a Comparative Analysis of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau

Yan Zhang*

CNPC Managers Training Institute, Beijing, China

Zhangyan_e@cnpc.com.cn

**Corresponding author*

Keywords: Social contract theory, theory of political philosophy, value

Abstract: In a sense, social contract theory is a theory of political philosophy. Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau are the representatives of modern western social contract theory. Although there are great differences in their theories of social contract, their contributions to this theory are of great significance from the perspective of value philosophy. Although their theories stem from different value purposes, in essence, their value purposes and value principles are the same. The only difference lies in that their theories belong to different stages of development and have different degree of theoretical maturity.

In a certain sense, social contract theory is a theory of political philosophy. In the history of philosophy, many philosophers have thought about this theory, from Grotius to Hobbes to Locke and Rousseau. The thoughts in this aspect are both successive and the process of criticism of the former by the successors, which makes this theory continuously improved. Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau are representatives of modern Western social contract theory. Although these three philosophers have huge differences in their theories on social contract, their contribution to this theory from the perspective of value philosophy is undoubtedly significant. On the surface, their theories are motivated by different value purposes, but fundamentally speaking, their value purposes and value principles are the same. The only difference lies in the development stage and theoretical maturity.

1. Differences in background

In the seventeenth century when Hobbes lived, Britain entered a period of bourgeois revolution. Finally, the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688 overthrew the feudal rule of the Stuart dynasty, ended the British autocratic monarchy, and established the rule of a new bourgeois aristocracy. Throughout the history of England in the seventeenth century, it was a history of autocratic sovereignty and democratic forces fighting each other, with democratic forces ultimately winning. Because Hobbes witnessed too much political chaos, the fear of war and lack of order was with him throughout his life. Therefore, his contract thinking focused on order and security from the beginning, valued protecting the people's right to life, and believed that only power can create Peaceful order. Hobbes said this in "Leviathan": "The affairs of mankind can never be without a little fault, and the greatest disadvantage that any form of government can do to the general population is compared with the

misery and terrible disasters that accompany civil war. Or it pales into insignificance in comparison with the disorder of a state in which no one is governed, and has no obedience to the laws and coercive powers to restrain the plundering and vengeful hands of his people.”^{[1]64} The social contract theory proposed by Hobbes was to defend absolute royal power. He was not the true representative of the interests of the British bourgeoisie, but appeared in the state of a bourgeois aristocracy. Between chaotic freedom and orderly autocracy, he decisively chose the latter. This choice is inseparable from his living environment and background of the times.

Locke is the founder of Western liberal and democratic political theory. As the main theorist of the British Whig Party, he was a representative of an emerging ruling class. His political ideas were consistent with the needs and development trends of society. Therefore, once his theory appeared, they were implemented not only in his home country but also widely spread abroad. Locke's social contract theory is mainly concentrated in his *Treatise of Government*. In "Treatise of Government", Locke proposed a theory different from Thomas Hobbes's "state of nature"^{[2]148-155}. He advocated that everyone has natural rights, and their duty is to protect their own rights and respect other people's rights, which are all equal. Through the concept of natural law, which Locke called "reason," people can understand why they must respect the rights of others, including the right to respect the property acquired by others through labor. Since natural law is often ignored in practice, government protection is necessary. However, government rule must also be subject to the consent of the governed. Such rule can only be implemented under a comprehensive legal system. Therefore all governments are only agents entrusted by the people, and when the agents betray the people, the government should be dissolved. A government betrays its people when established laws are violated or when agents abuse their power. When a government is declared dissolved, the people have the right to establish a new government to fight against the unjust authority of the old government. This situation can also be called a "revolution."

Rousseau lived in France in the eighteenth century. During this period, on the one hand, France was at the end of feudal society, and on the other hand, France had become the center of the European Enlightenment. Rousseau saw the dangers of absolutism, so he disagreed with Hobbes's proposal to establish an absolutist system, and thus formed a social contract theory that was different from Hobbes's. He believes that in the social contract, people do not give power to specific people or individuals, but to the entire society^{[3]72}. Rousseau's thoughts were radical and avant-garde. He advocated freedom, strongly opposed the feudal autocratic system, and passionately advocated the theory of people's sovereignty. It is believed that if a ruler violates public opinion, infringes on the people's rights, tears up the contract that everyone should abide by, and tramples on public consciousness, the people have the right to overthrow it. Rousseau's ideas played an important role in catalyzing and promoting the French Revolution that broke out in 1789.

From Hobbes to Locke to Rousseau, with the development of the times, social environment and regional differences, their theoretical contents are obviously different. The blueprints drawn in the theory and the measures taken to achieve the theoretical goals are very different. , but we cannot deny the value of their respective theories. They are all products of the times and have the feasibility of realization under the circumstances at that time.

2. The difference in content of social contract theory and the identity of value pursuit

2.1 Differences in the content of social contract theory

2.1.1 Hobbes' social contract theory

Hobbes's starting point is the idea of "natural man", a natural object who is completely subject to the laws of nature. Natural law was originally a medieval concept, referring to the divine moral law.

With the rise of natural science, nature has lost its religious and ethical attributes, and the laws of nature have also changed from moral laws to laws of human natural instincts of seeking advantages and avoiding disadvantages. Hobbes believed that before human beings entered society, they lived in a state of nature and acted completely in accordance with natural laws. Hobbes insisted that human nature is evil, "a war of every man against every man."^{[1]95} People compete with each other, are enemies of each other, kill each other, and are cruel and barbaric. The most fundamental and decisive characteristic of natural human nature is self-interested motivation including self-preservation, absorbing what is useful and rejecting what is harmful. This also explains the simple and self-evident law of the entire volitional activities of human being. He summed up two natural laws: one is to use all means to preserve oneself, and the other is to safeguard one's own interests to the maximum extent, and when necessary, give up the rights that others also agree to give up. Man's best interest is self-preservation. "When there is no common power to overwhelm everyone, people are in a so-called state of war."^{[1]94}

According to the first law, when a state of war threatens human life and violates the best interests, people must demand peace. According to the second law, people need to enter into a peace agreement: Everyone agrees to give up as many rights as others, and therefore enjoys as many benefits as others. This is the concept of "contract". A contract is the "mutual transfer of rights."^{[1]101} This requires everyone to transfer their rights to one or a group of people, and he or they will exercise the power on their behalf to preserve the life of the contractor. The meaning of "preserving life" is not to live an ignoble existence, but to live without getting tired of life. The country is the product of this contract. The contractor who agrees to transfer rights is the governed, and the agent who accepts the contract is the ruler.

The original intention and characteristic of Hobbes' social contract theory was to defend absolute royal power. The social contract he stipulated was extremely harsh on the governed. The governed transfer all other rights except their right to life. In order to ensure their safety, the ruler needs to be powerful enough to have a huge deterrent effect. "Hobbes believes that sovereignty is the soul that gives life and movement to the entire national body, and is the essential feature of the country. Without this sovereignty, there is no country."^{[4]11} There is a terrifying giant sea beast "Leviathan" in the "Bible, Revelation". Hobbes believes that the country is the great "Leviathan", the "immortal God", with absolute power and supreme authority. The power of the head of state is indivisible and inalienable. Because he is not a party to the contract and is not subject to the constraints of the contractor, overthrowing him is an illegal act of breaking the contract and a rebellion that violates natural reason. However, Hobbes also admitted that the head of state could only be replaced if he was unable to protect the life of the contractor. In this way, his social contract theory demonstrates the rationality of the autocratic system.

2.1.2 Locke' social contract theory

Locke criticized Hobbes and said that if the state produced by the social contract is a "Leviathan" that makes the members of society fear, "it is no more than saying that people are so stupid that they avoid the troubles that wild cats or foxes may cause them, by willing to be devoured by lions, and even regard this as safety."^{[5] 175} Locke pointed out that Hobbes's theory is illogical, because the harm to people by the State of Nature is accidental. While if the government established by the social contract is of despotism, then the harm to people is much greater. How can human rationality be so stupid as to sacrifice small harms for large harms, abandon heavy benefits and seek light benefits? People's rational choices can only be to obtain greater interests, rather than to lose their freedom. If people's natural nature is to distrust each other, then they will not believe that an autocratic ruler will protect their interests. According to rational standards, Locke established a more reasonable and logically convincing social contract theory. Locke modified Hobbes's view of

the state of nature. The state of nature is no longer a state of war, but a state of peace and freedom, in which people equally enjoy natural rights. Natural rights refer to "natural human rights" such as life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness, and ownership of property. But since the state of nature is so comfortable, why do people abandon the natural state and enter the State? Locke's answer is that the state was established to resolve people's property rights disputes. In order to understand Locke's social contract theory, we first need to understand his statement on property rights.^{[5]176-179} Locke believed that among the various natural rights enjoyed by people, property rights are the most important. Property rights originate from labor and are symbols of materialized labor engraved on natural objects. Whoever changes a natural object has the right to possess it. There are no restrictions on people in the state of nature. If two people take action on the same thing, they will both claim to have property rights over the same thing, thus creating a conflict of property rights. When a conflict occurs, everyone is simultaneously a plaintiff and a judge, as well as an executor of self-determination. This situation will lead to chaos and competition, people's property rights will not be protected, and even the right to life will be threatened. According to Locke's explanation of the state of nature, human beings' natural nature is not selfishness and self-preservation, but peace and cooperation; conflicts originate from the fact that people enjoy freedom and equal natural rights, but there is no public authority to judge property rights. The causes of conflicts between people are minor and accidental, but the consequences are serious. Making a social contract is their means to avoid this serious consequence.

The establishment of a social contract for this purpose requires that people give up the right to adjudicate and enforce property rights, and everyone transfers this right to an agent. The primary task of this public agent is to protect the property rights of the clients and prevent their claims from causing confusion and insecurity. Locke said: "The great and chief purpose of men uniting into a nation and placing themselves under government is the protection of their property."^{[6]77} Locke disagreed with Hobbes's statement that the social contract requires people to transfer all rights except the right to life. He believed that all rights other than the judgment and enforcement of property rights, including the right to life, property rights and freedom, are inalienable and inalienable natural rights. Another difference between Locke and Hobbes is that he regards the ruler as the party making the contract, who is elected from among the contracting parties. The ruler is also bound by the contract. If he fails to fulfill the contract, the people have the right to resist and overthrow his rule. The social contract clearly stipulates that the people have the right to overthrow the tyrant. This is inseparable from the fact that the UK where Locke lived at that time was implementing a constitutional monarchy. In many ways Locke's thought is better understood by us.

2.1.3 Rousseau's Social Contract Thoughts

Rousseau proposed another type of social contract theory that was different from Hobbes and Locke. The novelty of his views is as follows:

First, the social contract is not made in the state of nature before entering society, but in society. People made contracts twice: the first time was made under unequal conditions, with the purpose of establishing state power, and the result was to deepen social inequality; the second time was made under equal conditions, with the purpose of establishing a state power that can guarantee people's freedom and equality. Only the second contract is a social contract in the true sense, that is, the free choice of all members of society under equal conditions.

Secondly, the core of the social contract is the transfer of rights. On key issues such as what to transfer and to whom, Rousseau's answers were different from those of his predecessors. Hobbes requires that all rights except the right to life be transferred to the agent, Locke requires that only the right to arbitration of property be transferred to the agent, but Rousseau's request is that everyone transfers all rights to everyone. Rousseau believes that only this kind of transfer is equal

to all. "Since everyone gives himself to all the others, he does not give it to anyone specific; and since people hand over the right to control themselves, they also gain the same right to dominate all those who participate in the alliance, he will also gain something equivalent to what he has lost, and gain greater power to protect his belongings."^{[7]243} That is to say, an individual did not dedicate himself to anyone specific, but obtained from all contracting parties the same rights that he had transferred to them. He did not lose the right to freedom, but gained something more: That is, the right to freedom would not be deprived from anyone.

Finally, the result of the social contract is neither the "Leviathan" with absolute power as Hobbes said, nor the government with limited power as Locke said, but a "general will" with the combination of coercive power and free rights. The so-called general will refers to the public personality of all contracting parties, which is the "moral community" of their bodies and wills. It is "each member as an inseparable part of the whole."^{[8]39} You must know that the general will is an abstract concept, and it is not a collective concept; the general will is not equal to the public will, nor is it equal to the sum of all individual wills. The general will is the personal interests without conflicts. It is the same parts that remains after deducting the different parts of the general will. The general will always takes the public interest as its starting point and destination, so it is always just and will not make mistakes. The general will is also a dialectical concept, which achieves the unity of contradictory nature that Hegel later said.

First of all, the general will is both abstract and concrete; its incarnation is the law that guarantees equality for all and the political system that enables everyone to enjoy their freedom.

Secondly, the general will is both general and individual; its individual form is the legal right of everyone, and everyone is both the subject of freedom and the recipient of the freedom of others. Thirdly, the general will is both free and obedient. Rousseau said: "People are free but must obey the law, because the law is just our constant record."^{[8]51} Freedom does not contradict obedience. Obedience to one's own private interests is unfreedom, and obedience to the general will is freedom. If a person does not obey the general will, that is, he does not want to be free, the law can force him to be free. In short, Rousseau's theory of the general will combines the universality of freedom with the absoluteness of will, and has an impact on Kant's view of freedom and the theory of "good will".

The practical impact of the doctrine of the general will is even more significant. In real life, the abstract concept of the general will has been transformed more than once into political slogans such as "sovereignty lies with the people" and "people's power" and the practice of democratically elected governments. The first exercise of the general will was the French Revolution. Although the leaders of this revolution were divided into left, center and right, they were all followers of Rousseau. They all flaunted the general will and labelled themselves as citizens. The Paris Commune of 1871 was another practice of expressing the general will. As for what Russell said, "Russia and Germany (especially the dictatorship of the latter) were partly the result of Rousseau's theory",^{[7]243} that is not credible. It is not difficult for a discerning person to see that the people's power and public will advertised by modern authoritarianism only have the will to absolute power, without the universality of free rights, which is inconsistent with Rousseau's discussion of the general will. This shows that Rousseau's general will is very difficult to implement, and even has a bit of a fantasy.

Through the above discussion, it is not difficult to find that there are relatively large differences in the social contract theories of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, and there are even contradictions and oppositions in some places. However, these are all great explorations by philosophers. The latter is on the basis of the former, continuous improvement and development are carried out.

2.2 The identity of the pursuit of value

There is no denying that the philosophical theories of these three great philosophers are very valuable. "Although value has the plurality of subjects, in the end it is unified and unitary in the universality of the highest subject, that is to say, human society."^{[9]350} Therefore, from the perspective of value philosophy, how to determine whether a theory is valuable mainly depends on the following two aspects: The first is the starting point of this theory, that is, the purpose of this theory. As far as the social contract theories of the above three philosophers are concerned, although they differ in specific measures, they all aim to achieve peace in the country and order and security in people's lives. The second is the scope of adaptation or feasibility of this theory. The social contract theories of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau all emerged from specific backgrounds, all adapted to the requirements of the social conditions at that time to a large extent, and all made indelible contributions to the progress of society. Although Rousseau's thoughts contain idealistic elements, they also put forward new ideas for the exploration of political systems.

Fundamentally speaking, the three philosophers Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau have the same value pursuit in their theories of social contract. This is mainly reflected in the following two aspects:

First of all, the goals pursued by the three great philosophers are the same, which is to achieve social stability and order and the happiness and stability of people's lives. Because they lived in an era where social changes were taking place, they personally felt the harm that this social status brought to the people. Therefore, in order to achieve social stability and harmony, they continued to conduct theoretical explorations based on the actual situation and put forward proposals that were suitable for their respective Social contract theory in the context of the times.

Secondly, the effects achieved by the theories of the three philosophers are consistent. First, the theories of the three philosophers have provided positive information for subsequent scholars to study social and political issues. Although their theories all have flaws to varying degrees, there are many essences as well. Secondly, their theories all made important contributions to the solution of social and political issues at that time, and achieved social stability and order to a certain extent within a certain period of time.

3. The Political And Theoretical Significance Of Social Contract Theory

The political system of modern countries was established on the basis of absorbing the essence of this theory and discarding the dross of this theory. This fully reflects the guiding role of theory in practice. At the same time, on the basis of summarizing the application of this theory, philosophers continuously improve this theory, put forward new perspectives and new theories. This is also the most important value of social contract theory. Hobbes compared the country to a monster, Leviathan, hoping to establish an autocratic monarchy in an attempt to maintain social order and achieve equality among the people through such power. He only saw the significance of power to social order, but to a great extent ignores the freedom of the people. In a sense, its equality is a slave-like equality. Although equality is achieved, it also loses the freedom that should be possessed. However, we have to say that this was an idea to solve the problem under the circumstances at that time. Although it was a bit extreme, it was still effective to a certain extent and had positive significance for the social stability at the time, which means it was valuable.

Locke pointed out the shortcomings in Hobbes's social contract theory and proposed to protect the people's property rights. The people only transferred their power, not their rights as Hobbes advocated. The difference between power and rights is highlighted here. The so-called right means that you have rights to something, it means that you are qualified to enjoy it, such as voting, receiving pensions, etc. The so-called power is an ability, that is, the ability to control or influence others. It is a political concept, rather than an ethical concept. It is on the basis of the differences

between rights and power between Hobbes and Locke that we summarize the mechanism of modern democracy, which is: the product of the in-depth development of the exchange relationship between rights and power between the state and citizens. The people transfer their power to the state in exchange for the rights granted by the state, and at the same time the state returns power to the people through democratic means. This is a two-way process. The premise of this process is the separation of rights and power. Therefore, both Hobbes' concept of rights and Locke's concept of power are of great significance. Their respective views have limitations, but through practical testing and the development of later philosophers, the views on social contract theory have continued to develop and improve. In a certain sense, the relationship between democracy and autocracy has been continuously reconciled and reached a balanced state of harmony.

Similarly, with people's continuous pursuit of freedom and democracy, Rousseau fully put forward his idea of the general will. It can be said that Rousseau highly respected the general will and was very fanatical in his pursuit of freedom. He even proposed " Forced freedom" slogan. It was precisely in Rousseau's almost fanatical expression that the concept of freedom that had been suppressed for a long time spread rapidly in people's hearts, and waves of revolution came one after another. In my opinion, Rousseau's idea of the general public is the most beautiful one. He envisioned a kind of true equality and freedom, where everyone is his own master. However, this vision is the most difficult to realize. Will the eventual realization of this extreme democratic form lead to absolute autocracy? This is a question worth thinking about deeply. Therefore, there is a major difference between philosophical theory and real-life political practice. In political practice, we must distinguish the difference between theory and reality, use theory to guide practice, and use practice to verify theory, rather than dogmatically using practice to conform to theory. Exploration is always on the way. It is undeniable that the social contract theory of the philosopher has great significance for the development of society, and the predictive value of this theory is huge.

Generally speaking, there are great differences in the thoughts of the three philosophers on social contract theory. But judging from the standards that each of them relies on, under their respective ideological and theoretical systems, they all want to achieve fairness for the people. In other words, in their respective theories, the people are fair. And the difference lies in whether it is autocratic fairness or democratic fairness. This also confirms what was said before, their purpose is the same but the methods they adopt are different. Therefore, we cannot generally say whose thoughts among these three philosophers are more valuable. Their thoughts are all reasonable and adaptable to the development of the times. At the same time, their thoughts are ideal. After all, each theory is a beautiful vision from a philosopher. The social contract theory guides the political system. It is only in a process and can never have a final structure and absolute goodness. Therefore, the value of the social contract exists in the continuous exploration and development process. As long as it continues to develop in the footsteps of history, its value will always exist.

References

- [1] Hobbes. Translated by Li Sifu and Li Tingbi. *Leviathan*. Beijing: Commercial Press, 1985.
- [2] Locke, translated by Yang Si. *On the Government*, China Social Sciences Press, 2009.
- [3] Teaching and Research Section of the History of Western Philosophy, Peking University. *Selected Original Works of Western Philosophy (volume ii)*, Commercial Press, 1983.
- [4] Li Junsheng. *Hobbes's Doctrine of the State*, Jiangxi Normal University, 2010.
- [5] The Teaching and Research Section of the History of Foreign Philosophy, Peking University. *French Philosophy in the eighteenth Century*, the Commercial Press, 1979.
- [6] Locke. Translated by Ye Qifang, Qu Jufang: *On the Government (the next part)*, the Commercial Press, 2007.
- [7] Russell. Translated by Ma Yuande. *A History of Western Philosophy (Volume ii)*, The Commercial Press, 1997.
- [8] Rousseau. translated by He Zhaowu. *On the Social Contract*. The Commercial Press, 1982.
- [9] Li Deshun. *On Value*, China Renmin University Press, 2007.