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... I see you in your last days and for me the recollection of the time will always be a source of proud joy. I contemplated your august features and saw there the imprint of those dark griefs which the injustice of man inflicted on you. (D)Thomas Carlyle assessed its impact and now has not Jean Jacques promulgated his new Evangel of a Contrat Social, explaining the whole mystery of Government, and how it is contracted and bargained for,--to universal satisfaction? Theories of Government! Such have been, and will be, in ages of decadence. Acknowledge them in their degree, as processes of Nature, who does nothing in vain; as steps in her great process. Meanwhile, what theory is so certain as this, That all theories, were they never so earnest, painfully elaborated, art, and, by the very conditions of them, must be incomplete, questionable, and even false? Then shall know that this Universe, what it professes to be, an infinite one. Attempt not to swallow 'em, for thy logical digestion, be thankful, if skillfully planting down this and the other fixed pillar in the chaos, thou prevent its swallowing them. That a new young generation has exchanged the Sceptic Creed, What shall I believe? for passionate Faith in this Gospel according to Jean Jacques is a further step in the Business, and betoken much to be advised. "In such prophesied Lumberland of Happiness, Benevolence, and Vice cured of its deformity, trust not, my friends! ... It not Sentimentalism twin-sister to Cant, if not one and the same with it? Is not Cant the mothers prima of the Devil, from which all falsehoods, imbecilities, abominations body themselves, from which no good thing can come?" For Cant is itself properly a double-distilled Lie, the second power of a Lie. (E) George Mason Memorial, Washington, D.C., includes De Contrat Social as an element of the status of a sealed Mason. 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Diccionario histórico de la Compañía de Jesús: Costa Rosetti-Industrias. Univ. Pontificia Comillas. p. 1450. ISBN 978-84-8468-038-3. - Robespierre, Dany; Bretman, Christopher (2003). Rousseau and the Social Contract. Routledge. Cohen, Joshua (2010). Rousseau: A Free Community of Equals. Oxford University Press. Incoverti, Giovanni (2012). "Da contrat social, or the principles of political rights). Les citoyens de Rousseau ont à parole en anglais". Le citoyen de Rousseau (in French). Lebrun, P. P. Onda. Il principio della democrazia. Jean-Jacques Rousseau Du Contrat social (1762). Napoli, Jovene, p. 213-256. Williams, David Lay (2014). Rousseau's 'Social Contract'. An Introduction. Cambridge University Press. Wright, Christopher D. (2008). Rousseau's The Social Contract: A Reader's Guide. London: Continuum Books. Wikimedia Commons has media related to De Contrat social (Jean-Jacques Rousseau). English Wikisource has original text related to this article: The Social Contract. The Social Contract translated by C. D. H. Cole at Standard Ebooks The Social Contract Section from a philosophy encyclopedia entry on Rousseau: Du contrat social (MetaLibri) The Social Contract translated 1782 by C. D. H. Cole at constitution.org The Social Contract Public domain audiobook Introduction to Rousseau's Social Contract English translation audiobook on LibriVox.org Catholic Encyclopedia Based on an article critical of The Social Contract, written in 1908. SpanishNotes entry on The Social Contract Rousseau Genialitätshaftertrag in Kurzform a site containing The Social Contract, slightly modified for easier reading The Social Contract on In Our Time at the BBC Du contrat social, or the principles of political rights) Retrieved from "Published: Jan 27, 2025>written by Viktorya Sui, MA Philology Jean-Jacques Rousseau's social contract theory examines the connection between individuals and society. Accroting to this theory, if people want freedom, they must come together to create a fair government through a collective agreement—or what he calls a social contract. Rousseau considers concepts such as individual rights alongside the needs of everyone in society. By looking at both citizens' duties and responsibilities and those who govern them, Rousseau prompts us to question traditional ideas about power and authority. Let's take an in-depth look at his thoughts. Introduction to Rousseau's Social Contract Theory Library Leading the People. Eugène Delacroix, 1831. Source: Wikimedia Commons Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a key figure of the 18th-century European Enlightenment, was born in Geneva in 1712. His life was as eventful as his ideas were influential—he frequently found himself at odds with those around him and spent long periods living in exile. Although Rousseau wrote on diverse subjects—from opera to education—his work in political theory is best remembered today. Above all, historians single out one book when trying to understand what this man thought about how human beings should organize themselves: "The Social Contract" (1762). It was nothing less than revolutionary. Some even said its publication would have consequences equal to those great events and then shake Europe like an earthquake (see revolutions). At the heart of social contract theory lies the idea that legitimate authority derives solely from consent government). Further still, any governmental system ought to reflect general wishes or "Volonté générale" ("general will") populace comprising it. While Thomas Hobbes believed that the goal of a social contract was to avoid living a life that is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short," Rousseau saw it differently. He thought that such an agreement could help people obtain freedom, equality, and justice within their society—in other words, turn what they naturally have into civil liberty and justice. Rousseau wrote The Social Contract at a time of great social and political change. Absolute rule had caused difficulties throughout Europe, and Enlightenment thinkers were starting to question whether there might be better ways for people to be charged than traditional systems. It was natural: he wanted democracy, but one where everyone participated equally. These ideas were important not just for what happened later in the French Revolution but also how we think about politics today. The Foundation of the Social Contract The Oath of the Horatii, Jacques-Louis David, 1784. Source: Wikimedia Commons Jean-Jacques Rousseau introduced the idea of a "state of nature" as part of his social contract theory, which sets him apart from thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes. Rousseau imagined the state of nature as peaceful and solitary: people living simple lives satisfied their own wants directly from the environment around them. As mentioned, while Hobbes believed life in the state of nature was solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short, Rousseau argued that society itself brought about inequality, competition, and corruption. For Rousseau, humanity's move from this blissful state of nature to civil society came about because there was private property (which caused differences between people once they started accumulating things) With this shift, there had to be a social contract: an agreement between group members for self-preservation. One way they do this is by forming states. Here, individuals surrender some aspects of their personal freedom over others, so everyone protects everybody else—including individual possessions! He called this collective decision-making process "the general will." The principles of liberty, equality, and the common good are the foundation of Rousseau's civil society, and political authority is legitimized through the social contract. At the heart of Rousseau's theory is the idea of the "general will," which states that citizens' collective will should aim at what is best for everyone. Unlike individual desires or the will of all, which may serve particular interests, the general will only consider shared interests. Rousseau argues that by following this general will, people can be free and equal within civil society. The social contract creates justice and civil liberty by transforming natural liberty, and this happens when people agree on what is best for everyone (the general will). Key Principles of the Social Contract Theory The Third of May, Francisco de Goya, 1814. Source: ArtyNet Jean-Jacques Rousseau's social contract theory is based on the idea that the state's authority must come from a social contract agreed upon by its citizens, ensuring that power rests with the people, as opposed to divine right or hereditary rule. According to Rousseau, sovereignty doesn't reside in rulers themselves but rather in the general body of citizens. This sovereignty cannot be alienated or divided. It cannot be handed over to a monarch or small group. It must be exercised by the community as a whole. At the core of Rousseau's theory are notions of "liberty" and "equality." For Rousseau, liberty isn't about pursuing individual interests. Freedom comes when one aligns themselves with the general will, which represents what's collectively best for everyone (and leads to the common good). Equality does not just mean having the same legal rights and status as others. It also means having an equal say in making the laws everyone must obey. In a social contract, everyone gives up some freedom in exchange for protection—no one is rich enough to buy their way out of trouble, but nor is anyone so poor they are left unprotected. To understand Rousseau's idea, we need to know what he meant by "general will" versus "will of all." The general will does not just mean what most people want. It means things that are good for everyone, even if individuals disagree sometimes. In contrast, will of all simply adds up to what everybody wants, even if this is bad for society overall! Rousseau thought it important to follow our general will when making laws through social contracts—only then can we remain free and equal under the law. Criticism of the Social Contract Theory A Barial at Granas, Gustave Courbet, 1849-50. Source: Wikimedia Commons Rousseau's social contract theory has been criticized throughout its history and continues to be debated today. One major objection is that the idea of the general will is too vague and idealistic. Skeptics ask how practical it is to think that people can ever identify their common interest, properly understand it, or act on it selflessly. Thomas Hobbes had a very different—much bleaker—view of human nature than Rousseau's in the state of nature. He thought life without government would be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." Hobbes believed that for order to exist, an absolute sovereign (a king or queen) must have all power. John Locke agreed with Rousseau about natural rights and the consent of democracy but had a more down-to-earth theory of the social contract. He wanted the government to protect individual rights and property. His idea was limited government (such as we find in the United Kingdom and the United States today). This contrasts sharply with Rousseau, who cared deeply about both collective sovereignty and what he called "the tyranny of the majority." These arguments highlight the tension between individual freedom and collective decision-making, how difficult it can be to implement Rousseau's ideas, and the ongoing discussion within political philosophy about finding the right balance between authority and liberty. The Social Contract and Modern Society Coronation of Empress Joséphine in Notre-Dame de Paris, December 2, 1804, Jacques-Louis David, 1804-07. Source: Wikimedia Commons This theory has had a lasting influence on contemporary political thought and systems, including the development of both democratic and republican ideologies. His ideas about popular sovereignty and the general will as the basis for political legitimacy were highly influential during the Enlightenment and later revolutionary periods. For example, one can see echoes of Rousseau's thoughts on freedom, equality, and collective sovereignty in the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. One can, therefore, say that he helped shape modern democratic values. In terms of democracy and republicanism specifically, Rousseau's ideas stress the importance of an active citizenry, government limited by law, and governments reflecting the general will. This can be seen today in things like referendums (where they exist) and an emphasis on participation—ensuring that elected officials or laws made by them are in line with what people actually want. However, applying Rousseau's theory in today's world presents several challenges. It is hard to determine a single general will when states are complex and diverse, with many different interests at play. Furthermore, it is difficult to implement Rousseau's ideas practically because we live in an age of digital communication and global interconnectedness. There is so much information circulating online, and so much influence. For instance, the Brexit referendum raised questions about how far complex policy decisions can be said to align with the general will. After the vote, it became clear that British society was deeply divided on several fronts. And it wasn't at all obvious how to translate a simple majority voting for something into a workable political or economic strategy. These examples show that Rousseau's political philosophy continues to influence society even now and that putting his ideas into practice isn't easy, given the multifaceted nature of modern governance realities. So, What Does Rousseau's Social Contract Theory Say? The Meeting, or Bonapour Memsieur Courbet, Gustave Courbet, 1854. Source: Artychive.com Jean-Jacques Rousseau's social contract theory asserts that a government can only be considered legitimate if it has been formed with the consent of those being governed. Furthermore, Rousseau believed that any such state's authority ought to come directly from a social contract that its citizens have agreed upon. At the heart of his theory lies the idea of "general will," the collective agreement for the good of all—which Rousseau argued provides true sovereignty, liberty, and equality. While Hobbes saw people's natural state leading inevitably toward conflict, Rousseau thought humanity could live freely and equally under a government that reflects this general will. His ideas challenge conventional thinking about power but also raise difficult questions when considering how to implement them: It is possible to achieve unanimous support for general will? And how does one balance individual rights against collective decision-making in complex modern societies?