

# Leviathan and the social contract's concept of political legitimacy



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One of the upmost important factors in helping a government run smoothly that we have been exploring throughout the entirety of this course is political legitimacy. Both Hobbes in *Leviathan* and Rousseau in *The Social Contract* offer us complex ideas of political legitimacy that requires us to think deeply and to inquire on the natural state of a human. In its most simple form, political legitimacy refers to whether citizens agree that the government has the right to exercise authority, and, that the citizens have an obligation to obey that authority. While political legitimacy has a basic concept that is followed in both of these texts, we are offered new ways to explore the possible ways different governments can rule and gain authority.

*Leviathan* is one of the most complex texts that I have ever read, indulging in an idea of political legitimacy that I have not explored before. Hobbes is a quite complex writer who is very consistent with what he believes in. Hobbes introduces his modern conception that the natural state of human kind prior to any common authority to threaten us, is war. To Hobbes, the state of nature is the social conditions that humans have outside of civilization. Hobbes helps us to discover what a society without any kind of structure from a government looks like. Professor Dudas pointed out that the most consistent theory that Hobbes introduces to us is that “ humans are fearful people who desire peace above all else, and also have a natural right to life that allows them to do whatever is in their power to preserve themselves.” *Leviathan* is a way people are able to get out of the state of war, and keep themselves out of that state. According to Hobbes we are always fearful of our own safety, and our only true interest is self-preservation. Hobbes makes it clear that “ he believes some people are stronger and smarter than others,

but there is a basic consistency of equality so people who are weaker probably are mentally stronger so if needed they could conspire together.” Leviathan is essentially a metaphor that was created as a common authority that is an artificial person, made up of the bodies of its citizens. Leviathan is nothing more than our collective will of self-preservation. Leviathan is made up of the will of its citizens, so Leviathan must be obeyed because it will never harm its citizens. Professor Dudas stated in our lecture that “ if Leviathan does threaten, then it is not Leviathan anymore. Leviathan is nothing more than our collective will to live. Leviathan could not exist and threaten us. Hobbes believes there is one condition to disobey Leviathan, and that is that citizens do have the right to resist Leviathan if it means that they are resisting threats made to their own lives. This is our right to life, so we must resist. Hobbes believes only a fool would surrender their right to life.

In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau brings to light the key concepts of our state of nature, general will and political legitimacy. Rousseau understands the natural human state as having a sense of freedom that is not being limited in any way, meaning no restraints on our behavior, but does believe that human beings gain something important and meaningful through the act of creating government, essentially the social contract. While Hobbes has a very violent idea of the state of nature, Rousseau simply believes that there is much more to life than freedom, and this can be proved by leaving the state of nature. Individuals are able to become the people we are today, making life meaningful, because of the social contract, and having a common sense of leadership which is why it is so important to leave this

state of nature. By leaving the state of nature, you are entering yourself into the social contract which is an agreement to society that you will sacrifice your general freedom, in order to receive civil freedom so you are able to think and act rationally and morally. The state of nature is essentially negative to Rousseau, as people are consistently unintelligent as well as extremely limited in all aspects of their lives when not following by the social contract. By leaving this state of nature, Rousseau believes that a person will gain an extraordinary life, and you will quite literally be transformed from “ a stupid limited animal, into an intelligent man.” The symbolism of leaving the state of nature is astounding in terms of what Rousseau believes, as this is your way of becoming a citizen. A person should never regress back to the state of nature after leaving, because leaving society would limit you entirely, and would cause extreme stupidity in your entire being. The social contract is a way for people to engage and initially leave the state of nature, by giving up their individual wills to all other citizens. The only way that it would be possible to have a civil society, would be if we all agreed to the social contract. This will give citizens a general will, which is essentially what makes up a common good by generalizing the state as a whole. By leaving the general will, we would be regressing back into the general state of nature which Rousseau views extremely negatively, we will be less than fully human. If people leave the general will, they will be “ forced to be free,” being forced back into the general will in order to be intelligent. A person can only be “ free” when collectively involved in the general will. Rousseau believes all members of this civil society who have consented to the general will, must be forced to remain within the general will and obey. Individuals who have already “ consented” to society would thus be viewed as

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sovereign, meaning that they have given their consent to the authority already. Rousseau's idea of political legitimacy is essentially that a government can only be considered legitimate if it follows the general will of citizens in who have already previously consented to the government's authority.

While both *Leviathan* and *The Social Contract* greatly differ from one another, they share a very consistent idea of what political legitimacy is. In both texts, there is a focus of creating a single entity that is "essentially" used to govern its citizens. In the text *Leviathan*, we see this through the notion of Leviathan being this "artificial person" made up of many bodies of its citizens, but serving as an individual. Leviathan is the maker of laws, and Hobbes describes sovereignty as being Leviathan's soul. In *The Social Contract* we see this as the sovereignty that is created when citizens give up their individualized freedom for collective authority. Again, political legitimacy can only be created when citizens agree on the authority, which is why there is a focus on leaving the state of nature, in both circumstances leading to someone other than yourself gaining full power.

Citations -

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