

Café Philosophy



★ 'The Social Contract'

This allegorical work features a portrait of the influential philosopher and writer of the 18th Century Romanticism, J.J. Rousseau. Rousseau influenced the French Revolution and is shown hanging above two united flags of a new France.

< Nicolas Henry Jeaurat de Bertry >



EDITORIAL
TOM MCGUIRE

IN DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES LIKE NEW ZEALAND, IT IS TAKEN FOR GRANTED THAT EVERY FEW YEARS WE GET TO PARTICIPATE IN THE ELABORATE RITUAL OF DECIDING WHO WILL RULE OVER US UNTIL THE DECISION PROCESS REPEATS ITSELF.

But it wasn't always like this, and in many places is still not. Dictatorships, juntas, one-party states and tribal fiefdoms are going strong, and collectively outnumber the world's democracies.

While immersed in a particular political system, it is hard to imagine how things could be any different. But go back several hundred years, and the change is phenomenal. Women's voting rights, greater employee protections and a far more inclusive approach to ethnic diversity are just a few of the radical differences in New Zealand alone.

The frequent collapse of political systems around the world demonstrates the fragility of power. Fiji, although ostensibly a democratic state (with elections on hold for now), has been plagued by coups and power grabs for decades. And recent events in the Middle East show that so-called "strongman" regimes are only as strong as the tolerance levels of their people. It takes very little to ignite a revolution these days, and only a soothsayer could anticipate what that crucial moment is (an innocent child shot in the street? Crippling food taxes?) which inexorably moves a ruler from throne to guillotine.

The old Chinese proverb "may you live in interesting times" is widely considered a curse, and such times as we live in now are surely interesting (and painful) to more than a few. In such periods of change, it is useful to look afresh at the ideals which shape the world we live in. These ideals have their origin in the human mind, and are ultimately traceable to a small handful of people. Some of the more influential of these figures are covered in this issue. They are sometimes quirky characters, making a big splash during their lives whose ripple effect we are still experiencing.

Mostly commonly known today through catchy one-liners such as "I may not agree with what you say, but...." (Voltaire), they were met in their day by derision or even persecution by some but excited

enthusiasm by others. (Thomas Jefferson's "all men are created equal" might seem like tame words now, but war has been waged over them). Their ideas about the role of government and the rights of human beings have helped to shape our current political reality. To see where we are today, it helps to look at ourselves as their intellectual heirs, even if we are not directly conscious of this.

Rulers and governments have an air of impenetrability about them, but they are actually in a precarious position. The sovereign is outnumbered by their subjects, which almost always puts the ruler at a disadvantage in terms of sheer physical power. The ruler's power consists in convincing other people not to exercise theirs. Most people are quite easy to persuade, and there is always a bit of give and take. If there is adequate security and people's material needs are met, we are likely to think the ruler is doing a great job and not seek to exercise our collective power over the ruler, which was there all along but subdued by complacency or forgetfulness.

Political philosophers are able to justify or critique the concentration of power into the hands of a ruler, setting out the right conditions under which the people should allow this to happen. They tell a story about when state power is legitimate and when it is not. Anyone who holds consistent political views accepts such a story, even if their political activism is limited to griping about city rates increases to a stranger they just met at the bus stop, or chiming in with suggestions about Syria during the nightly news.

One of these legitimising stories we tell ourselves is about the social contract, for which we ought to thank the French thinker Rousseau. I don't know anyone who signed a contract saying that they were to pay taxes and obey the law. But of course, it's meant to be more implicit than that. We can't help but take from society unless we live alone in the mountains (in which case we are a law unto ourselves). I was born in a state hospital, given public schooling and so forth. Now I am obligated to do my bit in return. I think at the end of the day, it's a fancy way of talking about the 'give and take' that most people accept is part and parcel of living in a community. Opponents of the idea say there's something fishy about a contract you cannot refuse to enter into, but I suppose there's always the mountains.

When reading these classical theorists today, they often come across as a little quaint. In Rousseau's case his social contract idea is still widely regarded, but his notion of a benevolent dictator not quite so popular. Rousseau and rival theorist Hobbes both referred to a "state of nature" before the advent of government which could well have existed only in their imaginations. Rousseau romanticised it as savagely noble, while Hobbes thought it "nasty, brutish and short".

If you've ever been accused of acting in a Machiavellian fashion, you'll soon know why by reading the somewhat tragic story of the man for whom power was the true goal of politics, and goodness an afterthought. Would anyone who has spent serious time observing politicians (who are perhaps as entertaining as circus performers, though more dangerous) deny that The Prince is apt in its cold, calculated portrayal of the 'dirty business'?

For those who are aspiring to be active citizens, understanding how past ideas shape the present could help us to re-imagine better ways of living, creating and working together now and in the future. Enjoy this issue, and keep thinking deeply.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)

Graeme Garrard observes the life of a paradoxical revolutionary hero.

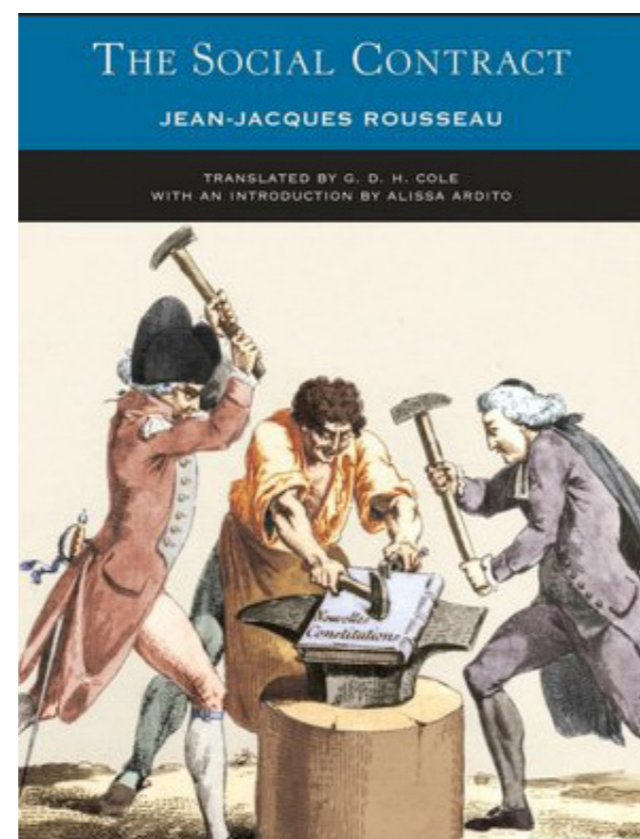
According to a popular legend the philosopher Immanuel Kant was so punctual that his neighbours would set their clocks by his daily constitutional. Allegedly, the only time he deviated from this rigid pattern was when he received a copy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's treatise on education, *Emile* (1762). The book so captivated him that he missed his afternoon walk for several days. Furthermore, the only piece of art that the austere Kant kept in his home was a portrait of Rousseau, which hung above his writing desk. He claimed that "Rousseau set me right" by teaching him to honour mankind.

Another German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, was not so impressed. At the end of the nineteenth century he denounced Rousseau as a tarantula who poisoned Kant with his moralising. This dim view of Rousseau's legacy cast a long shadow over much of twentieth century ethics, particularly for a generation of liberals such as Isaiah Berlin, Karl Popper and Jacob Talmon, for whom Rousseau was a proponent of 'totalitarian democracy'. However, in the four decades leading up to the 300th anniversary of his birth on the 28th June 2012, Rousseau's reputation has waxed again, in conjunction with the growing sophistication of Rousseau scholarship.

When Rousseau arrived in Paris in 1742 he was a poor, unknown, unpublished, thirty-year-old Genevan with no job, relatively little formal education (although well-read), whose mother had died in childbirth, and whose watchmaker father had abandoned him when he was ten years old. By the time Rousseau died in 1778 he was a best-selling novelist, an extremely successful opera composer, the author of numerous books and essays on education, ethics, music, religion, language, political philosophy, political economy and even botany, the rival of Voltaire, erstwhile friend of Diderot, d'Alembert and Hume (all of whom eventually denounced him as mad, as did Nietzsche), and one of the most famous men in Europe. Before the end of the century, Rousseau's body lay in the Panthéon in Paris, immediately opposite his arch-nemesis Voltaire, who died just over a month before him. It had been placed there by the Jacobins to honour a 'father of the French Revolution'. By the twentieth century, Rousseau had been blamed for influencing if not actually causing romanticism, anarchism, nationalism and even totalitarianism. He remains one of the most important, influential, divisive and widely-read thinkers in the history of ideas.

A Man of Paradoxes

Rousseau once described himself as a 'man of paradoxes', which is not difficult to believe of someone who famously claimed that it is sometimes necessary to force men to be free. Other evidence concurs. He wrote an influential treatise on education of the young, yet put all five of his children into a foundling home as soon as they were born (where probably most of them died). He claimed to have "the greatest aversion to revolutions," yet inspired the leaders of the French Revolution, such as Robespierre and Saint-Just, who hailed him as their hero. Rousseau is commonly included among the leading philosophes of the eighteenth century Enlightenment, and contributed to the *Encyclopédie*, yet in his first major work he praised ignorance and argued that the cultivation of the arts and sciences is detrimental to morals. He is famous as a proponent of democracy, yet claimed in his main political work, *The Social Contract* (1762) that the only place where democracy had any realistic prospect in contemporary Europe was in remote Corsica. Many of his most fervent and devoted admirers while he was alive were women and aristocrats, yet he was deeply misogynistic, and professed to dislike and disapprove of wealthy 'grondees' ("I hate their rank, their hardness, their prejudices, their pettiness, and all their vices"). He was one of the most admired and mesmerisingly eloquent writers of his age, yet he had little formal education and married an illiterate seamstress. He was a best-selling author and composer, yet he wrote that "books are good for nothing" and admired ancient Sparta, which tolerated neither writing nor music.



Rousseau's most successful opera, *Le Devin du Village* (The Village Soothsayer), was a huge hit when it was premiered in Paris in 1752, but it is almost never performed now. (Louis XV loved it, and wanted to offer its composer a lifetime pension, but Rousseau had fled, fearing that he might wet himself in the king's presence owing to a disease of his bladder.) And Rousseau's writings on music, extolling the virtues of Italian opera over French, are today known to only a few scholars. While his sentimental epistolary novel, *Julie, or the New Héloïse* (1761), was probably the biggest best-seller of the eighteenth century, it is now little read. *Emile*, which Rousseau described as the "best as well as the most important of the works I have written," had a vast influence on the theory and practice of education. However, its controversial assumptions and prescriptions have long since been superseded by rival pedagogies. Yet Rousseau's relevance endures despite all the changes which have made so much of what he did unfashionable to contemporary tastes. Many of his other works, above all in cultural anthropology and political philosophy, are classics that continue to resonate very powerfully with readers.

One such example is Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* (1755). Although it was not awarded first prize by the Academy of Dijon, for which it was written, it caused a sensation when it was published, and has had a huge and lasting impact on natural and social science. It begins with an account of man in a pre-social 'state of nature'. This account, while speculative and hypothetical, was enormously influential on debates about human nature and the origins of social and political life at a time when there was very little empirical evidence on these subjects and the gap between science and political philosophy was far less broad than it is today. The *Discourse's* idyllic picture of the original human beings as innocent, simple, happy, peaceful, isolated and benignly selfish prompted Voltaire sarcastically to thank Rousseau for his "new book against the human species." The second part of the book sketches the advent of society, and with it the emergence of an aggressive form of selfishness (*amour-propre*) that has led to a Hobbesian war of all against all dominated by inequality, injustice and exploitation.

The Social Contract

Rousseau's *Social Contract*, published 250 years ago in April 1762, sets out a solution to the dilemma of civilisation posed in the *Discourse*. It was immediately condemned by the Paris Parlement, and placed on the Vatican's Index of Forbidden Books, next to works by

fellow philosophes such as Voltaire, Hume, Diderot, Montesquieu, and d'Alembert. (This did not prevent Voltaire from declaring that the 'monster' had brought all these troubles on himself.) No one was surprised by any of this, least of all Rousseau. But Rousseau was shocked and dismayed when the book was banned in his native Geneva. The authorities ordered it burned and its author arrested if he ever dared to set foot in the city again. This wounded Rousseau deeply, since he had always been a proud citizen of Geneva – he signed his books (including *The Social Contract*) 'Citoyen de Genève', and said to the Genevese that "I took your constitution as my model." Rousseau blamed Voltaire, then resident in Geneva, for whipping up opposition to him in an unholy alliance with the religious bigots who dominated the city.

The Social Contract was even proscribed in relatively liberal, tolerant Amsterdam. It seemed as though all of continental Europe – Catholics and Protestants, secularists and religious fanatics, Jesuits and Jansenists, philosophes and anti-philosophes – had united against Jean-Jacques, who was forced to flee. He even considered suicide. Rousseau's desperation was so great that he actually moved to England, a nation he despised: "I have never liked England or the English," he states in his *Confessions* (1770). In *The Social Contract* he had written that although England regards itself as free, "it is grossly mistaken; it is free only during the election of its Members of Parliament. As soon as they are elected, slavery overtakes it, and it is nothing." Even so, the English gave Rousseau sanctuary when few others would, for which he displayed his characteristic ingratitude, as his friend David Hume was to discover to his amazement and disgust when Rousseau spurned the offer of a pension from King George III, just as he had done to Louis XV.

The Social Contract is Rousseau's most enduringly popular, widely-read and influential book. It ranks among the great classics of Western political philosophy, alongside Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle's *Politics*, Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Hobbes's *Leviathan*, Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*, Marx's *Communist Manifesto* and Mill's *On Liberty*. It has been continuously in print for two and a half centuries, inspiring generations of democrats and radicals as much as it has infuriated and provoked traditionalists and conservatives. It is a unique blend of ancient and modern elements which is difficult to classify, and it has vexed its interpreters since it was published.

In it Rousseau argues that both the monarchical absolutism of France's then *ancien régime*, and the enlightened despotism favoured by philosophes like Voltaire, are inconsistent with the 'principles of political right' (the book's subtitle) which he sets out in the book. Rousseau started from the assumption made by many near-contemporary political thinkers, such as Hobbes and Locke, that political life is unnatural and must therefore be based on consent and human artifice. In

this view he was fully modern; but his models of political consent were ancient Sparta and republican Rome, because he held they understood best how to generate a sense of public spirit, without which the general will essential to a well-functioning polity cannot be formed. He was thus a modern with the soul of an ancient who opposed liberalism with his own unique form of modernity.

In the first line of the first chapter of *The Social Contract* Rousseau famously declares that “man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.” Yet contrary to the claims of many writers (including Voltaire), it was never Rousseau’s intention to break the bonds of political life and return us to some idyllic pre-political state of nature. Rather, he shows how he thinks political bonds can be made legitimate – meaning that sovereign and subject are no longer alienated from each other. Such alienation is typical of despotic rule, where power is imposed by might rather than by right. Rousseau gave the name ‘citizen’ to those who help make the laws to which they are subject. By together making their own laws, each citizen “obeys no one but himself, and remains as free as before.” This Rousseau regarded as the only legitimate form of politics.

According to Rousseau, then, sovereignty should reside with the people, in the form of the general will, which ought to be the source of the law’s legitimacy. The general will is not a mere aggregation of the wills of selfish individuals (which Rousseau called “the will of all”). Rather, the general will is formed when citizens ask themselves what is in the common interest rather than what is good for them specifically as individuals. However, Rousseau believed that such public-spiritedness is wholly unnatural, since we are naturally selfish creatures. It must therefore be cultivated artificially, by means of a set of institutions and practices whose purpose is to promote ‘sentiments of sociability’. The most notorious of these proposed institutions is what Rousseau calls the ‘civil religion,’ which makes each individual love his duty to the polity more than to himself. Rousseau believed that Christianity is completely unsuited to this role, since it preaches “only servitude and submission.” In fact, he says that he knows “nothing more contrary to the social spirit” and “favourable to tyranny” than Christianity. Little wonder that *The Social Contract* was banned both in Calvinist Geneva and in Catholic Paris.

Another device that Rousseau says is necessary to induce naturally selfish individuals to think of the public good is what he calls ‘the legislator’. Such rare individuals (he mentions Moses and Lycurgus

as examples) invoke the divine to persuade people to subordinate their particular interests to the common interest, this being a precondition for the sovereignty of the general will.

Legacies

Despite his reputation as a naïve idealist with both feet planted firmly in the clouds, Rousseau was keenly aware of just how unlikely it was that the political principles he prescribed in *The Social Contract* would ever be adopted under contemporary conditions. He thought they were only applicable in relatively small, cohesive city-states of the kind commonly found in ancient Greece; not the large, sophisticated nation-states of modern Europe. That is why it is very unlikely he would have endorsed the French Revolutionary attempt to implement his theories, had he lived to see it – even though he correctly predicted a coming age of revolutions which would engulf Europe.

Whereas Thomas Jefferson believed that “the government that governs least governs best,” Rousseau set out to legitimate strong government rather than to limit it. Indeed, for Rousseau, to limit a legitimate government would be to limit political right itself, which is contrary to justice. His objection to Thomas Hobbes was not that Hobbes defended an absolute sovereign; it is that he defended an illegitimate sovereign. Yet the American Founding Fathers fundamentally mistrusted government, and therefore designed a political system that was deliberately weak and limited by ‘checks and balances’. This is why John Locke was a more important influence on the American Revolution than Rousseau, who inspired the French Revolutionaries.

The alienation Rousseau experienced from the enlightened civilisation in which he was immersed appears to have become complete in the last decade of his life, when he sought to escape from the company of men entirely, in an apparent effort to preserve his own integrity in an age of utter corruption. He had finally concluded that there is “no hope of remedies” and that the words ‘fatherland’ and ‘citizen’ should be “effaced from modern languages.” He ended his days in total resignation and pessimism. His last work, the unfinished *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, was written in the two years before he died, and suggests his conclusion that escape from civilisation into rustic isolation is the only real option for the man of virtue. His strong identification with Socrates is also best understood in terms of his self-conception as a good man living in a wicked age, attacked and vilified by contemporaries blinded to his goodness by their own vice. In his late best-selling masterpiece *The Confessions*, a cry from the heart written during the troubled and difficult years following the publication of his *Social Contract* and *Emile*, Rousseau

offers readers an irresistibly endearing and often shockingly frank self-portrait which inspired an entire generation of romantic writers when it was published posthumously.

It is a very grave mistake to dismiss Rousseau’s ideas as the ravings of a lunatic, as so many of his enemies and detractors have done over the centuries. He was undoubtedly an eccentric and often very difficult character, prone to bouts of paranoia – although he was a paranoiac with many powerful enemies who actively persecuted him. But the power and eloquence of his writing have inspired many generations of the rebels, malcontents, misfits and outsiders who share his profound disquiet about the place of the individual in the modern age.

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Dr Graeme is Senior Lecturer in Politics at Cardiff University

SOCIAL CONTRACT THEORY

Social contract theory, nearly as old as philosophy itself, is the view that persons’ moral and/or political obligations are dependent upon a contract or agreement among them to form the society in which they live. Socrates uses something quite like a social contract argument to explain to Crito why he must remain in prison and accept the death penalty. However, social contract theory is rightly associated with modern moral and political theory and is given its first full exposition and defense by Thomas Hobbes. After Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau are the best known proponents of this enormously influential theory, which has been one of the most dominant theories within moral and political theory throughout the history of the modern West. In the twentieth century, moral and political theory regained philosophical momentum as a result of John Rawls’ Kantian version of social contract theory, and was followed by new analyses of the subject by David Gauthier and others. More recently, philosophers from different perspectives have offered new criticisms of social contract theory. In particular, feminists and race-conscious philosophers have argued that social contract theory is at least an incomplete picture of our moral and political lives, and may in fact camouflage some of the ways in which the contract is itself parasitical upon the subjugations of classes of persons.

Socrates’ Argument

In the early Platonic dialogue, *Crito*, Socrates makes a compelling argument as to why he must stay in prison and accept the death penalty, rather than escape and go into exile in another Greek city. He personifies the Laws of Athens, and, speaking in their voice, explains that he has acquired an overwhelming obligation to obey

the Laws because they have made his entire way of life, and even the fact of his very existence, possible. They made it possible for his mother and father to marry, and therefore to have legitimate children, including himself. Having been born, the city of Athens, through its laws, then required that his father care for and educate him. Socrates’ life and the way in which that life has flourished in Athens are each dependent upon the Laws. Importantly, however, this relationship between citizens and the Laws of the city are not coerced. Citizens, once

they have grown up, and have seen how the city conducts itself, can choose whether to leave, taking their property with them, or stay. Staying implies an agreement to abide by the Laws and accept the punishments that they mete out. And, having made an agreement that is itself just, Socrates asserts that he must keep to this agreement that he has made and obey the Laws, in this case, by staying and accepting the death penalty. Importantly, the contract described by Socrates is an implicit one: it is implied by his choice to stay in Athens, even though he is free to leave.

In Plato's most well-known dialogue, Republic, social contract theory is represented again, although this time less favourably. In Book II, Glaucon offers a candidate for an answer to the question "what is justice?" by representing a social contract explanation for the nature of justice. What men would most want is to be able to commit injustices against others without the fear of reprisal, and what they most want to avoid is being treated unjustly by others without being able to do injustice in return. Justice then, he says, is the conventional result of the laws and covenants that men make in order to avoid these extremes. Being unable to commit injustice with impunity (as those who wear the ring of Gyges would), and fearing becoming victims themselves, men decide that it is in their interests to submit themselves to the convention of justice. Socrates rejects this view, and most of the rest of the dialogue centres on showing that justice is worth having for its own sake, and that the just man is the happy man. So, from Socrates' point of view, justice has a value that greatly exceeds the prudential value that Glaucon assigns to it.

These views, in the Crito and the Republic, might seem at first glance inconsistent: in the former dialogue Socrates uses a social contract type of argument to show why it is just for him to remain in prison, whereas in the latter he rejects social contract as the source of justice. These two views are, however, reconcilable. From Socrates' point of view, a just man is one who will, among other things, recognize his obligation to the state by obeying its laws. The state is the morally and politically most fundamental entity, and as such deserves our highest allegiance and deepest respect. Just men know this and act accordingly. Justice, however, is more than simply obeying laws in exchange for others obeying them as well. Justice is the state of a well-regulated soul, and so the just man will also necessarily be the happy man. So, justice is more than the simple reciprocal obedience to law, as Glaucon suggests, but it does nonetheless include obedience to the state and the laws that sustain it. So in the end, although Plato is perhaps the first philosopher to offer a representation of the argument at the heart of social

contract theory, Socrates ultimately rejects the idea that social contract is the original source of justice.

MODERN SOCIAL CONTRACT THEORY

Thomas Hobbes 1588-1679, lived during the most crucial period of early modern England's history: the English Civil War, waged from 1642-1648. To describe this conflict in the most general of terms, it was a clash between the King and his supporters, the Monarchists, who preferred the traditional authority of a monarch, and the Parliamentarians, most notably led by Oliver Cromwell, who demanded more power for the quasi-democratic institution of Parliament. Hobbes represents a compromise between these two factions. On the one hand he rejects the theory of the Divine Right of Kings, which is most eloquently expressed by Robert Filmer in his Patriarcha or the Natural Power of Kings, (although it would be left to John Locke to refute Filmer directly). Filmer's view held that a king's authority was invested in him (or, presumably, her) by God, that such authority was absolute, and therefore that the basis of political obligation lay in our obligation to obey God absolutely. According to this view, then, political obligation is subsumed under religious obligation. On the other hand, Hobbes also rejects the early democratic view, taken up by the Parliamentarians, that power ought to be shared between Parliament and the King. In rejecting both these views, Hobbes occupies the ground of one who is both radical and conservative. He argues, radically for his times, that political authority and obligation are based on the individual self-interests of members of society who are understood to be equal to one another, with no single individual invested with any essential authority to rule over the rest, while at the same time maintaining the conservative position that the monarch, which he called the Sovereign, must be ceded absolute authority if society is to survive.

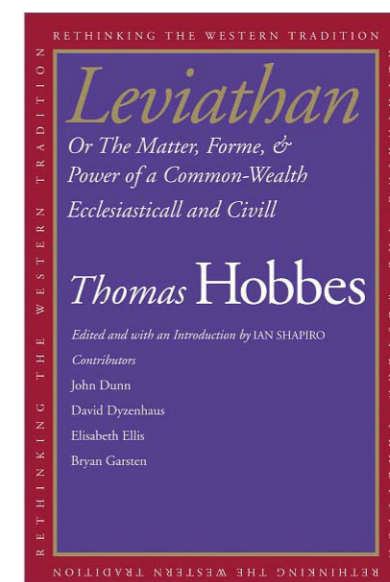
Hobbes' political theory is best understood if taken in two parts: his theory of human motivation, Psychological Egoism, and his theory of the social contract, founded on the hypothetical State of Nature. Hobbes has, first and foremost, a particular theory of human nature, which gives rise to a particular view of morality and politics, as developed in his philosophical masterpiece, Leviathan, published in 1651. The Scientific Revolution, with its important new discoveries that the universe

could be both described and predicted in accordance with universal laws of nature, greatly influenced Hobbes. He sought to provide a theory of human nature that would parallel the discoveries being made in the sciences of the inanimate universe. His psychological theory is therefore informed by mechanism, the general view that everything in the universe is produced by nothing other than matter in motion. According to Hobbes, this extends to human behavior. Human macro-behavior can be aptly described as the effect of certain kinds of micro-behavior, even though some of this latter behavior is invisible to us. So, such behaviors as walking, talking, and the like are themselves produced by other actions inside of us. And these other actions are themselves caused by the interaction of our bodies with other bodies, human or otherwise, which create in us certain chains of causes and effects, and which eventually give rise to the human behavior that we can plainly observe. We, including all of our actions and choices, are then, according to this view, as explainable in terms of universal laws of nature as are the motions of heavenly bodies. The gradual disintegration of memory, for example, can be explained by inertia. As we are presented with ever more sensory information, the residue of earlier impressions 'slows down' over time. From Hobbes' point of view, we are essentially very complicated organic machines, responding to the stimuli of the world mechanistically and in accordance with universal laws of human nature.

In Hobbes' view, this mechanistic quality of human psychology implies the subjective nature of normative claims. 'Love' and 'hate', for instance, are just words we use to describe the things we are drawn to and repelled by, respectively. So, too, the terms 'good' and 'bad' have no meaning other than to describe our appetites and aversions. Moral terms do not, therefore, describe some objective state of affairs, but are rather reflections of individual tastes and preferences.

In addition to Subjectivism, Hobbes also infers from his mechanistic theory of human nature that humans are necessarily and exclusively self-interested. All men pursue only what they perceive to be in their own individually considered best interests – they respond mechanistically by

being drawn to that which they desire and repelled by that to which they are averse. This is a universal claim: it is meant to cover all human actions under all circumstances – in society or out of it, with regard to strangers and friends alike, with regard to small ends and the most generalized of human desires, such as the desire for power and status. Everything we do is motivated solely by the desire to better our own situations, and satisfy as many of our own, individually considered desires as possible. We are infinitely appetitive and only genuinely concerned with our own selves. According to Hobbes, even the reason that adults care for small children can be explicated in terms of the adults' own self-interest (he claims that in saving an infant by caring for it, we become the recipient of a strong sense of obligation in one who has been helped to survive rather than allowed to die).



In addition to being exclusively self-interested, Hobbes also argues /

... *that* human beings are reasonable. They have in them the rational capacity to pursue their desires as efficiently and maximally as possible. Their reason does not, given the subjective nature of value, evaluate their given ends, rather it merely acts as “Scouts, and Spies, to range abroad, and find the way to the things Desired” (139). Rationality is purely instrumental. It can add and subtract, and compare sums one to another, and thereby endows us with the capacity to formulate the best means to whatever ends we might happen to have.

From these premises of human nature, Hobbes goes on to construct a provocative and compelling argument for why we ought to be willing to submit ourselves to political authority. He does this by imagining persons in a situation prior to the establishment of society, the State of Nature.

According to Hobbes, the justification for political obligation is this: given that men are naturally self-interested, yet they are rational, they will choose to submit to the authority of a Sovereign in order to be able to live in a civil society, which is conducive to their own interests. Hobbes argues for this by imagining men in their natural state, or in other words, the State of Nature. In the State of Nature, which is purely hypothetical according to Hobbes, men are naturally and exclusively self-interested, they are more or less equal to one another, (even the strongest man can be killed in his sleep), there are limited resources, and yet there is no power able to force men to cooperate. Given these conditions in the State of Nature, Hobbes concludes that the State of Nature would be unbearably brutal. In the State of Nature, every person is always in fear of losing his life to another. They have no capacity to ensure the long-term satisfaction of their needs or desires. No long-term or complex cooperation is possible because the State of Nature can be aptly described as a state of utter distrust. Given Hobbes’ reasonable assumption that most people want first and foremost to avoid their own deaths, he concludes that the State of Nature is the worst possible situation in which men can find themselves. It is the state of perpetual and unavoidable war.

The situation is not, however, hopeless. Because men are reasonable, they can see their way out of such a state by recognizing the laws of nature, which show them the means by which to escape the State of Nature and create a civil society. The first and most important law of nature commands that each man be willing to pursue peace when others are willing to do the same, all the while retaining the right to continue to pursue war when others do not pursue peace. Being reasonable, and recognizing the rationality of this basic precept of reason, men can be expected to construct a Social Contract that will afford them a life other than that available to them in the State of Nature. This contract is constituted by two distinguishable contracts. First, they must agree to establish society by collectively and reciprocally renouncing the rights they had against one another in the State of Nature. Second, they must imbue some one person or assembly of persons with the authority and power to enforce the initial contract. In other words, to ensure their escape from the State of Nature, they must both agree to live together under common laws, and create an enforcement mechanism for the social contract and the laws that constitute it. Since the sovereign is invested with the authority and power to mete out punishments for breaches of the contract which are worse than not being able to act as one pleases, men have good, albeit self-interested, reason to adjust themselves to the artifice of morality in general, and justice in particular. Society becomes possible because, whereas in the State of Nature there was no power able to “overawe them all”, now there is an artificially and conventionally superior and more powerful person who can force men to cooperate. While living under the authority of a Sovereign can be harsh (Hobbes argues that because men’s passions can be expected to overwhelm their reason, the Sovereign must have absolute authority in order for the contract to be successful) it is at least better than living in the State of Nature. And, no matter how much we may object to how poorly a Sovereign manages the affairs of the state and regulates our own lives, we are never justified in resisting his power because it is the only thing which stands between us and what we most want to avoid, the State of Nature.

According to this argument, morality, politics, society, and everything that comes along with it, all of which Hobbes calls ‘commodious living’ are purely conventional. Prior to the establishment of the basic social contract, according to which men agree to live together and the contract to embody a Sovereign with absolute authority, nothing is immoral or unjust – anything goes. After these contracts are established, however, then society becomes possible, and people can be expected to keep their promises, cooperate with one another, and so on. The Social Contract is the most fundamental source of all that is good and that which we depend upon to live well. Our choice is either to abide by the terms of the contract, or return to the State of Nature, which Hobbes argues no reasonable person could possibly prefer.

Given his rather severe view of human nature, Hobbes nonetheless manages to create an argument that makes civil society, along with all its advantages, possible. Within the context of the political events of his England, he also managed to argue for a continuation of the traditional form of authority that his society had long since enjoyed, while nonetheless placing it on what he saw as a far more acceptable foundation.



John Locke

For Hobbes, the necessity of an absolute authority, in the form of a Sovereign, followed from the utter brutality of the State of Nature. The State of Nature was completely intolerable, and so rational men would be willing to

submit themselves even to absolute authority in order to escape it. For John Locke, 1632-1704, the State of Nature is a very different type of place, and so his argument concerning the social contract and the nature of men’s relationship to authority are consequently quite different. While Locke uses Hobbes’ methodological device of the State of Nature, as do virtually all social contract theorists, he uses it to a quite different end. Locke’s arguments for the social contract, and for the right of citizens to revolt against their king were enormously influential on the democratic revolutions that followed, especially on Thomas Jefferson, and the founders of the United States.

Locke’s most important and influential political writings are contained in his Two Treatises on Government. The first treatise is concerned almost exclusively with refuting the argument of Robert Filmer’s Patriarcha, that political authority was derived from religious authority, also known by the description of the Divine Right of Kings, which was a very dominant theory in seventeenth-century England. The second treatise contains Locke’s own constructive view of the aims and justification for civil government, and is titled “An Essay Concerning the True Original Extent and End of Civil Government”.

According to Locke, the State of Nature, the natural condition of mankind, is a state of perfect and complete liberty to conduct one’s life as one best sees fit, free from the interference of others. This does not mean, however, that it is a state of license: one is not free to do anything at all one pleases, or even anything that one judges to be in one’s interest. The State of Nature, although a state wherein there is no civil authority or government to punish people for transgressions against laws, is not a state without morality. The State of Nature is pre-political, but it is not pre-moral. Persons are assumed to be equal to one another in such a state, and therefore equally capable of discovering and being bound by the Law of Nature. The Law of Nature, which is on Locke’s view the basis of all morality, and given to us by God, commands that we not harm others with regards to their “life, health, liberty, or possessions” (par. 6). Because we all belong equally to God, and because we cannot take away that which is rightfully His, we are prohibited from harming one another. So, the State of Nature is a state of liberty where persons are free to pursue their own interests and plans, free from interference, and, because of the Law of Nature and the restrictions that it imposes upon persons, it is relatively peaceful.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

The State of Nature therefore, is not the same as the state of war, as it is according to Hobbes. It can, however devolve into a state of war, in particular, a state of war over property disputes. Whereas the State of Nature is the state of liberty where persons recognize the Law of Nature and therefore do not harm one another, the state of war begins between two or more men once one man declares war on another, by stealing from him, or by trying to make him his slave. Since in the State of Nature there is no civil power to whom men can appeal, and since the Law of Nature allows them to defend their own lives, they may then kill those who would bring force against them. Since the State of Nature lacks civil authority, once war begins it is likely to continue. And this is one of the strongest reasons that men have to abandon the State of Nature by contracting together to form civil government.

Property plays an essential role in Locke's argument for civil government and the contract that establishes it. According to Locke, private property is created when a person mixes his labor with the raw materials of nature. So, for example, when one tills a piece of land in nature, and makes it into a piece of farmland, which produces food, then one has a claim to own that piece of land and the food produced upon it. (This led Locke to conclude that America didn't really belong to the natives who lived there, because they were, on his view, failing to utilize the basic material of nature. In other words, they didn't farm it, so they had no legitimate claim to it, and others could therefore justifiably appropriate it.) Given the implications of the Law of Nature, there are limits as to how much property one can own: one is not allowed to take so more from nature than oneself can use, thereby leaving others without enough for themselves. Because nature is given to all of mankind by God for its common subsistence, one cannot take more than his own fair share. Property is the linchpin of Locke's argument for the social contract and civil government because it is the protection of their property, including their property in their own bodies that men seek when they decide to abandon the State of Nature.

According to Locke, the State of Nature is not a condition of individuals, as it is for Hobbes. Rather, it is populated by mothers and fathers with their children, or families – what he calls “conjugal society” (par. 78). These societies are based on the voluntary agreements to care for children together, and they are moral but not political. Political society comes into being when individual men, representing their families, come together in the State of Nature and agree to each give

up the executive power to punish those who transgress the Law of Nature, and hand over that power to the public power of a government. Having done this, they then become subject to the will of the majority. In other words, by making a compact to leave the State of Nature and form society, they make “one body politic under one government” (par. 97) and submit themselves to the will of that body. One joins such a body, either from its beginnings, or after it has already been established by others, only by explicit consent. Having created a political society and government through their consent, men then gain three things which they lacked in the State of Nature: laws, judges to adjudicate laws, and the executive power necessary to enforce these laws. Each man therefore gives over the power to protect himself and punish transgressors of the Law of Nature to the government that he has created through the compact.

Given that the end of “men's uniting into commonwealths” (par. 124) is the preservation of their wealth, and preserving their lives, liberty, and well-being in general, Locke can easily imagine the conditions under which the compact with government is destroyed, and men are justified in resisting the authority of a civil government, such as a King. When the executive power of a government devolves into tyranny, such as by dissolving the legislature and therefore denying the people the ability to make laws for their own preservation, then the resulting tyrant puts himself into a State of Nature, and specifically into a state of war with the people, and they then have the same right to self-defense as they had before making a compact to establish society in the first place. In other words, the justification of the authority of the executive component of government is the protection of the people's property and well-being, so when such protection is no longer present, or when the king becomes a tyrant and acts against the interests of the people, they have a right, if not an outright obligation, to resist his authority. The social compact can be dissolved and the process to create political society begun anew.

Because Locke did not envision the State of Nature as grimly as did Hobbes, he can imagine conditions under which one would be better off rejecting a particular civil government and returning to the State of Nature, with the aim of constructing a better civil government in its place. It is therefore both the view of human nature, and the nature of morality itself, which account for the differences between Hobbes' and Locke's views of the social contract.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1712-1778, lived and wrote during what was arguably the headiest period in the intellectual history of modern France—the Enlightenment. He was one of the bright lights of that intellectual movement, contributing articles to the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot, and participating in the salons in Paris, where the great intellectual questions of his day were pursued.

Rousseau has two distinct social contract theories. The first is found in his essay, *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men*, commonly referred to as the *Second Discourse*, and is an account of the moral and political evolution of human beings over time, from a State of Nature to modern society. As such it contains his naturalized account of the social contract, which he sees as very problematic. The second is his normative, or idealized theory of the social contract, and is meant to provide the means by which to alleviate the problems that modern society has created for us, as laid out in the *Second Discourse*.

Rousseau wrote his *Second Discourse* in response to an essay contest sponsored by the Academy of Dijon. (Rousseau had previously won the same essay contest with an earlier essay, commonly referred to as the *First Discourse*.) In it he describes the historical process by which man began in a State of Nature and over time ‘progressed’ into civil society. According to Rousseau, the State of Nature was a peaceful and quixotic time. People lived solitary, uncomplicated lives. Their few needs were easily satisfied by nature. Because of the abundance of nature and the small size of the population, competition was non-existent, and persons rarely even saw one another, much less had reason for conflict or fear. Moreover, these simple, morally pure persons were naturally endowed with the capacity for pity, and therefore were not inclined to bring harm to one another.

As time passed, however, humanity faced certain changes. As the overall population increased, the means by which people could satisfy their needs had to change. People slowly began to live together in small families, and then in small communities. Divisions of labor were introduced, both within and between families, and discoveries and inventions made life easier, giving rise to leisure time. Such leisure time inevitably led people to make comparisons between themselves and others, resulting in public values, leading to shame and envy, pride and contempt. Most importantly however, according to Rousseau, was the invention of private property, which constituted the pivotal moment in humanity's evolution out of

a simple, pure state into one characterized by greed, competition, vanity, inequality, and vice. For Rousseau the invention of property constitutes humanity's ‘fall from grace’ out of the State of Nature.

Having introduced private property, initial conditions of inequality became more pronounced. Some have property and others are forced to work for them, and the development of social classes begins. Eventually, those who have property notice that it would be in their interests to create a government that would protect private property from those who do not have it but can see that they might be able to acquire it by force. So, government gets established, through a contract, which purports to guarantee equality and protection for all, even though its true purpose is to fossilize the very inequalities that private property has produced. In other words, the contract, which claims to be in the interests of everyone equally, is really in the interests of the few who have become stronger and richer as a result of the developments of private property. This is the naturalized social contract, which Rousseau views as responsible for the conflict and competition from which modern society suffers.

The normative social contract, argued for by Rousseau in *The Social Contract* (1762), is meant to respond to this sorry state of affairs and to remedy the social and moral ills that have been produced by the development of society. The distinction between history and justification, between the factual situation of mankind and how it ought to live together, is of the utmost importance to Rousseau. While we ought not to ignore history, nor ignore the causes of the problems we face, we must resolve those problems through our capacity to choose how we ought to live. Might never makes right, despite how often it pretends that it can.

The *Social Contract* begins with the most oft-quoted line from Rousseau: “Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains” (49). This claim is the conceptual bridge between the descriptive work of the *Second Discourse*, and the prescriptive work that is to come. Humans are essentially free, and were free in the State of Nature, but the ‘progress’ of civilization has substituted subservience to others for that freedom, through dependence, economic and social inequalities, and the extent to which we judge ourselves through comparisons with others. Since a return to the State of Nature is neither feasible nor desirable, the purpose of politics is to restore freedom to us, thereby reconciling who we truly and essentially are with how we live together. So, this is the fundamental philosophical problem that *The Social Contract* seeks to address: how can we be free and live together? Or,

Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527)

put another way, how can we live together without succumbing to the force and coercion of others? We can do so, Rousseau maintains, by submitting our individual, particular wills to the collective or general will, created through agreement with other free and equal persons. Like Hobbes and Locke before him, and in contrast to the ancient philosophers, all men are made by nature to be equals, therefore no one has a natural right to govern others, and therefore the only justified authority is the authority that is generated out of agreements or covenants.

The most basic covenant, the social pact, is the agreement to come together and form a people, a collectivity, which by definition is more than and different from a mere aggregation of individual interests and wills. This act, where individual persons become a people is “the real foundation of society” (59). Through the collective renunciation of the individual rights and freedom that one has in the State of Nature, and the transfer of these rights to the collective body, a new ‘person’, as it were, is formed. The sovereign is thus formed when free and equal persons come together and agree to create themselves anew as a single body, directed to the good of all considered together. So, just as individual wills are directed towards individual interests, the general will, once formed, is directed towards the common good, understood and agreed to collectively. Included in this version of the social contract is the idea of reciprocated duties: the sovereign is committed to the good of the individuals who constitute it, and each individual is likewise committed to the good of the whole. Given this, individuals cannot be given liberty to decide whether it is in their own interests to fulfill their duties to the Sovereign, while at the same time being allowed to reap the benefits of citizenship. They must be made to conform themselves to the general will, they must be “forced to be free” (64).

For Rousseau, this implies an extremely strong and direct form of democracy. One cannot transfer one’s will to another, to do with as he or she sees fit, as one does in representative democracies. Rather, the general will depends on the coming together periodically of the entire democratic body, each and every citizen, to decide collectively, and with at least near unanimity, how to live together, i.e., what laws to enact. As it is constituted only by individual wills, these private, individual wills must assemble themselves regularly if the general will is to continue. One implication of this is that the strong form of democracy which is consistent with the general will is also only possible in relatively small states. The people must be able to identify with one another, and at least know who each other are.

They cannot live in a large area, too spread out to come together regularly, and they cannot live in such different geographic circumstances as to be unable to be united under common laws. (Could the present-day U.S. satisfy Rousseau’s conception of democracy? It could not.) Although the conditions for true democracy are stringent, they are also the only means by which we can, according to Rousseau, save ourselves, and regain the freedom to which we are naturally entitled.

Rousseau’s social contract theories together form a single, consistent view of our moral and political situation. We are endowed with freedom and equality by nature, but our nature has been corrupted by our contingent social history. We can overcome this corruption, however, by invoking our free will to reconstitute ourselves politically, along strongly democratic principles, which is good for us, both individually and collectively.

CONCLUSION

Professor Virginia Held has argued that “Contemporary Western society is in the grip of contractual thinking” (193). Contractual models have come to inform a vast variety of relations and interaction between persons, from students and their teachers, to authors and their readers. Given this, it would be difficult to overestimate the effect that social contract theory has had, both within philosophy, and on the wider culture. Social contract theory is undoubtedly with us for the foreseeable future. But so too are the critiques of such theory, which will continue to compel us to think and rethink the nature of both ourselves and our relations with one another.

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Celeste Friend has been a professional philosopher having spent many years teaching philosophy in universities and colleges, most recently at Hamilton College in Clinton, NY. <http://www.celestefriend.com/about.php>

Among the most original thinkers of the Renaissance is a brilliant and slightly tragic figure, Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527). Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, his name would be synonymous with deviousness, cruelty, and willfully destructive rationality; no thinker was ever so demonized or misunderstood than Machiavelli. The source of this misunderstanding is his most influential and widely read treatise on government, *The Prince*, a remarkably short book that attempts to lay out methods to secure and maintain political power.

His life spanned the greatest period of cultural achievement in Florence to its ultimate downfall. This period was marked by political instability, fear, invasion, intrigue, and high cultural achievement as the tiny states of Italy, including the Papal States, were pulled into the politics and wars of Europe by the immense gravity of two large states, Spain and France. His life began at the very start of this process: in 1469, when Ferdinand and Isabella married and through this marriage created a new, large kingdom of Spain composed of Castile and Aragon, Machiavelli was born to a wealthy Florentine lawyer. In his lifetime, he would see the efflorescence of Florentine culture and political power under the brilliant political genius of Lorenzo de’Medici. He would also see the twilight of the Medici power as Lorenzo’s son and successor, Piero de’Medici, was thrown from power by the Dominican monk, Savonarola, who with the aid of his followers, nicknamed “the Weepers” set up a true Florentine Republic. When Savonarola, fanatic about reform, was himself thrown from power and burned, a second Republic was set up under Soderini in 1498. Machiavelli was the secretary of this new Republic, an important and distinguished position. The Republic, however, was crushed in 1512 by the Spanish who installed the Medici’s as rulers of Florence once again.

It seems that Machiavelli really had no political commitments or political stripe: he seems to have been on nobody’s side politically. For when the Medici came to power, he began to work overtime to get in good with them. It seems that either he was ruthlessly ambitious or believed in serving in government no matter what political group or party was in charge. The Medici, however, never fully trusted him since he had been an important official in the Republic. They imprisoned and tortured him in 1513 and eventually banished him to his country estate at San Casciano (all this torture and imprisonment, however, didn’t stop him from trying to get in good with the Medici). It was during his exile in San Casciano, when he was desperate to get back into government, that he wrote his principle works: the *Discourse on Livy*, *The Prince*, *The History of Florence*, and two plays. Many of these works, such as *The Prince*, were written for the express purpose of getting a job in the Medici government.

The tremendous innovation of both the *Discourses on Livy* and *The Prince* was Machiavelli’s uncoupling of political theory from ethics. Throughout the Western tradition, as in the Chinese tradition, political theory and policy was closely linked to ethics. Aristotle summed up this connection when he defined politics as merely an extension of ethics. Throughout the Western tradition, then, politics had been understood in terms of right and wrong, just and unjust, temperate and intemperate, and so on. The moral terms used to evaluate human actions were employed to evaluate political actions.

Machiavelli was the first to discuss politics and social phenomena in their own terms without recourse to ethics or jurisprudence. In many ways you could consider Machiavelli to be the first major Western thinker to apply the strictly

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Politics as Art of the Impossible:

• **THE CASE FOR A DREAMPOLITIK IN THE UNITED STATES**

scientific method of Aristotle and Averroes to politics. He did so by observing the phenomena of politics, reading all that's been written on the subject, and describing political systems in their own terms. For Machiavelli, politics was about one and only one thing: getting and keeping power or authority.

Everything else—religion, morality, etc.—that people associate with politics has nothing to do with this fundamental aspect of politics—unless being moral helps one get and keep power. The only skill that counts in getting and maintaining power is calculation; the successful politician knows what to do or what to say for every situation.

With this insight, Machiavelli in *The Prince* simply describes the means by which individuals have tried to seize and to maintain power. Most of the examples he gives are failures; the entire book is suffused with tragedy for at any moment, if the ruler makes one miscalculation, all the authority he has so assiduously cultivated will dry up like the morning dew. The social and political world of the *The Prince* is monstrously unpredictable and volatile; only the most superhuman calculative mind can overcome this social and political volatility.

Throughout *The Prince* and the *Discourses*, it's clear that Machiavelli has praise only for the winners. For this reason, he admires figures such as Alexander VI and Julius II, universally hated throughout Europe as ungodly popes, for their astonishing military and political success. His refusal to allow ethical judgements enter into political theory branded him throughout the Renaissance as a kind of anti-Christ. In chapters such as "Whether a Prince Should Be True to his Word," Machiavelli argues that any moral judgment should be secondary to getting, increasing and maintaining power. The answer to the above question, for instance, is "it's good to be true to your word, but you should lie whenever it advances your power or security—not only that, it's necessary."

It might help to understand Machiavelli to imagine that he's not talking about the state so much in ethical terms but in medical terms. For Machiavelli believed that the Italian situation was desperate and that the Florentine state was in grave danger. Rather than approach the question from an ethical point of view, Machiavelli was genuinely concerned with healing the state to make it stronger. For instance, in talking about seditious points of view, Machiavelli doesn't make an ethical argument, but rather a medical one—"seditious people should be amputated before they infect the whole state."

The single most articulated value in the work of Machiavelli is *virtù* (Latin *virtus*), which is related to our word, "virtue." Machiavelli means it more in its Latin sense of "manly," but individuals with *virtù* are primarily marked by their ability to enforce their will on volatile social situations. They do this through a combination of strong will, strength, and brilliant and strategic calculation. In one of the most famous passages from *The Prince*, Machiavelli describes the proper orientation towards the volatility of the world, or Fortune, by comparing Fortune to a lady: "la fortuna é donna," or "Fortune is a Lady." Machiavelli is referring to the courtly love tradition, where the lady that constitutes the object of desire is approached and entreated and begged. The ideal Prince, however, for Machiavelli does not entreat or beg Lady Fortune, but rather physically grabs her and takes whatever he wants. This was a scandalous passage and still is today, but it represents a powerful translation of the Renaissance idea of human potential to the area of politics. For if, according to Pico della Mirandola, a human being can self-transform into anything it wants, then it must be possible for a single, strong-willed individual to order the chaos of political life.

Despite his hopes that the Medici's might prove to be those ideal rulers that could unite Italy, they did not remain in power for long. When Giulio de' Medici left Firenze to become Pope Clement VII, the subalterns that he left in charge of the city managed it very poorly.

The people soon overthrew the Medici rule and established the Third Republic of Firenze in 1527. Machiavelli saw his chance and tried to get a position in the new republic, but the new rulers distrusted him because of his long association with the Medici. So on June 22, 1527, only a few months after the establishment of the Third Republic, Machiavelli died. That same year, Rome was sacked by Emperor Charles VII and the pope was forced to ally with Charles.



The Prince, translated by Tim Parks, is the most controversial book about winning power – and holding on to it – ever written. Machiavelli's tough-minded, pragmatic argument that sometimes it is necessary to abandon ethics to succeed made his name notorious.



A dominant movement in leftist politics has always embraced a sense of reality as opposed to dreams and imagination. The American sociologist Stephen Duncombe argues instead for a dream-politik, which, unlike reactionary populist fantasies, can activate the imagination with impossible dreams. They make it possible to think 'out of the box' and to wonder what an alternative world and a different attitude to life might be like.

In his day, Otto von Bismarck was known for the practice of *realpolitik*: a hard-headed and hard-hearted style of politics that eschewed ideals in favour of the advantageous assessment of real conditions. Politics, in Bismarck's words, was 'the art of the possible'. But Germany's 'Iron Chancellor' ruled at the end of a long era of open autocracy, where the desires of the populace mattered little, if at all. What was realistic then is not realistic now. Today 'the crowd is in the saddle', as the American public relations pioneer Ivy Lee warned business leaders in the first decades of the twentieth century, and politics must embrace the dreams of the people (a lesson not lost on a certain leader of a later German Reich).¹ Furthermore, real conditions have changed. Today's world is linked by media systems and awash in advertising images; political policies are packaged by public relations experts and celebrity gossip is considered news. More and more of the economy is devoted to marketing and entertainment and the performance of scripted roles in the service sector. The imaginary is an integral part of reality. *Realpolitik* now necessitates *dreampolitik*.

So what sort of dream-politik is being practiced in the USA in the twenty-first century? Let's begin with the presidential campaign of Barack Obama. No president in recent history has so successfully channelled popular American political dreams. Ronald Reagan was the last to do so, but his dream of limited government at home and muscular intervention abroad were, after three decades, shattered by the feeble state response to the domestic disaster of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and the foreign debacle of the war in Iraq. As Americans awoke from this conservative nightmare, Obama and his advisers conjured up a competing and compelling fantasy: change and hope. Change from what was and hope for what would be.

The brilliance of Obama's dream was its absolute emptiness. Nearly anyone, no matter what their political beliefs, could curl up inside it and fall asleep with contentment. This technique of dream-politik is not a new one. Walter Lippmann, political journalist and adviser to nearly every American president from Teddy Roosevelt to Lyndon Johnson, outlined this practice back in 1922 in his masterwork *Public Opinion*. He called it the 'manufacture of consent'. The procedure is simple: in order to organize the myriad and often conflicting desires and interests of voters in a popular democracy, savvy leaders learn to mobilize symbols with which people can identify. The broader and emptier the symbol the better, as it makes for a bigger tent within which to fit a greater number of people's individual dreams. The trick is, as Lippmann wrote, to 'siphon emotion out of distinct ideas' and then channel all that emotion into a unifying symbol.² That symbol – and all its new followers – can then be re-linked to a party, platform or politician. By owning the symbol, you own the people's fantasies, and if you own their fantasies then you own their consent.

Given the exhaustion of neoconservative ideals and the fiasco of George W. Bush's presidency, very few Americans didn't dream of change in 2008. And who isn't for hope? What I hope for and want the world to change to might be very different from a middle-American suburbanite defecting from the Republican Party, but we can both embrace the dream of hope and change. Mobilizing these abstractions, Barack Obama won in a landslide. But there's a fatal flaw to the manufacture of consent: an empty symbol can remain empty for only so long. What is widely interpreted as Obama's excessive political caution in enacting any real change might be better understood as a savvy understanding of this mechanics of the manufacture of consent once power is obtained. Obama delayed giving substance to the dream for as long as possible but sooner or later political decisions had to be made and real policies enacted. And this is when his popularity plummeted. As his administration escalated the war in Afghanistan he betrayed my dream of peace, and when he passed the health care bill he lost my limited-government-loving middle-American doppelganger.

The disjuncture between the dreams conjured up by Obama and the disappointing political realities he's delivered has had disparate effect across the political spectrum. Liberals, for the most part, have given up their dreams. They support the president, not with the initial emotion that Obama had once masterfully siphoned, but instead with a dispirited sense of necessity. The popular right, on the other hand, has found something to dream about again. No place is this phantasmagoric renaissance on display more than with the Tea Party.

DREAMS OF THE *Past*

People in the Tea Party dream of being American patriots of the past. And they love to dress the part, sporting tri-corner hats and wearing colonial garb, waving American flags and holding aloft tea bags. As their name and dominant symbol suggest, these people honestly and earnestly think of themselves as the ideological heirs to the Sons of Liberty that dumped British tea into the Boston harbour. ('Socialists are Today's Redcoats', reads a sign attached to a tri-corner hat at a Tea Party protest.) The Tea Party's politics, at their most coherent, adhere to this self stylization. Just as the American colonists rallied to fight an intrusive government, the Tea Party musters its troops to protest the expansion of government health care and interference in the free market; just as the flashpoint for the American Revolution was unfair taxation, so too, do the Tea Partiers rail against government levies, flashing their favourite sign: Taxed Enough Already.

But there's a problem in equating the political grievances of eighteenth-century American revolutionaries with today's Tea Party activists, and it is a revealing problem. The patriots of the past were not protesting government or taxation per se, they were riled up over rule by foreign government and taxation without representation. Today, however, there is a US government made up of elected representatives. Given this, there are two ways to understand the Tea Party's faulty analogy: one, they really are the ignorant hicks that liberals believe them to be and need to be educated in basic US history, or two, Tea Partiers truly believe that the Federal Government is a foreign body and their elected officials don't really represent them. Given the Tea Party's obsession with proving that President Obama was not born in the USA, it's safe to bet on interpretation number two.

Part of the Tea Party's refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of the current US government is just sour grapes. After 30-odd years of conservative rule, the right lost the last election and lost it badly. It's not unrepresentative rule, as they might fantasize, it's that the other side's representatives won. That's how a democracy works. But there's something more at stake. It isn't just political representation that Tea Partiers feel alienated from, it is cultural representation.

You can spend weeks wandering the vast mediascape and not see a sea of middle-aged, middle-American whiteness like a Tea Party rally. Over the past 50 years, partly out of political concern, partly out of some desire to accurately represent the changing face of America, but mostly in an attempt to reach as broad an audience as possible, the culture industry has largely rejected such bland homogeneity. The starring roles in most hit dramas still go to the straight white guy and girl, but the show would seem incomplete without a couple of co-stars of a different colour. And while whites still dominate positions of factual authority in the mass media, every local newscast has their 'other' anchor. It's been a long journey from the novelty of Nat King Cole in the mid 1950s to the routinized multihued casting of a show like today's *Survivor*, but what the American audience watches, and thus how they see their world and imagine its possibilities, has been irrevocably altered. 'Difference' is no longer different, and diversity, albeit in its most banal form, is what Americans have come to expect. Beneath this ethereal media rainbow there used to be places where one might reliably find jowly white guys playing prominent roles, one of them being the nation's capital. Then came the Obama not-so-White House.

'Take our country back!' is a common cry at a Tea Party protest. Back. Back to a time when white people were firmly in power and those of other races knew their place. But also back to an imaginary America that was almost entirely white as well. Tea Party rallies – the costumes, the outrage, the provocative rhetoric – are so theatrical because they are theatre: a way for disaffected white people to represent themselves in a mediated world that no longer recognizes them. The Tea Party folks have a nascent understanding that they are out of sync with the cultural dreams of America. This is a subtext to Sarah Palin's appeals to the 'Real America'. But the problem for the Tea Party is that a multicultural America is not a mere media fantasy, it's a demographic reality. And it has been for some time: Crispus Attucks, the first patriot killed in the Boston Massacre, was black. In a recent *Captain America* comic book a group of protesters is shown holding aloft signs that read 'Tea Bag The Libs Before They Tea Bag YOU!' Captain America and his – African-American – sidekick Falcon look down on the crowd in the street and dismiss them as a just a bunch of 'angry white people'.³ When you've been dissed by Captain America you know you're on the losing side of history.

Bypassed by multicultural America, Tea Partiers are attempting to resurrect a mythic (white) past through tri-corner hats and colonial garb. They may look ridiculous, but that doesn't mean they are not dangerous. The alienation that Tea Partiers feel from the dominant fantasies and demographic realities of the USA is exactly what makes them so volatile. They have no sense of identification with the majority and little recognition from the majority, and these are the conditions that breed incivility, violence and perhaps even terror. If the

majority doesn't exist in the dream world of the Tea Party, then violence against them is not quite real. And, paradoxically, when the dream world of the Tea Party is not recognized by the majority, what better than violence to make them notice? But their dream has no future. No doubt there will be electoral shocks and violent outbursts from the Tea Party over the next few years, but in the end it will disappear like Father Coughlin's National Union for Social Justice, the John Birch Society, the Ku Klux Klan and the myriad other manifestations of the populist radical right in the USA that promised a dream of the past.

DREAMING THE *Future*

So what is the alternative? Is there a practice of dreampolitik distinct from the reactionary, and ultimately doomed, popular fantasies of the far right and the manufactured consent of the political elite? I think so. You will not find it among the liberal-left, vacillating as they are between a support for Obama rationalized by the 'realities' of the present and reflexive criticism of his policies with no counter-inspirations offered. But on the creative fringes of the left another type of dreaming is taking place.

On 12 November 2008, New Yorkers awoke to a 'special edition' of the *New York Times*, handed out by a legion of volunteers at subway, bus and train stations across the city. 'IRAQ WAR ENDS' screamed the headline, followed by an article reporting that US troops would immediately withdraw from Iraq and that the UN would take responsibility for rebuilding the social and political institutions of both countries. This 'news' was surrounded by reports declaring passage of a Maximum Wage Law, the elimination of tuition at all public universities, a ban on lobbying, and a timeline detailing how progressives gained power in Washington, DC. Even the advertisements envisioned a utopic future: a picture-perfect full page ad for Exxon, with the tagline: 'Peace. An idea the world can profit from', pledged the multinational to a pacific and environmentally sound future. The *Times*' slogan: 'All the News That's Fit to Print', was altered for one day to read: 'All the News We Hope to Print'.⁴

Over 80,000 copies of the faux *Times* (the organizers, in fabulist form, claimed over a million) were handed out across the city and forwarded to national and international newsrooms, where news of the 'news' was then spread around the world. The project, the result of the clandestine labour of hundreds of contributors facilitated by artist/activists Andy Bichlbaum of the Yes Men and Steve Lambert, a political artist with a history of utopian interventions, was meant as an imaginary act of politics, or rather, a political act of imagination. The prefigured future, however, was not meant as a magical

transformation: each event reported in the paper was described as the result of everyday citizens pushing for a more progressive agenda. Yet the experience was meant to be magical. The realism of the newspaper was singularly impressive: the paper, the type, the layout, even the tone and style of the articles and ads themselves were crafted to create a believable product of an imaginary future. The organizers hoped to make people stop and, for a moment, enter a dream world. 'The challenge isn't to make people think that the war is a bad idea, since most people already do,' Bichlbaum explained at the time. 'The challenge is to make people feel it can be over now.' He continues: 'We wanted people to read this and say to themselves, What if?'

Verfremdungseffekt, or What If?

What if? – to state the obvious – is a question. It is a question that disrupts the fantasy; it asks the person reading the Times to realize that what they hold in their hands represents a dream. The striking verisimilitude of the newspaper was intended to convey a sense of felt possibility. 'None of this is currently true,' co-organizer Steve Lambert explained, 'but it's all possible.'⁵ But the sense of possibility that the paper hoped to evoke is complicated, for at the same time the reader was meant to feel the possibility of peace and justice, she was expected to know that this was just a dream.

for both is to overcome alienation and regain power and control over the foreign object. Brecht, however, theorized that alienation might be used as a positive force: a means to shake people out of their comfortable integration. Through a battery of techniques like giving away the ending of a play at the beginning, disrupting dramatic scenes with song and dance, having stage hands appear on stage, and collapsing the fourth wall to have actors address the audience, Brecht worked to alienate his audience. Instead of drawing people into a seamless illusion, the playwright strove to push them away and remind them that they were only watching a play. If the audience wanted real action, if they wanted the world to change, they could not rely upon art to do it for them – they would have to do it themselves.

An end to wars and a just economy are not impossible, no matter how far we seem from these goals today, but the Times reporting this as factual news in 2008 is an impossibility. I saw firsthand the cognitive dissonance in people's faces when they were handed a copy of the newspaper: first surprise, then interest, then realization that what they held in their hands was not genuine – all in the matter of seconds. This rapid realization on the part of the audience that what they had been reading was a fake was not a political failure on the part of the project; it is the secret of its success. By holding out a dream and refusing entry simultaneously, the 'special edition' of the Times created the conditions for popular political dreaming.

UTOPIA IS *No-Place*

Bertolt Brecht, the great German communist playwright, experimented with this tension between illusion and awareness in his quest for a radical theatre. Brecht was horrified about the ability of most theatre to suck the spectator into an illusion and have them vicariously dream someone else's dream. Traditional theatre made spectators into passive receptacles: a dumb, obedient mass, well suited for fascist mythologies or the 'democratic' manufacture of consent, but not the radical transformation of society. Brecht wanted his theatre to create active subjects who would think critically and act politically. His dramaturgical solution to this problem was Verfremdungseffekt, or alienation effect. Alienation, in Marxist as well as common parlance, has traditionally had a negative connotation: the proletariat was alienated from their labour just as the Tea Partier is alienated from the contemporary culture of their country; the struggle

This technique was pioneered nearly 500 years ago in Utopia, Thomas More's story of a far-off land that was, well, utopic. On this fantasy island living and labour is rationally planned for the good of all. There is a democratically elected government and priesthood, and freedom of speech and religion. There is no money and no private property or privately held wealth, and perhaps most utopian of all, there are no lawyers. More's Utopia was everything his sixteenth-century European home was not: peaceful, prosperous and just. For, as More writes in his tale: 'When no one owns anything, all are rich.'⁶

Utopia, however, is a curious book; two books really. Book # I is essentially an argument – made through Raphael, the traveller and describer of Utopia – of why Book # II – the actual description of the Isle of Utopia – is politically useless. Raphael explains that rulers don't

listen to imaginings other than their own, and Europeans are resistant to new ideas. Indeed, Raphael insists that his own story will soon be forgotten (which, of course, is a clever rhetorical strategy to make sure it is not). The book is full of such seeming contradictions, riddles and paradoxes. The grandest one being the title itself. Utopia, composed of the Greek *ou* (no) and *topos* (place), is a place that is, literally, no-place. In addition, the story teller of this magic land is called Raphael Hythloday (or Hythlodæus), from the Greek *Huthlos*, meaning nonsense. So the reader is told a story of a place which is named out of existence, by a narrator who is named as unreliable. And so begins the debate: Is the entirety of More's Utopia a satire, an exercise demonstrating the absurdity of such political fantasies? Or is it an earnest effort to suggest and promote these dreams?

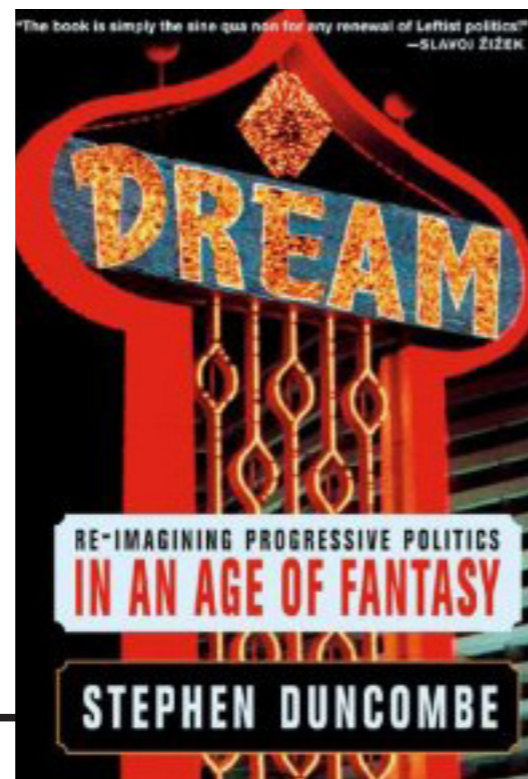
There's evidence for both sides. First the case for the satirical interpretation: in addition to the problematic names given the place and the narrator, More, in his description of the island of Utopia, mixes 'possible' political proposals like publicly held property and the freedom of speech and religion with such absurdities as gold and jewel encrusted chamber pots. As such, one might argue that More effectively dismisses as ridiculous all political dreams. 'Freedom of speech? Well that is about as absurd as taking a shit in a gold chamber pot!' On the other hand, Raphael – our narrator – is named after the Archangel Raphael who gives sight to the blind and guides the lost. Arguing for More's political sincerity, one might propose that he uses the absurd to seriously suggest, yet at the same time politically distance himself from, political, economic and religious dreams that he favours but that would, in his time, be considered political and religious heresy. 'Freedom of religion?' More might plausibly plea: 'Can't you see I was kidding?'

But I think this orthodox debate about whether More was satirical or sincere obfuscates rather than clarifies, and actually misses the point entirely. The genius of More's Utopia is that it is both absurd and earnest, simultaneously. And it is through the combination of these seemingly opposite ways of presenting political ideals that a more fruitful way of thinking about dreampolitik can start to take shape. For it is the presentation of Utopia as no-place, and its narrator as nonsense, that opens up a space for the reader's imagination to wonder what an alternative someplace and a radically different sensibility might be like.

By positing his fantasy someplace as a no-place, More escapes the problems that typically haunt political dreamscapes. Most political imaginaries insist upon their possibility: positing an imagined future or alternative as the future or the alternative. This assurance guarantees at least one of *several results*:

- A brutalization of the present to bring it into line with the imagined future. (Stalinization, Year Zero of the Khmer Rouge)
- A political disenchantment as the future never arrives and the alternative is never realized. (Post 1968 left, the current implosion of the US Republican Party.)
- A vain search for a new dream when the promised one isn't realized. (Endless consumption of products or lifestyles.)
- Living in a lie. ('Actually existing Socialism', 'The American Dream'.)

What More proposes is something entirely different: he imagines an alternative to his sixteenth-century Europe that is openly proclaimed to be a work of imagination. It can not be realized simply because it is unrealistic. It is, after all, no place. But the reader has been infected; another option has been shown. As such, they can't safely return to the surety of their own present as the naturalness of their world has been disrupted. Once an alternative has been imagined, to stay where one is or to try something else becomes a question that demands attention and a choice. Yet More resists the short-circuiting of this imaginative moment by refusing to provide a 'realistic' alternative. As such, this technique of dreampolitik resists the simple swapping of one truth for another, a left dream for a right dream, communism for capitalism. As no-place Utopia denies the easy, and politically problematic, option of such a simple choice. Instead, the question of alternatives is left open, and space is opened to imagine: Why not? How come? What if?



ART OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

I was drawn into working on the faux Times (I wrote the copy for some of the advertisements) by one of the organizers, Steve Lambert. A few months earlier Lambert and his collaborator, Packard Jennings, had asked me to write the catalogue essay for a set of street posters that were commissioned and displayed by the city of San Francisco. These large-format posters, illustrated in the style of airplane emergency instructions and displayed on illuminated kiosks on one of San Francisco's main thoroughfares, offered passers-by images of the city's future. But not just any future: an absurd future. Skyscrapers are movable so citizens can rearrange their city. A commuter train is turned into a green market, lending library and martial arts studio. A football stadium is made into an organic farm (and linebackers into human ploughs). The entire city is transformed into a wildlife refuge. For inspiration Packard and Lambert asked experts in the fields of architecture, city planning and transportation for ideas on how to make a better city. These plans were then, in their own words, 'perhaps mildly exaggerated'. It is exactly this exaggeration that makes these artists' images so politically powerful.⁷

Jennings and Lambert's plans are unrealizable. A city could become more 'green' with additional public parks and community gardens, but transforming San Francisco into a nature preserve where office workers take their lunch break next to a mountain gorilla family? This isn't going to happen. And that's the point. Because it is a patent impossibility their fantasies fool no one. There is no duplicity, no selling the people a false bill of goods. Yet at the same time these impossible dreams open up spaces to imagine new possibilities. The problem with asking professionals to 'think outside the box' and imagine new solutions is that without intervention, they usually won't. Like most of us, their imaginations are constrained by the tyranny of the possible. By visualizing impossibilities, Jennings and Lambert create an opening to ask: 'What if?' without closing down this free space by seriously answering: *'This is what.'*

Most political spectacles are constructed with the intent of passing off fantasy for reality. The function of the Nazi rallies in Nuremberg, so spectacularly captured in Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, were to substitute an image of power, unity and order for the reality of the depression, chaos and infighting that plagued interwar Germany; US president George W. Bush's landing on an aircraft carrier in a flight suit to declare 'mission accomplished' in Iraq was the attempt to trade the actuality of a disastrous and

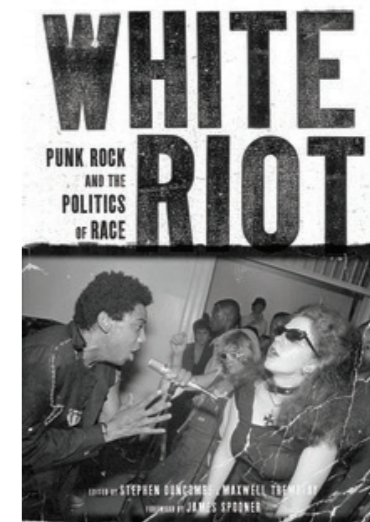
soon to be protracted war launched by a combat-shirking president for the fantasy of easy victory declared by a noble warrior-chief. These are fascist spectacles: the future is imagined by elites and then presented as already in existence. Ethical spectacle operates differently by presenting dreams that people are aware are just dreams. These are acts of imagination that provide visions of what could be without ever pretending they are anything other than what they are. Presenting itself as what it actually is, this form of fantasy is, ironically, truthful and real. It is also unfinished. Because it is presented as only an act of human imagination, not a representation of concrete reality, ethical spectacle remains open to revision or rejection and, most important, popular intervention. Jennings and Lambert's posters are exemplars of ethical spectacle.

Standing in front of one of their posters on a street corner you smile at the absurd idea of practicing Tae Kwon Do on your train ride home. But you may also begin to question why public transportation is so unfunctional, and then ask yourself why shouldn't a public transport system cater to other public desires. This could set your mind to wondering why the government is so often in the business of controlling, instead of facilitating, our desires, and then you might start to envision what a truly desirable state might look like. And so on, ad infinitum. Jennings and Lambert's impossible solutions – like More's Utopia and the 'special edition' of the New York Times – are means to dream of new ones.

There's a dominant strain of the left that has always argued for a politics without dreams. In this vision, the masses (led by the left) will wake up and see the truth . . . and it shall make them free. In the famous words of Marx and Engels: 'Man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.' It's a nice fantasy, but that's all it is and ever has been. Even Marx and Engels implicitly recognized this by beginning their *Manifesto* with the chimera of communist inevitability: 'A spectre is haunting Europe . . .'⁸ In the fantasy-fuelled world we inhabit today the dream of a politics without dreams is a prescription for political impotence. The question is not whether dreams should, or should not, be a part of politics, but what sort of dreampolitik ought to be practiced. What is not needed is a left equivalent of the center's cynical manufacture of consent, or a replica of the reactionary phantasmagorias of the right. Nor is it desirable to wait for and follow the next progressive saviour who pronounces: 'I Have a Dream.' What is needed, if we are serious about the potential of populist (un)reason, are tools and techniques to help people dream on their own. Bismarck might have insisted that 'politics is the art of the possible', but a much more powerful case can be made today that politics is the art of the impossible.⁹

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Stephen Duncombe's interests lie in media and cultural studies. He teaches and writes on the history of mass and alternative media and the intersection of culture and politics. He is the author of *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy* and *Notes From Underground: Zines and the Politics of Underground Culture*, co-author of *The Bobbed Haired Bandit: Crime and Celebrity in 1920s New York*, editor of the *Cultural Resistance Reader*, co-editor of *White Riot: Punk Rock and the Politics of Race*, and writes on the intersection of culture and politics for a range of scholarly and popular publications



Notes:

- 1.(pg17)** Ivy L. Lee, address before the American Electric Railway Association, 10 October 1916, cited in Stuart Ewen, *PR!* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 75.
- 2.(pg18)** Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 158, 151.
- 3.(pg19)** Captain America, #602 (New York: Marvel Universe, 2010). Pressured by conservatives, Marvel later apologized for their portrayal of the Tea Party.
- 4.(pg19)** For the complete 'special edition' of the New York Times see www.nytimes-se.com.
- 5.(pg20)** Andy Bichlbaum and Steve Lambert, personal interview, 20 November 2008; CNN interview, 14 November 2008.
- 6.(pg20)** Thomas More, *Utopia*, edited and translated by V.S. Ogden (New York: Appleton Century Crofts, 1949), 80.
- 7.(pg21)** All posters can be viewed and downloaded from visitsteve.com/work/wish-you-were-here-postcards-from-our-awesome-future-2/.
- 8.(pg22)** Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd edition, edited by Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 476, 473.
- 9.(pg22)** Fragments of this essay have appeared, in altered form, in *Playboy* magazine, *The Nation*, the exhibition catalogue for 'Wish You Were Here: Postcards from Our Awesome Future', and 'Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy'.

PUSSY RIOT SENTENCED TO TWO YEARS IN PRISON



“ The charges are of hooliganism that call for 7 years imprisonment for a 1-minute performance on February 21 in a priests-only section of Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. The **investigator's report claims religious hatred.** The intention of the performance was to draw attention to the special relationship with President Putin and the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church. ”

WHO ARE PUSSY RIOT

—[HTTP://FREEPUSSYRIOT.ORG/NEWS](http://freepussyriot.org/news)

Pussy Riot is an anonymous Russian feminist performance art group formed in October 2011. Through a series of peaceful performances in highly visible places, the group has given voice to basic rights under threat in Russia today, while expressing the values and principles of gender equality, democracy and freedom of expression contained in the Russian constitution and other international instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the CEDAW Convention

Detained members of the art group, Pussy Riot (right to left)

Maria Alekhina, 24. Poet and Student at the Institute of Journalism and Creative writing. Mother of 5 year-old boy. **Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, 23.** Visual Artist and 4th year Philosophy Student. Mother of 4 year-old girl. **Ekaterina Samucevich, 29.** Visual Artist,, degree from The Alexander Rodchenko School of Photography and Multimedia. Moscow

FREEPUSSYRIOT.ORG, an international team advocating for the release of Maria Alekhina, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Ekaterina Samucevich, whom we would like to see reunited with their children, families, and supportive community.

One week after the performance at Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, an edited video piece appeared on Youtube, and a week after that the police were instructed to arrest the group's known members. Since March 4th, the women have sat in pre-trial detention, refused bail due to the authorities' fear for the women's safety. Please refer to freepussyriot.org/news for the subsequent 4 months of news. July 30 - August 15 Moscow's Khamovnichesky District Court will be considering the merits of the Pussy Riot case. The European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg has recently made clear its intentions to hear a complaint registered by the defence team.

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