



# Understanding Enlightenment: Ideas And Ideologues In Early Modern Europe

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**Abstract:** This paper is an effort to peep into the political ideas of Early Modern Europe through the writings of two great scholars- John Locke and J.J Rousseau. The paper talks about the various features and problems of Early Modern European society like the nature of authority, forms of government and society conditions of that time.

**Key Words:** General Will, Savage Society, Social Contract, Treaties of Government.

## Introduction:

The period from 15<sup>th</sup> century to 18<sup>th</sup> century is widely known as Early Modern period.<sup>1</sup> It was a transitional period which witnessed change in socio-religious-economic-political-philosophical and cultural fields. During this time European society was witnessing large number of changes like- renaissance, scientific discoveries, geographical explorations, religious movements, reformations, absolutism, etc. By the end of Early Modern period the enlightenment emerged as a political and philosophical force. It basically focuses on the reason, rationality and science, in every sphere of life. As we know that very person is a product of his or her own time and can't write without being affected by it. The same proves to be true in the context of John Locke and Rousseau as well. They were writing in the 17<sup>th</sup> 18<sup>th</sup> C.E when subversive writings were considered to be dangerous and blasphemous by the ruling class. But still, the writers dared to question the ones who were in power and tried to present an alternative definition of power where all could be free and equal. John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (1690-95) was written during the time of the English civil war and Rousseau was writing when the French people were much dissatisfied with the current government and were ready for the revolution. *Two Treatises of Government* was first time drafted in 1679-80. So, the spirit of age favoured such methods, and it was, therefore, natural for Locke and Rousseau to pursue them.

## John Locke:

John Locke (1632- 1704) was an English enlightenment philosopher and propagator of liberal ideas. He belonged to the empiricist group of philosophers for whom senses were the prime reality. Empiricists believed that the senses are the base of knowledge and any knowledge perceived without sensory experiences will be a false conception. In this way, he went much ahead of his time.<sup>2</sup> His book *Two Treatises of Government*<sup>3</sup> is divided into two parts. In the first part of the book, John Locke criticizes the ideas of Robert Filmer who favoured slavery, fatherhood, property, donation, etc. as sources of ultimate and absolute authority while in the 2<sup>nd</sup> treaty he talks about the natural rights, form of

governments, justification for revolution, the true extent of government and end of civil governments, etc. So, John Locke not only tells us about the problems of the world or what's wrong with the world, but he also suggests solutions for those problems. He believes in the ultimate freedom of men which is granted to him by nature. J.J. Rousseau, (1712-78) in his book *The Social Contract* takes this idea of natural freedom a bit further and discusses the conditions which paved the way for mankind's slavery. He also discusses the binding contract between people and government, legitimate political authority, general will, the idea of property, and how it kept on changing from time to time <sup>4</sup>.

John lock in the first treaty criticizes Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha* which is written in the biblical form and claims that all monarchical and absolutist power is derived from fatherhood and biblical doctrine. While Locke dismisses this idea and says that bible doesn't support Filmer's divine right absolutism. It is Filmer who misinterpreted and used the scripture out of context. In this book, he makes it clear that man is naturally born free, so nobody has the right to enslave others. John Locke denies the idea of derivation of political authority from any sort of divine right of kingship. People themselves are sovereign and free from any kind of bondage. John Locke also advocates equal rights for women and asserts that the cause of women's subjugation is patriarchy.

### **Rousseau:**

Rousseau in his book *The Discourse of Inequality* distinguishes between the natural state and civil society. On the same basis, he distinguishes between the natural man (savage man) and the civil man. According to him, the natural man is a savage who doesn't bound to any laws and morality and hence enjoys full freedom, but the very moment he becomes the so-called civilized man he is surrounded by various kinds of inequalities. So, he points out that in a natural state there are fewer inequalities and more liberty as compared to civil society. But he also talks about the problems of the natural state or society. In the natural society, there was the rule of force, so man became immoral. The same immorality paved the way for a more complex private property-based civil society. For him, family is the most ancient form of society like the government which was formed based on interdependence and need. When these needs ended natural bonds also got dissolved. If it persists, then it would be based on customs and conventions. Rousseau compares the family with the state, where individuals abandon their natural liberties for self-possession and protection of property. Otherwise naturally all men are free, and nobody has naturally any authority over the other. Rousseau makes a view that man is naturally free, and no one has a right to possess other's rights. For Rousseau denying liberty means denying being man. Even parents have no right to dispose of the liberty of their children. His idea is much similar to John Locke who denies fatherhood as a source of authority. <sup>5</sup>

Rousseau further distinguishes between legitimate authority and absolute authority and contends that rights are derived from customs and conventions, or only legitimate authority can create the right, force or coercion can't. Force can create only obedience, absolute authority but not duty. Force can create slave-master relationships and not ruler and people relationships.

John Locke too keeps the same ideas about the state of nature which gives full freedom but lacks morality. In the state of nature, no one possesses political power to judge who is right or who is wrong? But some people violate the same natural freedom under the name of rights which causes tyranny in society. An immoral or irresponsible society paves the way for tyranny so there is a need for laws to govern. The state of nature becomes like a state of war (insecurity of rights) in the lack of authority, so the only solution is to establish original political Power.

### **Civil and Savage Society:**

Rousseau criticizes the idea of war and conquest and focuses on the establishment of a just and civil society that is free of slavery. Speaking about the rights of slaves he says that the right of conquest doesn't give the right to enslave or massacre. War happens between states where people were merely instruments and artifacts of the state, so the right of

slavery is absurd and meaningless. John Locke too is critical of the idea of slavery. In the first treaty, he criticized Robert Filmer and points out that man is naturally born free and born for freedom. Any sort of political authority doesn't give any right, neither to the ruler nor to anybody else, to dominate others.

Rousseau having found problems with both the state of nature and civil society suggests a middle way. This middle way is the need for a social contract in civil society. Man being unable to preserve himself in the state of nature moved towards civil society. But civil society too proved to be exploitative. So, the solution lies down in the social contract. *"Social contract is the association between individuals and society, which will protect and defend persons and their proprietor rights"*. In this association, each is equal and makes a contract with two entities: first as a member of sovereign bound to the individuals, and second as a member of state bounds to the sovereign. This social contract binds the sovereign to himself and the people which means the sovereign can't have any interest which is against the individuals of the contract. This act of association creates a moral and collective body and receives common will and identity. Sovereign exercises its power through laws and legislature. Any slight modification can dissolve the contract. And this social contract would be run by the general will. While Locke's idea of the social contract is the reconstruction of rights and a feeling of security without true government. Rational people create a government that treats individuals as an artifact (existing for certain purposes mainly to secure their rights) of their rational will. When shortcomings emerged in government then these rational individuals can go for a revolution to overthrow the existing government. Rousseau through this contract indicates the private property and the origin of property rights of the individuals. For him, the right of own emerged from the right of 1<sup>st</sup> occupier rather than the right of the strongest. And in civil society property rights validate the right of 1<sup>st</sup> occupier with some conditions such as land occupied must not yet be inhabited; the occupier can take only according to his need, and the possession must be taken by his labor and cultivation. In the state of nature, these property rights became weaker while in civil society these claims got respect. John Locke was the great champion of the idea of private property. He points out that initially all things belong to everyone but later on due to his own labor man creates his private property. While Rousseau points out that private property is the cause of all inequalities and tyrannies that led to crimes and murders, Locke didn't have such an extreme opinion regarding the same. For him, it was neither good nor bad.

Rousseau makes a difference over the sovereignty rights in earlier societies and civil society, by pointing out that from the state of nature to civil society the rights of sovereignty extended from subjects over land. For example, a shift could be seen from the king of French (ruler of men) to the king of France (ruler of land). Rousseau also shows the distinction between rights, that sovereign and proprietor have over the same estate. However, community rights are always subordinate the individual rights, because, without that social structure, social ties, and exercise of sovereignty are not possible. When individual rights become more dominating, then social contract would no longer exist and there would be tyranny. So, there is a need for a general will.

### **Social Contract and General Will:**

For Rousseau general will alone direct the state towards its main objective which is the common good. Each individual bound by contract may have a will as a man, which may be different from the general will of a citizen. So, he has to lose the particular will (which may be partial) for the general will (which shares the community's interest). Rousseau differentiates between the will of all and general will, as the former is competing for private interests and sums of particular will, while the latter one is common interests. Sometimes general will and will of all may be the same. But when factions arise and partial associations are formed at the expense of great associations, the will of each association becomes general about its members, while in the context of state it remains particular. <sup>6</sup>According to Rousseau to express general-will, there must be no partial societies, or if they exist then they should be in large numbers but not

large enough to have an equal amount of power to the general will. So, it can't affect the citizen's idea and their rational thinking.

Further Rousseau states that sovereignty can't be expressed through anything else than by sovereignty itself. If sovereignty exists, then it should be in the form of general will (will of the body of people can be sovereign and constitute laws) otherwise will of the body or people is merely a decree or act of magistracy. He criticized the idea of division of sovereignty into executive and legislative authority because the rights which are taken as being parts of sovereignty are subordinate and executive sanction only supreme will not general will. Separated powers are merely illusions. Excessive authority came in the way of liberty that's why Rousseau points out that "man is born free: everywhere he is in chains".<sup>7</sup> So, in a social contract, it is necessary to maintain a balance between individual liberty and the institution of government.

John Locke in *The True Extent of Government* differs from Rousseau and asserts that the 'true original' of government lies only in the separated and limited powers, legislative supremacy over the executive, and also limiting the powers of the legislature. Government must protect the rights of all and implement the law as equally as possible. However, he favoured the idea of execution for the public good. Like Rousseau who looked at the failure of the social contract as the failure of civil society, Locke too looks at the true extent of civil government as the end of civil government.

### Conclusion:

I have tried to draw a comparison between the above-mentioned texts and found so many similarities and dissimilarities between the ideas of both philosophers. They both believe in the idea of the natural freedom of mankind but they also recognize the dangers of ultimate freedom. Apart from this, there seems to be so much difference between what these philosophers preached and what they did in their real life. John Locke being an empiricist takes sensory perception or experience as the only existing reality of the world, but when it comes to God, he follows the path of reason and says that certain things could be felt without having experienced. Though John Locke speaks for the rights of slaves, he was a shareholder in the slave trade. In the same manner there are problems with Rousseau's philosophy as well. Robespierre inspired with Rousseau's idea of General Will and said that General Will is the will of the majority where the minority gets no representation. So, in a way minorities will become contrary to the general will. If we understand General Will in the present context then we can say that it is the will of the powerful or the chosen few. Though there are certain contradictions in the ideas of these philosophers yet still we can't deny the greatness of their ideas.

### Endnotes and References:

<sup>1</sup> Scribner, Bob. *Understanding Early Modern Europe*, The Historical Journal, Sep 1987, vol 30, no.3, p.p 743-758.

<sup>2</sup> *Encyclopedia of Political Philosophy vol.2.*

<sup>3</sup> Locke, John. *Two Treatises of Government*. Oxford University Press, 1988.

<sup>4</sup> Rousseau, J.J. *The Social Contract and Discourses*. J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1913.

<sup>5</sup> Durant, Wil. *The Story of Philosophy*. Pocket Books, 1926.

<sup>6</sup> *Encyclopedia of Political Philosophy, Vol. 3.*

<sup>7</sup> Rousseau, J.J. *The Social Contract and Discourses*. J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1913. P-5.