

Bertrand Russell said, "Hitler was the product of Rousseau, and Roosevelt and Churchill were the Locke." - a dialectical analysis of this view

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Abstract. This essay evaluates the extent to which Rousseau's and Locke's ideas were appropriated, distorted, or faithfully applied in radically different political contexts. Rousseau's concept of the "general will," originally conceived as a collective expression of democratic sovereignty, was co-opted by Nazi Germany to legitimize totalitarian rule, stripping it of its egalitarian essence and reframing it as an exclusionary, racially defined mandate. Conversely, Locke's theories of natural rights, limited government, and popular consent were invoked by liberal democracies, particularly under Roosevelt's New Deal and Churchill's wartime leadership, to defend individual freedoms and constitutional governance against authoritarian threats. The analysis employs a multi-layered methodological approach, integrating contextualism, reception history, and conceptual history to trace how these philosophical ideas evolved semantically and politically over time. It demonstrates that neither Rousseau nor Locke can be held directly responsible for their later ideological misappropriations, as historical crises, propaganda, and shifting socio-political needs fundamentally altered their original meanings. The essay concludes with a historiographical warning against deterministic readings of political philosophy, emphasizing the need for nuanced, context-sensitive interpretations of intellectual legacies. By examining these case studies, the paper contributes to broader debates about the malleability of political concepts and their instrumentalization in modern governance.

Keywords: Rousseau; Locke; Natural Rights; Totalitarianism; liberal democracy.

1. Introduction

The relationship between Enlightenment philosophy and modern political ideology is a complex and often controversial topic, which still inspires extensive discussions in the academic circle to this day. What do the philosophies of two Enlightenment philosophers, Rousseau and Locke, have in common with two political extremes, totalitarian dictatorship and liberal democracy? Bertrand Russell's claim, "Hitler is an outcome of Rousseau; Roosevelt and Churchill of Locke", invites reflection on how 18th-century ideas were transformed to meet the challenges of the 20th century.

This relationship is paradoxical at the surface. Enlightenment was a project of reason, liberty, and human progress, after all, something that could not coexist with fascism or mass violence. However, history tells us that even such fundamental notions as general will or natural rights are not immune to distortion. When modern regimes had to grapple with war, crisis, and revolution, they turned again and again to classical sources of philosophy not to conserve them, but to reinterpret or even to exploit them to meet the demands of the present.

The intellectual legacy of Enlightenment thought has a dual nature; it can both inspire liberation and may also encourage oppression. Rousseau's "general will" and his story of moral regeneration were adopted to uphold authoritarian rule. It was initially a democratic ideal, emphasizing collective decision-making and placing private interests below public interests. However, in the hands of totalitarian regimes such as Nazi Germany in the 20th century, this concept was stripped of its democratic core. Instead, it became a defense tool for authoritarian rule and racial exclusion. Locke's stress on personal freedom and restriction on government highlighted the defense of democratic principles. These strikingly different results raise a key question: Just how malleable is philosophical thought? How did the historical background shape their acceptance and application?

This article aims to explore the extent to which the contrast between Rousseau and Locke holds by examining the historical and ideological paths of the transformation of their ideas. This essay suggests that, though Russell may be correct in his juxtaposition of ideological continuities, it is simplistic in its explanation of how the concepts of Rousseau and Locke were reinterpreted and used to address the crises of their time. By analyzing the original context of Rousseau and Locke's philosophy, subsequent distortions or expansions, as well as broader historical forces, this article attempts to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how Enlightenment thought influenced the political reality of the 20th century. In this process, the article will also emphasize the methodological challenges of tracing the evolution of political concepts, as well as the danger of attributing philosophical thoughts to definite outcomes in isolation from their historical context.

Ultimately, this discussion reminds us that the history of thought is dynamic and often unpredictable. No matter how clearly the ideas are expressed, they are inevitably shaped by the background of The Times and the agenda of the references. Therefore, the study of the intellectual legacies of Rousseau and Locke not only offers insights into the past but also serves as a warning for contemporary discussions on democracy, rights, and governance.

2. Enlightenment Origins and 20th-Century Reuses

To decipher how the ideas of Rousseau were misinterpreted, one must understand the original Enlightenment, where these ideas were developed. Rousseau developed the concept of the general will in the 18th century to counter the idea of the absolute monarchy and aristocratic privilege. Rousseau surpassed the formulation of Hobbes in his treatise *The Social Contract* (1762) by defining general will as the common best interest of a community, rather than the collection of self-interests. Citizens are free only if they directly subordinate private interests to the public good, creating freely democratic decisions. The utopia of Rousseau, or Francophone Rousseauism, was the world of small, fraternal republics, where legitimacy was based not on the autocratic dictate but on the direct involvement of citizens in the life of their communities. He emphasized freedom, equality, and reason-based discussion, which he considered the manifestation of the Enlightenment's belief in reason and progress.

Rousseau believed that a valid social contract is not an individual's abandonment of power, but rather the joint construction of a community based on public interests by citizens. He defined "public will" as the common interests of society rather than a simple collection of individual private interests. He emphasized that "public will" can only be formed through the equal participation and rational discussion of all citizens. Rousseau's ideal society was composed of small, autonomous republics, whose legitimacy stemmed from citizens' direct involvement in public affairs rather than autocratic rule. He believes that true freedom can only be achieved when personal interests are subordinate to public interests. This kind of freedom is not indulgence in anarchy, but self-restraint within the framework of law, because law itself is the embodiment of "public will". Rousseau's thoughts were deeply rooted in the Enlightenment's belief in reason, equality, and democracy. His theories provided necessary ideological resources for the subsequent French Revolution, especially the Jacobins' emphasis on "popular sovereignty" during the revolution.

However, Rousseau's delicate vision of democracy was meticulously adopted and severely distorted in Hitler's Nazi regime, serving a totalitarian and exclusive racial ideology. After World War I, Germany was plunged into turmoil due to the Treaty of Versailles (1918-1939). The hyperinflation in 1923 and the large-scale unemployment during the Great Depression provided fertile ground for the breeding of extreme ideologies such as Nazism (Evans, 2005). Against this backdrop, extreme nationalism and anti-Semitism were on the rise. The Nazi Party took advantage of the public's dissatisfaction, attributing Germany's problems to "Jewish conspiracies" and "the weakness of Western democracy", and promised to restore Germany's glory through power politics. Against the backdrop of the collapse of the liberal order, the Nazi regime used philosophical language to justify its radical nationalism.

Such an unstable situation led the Nazis to distort the concept of the general will developed by Rousseau, a dream of egalitarian democracy, into a means of authoritarian domination. Hitler used the rhetoric of Rousseau, referring to the will of the German people; however, he deprived it of the democratic content (Bytwerk, 2012). The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 coordinated the stripping of Jewish citizens of their rights. They introduced the exclusion of Jewish blood as a positive expression of the common German collective will and race purity. The Nazis enforced consistency through the Gestapo and the "Gleichschaltung" policy, compelling all social institutions (such as trade unions, the media, and the education system) to submit to the ideology of the Nazi Party. At the same time, the Gestapo (the secret police) suppressed any dissent through terrorist means. These means have nothing to do with the "public will" envisioned by Rousseau - formed voluntarily through discussion by free and equal citizens (Peukert, 1993).

Hannah Arendt pointed out in "The Origins of Totalitarianism" (1951) that the Nazi regime completely rejected the rational tradition of the Enlightenment, and its ideology was based on the "supreme will of the leader", free from any moral or legal constraints. The jurist Karl Schmidt (1932) analyzed from the perspective of political philosophy that the Nazis distorted Rousseau's "public will" into a political tool for "distinguishing friends from foes", that is, by shaping an external enemy (such as Jews or communists), they strengthened the internal identity of the "national community". This distortion has transformed "public will" from a democratic concept into an excuse for totalitarian rule.

By contrast, the philosophy of Locke emerged following the English Civil War and Glorious Revolution, which were marked by disputes on sovereignty, rights, and the right of resistance against tyrants. The Second Treatise of Government (1690) by Locke suggested the following natural rights: life, liberty, property, the consent of the governed, and limited government. Locke held that governments should exist to protect the rights and freedoms of individuals and to ensure that they are better secured than they could be in a state of nature, and that political power was valid only when the people as a whole agree to it by the terms of a social contract and not when it is handed to the state as a result of the need of self-rule by some mythical divine right or through the use of force solely. The political system that Locke envisioned provided constitutional government, parliamentary accountability, and individual liberty. This vision reflected the emergence of capitalist economies and signified a transition from monarchical absolutism to representative governance.

In the 20th century, Locke's liberal ideas were employed by Roosevelt and Churchill to counter totalitarianism. The "New Deal" introduced by Roosevelt was essentially aimed at addressing the economic disaster brought about by the Great Depression. In this process, he drew on Locke's concept of natural rights and used it as a basis to promote the implementation of financial security and social welfare policies. In simple terms, it is to transform the "natural rights" mentioned by Locke into economic security and social welfare that the ordinary people can truly enjoy. By 1941, when Roosevelt delivered his speech on the "Four Freedoms", he further combined Locke's ideas of freedom with the economic situation at that time. Later, scholar Richard Hofstadter commented that this was a practical extension of Locke's liberalism - not empty talk of theory, but enabling the concept of freedom to truly address economic issues in reality. During World War II, in the face of the threat of Nazi totalitarianism, Churchill, while defending parliamentary democracy and individual freedom, also drew entirely on Locke's ideas. Among the many speeches he delivered during the war, he defined the British struggle as a fight to safeguard human rights and against oppressive regimes. The most famous one was the "Most Glorious Moment" speech in 1940.

This proposition is highly consistent with Locke's core viewpoint - Locke believed that a government's existence is legitimate only when it gains the recognition of the people and effectively protects their natural rights. It was through the transmission of such ideas that Churchill consolidated the will of the British people to fight and also provided a more solid ideological support for the war against the Nazis.

3. From Reception to Conceptual Mutation

The contextualist approach emphasizes that the interpretation of any idea must return to its original historical soil and, at the same time, examine its acceptance and transformation processes in different eras. When Rousseau's "public will" and Locke's "natural rights" were born during the Enlightenment in the 18th century, they were characterized by distinct progressiveness and criticality. However, in the confrontation between totalitarianism and liberal democracy in the 20th century, they experienced completely different fates. This contextualist approach highlights the extreme importance of the historical context within which political ideas were read and reinterpreted. Reception history shows that there cannot be a direct transmission from ideas to political praxis. Ideas can always be susceptible to a selective, at least tendentious, re-reading in the context of other times, other crises, and other political propaganda. Even these external reinterpretations are not the only way in which meanings of central philosophical concepts change over time; one should also be interested in how they change internally, without any external influence: that is the concern of conceptual history. Whereas contextualization studies the historical and reception context of the philosophical semantics, conceptual history studies the differentiated evolution of the meanings of the philosophical semantics through time.

The idea of a "general will" as presented by Rousseau in the Enlightenment era is a significant change from the historical Western view of legitimacy being rooted in dynastic law, or later, in polity or authorities, standing in for monarchical law. Conceptual history now shows that the general will at this early stage was conceived of as open, inclusive, and equally participatory of all citizens, a function of the Enlightenment's belief in the potential of human reason and its belief in universal (moral) justice. He believes that true freedom stems from the common interests formed through collective consultation among citizens, rather than the simple accumulation of personal self-interest. This idea was originally a criticism of absolute monarchy and noble privileges, and envisioned a small republic composed of equal citizens.

In the 19th century, the development of Romantic nationalism influenced the understanding of the general will, as it took on a more cultural rather than rationalistic form, leading to concepts such as the "national spirit." This change took it from an idea limited to intellectual elites and, in a break from Herder's use, turned it into a standard heuristic device serving as a mechanism for building national identity and even ethnic unity, as the philosophers of the day compared the development of nationhood to the gestation and growth of an embryo. During the 20th century, in totalitarian states such as Nazi Germany, the inner semantic structure of Rousseau's general will was radically simplified and ideologically sealed. In this latter context, the original openness and deliberative nature of the concept was lost by an inflexible, unitary, national will held up as the basis for authoritarianism and racial exclusion. In other words, the concept's original democratic impulse was seriously weakened.

In contrast, Locke's theory of "natural rights" underwent another transformation. In "On Government (Part II)" (1690), Locke proposed that life, freedom, and property rights are inherent rights of human beings, and the legitimacy of government stems from the consent of the people. This theory provided a philosophical foundation for the Glorious Revolution in Britain and constitutional democracy in the United States. Locke's doctrine of "natural rights" suffered a comparable degree of semantic evolution. Rooted in a theological context in the thought of Locke, natural rights came in the Enlightenment to fall increasingly into a secular political discourse, in which the inviolability of individual freedoms and the sinfulness of unlimited governments are insisted upon. Natural law was mainly defended by Enlightenment intellectuals and the bourgeoisie in the search for limitations on absolutism. The era of industrial and capitalist growth in the 19th century also introduced the new concept of freedom, which accentuated the economic freedom of property and free trade even more. This liberal economy reduced the semantic scope of meaning, thus marginalizing Locke in the discussion of the social obligations and collective responsibilities, which turned out to be the focus of social arguments and disputes of inequality. In the 20th century, worldwide crises and attempts at international cooperation further solidified the normative framework of natural rights as well.

Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms," particularly as articulated as "freedom from want" and "freedom from fear," and the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, expanded its ambit to include economic security, social welfare, and international cooperation, shifting natural rights into a global ethical consensus.

The ideological evolution of Rousseau and Locke reveals two fates of political concepts: distortion and alienation (such as the extreme transformation of "public will" by the Nazis, making it a tool against democracy); Expansion and innovation (such as Roosevelt's reinterpretation of "natural rights" to adapt to the demands of modern society). This contrast also warns us that any philosophical concept can be redefined by power, and the key lies in who holds the power of interpretation. Historians must be vigilant against the trap of "retrospective projection" - that is, tracing back the "essence" of the original idea from later political practices. A proper study of the history of thought should reveal the complex genealogy of concepts rather than simplify them into linear causal chains.

Rousseau was not the source of Hitler's thoughts, just as Locke was not directly equated with Roosevelt and Churchill. The theories of both have been constantly reconstructed throughout history, and their significance depends on specific political demands and ideological struggles.

This process also echoes Michel Foucault's "archaeology of knowledge" - the meaning of concepts is not eternal but a product of discourse power. Therefore, when studying the history of political thought, we should not only trace its original context but also analyze its "strategic position" in different eras. Only in this way can we avoid simplifying history to the "original sin" or "prophecy" of philosophers.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this article uses different perspectives to understand Bertrand Russell's claim. A contextualist approach suggests that one must be cautious in understanding the philosophies of Rousseau and Locke within the historical context in which they were written. The history of reception stresses that philosophical concepts (such as Rousseau's 'general will' or Locke's 'natural rights') are prone to being positively or negatively interpreted when transferred from one historical setting to another. To these approaches, conceptual history (as defined by Koselleck and Skinner) adds a dimension that centres on the intrinsically semantic change in core philosophical concepts. All of these layers of analysis give us a much more complicated interpretation of Russell's remark than his powerful insight, but that is as it should be. It is impossible to accuse Rousseau of this fact without taking into consideration the monstrous falsification and confiscation of the initial democratic intentions of Rousseau in some historical conditions. Neither were the appropriations of Locke's ideas by Roosevelt and Churchill simply a further elaboration of Enlightenment ideas in a primitive form, but a learned reworking of those ideas to meet modern demands.

This broader evaluation offers a crucial methodological warning for contemporary historiography. It cautions us against projecting a determinate and transhistorical meaning on political concepts, as is customarily done with such notions as democracy. The ideas that ancient Athens meant by democracy differ significantly from the ideas that modern people refer to. In addition, the argument presented in this essay is a warning against the oversimplification of history. This issue is already inherent in the archaeological approaches developed by Michel Foucault (1969), as the latter focuses on the underlying structure, often leaving aside the nuanced, context-dependent definitions of concepts. Instead, historians are encouraged to be critical of the changing significance of concepts and their uses in different social and political contexts. Combining conceptual history with empirical social inquiry enables a deeper understanding of how ideas shape historical development.

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