

Society and Government: Locke, Rousseau, the “State of Nature,” and the Social Compact Student Worksheet

Introduction:

One of the primary questions Enlightenment thinkers applied rational analysis to was the basic nature of society and politics: How and why did societies arise in the first place? What did the conditions of their formation imply about political power? What responsibilities does a state have to its citizens, and vice versa? In this lesson, you will learn about two key concepts: the idea of a “state of nature” (i.e., the conditions under which people lived before they formed societies), and the “social compact” (a means by which people formed societies and governments).

Directions:

All Web links for this lesson can be found at:

<http://www.socialstudies.com/worldlinks.html>

“On the State of Nature”: Locke

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1690locke-sel.asp>

1. In the first section (number four), Locke says that in a state of nature all men have “perfect freedom,” but this is not a freedom to do whatever they please. What specifically does he say men in the state of nature have the freedom to do?
2. Why does Locke believe that men in the state of nature are equal? Do you agree with his reasoning here?
3. Go to section number six. Locke reiterates how the state of nature is a “state of liberty, yet it is not a state of licence.” In other words, the state of nature is not simply anarchy, but “has a law of Nature to govern it.” What is this “law” to which Locke refers? What conclusions about society does he think follow from this “law”?
4. Why does Locke think that this “law” will lead each man to conclude that “when his own preservation comes not in competition, ought he as much as he can to preserve the rest of mankind”? In your own words, paraphrase the meaning of this statement.
5. Go to section seven. Locke says here that “the law of Nature would...be in vain if there were nobody in that state of Nature had a power to execute that law, and thereby preserve the innocent and restrain offenders.” He concludes that because men in the state of Nature are equal, everyone has the right to “punish another for any evil he has done.” Do you agree with his conclusion here? Explain your reasoning.

“The Social Compact”: Rousseau

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/rousseau-contract2.asp>

Scroll down to “Chapter vi: The Social Compact.” Answer the following questions:

6. Rousseau begins here by claiming that a man in the state of nature at some point encounters “obstacles” that are too large for him to overcome on his own. Only by banding together with other men can one achieve “a sum of forces great enough to overcome” the obstacle. However, banding together poses a different problem, which Rousseau characterizes as “...[finding] a form of association which will defend and protect with the whole common force the person and goods of each associate, and which in each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone, and remain as free as before.” Do you agree with this statement? Is it possible to effectively take part in and give support to an “association” yet still retain all of one’s individual freedom? Can a person “unite” with others without sacrificing any of their individuality?

7. Rousseau next talks about the “clauses” of the social compact, and makes a distinction between “natural liberty” (that enjoyed by men in the state of nature) and “conventional liberty” (liberty created when men come together in association). He then concludes that the social compact actually only has one “clause”—“the total alienation of each associate, together with all his rights, to the whole community.” In your own words, paraphrase what you think this statement means, then explain why Rousseau believes the social compact in its essence insures equality for those who enter into it.

8. Explain how Rousseau contrasts the following sets of terms: “city” versus “republic”; “citizens” versus “subjects.” How does the way in which he defines these terms reveal his views on the nature of power under the social compact?

9. Compare Locke and Rousseau. In what ways are their views on the “state of nature” similar? In what ways are they different?

10. Write a paragraph or more showing how the ideas expressed in the selections by Locke and Rousseau could be used to argue against monarchy as a legitimate form of government.