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“Manly” Presences in Modernity: Social Contract Theory

Cristiana Roxana NEACȘU¹

Abstract

Although gender became an important identity marker only in the twentieth century, significant developments showing concerns with gender constructions can be traced back as early as the beginning of modernity. The enlightenment announced a reconsideration of many issues that had been taken for granted until then for generations. One can go back as far as to the end of the seventeenth century, when the cradle of political modernity began to take shape, being faced with the intellectual challenge of looking into the legacy of authoritarian thought, which had been reigning both in important institutions having to do with power (including the catholic church) and in intellectual circles. A range of beliefs that challenged established religious dogma gradually emerged with their alternative solutions, drawing attention to a very important issue that would announce great changes outside the religious realm: the realization that most of the things considered ‘natural’ were socially constructed. The study of the modern theories of the social contract will reveal aspects that feminists did value and reflect upon, as it will be seen further on, at the same time, the modernity bringing to light important issues for, what it is to become, decades later, men’s studies. The focus will be on three major social contract theorists separately. Each subsection will contain a brief presentation of the respective thinker’s essential arguments regarding the first signs of social constructions of gender, with special focus on their ideas about human nature and their denouncing of ‘naturalized’ authoritarian rule. The final goal is that of revealing manly presences and issues concerning gender constructions, as perceived in those centuries.

Keywords: *Gender; social contract; modernity; feminism; social constructions.*

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1. Introduction

Among those whom one may consider the founders of a modern patriarchal perspective, within the framework of the European Modernity, were Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, architects of the *Social Contract Theory*, which, in spite of these progressive aspects, is tinged with sexism and male chauvinism. They drew the attention to societal features of human beings by stating that every person got involved in several contracts with fellow beings. It were these aspects that made clear their relationship to others, but also the status they held in the society, at the time being, contributing to a better comprehension of the relations and contracts existing both between individuals and between individuals the authorities, and the manner in which they construct reality and inflict it upon the community.

The Contract was a step forward in the emancipation of the individual in relation to authority structures. This emancipation was beneficial for men, with women still having a secondary role in the family and in the society as a whole.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Thomas Hobbes' challenging of "natural" rules

A famous quote from Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* states that the "life of man," when "where there is no power able to overawe them all," is "poor, nasty, brutish, and short" [1]. Hobbes claims that men, in late modern Europe, need to exchange the continuous warfare, seen as normal for the state of nature, for a political, peaceful community, under the authority of the state. The manner in which they should do this is through the social contract, which should ensure them with security. As the quote above underlines, Thomas Hobbes' political theory has security and the fear of losing it, at its core. To Hobbes, human existence is defined by the need for security, humans' main fears being: fear of harm, war and death, aspects that are to be found even in contemporary writings, more precisely in novels that make the object of study in the current dissertation. Returning to Hobbes, in the state of nature, man's primary concern is to avoid the things he fears. In Hobbes's view, the expression of this drive is a form of self-interest, which pushes one to do whatever is needed to ensure his/her permanent motion or perennial existence. Thus, in the state of nature, individuals have the natural right to do things which are supposed to protect

their life, including things that may harm others, this unbridled self-interest being what generates a state of war involving violence and death.

Hobbes underlines that such a state is not a fertile ground for creation, development or even the most elementary, well-being. In this context, Hobbes affirms the necessity for peace under the authority of the social contract, contributing to a better comprehension of the relations and contracts existing both between individuals and between individuals the authorities, and the manner in which they construct reality and inflict it upon people.

In addition, it should be stipulated that Hobbes referred to men in the sense that women were not included, which makes worth examining the role of women within the Hobbesian family framework, particularly in the context of this dissertation. According to Hobbes, the chief feature of society is the father-child relationship, a paradigm in which the mother no longer finds her place. This aspect is also supported by Susan Okin, who argues that, although women participate in the family relationships in nature, once people enter the political realm, women become completely absent [2]. Once again Hobbes' sexism can be easily spotted in his writing, quite common to most of the male population at that time. Still, what needs to be underlined is his position as far as the 'naturalized' authoritarian rule was concerned, his pleading in favor of a social contract, this being a starting point for the coming to understand that gender is not god-given, but socially and culturally determined. Hobbes asserted that, along with marriage, family and sexual relations must be constructed, at least to a certain extent, through contract or political agreement. In Hobbes' opinion, there is a formal equality between women and men, but when women enter marriage, they consent the recognition of superior force. Consequently, marriage, work division inside the family, together with the social position of women as a sex in "wider society associated with it could now be seen as social constructs, rather than as a directly natural order - relevant to natural differences between men and women, but acting upon them rather than being determined by them" [3]. Indeed, if one replaces "gender relations" with "marriage contract", Hobbes's views can be put into contemporary words as follows: "The social practices that construct the gender relations do not express natural patterns, nor do they ignore natural patterns; rather they negate them in a practical transformation" [4].

Another central theme in Hobbes' *Leviathan* is violence. In his opinion, men, constantly dedicated themselves to protecting their honor, most of the times using violence. Hobbes considers that the goal of political society is to avert the abomination of the state of nature. As already seen, in Hobbes' opinion, man aspires to harmony, security and order. Hobbes

affirms that the existence or a mere anticipation of a belligerent existence would determine individuals to make the choices that will generate and maintain peace and stability, and this is the case of Updike's and Roth's main protagonists, as it will be seen.

To have these, people will place themselves under the authority of a sovereign with absolute power, capable of furthering peace and order. Only in this state of order and peace would people have a chance to live peacefully and comfortably according to their aspirations. Due to this belligerent existence of men, peace and democracy were difficult to attain, which made Hobbes consider necessary an absolute monarchy, as the only type of government suitable for men, strong enough to secure "on their [...] passions" [5].

The only way to erect such a common power as may be able to defend them from the invasion of foreigners and the injuries' of one another... is to confer all their power and strength upon one man, or upon one assembly of men, that may reduce all their wills, by plurality of voices, unto one will, which is as much as to say, to appoint one man or assembly of men to bear their person, and every one to own and acknowledge himself to be author of whatsoever he that so beareth their person shall act, or cause to be acted, in those things which concern the common peace and safety, and therein to submit their wills, everyone to his will, and their judgments, to his judgment [1].

The early modern England did provide justification for Hobbes's comment that the life of man is poor, nasty, brutish, and short. In the context of the violence that characterized that time, peace and democracy were, in fact, impossible. Among the issues that led to public violence among men, in early modern England, was "glory" [1]. According to Hobbes, quarrels over glory occur "for trifles, as a word, a smile, a different opinion, and any other sign of undervalue, either direct in their persons, or by reflection in their kindred, their friends, their nation, their profession, or their name" [1]. Next to glory, pride provokes, according to Hobbes, "a man to anger, the excess whereof is the madness called RAGE and FURY" [1]. In Hobbes vision, the most hypersensitive passion of all is pride, because due to it, one cannot accept different opinions, this leading to "excessive desire of revenge":

And thus it comes to pass that excessive desire of revenge, when it becomes habitual, hurts the organs and becomes rage; that excessive love,

with jealousy, becomes also rage; excessive opinion of a man's own self, for divine inspiration, for wisdom, learning, form, and the like, becomes distraction and giddiness; the same, joined with envy, rage: vehement opinion of the truth of anything, contradicted by others, rage [1].

To Hobbes, pride can become either “excessive love” or jealous rage. Another reason for men to each other, in Hobbes’ vision is “reputation” [1]. As Hobbes puts it, men “use violence to make themselves masters of other men’s persons, wives, children, and cattle” [1]. In early modernity, man’s state of nature provided additional arguments that men’s passions preempted possibilities for societal peace.

Abandoning tradition, Hobbes’ ideas supported the re-shaping of the state as a freely constructed artifice, serving the community’s collective needs. The Leviathan is not a Prince, as in the case of Machiavelli, but a man constructed with an aim: to settle law and order. Being among the first theorists who destroyed the irrational traditional constraints, Hobbes freed man to pursue his passions under the authority of a sovereign, securing a path for human development not established by nature, but freely constructed. In his political theory, Hobbes identifies the underlying force that animates man at the same time constructing a social and political order aimed at providing facilities for him.

The foundation of the Leviathan would be upon man’s most powerful force; his fear of death, having as means and method - the social contract. With the help of this instrument the Leviathan can be created. Further on, the Leviathan will transform the ‘natural’ man into a citizen through social construction.

2.2. John Locke’s gendered legacy

In Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government*, as in Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, human nature is generally delimited to males, women being disregarded, both as moral and political members of the society. Thus, Locke states that,

Every Man has a Property in his own Person. This no Body has any Right to but himself. The Labour of his Body, and the Work of his Hands, we may say, are properly his” [6].

In spite of his claims, he thinks women exempt from ‘natural freedom’, at the same time declaring that they need to be subordinated to their husband - “the Subjection that is due from a Wife to her Husband” [7]. In Locke’s opinion, women’s bodies are seen as weaker, at the same time

being constrained to the domestic/private sphere due to their childbearing abilities. Men, on the other side, are the ones in control of the public, political and economic aspects of life. It is true that, Locke inherently challenges the custom of marriage as a hierarchical contract pre-established by a higher, divine order, since he defines all political institutions as secular and modifiable relationships. Thus, the partners' abilities and flaws should establish the power balance within marriage, which, in Locke's opinion, is still inclined to the husband's side.

Although, Locke is obviously sexist, one should carefully consider the time when he wrote his theories, and focus more on his challenging of 'naturalized' law as well as on the necessity for a social contract between a limited government and the rest of the society.

2.3. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Views on the Social Contract

Rousseau's theory of social contract treats many of the ideas advanced by Hobbes and Locke. According to Rousseau, social characteristics and modern dwelling should be seen as features of civilization, therefore as social constructs, rather than of nature.

Jean Bethke Elshtain claims that Rousseau's theory disturbs feminists by its insistence on a number of issues which coincide or have a close connection with those that form the essence of the feminist enterprise [8]. One such coincidence occurs in Rousseau's argument about pity and egocentrism. Feminists are uneasy about conceptions of human nature which disregard the natural aptness to feel affection for others. Another feminist concern is the over-abstraction of human obligation. According to Rousseau, humans have an inborn concern for others which does not need a complex philosophical description. He even considers the nurturing relation between mother and child as the axis of language development. This differentiates Rousseau from the two philosophers discussed previously who, while mentioning the relationship between fathers and their children, ignore to a great extent the specific mother-child relationship. Apparently, Rousseau's ideas may raise great expectations on the part of feminists. But that is not the case at all. Of the three thinkers, Rousseau is the most negatively disposed to women, at least in his writings.

In his discussion of freedom and slavery, Rousseau criticizes Aristotle because he takes the "effect for the cause" [9]. He explains that a slave had the temperament of a slave because of slavery itself, and its effect on the human character. This propensity is not innate, but inflicted to them by chains. In the same way, eighteenth century women were the product of a traditional patriarchal family pattern. Their nature was not inborn, it was the

result of the social chains. As Pateman underlines, Rousseau considers that “the interrelated development of reason, language and social relationships is simultaneously the development of sexual difference, a difference that necessarily entails that women must be dependent on and subordinate to men” [10].

3. Argument of the paper

I have concentrated on the ideas of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau and social contract theory due to their importance for the subsequent development of social and political thought. Although they did not use the concept “gender” as explicitly as Freud would, later on, this was the only concept able to describe the structure of their arguments in an accurate manner.

4. Arguments to support the thesis

It is true that, as already seen, women are frequently disregarded as serious moral and political players. Also, when taken into account, women are generally just recognized as birth givers. Finally, depictions of human nature are usually circumscribed to males, being excluded elements of care from the frame of human nature. However, even if these thinkers are obviously sexist, like the vast majority of the male population at that time, their challenging of ‘naturalized’ authoritarian rule, their drawing attention to the fact that there should be a social contract between the ruler and those he or she rules paves the ground for the realization that gender is not god-given, but, like most things in a society, socially and culturally determined. The conclusion that one can speak of gender constructions is thus prepared, even if there would be centuries until it is shared by an important number of thinkers.

5. Arguments to argue the thesis

Summing up, it can be argued that the social contract theorist tried to explain the position of men and women as being socially constructed (a function of their gender), not naturally determined (rather than their sex). Hobbes even admitted that “Man is made fit for Society not by nature, but by Education” [1], where education means actually socialisation and social construction. He also advanced a relationship between men and women having as basis their sexual difference: the childbirth implications for

women. This was actually the point when Hobbes swang between the penis and the phallus.

According to MacInnes,

Hobbes, and the social contract theorists who followed him, solved the problem of accounting for the sexual genesis of human beings by appealing to a concept of sexual difference between them. He produced an account of what women essentially lacked, and rooted it in sex. But these roots had to be obscured if the principle of social contract was to be maintained, so this sexual difference had to be socially constructed; it had to be a product of socialization, what we would learn to think of as ‘gender’” [3].

Consequently, Hobbes considered that the fathers’ power came from the political order of the commonwealth, and it was on its behalf that fathers ruled. As it will be seen later on, social contract debates in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries turned into social construction and socialization debates in the twentieth century.

From a feminist point of view, more precisely, in Carole Patman’s terms, what bothers in the description of the Hobbessian family is its absolutism rather than its contractual form. In both the political contract and the family contract absolute power is given to an absolute ruler: the sovereign in the former and the “master” of the household in the latter [10].

Seventeenth-century debates about social contracts, according to John MacInnes, opened the way to new perceptions of gender, ‘masculinity’ being seen as some fundamental difference between men and women. They implied that all relations between people were socially constructed with one vital exception: sexual difference. These relations, they argued, were both natural and social. If they could imagine the differences between men and women to be social in some way, as well as natural, and that it was these social differences which explained the vastly different behaviour and experience of men and women, so that they could attribute men's public power to their ‘masculinity’ rather than their anatomy, then the theoretical circle could be squared, as it were. The apparently patriarchal sexual division of labour could now be seen to be the result of the contrasting gender identities of men and women and, as such, to be socially constructed, not naturally determined [3].

Even if, at first sight, the social contract theorists’ ideas are irrelevant in the analysis of masculinity, there are at least two reasons for which they are important. The first one is that social contract theories laid the basis for

referring to society through sociology and social constructionism. The second one because, in spite of the fact that the contract theorists did not use the masculinity concept, they invented it, along with the concept of gender, from the point of view of the social construction of sexual difference starting from the sexual division of labour, and not only. They did this with the aim to explain men's superiority to women, trying to avoid explanations having to do with nature.

6. Dismantling the arguments against

Joanne Wright explains that, "since gender was not of primary concern to Hobbes or Locke, to discuss their interpretations of gender is to read our political concerns and problematics into the past" [11]. It is true that, the enlightenment scholars had no special interest in proving that gender is culturally constructed, but their challenging of authoritarian rules and the divine right of kings, for example, as well as religious dogma, paved the way for an understanding of the mechanisms through which prevailing systems and ideologies construct reality and impose it on its populations.

7. Conclusions

To conclude, the political theories developed by Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau are three of the most influential and challenging discourses about human nature and political society. However, a closer analysis enables one to see that their representation of human nature has important shortcomings, especially in their approach of the roles of women and family. The difficulty lies in consent, a notion on which all three philosophers discussed herein, lay emphasis. The three theories are developed by men, they focus on men and are intended for men. As Susan Moller Okin argues, the expression "human nature" in most political theorists is designed to apply exclusively to male human nature [2].

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