

THE PHILOSOPHY BEHIND POLITICS

Ms. Jiya Doshi

Student

Prabhavati Padamshi Soni

International Junior College

Juhu, Mumbai – 400049.

Mark Twain once said,

“There is no such thing as an original idea.”¹

History is witness to the intersections on the bulletin board of politics and philosophy. The rationalists arguing on the table, torn apart by ideologies and theories, the dialectical tensions, all sources from clashing doctrines established by philosophy. The impact of it sends shockwaves, high frequencies of differing opinions that shape the landscapes and eras of politics. For students, history is like a lens that allows past mistakes to be evaluated and circumvented, so that the strengths of each empire can be recorded and incorporated in the world around us, sculpting it to retrospect and steering it to reach heights our ancestors couldn't.

Year	Historical Figure(s)	Event
1689	John Locke	<i>Two Treatises of Government</i>
1762	Jean-Jacques Rosseau	<i>The Social Contract</i> - Proposes a world where man is “forced to be free”
1919	Adolf Hitler	rises to power in Germany
1941	Franklin D. Roosevelt	Four Freedoms
	Winston Churchill	Liberty is the essence of civilization

These dates might feel like numbers, but put them in a Rube Goldberg machine and Russel's famous quote “Hitler is an outcome of Rousseau; Roosevelt and Churchill of Locke.” is born, filing history into color-coded folders. It necessitates delving into the trajectories of Rousseau's romanticism and Locke's empirical rationalism, assessing whether their constructs were the inevitably picked up and re-established by political leaders of the 20th century. Jean-Jacques Rosseau, a philosopher of great paradoxes, was the inaugurator of various ideological currents. With socialism and nationalism on one side and romanticism and existentialism on the other, he was instrumental in shaping several movements². Rosseau is probably best known for his idea of ‘general will’ – he believed that a legitimate state is guided by the collective will of people³. This laid the very foundation of revolution. He strongly believed that the corruption of human goodness was rooted from societal structures³ and romanticized human nature.

Despite this, embedded somewhere, was the contradictory tension between liberty and authority. His controversial ideas included his support towards liberty and freedom as well as the belief in totalitarianism. While he championed individual freedom, he believed that to fight against the fraud and deterioration of morality, ethics and general values, the state or its administrative system should become all-powerful. The very roots of controversy source from his idea that the general will represents the real will of all and that this will could never be wrong as all individuals would participate in it. Any refusal of it would be followed by application of force. His infamous words 'forced to be free' link force and freedom⁴, which is impossible pragmatically. The paradox suggests that unwilling citizens would be compelled into compliance, which blurs the borders between democrats and totalitarians.

This utopian framework would have been great to uphold civics, but in the hands of autocratic leaders like Robespierre and Hitler, proved to be a weapon under the veil of unity. Adolf Hitler, the famous dictator of Nazi Germany, best known for his fascist regime with his obsessive pursuit of national homogeneity and purity echoed Rousseau's emphasis on supremacy of a unified body; however his principles of racial exclusion are starkly different from Rousseau's ideas of inclusivity.

There is a straight line from Rousseau to Hitler – both of them grew out of the failure of the rationalist liberalism of their times. They both tried translating totalitarianism of the rationalist to open and effective totalitarianism⁵. However, the difference lies in Rousseau's vision of a democratic structure where individuals shaped laws and Hitler's principles to enforce rigid authoritarianism. His state power was wielded as an instrument of oppression and dictatorship under the name of 'benefit for the state'.

Rousseau's ideologies relied firmly on mutual agreement and freedom, but Hitler enforced the same loyalty to the state through violence and oppression. This is the most realistic portrayal of the consequence of putting freedom and force together. Hitler strongly believed in racial purity and Aryan ('the master race') supremacy, but Rousseau's perspective involved unity via civic participation and shared values. While Rousseau's visions were utopian, when translated and executed by Hitler, they were distorted to something quite different.

Rousseau encouraged equal rights for everyone, but this was strongly turned down by Hitler, who eliminated those deemed inferior to the Aryans. It is strongly observed that the roots of the Nazi ideology source from Darwin, Nietzsche and the philosopher Houston Stewart Chamberlain⁶. Hitler mentions the term 'struggle for existence' several times in *Mein Kampf*⁷ and believed in picking the strongest organisms (Aryans) and eliminating the weakest. Racial mixing was described as deleterious to biological organisms, stymieing evolution⁶.

Rousseau's paradox of 'forced to be free' was twisted to Hitler's enforcement of loyalty, where the focus was on 'forced' not 'free'. His views on racial purity, nationalism and xenophobia triggered societal divisions, which was discouraged by Rousseau. Hitler not only centralized absolute power, silencing any sorts of oppression, but he also utilized fear, propaganda and immorality to manipulate masses and exercise his control.

While Rousseau encouraged guidance and education, respecting human dignity, Hitler used education as a tool for propaganda for his vision, conditioning citizens to accept the Nazi ideology. The many atrocities of Hitler towards inferior groups such as dehumanizing them have been written in the darkest inks in the pages of history.

Another case where Rosseau's ideology went crashing down is The French Revolution where liberty wore a crimson sash and the 'General Will' led not to unity but to the guillotine. However, an example of a modern leader who focused on the 'free' part of the statement 'forced to be free' was Nelson Mandela. His leadership and vision, especially his ideas on civil religion, the social contract and fight against apartheid portrayed a society united by a collective identity⁸.

We can say that Russel's opinions about Hitler and Rousseau are only superficially correct. Mandela, however, is a leader who followed Rousseau's vision. On diving past the surface, the principles of Hitler and Rousseau are strictly different. It can be said that a few ideas of Rousseau inspired Hitler, but his interpretations of those ideas are strongly different than what Rousseau originally thought.

Similar is connecting between John Locke and Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill. John Locke, among the most influential political philosophers of the modern period, supported human rights like the right to life, liberty and property⁹ which laid the foundations of the modern-day democracy. This influenced political structures around the world such as in the US, France, UK, India, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. His firmest belief lay in the theory of natural law and natural rights⁹. He suggested that citizens have a right to disregard the social contract, overthrowing the government and instilling a better one if the government isn't protecting its citizens¹⁰. This suggests that governments derive the legitimacy and power from the consent of those governed. In clear distinction from Rousseau's collectivist philosophy, Locke had a doctrine of liberal empiricism championed individual rights, limited government and the primacy of reason.

When it comes to Roosevelt and Churchill, two symbols of democratism in the 20th century, both have shown a sort of affinity to Locke's ideas. Locke advocated for life, liberty and property as fundamental rights; both leaders encouraged freedom and democracy. Roosevelt introduced the idea of four freedoms (freedom of speech and expression, freedom of worship, freedom from want and freedom from fear¹¹) to the congress in 1941. Known for speaking aloud about democracy, one of his most famous quotes include, "In their blindness they forget what the flag and the Constitution stand for. Now, as always, they stand for democracy, not tyranny; for freedom, not subjection; and against a dictatorship by mob rule and the over-privileged alike."¹² Churchill, likewise, is also known for his quote, "All the great things are simple, and many can be expressed in a single word: freedom, justice, honor, duty, mercy, hope."¹³ Sometimes considered to be a half-hearted democrat, he was reluctant to trust people (he did not support suffrage and low-class and uneducated people having voting rights) and be in harmony with 'the Gettysburg ideal'¹⁴. This portrays his mixed feelings about few aspects of democracy which don't reflect Locke's ideas completely.

However, it was Churchill and Roosevelt's wartime leadership that showed a strong commitment that protected both the democratic governance as well as the people's will. They both upheld legal frameworks ensuring justice and stability and did their best to protect freedom of individuals. They let the government serve the people and used governance to reflect citizens' needs. One of the most notable happenings was the establishment of the United Nations, with the goal to promote the very core of Locke's principles.

However, differences are observed between Locke's ideologies and the practices of these leaders. They encouraged government actions during crisis. A few examples include Roosevelt's New Deal (used an interventionist approach to lift USA out of the Great Depression)¹⁵ and

Churchill's leadership during war (for military strategizing, wartime policies and unity). Here, governments were seen exercising their power to address changes within the society. Locke, however, promoted limited government, stressing on the fact that its role was to protect rights. Locke's focus on individual rights and freedom argued that a collective action should not affect these liberties. However, sometimes, these leaders had to consider collective action first, especially during World War II, where they had to act for the greater good. Just like it was for Rousseau, it can be observed that Locke's theories, while they were extraordinary, were ideal, but in the practical world, it may be assumed, in certain contexts and situations, it would feel utopian.

Yet, there is a leader who brought this sense of utopia to reality. Woodrow Wilson's advocacy for democracy, self-determination, and the League of Nations is a strong portrayal of Locke's principles even during war times¹⁶. This was seen in instances where he brought sheep to the White House to graze and auctioned wool to the Red Cross¹⁷. His actions fell under the interest of the public and safeguarded individual freedoms. Yet, it can be said that Russell's second claim was more accurate than his first. Locke's philosophy gave us leaders that preserved democracy and the rights of the people. To conclude, Bertrand Russell's assertion is superficially true, but has a lot of gray areas when closely examined.

Rousseau's philosophical paradoxes caused controversies and authoritarian reinterpretation. However, one cannot blame all of Hitler's totalitarianism solely due to Rousseau's influence – it was rather an incorporation of several distortions from many philosophers, historical grievances, economic instabilities, and radical nationalism. Furthermore, Locke's commitment to liberty has a greater resonance with the leadership of Roosevelt and Churchill with the government being like a mutual agreement between the rulers and those who were ruled. While they usually stuck to his principles, extreme crisis did raise the alarm to look at the bigger picture.

It can be said that Locke's liberal empiricism did pass on to Roosevelt and Churchill, but Hitler's connection to Rousseau relies heavily on individual understandings. Ultimately, history resists a fixed interpretation. Ideas are like organisms – they evolve, mutate, and find themselves as weapons or crowns in the hands of leaders. Rousseau and Locke did not create totalitarianism or democracy – they remain forces whose legacies (intended or not) keep sculpting political thought. Russell's statement makes historians and philosopher's research and may, someday, spark inspiration for a new generation of leaders. It reminds us that philosophy, like history, is an ever-changing landscape. There are several ways to look at it – almost like a holographic image. It cannot define a specific governance or idea of governance, but it can definitely spark a whole new system of running the world.

Russell saw monsters in Rousseau and angels in Locke. But history tells us: even angels cast shadows. Russell's claim is dramatic, maybe even unfair. But it's not wrong. It's a reminder. Ideas aren't good or evil. They're powerful. And in the hands of those desperate enough, brilliant enough, or broken enough—they shape empires, burn cities, and leave legacies carved into tombstones and textbooks.

So maybe the real question isn't "*Was Russell right?*"

It's "*What legacy and ideas will we inherit next?*"

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. "There is no such thing as a new idea. We simply take a lot of old ideas and put them into a sort of mental kaleidoscope. - Mark Twain," *Dr. Gary Fox*, Apr. 29, 2019. <https://www.garyfox.co/quote/no-such-thing-as-a-new-idea/>
2. "An Introduction to the Work of Rousseau," *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. <https://thegreatthinkers.org/rousseau/introduction/>
3. C. Bertram, "Jean Jacques Rousseau," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2010. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rousseau/>
4. "Rousseau is a Totalitarian Thinker – Justified !," *Political Science Notes*, Jul. 28, 2016. <https://www.politicalsciencenotes.com/political-thinkers/jean-jacques-rousseau/rousseau-is-a-totalitarian-thinker-justified/1127>
5. P. F. Drucker, *The Future of Industrial Man*. Transaction Publishers, 2011.
6. S. Rank, "Hitler's Views on Eugenics and Aryan Supremacism," *History*, Feb. 21, 2017. <https://www.historyonthenet.com/hitlers-views-eugenics>
7. A. Hitler, *Mein Kampf*. London: Pimlico, 1925. Available: <https://greatwar.nl/books/meinkampf/meinkampf.pdf>
8. A. H. Jazbhay, "When Mandela Meets Rousseau: An Exploration of South Africa's Civil Religion," *Advances in African economic, social and political development*, pp. 159–177, Aug. 2019, doi: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-25143-7_8.
9. A. Tuckness, "Locke's political philosophy," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Nov. 09, 2005. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/locke-political/>
10. D. Pandya, "John Locke, The Social Contract, and Democracy," *Philosophy in Context*, Jun. 09, 2021. <https://www.philosophyincontext.com/guest-contributions/john-locke-the-social-contract-and-democracy>
11. F. Roosevelt, "President Franklin Roosevelt's Annual Message (Four Freedoms) to Congress (1941)," *National Archives*, Jan. 06, 1941. <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/president-franklin-roosevelts-annual-message-to-congress>
12. "Franklin D. Roosevelt Quotes About Democracy | A-Z Quotes," *A-Z Quotes*, 2025. https://www.azquotes.com/author/12604-Franklin_D_Roosevelt/tag/democracy (accessed May 26, 2025).
13. "Winston Churchill Quotes About Freedom | A-Z Quotes," *A-Z Quotes*, 2025. https://www.azquotes.com/author/2886-Winston_Churchill/tag/freedom (accessed May 26, 2025).
14. pixelstorm, "'Part of the Constitution': Winston S. Churchill and Parliamentary Democracy," *International Churchill Society*, Jul. 02, 2013. <https://winstonchurchill.org/publications/finest-hour/finest-hour-136/part-of-the-constitution-winston-s-churchill-and-parliamentary-democracy/>
15. History.com Editors, "New Deal - Programs, Social Security & FDR," *HISTORY*, Oct. 29, 2009. <https://www.history.com/articles/new-deal>
16. D. W. Yang, "An Agonized State of Peace: The Lockean Social Contract Theory of Woodrow Wilson," *Philpapers.org*, 2019. <https://philpapers.org/rec/YANAAS-2> (accessed May 26, 2025).
17. W. Bushong, "The Life and Presidency of Woodrow Wilson," *WHHA (en-US)*, 2013. <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/the-life-and-presidency-of-woodrow-wilson>