Constitutional Rights Foundation
Educate. Participate.

HOBBES, LOCKE, MONTESQUIEU, ROUSSEAU ON GOVERNMENT

Overview

This study of Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, and Rousseau is designed to give students an understanding of the ideas of these four philosophers and is also an opportunity for them to reflect on humanity's need for order and efforts to create stability within the social community. In the first part of the unit, activities focus student awareness on the nature of government itself and then progress to close reading and writing centered on the specifics of each philosopher's views. Large-group and small-group discussion as well as textual evidence are emphasized throughout. In the second part of the unit, students are asked to engage in creative writing that has research as its foundation. Collaboration, role-playing, and a panel discussion are fundamental parts of the culminating activity. Options for further writing activities and assessments close the unit.

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Discuss and differentiate the main ideas of Enlightenment philosophers Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, and Rousseau.
- Compose an interior monologue for a philosopher based on text provided and historical research.
- Explain and defend the ideas of a philosopher in a panel discussion.

Materials

- Handout A: Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, and Rousseau on Government (one for each student)
- Handout B: Interior Monologue Assignment (one for each student)
- Handout C: Moderator's Questions for Panel Discusssion (one for panel moderator)

Standards Addressed

National High School World History Standard 27: Understands how European society experienced political, economic, and cultural transformations in an age of global intercommunication between 1450 and 1750. (4) Understands influences on the spread of scientific ideas and Enlightenment thought . . . .

California History-Social Science Content Standard 10.2: Students compare and contrast the Glorious Revolution of England, the American Revolution, and the French Revolution and their enduring effects worldwide on the political expectations for self-government and individual liberty. (1) Compare the major ideas of philosophers and their effects on the democratic revolutions in England, the United States, France, and Latin America (e.g., John Locke, Charles-Louis Montesquieu, Jean-Jacques Rousseau . . .).

Common Core Standards Addressed

Reading Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies

Key Ideas and Details RH.10-12.1, 2, 3

Craft and Structure RH.10-12.4, 6

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas RH.10-12.8, 9

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity RH.10-12.10

Writing Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies

Text Types and Purposes WHST.10-12.1.a, b, c, d, e, WHST.10-12.2.a, b, c, d, e, f

Production and Distribution of Writing WHST.10-12.4, 5,6

Research to Build and Present Knowledge WHST.10-12.7, 8,9

Range of Writing WHST.10-12.10

I. Procedure

A. Focus Activity

Present the following hypothetical situation and corresponding questions to students.

"Stranded"

You and a group of approximately 20 others (ages 10-17) have become stranded on a deserted island. Fruit trees appear to be the major source of food. Water is available from rainfall. You possess the clothes on your back. There is no apparent shelter.

1. What would be your major problems?

2. What would you need to do first?

3. Explain what types of persons in the group would emerge as leaders.

4. Describe various types of conflicts that might occur among individuals in the group.

5. How might these problems be resolved?

6. How would order, continuity, and social welfare be established and maintained within the group?

B. Debrief the Activity: Large-Group Discussion

At the conclusion of the small-group work, initiate a class discussion by having groups share their ideas from the hypothetical situation activity. As the discussion progresses, encourage students to reflect on:

--man's relationship to nature;
--man's need for community;
--the role of law and government in the protection of the individual and the maintenance of society;
--the impact of political power on both the individual and society;
--the power of government to advance man's welfare.

C. Examining the Four Philosophers

Begin your central examination of Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, and Rousseau by asking students to read the accompanying text in Handout A (full text below) and then to write answers to the following questions. This activity should encourage close reading and help students begin to comprehend the complexities of the philosophers' ideas. Student work here will provide a foundation for the remaining activities and assessments in this unit.

You may want students to work individually or in pairs while working on this material. They should use textual evidence in each section.

Hobbes Discussion Questions

1. What significant historical event occurred prior to Thomas Hobbes' writing of *Leviathan*? What is the meaning of the title?
2. Explain what Hobbes meant by the "state of nature" and by the "social contract."
3. Why did Hobbes believe that the best form of government had a king as its sovereign?
4. How did Hobbes view the church's relationship to government?

Locke Discussion Questions

1. What was John Locke's educational and political background? How did his background reflect Enlightenment ideas?
2. Although Locke in *Two Treatises of Government* agreed with Hobbes about the necessity of a social contract in a brutish state of nature, what were his disagreements regarding man's natural rights and the operation of the social contract? How did he view the power of the king?
3. What were Locke's views on property and its relationship to government?
4. Explain Locke's ideas about representative government. What role did property play in his conception of voting rights?

Montesquieu Discussion Questions

1. Describe Montesquieu's family, educational, and political background.
2. In *The Spirit of the Laws*, how did Montesquieu differ from Hobbes and Locke in his beliefs about the state of nature? What did he mean by "the state of war" and its relation to "the state of society"?
3. According to Montesquieu, what was the main purpose of government? What did he determine was the best form of government? Why?
4. How did Montesquieu somewhat misinterpret the exercise of political power in England?

Rousseau Discussion Questions

1. Explain Rousseau's early life, education, and first successful writing experience.
2. How did Rousseau view man in a "state of nature"? What, according to Rousseau, was the influence of society on man, particularly the ownership of property? How did he disagree with Hobbes, Locke, and Montesquieu regarding the idea of the social contract?
3. What was the relationship between the social contract and the sovereign as stated in Rousseau's work *The Social Contract*?
4. Explain Rousseau's ideas about a direct democracy and political power. How did he view religion's relationship to the state?

D. Large-Group Discussion on Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau Texts

You have many options within a large-group discussion of the background material on Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, and Rousseau. Listed below are various choices to consider. A combination of two or more of these strategies can also be effective.

1. Discuss the reading material by eliciting responses to each of the discussion questions chronologically.
2. Discuss central components embedded within the readings by each philosopher. These components could be compared and contrasted--for example, the state of nature, the social contract, the king, property, political power, forms of government.
3. Explore each philosopher's relationship to Enlightenment thinking and how it evolved over time.
4. Examine the connections between the writers' historical/cultural/personal environments and the development of their political philosophies.

II. Individual Research and Writing

A. Research

After the large-group discussion of the reading material in Part I above, assign one of the four philosophers to each students for further research and writing. You may also allow students to choose a philosopher to research. (Be sure that Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, and Rousseau are allotted equally throughout the class so that the activity following this assignment will work effectively.)

Students should research their philosopher in depth, using what they know at this point as context for further exploration. You may want to require a specific number and/or type of resources. In addition to directing students toward more biographical context for their philosophers, provide students with the topics below as continued focus for their research.

1. Representative democracy
2. The power of the sovereign and the people
3. Making laws within a society
4. Religion's relationship to government
5. The state of nature
6. The social contract
7. Property laws

B. Interior Monologue

Once students have completed their research, assign them to write an interior monologue in the voice of their philosopher. This activity will give them the opportunity to use what they have already learned through reading, discussion, and research about Hobbes', Locke's, Montesquieu's, and Rousseau's views. They can now further express this knowledge through a synthesis of factual information and their own creative imaginations.

Review the characteristics and components of interior monologues with your students. Emphasize that interior monologues represent the individual's inner world including thoughts, feelings, and conflicts. The

interior monologue communicates the person's thoughts as if spoken aloud, similar to a dramatic soliloquy in a play. Students should write in first person aiming to reflect both the philosopher's intellectual beliefs about the subject matter as well as an authentic persona based on what they have learned about him. To accomplish this, they will need to use the research material they have explored, their understanding of the content, and their own imagination regarding the philosopher's inner life.

C. Small-Group Collaboration

After students have written their interior monologues, place them in small groups according to philosopher. (Depending on the size of your class, you may need two groups for each of the four philosophers in order to maintain an effective small-group size.)

Then, ask students to share their interior monologues within their small groups. (They may wish to read the monologues aloud or simply exchange them within the group and read them silently.) Direct students to discuss the content of the monologues in terms of the topic areas, how each philosopher's ideas are communicated, and the similarities and differences between monologues.

Once students have discussed the monologues, ask them to choose one member of the group to portray their philosopher in the panel discussion that follows this activity. Provide each group with 3x5 cards and allow them enough time to pull information from the monologues for the panel member to use as an aid during the discussion.

D. Large-Group Panel Discussion

Representatives from the Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, and Rousseau groups portray the philosophers in a panel discussion. (You may want to split the discussion into two parts to accommodate student representatives from all groups if you have more than four.) You will need a **moderator** for the discussion to relay the questions and provide clarification of points when necessary. The discussion should flow freely with panel members speaking at will (without raising their hands), engaging interactively with other panelists, and communicating a recognizable persona for their individual philosopher. Before the discussion begins, consider speaking to the panelists as a group to encourage them to provide specific content knowledge in their responses and to actively agree and disagree with other philosophers. They should use primary and secondary textual support from their research and their monologues in their answers as well.

NOTE: Consider including a second part to the panel discussion in which the audience can play a role.

E. Options for Post-Panel Discussion

1. At the conclusion of the discussion, students in the audience can ask panelists extended questions of their own.

2. Use a large-group discussion to explore the similarities and differences between the philosophers' views.

3. Ask students to discuss parallels from Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, and Rousseau to modern political beliefs and/or systems.

III. Enrichment Activities/Assessments

1. Which one of the four philosophers (Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, or Rousseau) do you agree with the most? Give three reasons for your choice. Use textual evidence from your readings as support.

   (You can assign this writing activity as one full paragraph or as a five-paragraph essay.)

2. Discuss the evolution of Enlightenment thinking as reflected in the views of the philosophers Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, and Rousseau. Use textual evidence as support.

   (This writing activity would be most effective as a six-paragraph essay. Students should trace Enlightenment development by focusing on a specific philosopher in each body paragraph.)

3. Small-Group Writing Activity

Students can use what they have explored and learned in the preceding activities by participating in this small-group assignment which asks them to create their own government. Encourage students to discuss the following areas thoroughly before deciding on the components of their own model government.

A. Purpose of government

B. The social contract

C. Formation of laws

D. Governmental entities

E. Political power

F. Rights of the individual

The written report that students produce should consist of four sections:

1. An introduction that discusses man's need for government and the nature of the social contract.

2. A central section that explains the mechanics of their governmental system. Here they would describe how laws are made, the various divisions of government and how they interact, and how political power operates.

3. A reflection on the rights of the individual and their view of how those rights would exist within their government.

4. A final section in which students identify components of Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, and Rousseau that influenced the creation of their government.

Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, and Rousseau on Government

Starting in the 1600s, European philosophers began debating the question of who should govern a nation. As the absolute rule of kings weakened, Enlightenment philosophers argued for different forms of democracy.

Thomas Hobbes

In 1649, a civil war broke out over who would rule England: Parliament or King Charles I. The war ended with the beheading of the king. Shortly after Charles was executed, an English philosopher, Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), wrote *The Leviathan*, a defense of the absolute power of kings. The title of the book referred to a leviathan, a mythological, whale-like sea monster that devoured whole ships. Hobbes likened the leviathan to government, a powerful state created to impose order.

Hobbes began *The Leviathan* by describing the state of nature where all individuals were naturally equal. Every person was free to do what he or she needed to do to survive. As a result, everyone suffered from continued fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man [was] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

In the state of nature, there were no laws or anyone to enforce them. The only way out of this situation, Hobbes said, was for individuals to create some supreme power to impose peace on everyone.

Hobbes borrowed a concept from English contract law: an implied agreement. Hobbes asserted that the people agreed among themselves to "lay down" their natural rights of equality and freedom and give absolute power to a sovereign. The sovereign, created by the people, might be a person or a group. The sovereign would make and enforce the laws to secure a peaceful society, making life, liberty, and property possible. Hobbes called this agreement the social contract.

Hobbes believed that a government headed by a king was the best form that the sovereign could take. Placing all power in the hands of a king would mean more resolute and consistent exercise of political authority, Hobbes argued. Hobbes also maintained that the social contract was an agreement only among the people and not between them and their king. Once the people had given absolute power to the king, they had no right to revolt against him.

Hobbes warned against the church meddling with the king's government. He feared religion could become a source of civil war. Thus, he advised that the church become a department of the king's government, which would closely control all religious affairs. In any conflict between divine and royal law, Hobbes wrote, the individual should obey the king or choose death.

A new age with fresh ideas was emerging: the European Enlightenment. Thinkers of this time, including Hobbes, wanted to improve human conditions on earth rather than concern themselves with religion and the afterlife. These thinkers valued reason, science, religious tolerance, and what they called "natural rights": life, liberty, and property.

Enlightenment philosophers John Locke, Charles Montesquieu, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau all developed theories of government in which some or even all the people would govern. These thinkers had a profound effect on the American and French revolutions and the democratic governments that they produced.

Locke: The Reluctant Democrat

John Locke

John Locke (1632–1704) was born shortly before the English Civil War. Locke studied science and medicine at Oxford University and became a professor there. He sided with the Protestant Parliament against the Roman Catholic King James II in the Glorious Revolution of 1685. This event reduced the power of the king and made Parliament the major authority in English government.

In 1690, Locke published his *Two Treatises of Government*. He generally agreed with Hobbes about the brutality of the state of nature, which required a social contract to assure peace. But he disagreed with Hobbes on two major points.

First, Locke argued that natural rights such as life, liberty, and property existed in the state of nature and could never be taken away or even voluntarily given up by individuals. These rights were "inalienable" (impossible to surrender). Locke also disagreed with Hobbes about the social contract. For him, it was not just an agreement among the people, but between them and the sovereign (preferably a king).

According to Locke, the natural rights of individuals limited the power of the king. The king did not hold absolute power, as Hobbes had said, but acted only to enforce and protect the natural rights of the people. If a sovereign violated these rights, the social contract was broken, and the people had the right to revolt and establish a new government. Less than 100 years after Locke wrote his *Two Treatises of Government*, Thomas Jefferson used his theory in writing the Declaration of Independence.

Although Locke spoke out for freedom of thought, speech, and religion, he believed property to be the most important natural right. He declared that owners may do whatever they want with their property as long as they do not invade the rights of others. Government, he said, was mainly necessary to promote the "public good," that is to protect property and encourage commerce and little else. "Govern lightly," Locke said.

Locke favored a representative government such as the English Parliament, which had a hereditary House of Lords and an elected House of Commons. But he wanted representatives to be only men of property and business. Consequently, only adult male property owners should have the right to vote. Locke was reluctant to allow the propertyless masses of people to participate in government because he believed that they were unfit.

The supreme authority of government, Locke said, should reside in the law-making legislature, like England's Parliament. The executive (prime minister) and courts would be creations of the legislature and under its authority.

Charles Montesquieu

Montesquieu: The Balanced Democrat

When Charles Montesquieu (1689–1755) was born, France was ruled by an absolute king, Louis XIV. Montesquieu was born into a noble family and educated in the law. He traveled extensively throughout Europe, including England, where he studied the Parliament. In 1722, he wrote a book, ridiculing the reign of Louis XIV and the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church.

Montesquieu published his greatest work, *The Spirit of the Laws*, in 1748. Unlike Hobbes and Locke, Montesquieu believed that in the state of nature individuals were so fearful that they avoided violence and war. The need for food, Montesquieu said, caused the timid humans to associate with others and seek to live in a society. "As soon as man enters into a state of society," Montesquieu wrote, "he loses the sense of his weakness, equality ceases, and then commences the state of war."

Montesquieu did not describe a social contract as such. But he said that the state of war among individuals and nations led to human laws and government.

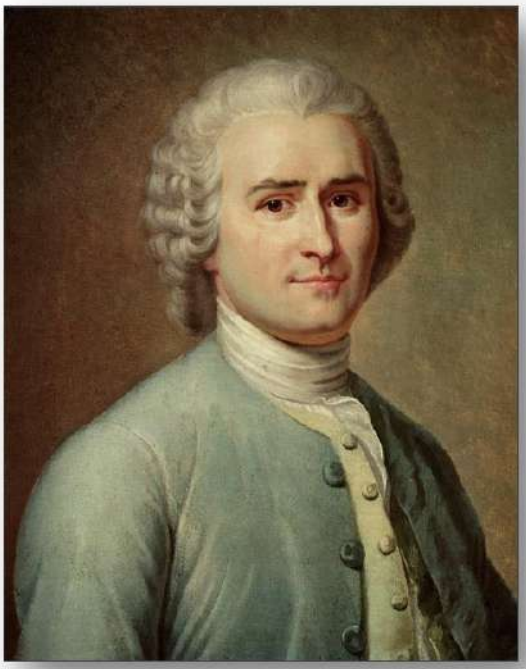
Montesquieu wrote that the main purpose of government is to maintain law and order, political liberty, and the property of the individual. Montesquieu opposed the absolute monarchy of his home country and favored the English system as the best model of government.

Montesquieu somewhat misinterpreted how political power was actually exercised in England. When he wrote *The Spirit of the Laws*, power was concentrated pretty much in Parliament, the national legislature. Basing his ideas on separation of powers in the ancient Roman Republic, Montesquieu thought he saw a separation and balancing of the powers of government in England as well.

Montesquieu viewed the English king as exercising executive power balanced by the law-making Parliament, which was itself divided into the House of Lords and the House of Commons, each checking the other. Then, the executive and legislative branches were still further balanced by an independent court system.

Montesquieu concluded that the best form of government was one in which the legislative, executive, and judicial powers were separate and kept each other in check to prevent any branch from becoming too powerful. He believed that uniting these powers, as in the monarchy of Louis XIV, would lead to despotism. While Montesquieu's separation of powers theory did not accurately describe the government of England, Americans later adopted it as the foundation of the U.S. Constitution.

Rousseau: The Extreme Democrat



Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) was born in Geneva, Switzerland, where all adult male citizens could vote for a representative government. Rousseau traveled in France and Italy, educating himself.

In 1751, he won an essay contest. His fresh view that man was naturally good and was corrupted by society made him a celebrity in the French salons where artists, scientists, and writers gathered to discuss the latest ideas.

A few years later he published another essay in which he described savages in a state of nature as free, equal, peaceful, and happy. When people began to claim ownership of property, Rousseau argued, inequality, murder, and war resulted.

According to Rousseau, the powerful rich stole the land belonging to everyone and fooled the common people into accepting them as rulers. Rousseau concluded that the social contract was not a willing agreement, as Hobbes, Locke, and Montesquieu had believed, but a fraud against the people committed by the rich.

In 1762, Rousseau published his most important work on political theory, *The Social Contract*. His opening line is still striking today: "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains." Rousseau agreed with Locke that the individual should never be forced to give up his or her natural rights to a king.

The problem in the state of nature, Rousseau said, was to find a way to protect everyone's life, liberty, and property while each person remained free. Rousseau's solution was for people to enter into a social contract. They would give up all their rights, not to a king, but to "the whole community," all the people. He called all the people the "sovereign," a term used by Hobbes to mainly refer to a king. The people then exercised their "general will" to make laws for the "public good."

Rousseau argued that the general will of the people could not be decided by elected representatives. He believed in a direct democracy in which everyone voted to express the general will and to make the laws of the land. Rousseau had in mind a democracy on a small scale, a city-state like his native Geneva.

In Rousseau's democracy, anyone who disobeyed the general will of the people "will be forced to be free." He believed that citizens must obey the laws or be forced to do so as long as they remained a resident of the state. This is a "civil state," Rousseau says, where security, justice, liberty, and property are protected and enjoyed by all.

All political power, according to Rousseau, must reside with the people, exercising their general will. There can be no separation of powers, as Montesquieu proposed. The people, meeting together, will deliberate individually on laws and then by majority vote find the general will. Rousseau's general will was later embodied in the words "We the people . . ." at the beginning of the U.S. Constitution.

Rousseau was rather vague on the mechanics of how his democracy would work. There would be a government of sorts, entrusted with administering the general will. But it would be composed of "mere officials" who got their orders from the people.

Rousseau believed that religion divided and weakened the state. "It is impossible to live in peace with people you think are damned," he said. He favored a "civil religion" that accepted God, but concentrated on the sacredness of the social contract.

Rousseau realized that democracy as he envisioned it would be hard to maintain. He warned, "As soon as any man says of the affairs of the State, 'What does it matter to me?' the State may be given up for lost."

Sources

Aaron, Richard I. "Locke." *New Encyclopaedia Britannica Macropaedia*. 2002 ed. • Abbott, Leonard Dalton, ed. *Masterworks of Government*. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1947. • Conroy, Peter V. *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. Twayne Publishers, 1998. • Cranston, Maurice. "Jean-Jacques Rousseau," *New Encyclopaedia Britannica Macropaedia*. 2002 ed. • Ebenstein, William. *Great Political Thinkers, Plato to the Present*, 3rd ed. New York: Holt, Rinhart and Winston, 1963. • Havens, George R. *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978. • "Hobbes, Thomas." *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica Micropaedia*. 2002 ed. • Levine, Andrew. *Engaging Political Philosophy From Hobbes to Rawls*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002. • Robertson, John. "The Enlightenment." *History Review*. 1 Sept. 1997. • Shackelton, Robert. "Montesquieu, Charles." *New Enccyclopaedia Britannica Micropaedia*. 2002 ed. • Shklar, Judith N. *Political Thought and Political Thinkers*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Images: Wikimedia Commons

Cite as: Martz, Carlton. "Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, and Rousseau on Government." *Bill of Rights in Action*. Constitutional Rights Foundation, Spring 2004.

Interior Monologue Assignment

You have been assigned to research Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, or Rousseau. Imagine what your assigned philosopher would think or say about the following topics of his time:

- Representative democracy
- The power of the sovereign and the people
- Making laws within a society
- Religion's relationship to government
- The state of nature
- The social contract
- Property laws

Then write an interior monologue that illustrates his views about the above. You may also reference specific biographical and/or historical information or events that you learned about your philosopher during your research. You may even add details that are not explicitly in the reading materials as long as these details are consistent with the characterization and views of your philosopher as well as the historical and cultural environment of the time.

Include some directly quoted material from your initial reading and research as part of your imagined interior monologue.

Strive to create a strong voice for your philosopher that reflects both his intellectual viewpoints and his personal characteristics.

Moderator's Questions for Panel Discussion

The moderator can determine the order of the questions. Discussion of each topic should continue until the question is fully answered and students have had ample opportunity to engage. Avoid each panelist providing only one statement for each area.

1. Explain man's relationship to nature.

2. What is the individual's relationship to society?

3. What role should religion play in government?

4. How should laws be made in a society?

5. Who should have the most political power in government?

6. What form of government is most effective?

7. What rights to property should the individual hold? What should governmental property rights entail?