

Remembering the Social Contract

For months the Framers toiled away over the Constitution in the Philadelphia summertime heat. Their arguments, inflammatory and measured, their beliefs, contradictory and determined, were fossilized on a piece of parchment. The transition from written word to political institution began with agreement, and this is the basis of what Benjamin Franklin, a Pennsylvania Delegate to the Constitution, meant when he declared, “Much of the Strength and Efficiency of any Government in procuring and securing Happiness to the People depends on Opinion, on the general Opinion of the Goodness of that Government as well as of the Wisdom and Integrity of its Governors.” Without the agreement in the authority of its overarching power, our democracy is at a standstill. Without our mutual belief in the moral judgment of our governors, it is difficult to discern whether or not we have truly consented to our political agreements. At the Constitutional Convention, Franklin spoke these prescient words, foreshadowing modern feelings of political disillusionment not unlike the sentiments those very colonists sought to overcome—ultimately affirming the importance of the social contract.

The political theory that the United States was founded on has its direct origins in the work of Enlightenment philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. In their 17th and 18th century works, these philosophers argued their respective proposals for transcending the natural human condition and establishing political authority. Though their theories differ in endless ways, each agrees on one necessity to a working body politic: the social contract. The social contract, fundamentally, is the compact among people to surrender certain rights and submit to a common power, all of which is founded on mutual trust and protection. Inspired by these ideas, the Founding Fathers established this social contract, designing our civilization to last— but more importantly, designing it to change.

In that same speech, Franklin said, “For when you assemble a number of men to have the advantage of their joint wisdom, you inevitably assemble with those men, all their prejudices, their passions, their errors of opinion, their local interests, and their selfish views. From such an assembly can a perfect production be expected?” It is no secret that the Constitution is imperfect. Time has magnified those prejudices, passions, and errors of its authors, and now it is up to the people of today to amend such imperfections. It is in our private interest to attain a society representative of its citizens.

Though unforeseeable to the original Social Contract theorists, the industrial revolution spurred economic disparity at unprecedented rates. Even since the 1980s, income rates have increased among the upper class while the middle class has been steadily depleted. More than one in ten people live below the poverty line (Horowitz et al.). These economic realities make clear the necessity of an adaptive government, equipped to protect the welfare of its members. Furthermore, the climate crisis threatens the liberty of people across the planet. Air pollution and ocean acidification disproportionately affects marginalized demographics— those least represented in politics (Patnaik et al.). Along with the COVID-19 pandemic, we have all stood witness to how these natural disasters can exacerbate social disaster. The tumult of the past several years has driven people to recognize the importance of an effective government. According to the United States Census Bureau, “The 2020 presidential election had the highest voter turnout of the 21st century, with 66.8% of citizens... voting in the election.” When faced with the gravity of our current times, more Americans opted to have their voices counted. Now more than ever, this reevaluation of our social contract is critical.

Although the social contract is commonly theorized to be an agreement made at one moment in time, persisting even as legislation changes, its relationship to the public is constantly

evolving. To engage in the social contract is to engage in a timeless tradition, of which Franklin was cognizant. He set forth the Constitution with the stipulation that one's relationship with the government depends on their faith in that government. He described the inevitability of despotism. Still, he urged his fellow delegates to sign that incomplete document, aware of their own fallibility, but also aware of our perpetual striving towards a trustworthy government— one based on the agreement between citizens and the goodness of its governors. Franklin was insinuating that America will reach its despotic end only when our social contract with one another becomes null and void. It is for this reason that our sustained, active involvement in society is essential to a working government.

Works Cited

- Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan: With Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1668*. Edited by Edwin Curley, Hackett Publishing, 1994.
- Horowitz, Juliana Menasce, et al. "Trends in U.S. Income and Wealth Inequality." *Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project*, Pew Research Center, 9 Jan. 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/01/09/trends-in-income-and-wealth-inequality/>.
- Locke, John, and A. John Simmons. *Second Treatise of Government*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2021.
- Patnaik, Aneesh, et al. "Racial Disparities and Climate Change." *PSCI*, The Trustees of Princeton University, 15 Aug. 2020, <https://psci.princeton.edu/tips/2020/8/15/racial-disparities-and-climate-change>.
- Smith, Duane. "An Introduction to the Political Philosophy of the Constitution." *An Introduction to the Political Philosophy of the Constitution*, Civiced.org, <https://www.civiced.org/papers/political.html>.
- "The Papers of Benjamin Franklin." *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, The American Philosophical Society and Yale University, <https://franklinpapers.org/>.
- US Census Bureau. "2020 Presidential Election Voting and Registration Tables Now Available." *Census.gov*, 8 Oct. 2021,

<https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2021/2020-presidential-election-voting-and-registration-tables-now-available.html>.