



FREEDOM IN THE POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF J. LOCKE AND J.J. ROUSSEAU: IMPLICATIONS FOR RESOLVING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL LIBERTY AND POLITICAL STABILITY IN CONTEMPORARY VIETNAM

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Abstract:

This article focuses on analyzing and comparing the concept of freedom of thought within the philosophical systems of John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, two prominent representatives of the Social Contract theory. Based on this theoretical framework, the author draws a direct correlation to the current practical context of Vietnam—a nation in the process of building a socialist rule of law state and undergoing profound international integration. The article argues that resolving the relationship between individual liberty and political stability in Vietnam is not an exclusive choice but rather a process of harmonizing these two values.

Keywords: freedom; J. Locke; J.J. Rousseau; Vietnam

1. Introduction

In the history of thought, J. Locke and J.J. Rousseau represent two successive generations of the 17th and 18th-century Enlightenment. The continuity and development of ideas from J. Locke to J.J. Rousseau are intrinsically linked to political culture. Between Locke and Rousseau, we find humanistic ideals as both aimed at progressive values, primarily for human beings, and subsequently for political-legal life. From different perspectives, differences remain between them, reflecting the acceptance of the "*possible*" within specific conditions on one hand, and the relentless effort to strive for the highest values that humanity deserves regardless of circumstances on the other. In the current context, where political conflicts are increasing in both intensity and scope, establishing a unified understanding of freedom will contribute to creating connective values and resolving contemporary conflicts. This article focuses on clarifying and suggesting solutions to the outstanding issues regarding the relationship between individual liberty and political

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stability in Vietnam amidst the explosive growth of artificial intelligence and digital media.

2. Literature Review

The issue of freedom of thought and the relationship between the individual and the state is a classic theme that has attracted the attention of domestic and international scholars for centuries. The literature review can be categorized into three main groups:

First, studies on the philosophical thoughts of John Locke and J.J. Rousseau. Globally, the works of scholars such as Peter Laslett (analyzing Locke) and Robert Derathé (analyzing Rousseau) have laid a solid foundation for understanding the Social Contract. These studies focus on clarifying the contrast between Locke's egoistic individualism and Rousseau's moral communitarianism. In Vietnam, translation and critical works by scholars like Nguyen Hien Le, or research conducted at the Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics, have systematized the ideas of these two philosophers from the perspective of dialectical materialism, affirming their progressive value in countering the absolute power of feudalism.

Second, studies on individual freedom and political stability in the modern context. Many modern political science works have discussed the "*paradox of freedom*." Scholars like Isaiah Berlin, with his concept of "*two concepts of liberty*" (negative liberty and positive liberty), provided theoretical tools to deeply analyze the boundaries between individual rights and state intervention. Domestically, studies on the socialist rule of law state often emphasize the supremacy of law as a method to maintain stability without eliminating the driving force of individual development.

Third, studies directly relating to Vietnam's reality in the digital age. Over the past decade, the explosion of cyberspace has spurred a new wave of research on freedom of speech and national security. Articles in the Communist Review and the Jurisprudence Journal frequently delve into refining institutions to control the "*dark side*" of freedom of thought in order to protect the Party's ideological foundation. However, most current research tends to separate classical philosophical theory from practical solutions, or solely focuses on the security aspect without deeply exploring the harmonization between Locke's and Rousseau's philosophies as a comprehensive model for social governance.

The novelty of this article lies in its effort to systematically connect the core values of Locke's "*natural rights*" and Rousseau's "*general will*" to propose a governance mechanism in Vietnam. The research goes beyond merely protecting political stability; it views freedom of thought as an endogenous resource to consolidate that very stability in the new context.

3. Material and Methods Material

3.1 Material

Primary data sources include the original works of the two philosophers: *Second Treatise of Government* and *A Letter Concerning Toleration* by John Locke; and *The Social Contract* by J.J. Rousseau. Secondary data sources encompass documents of the Communist Party of Vietnam on promoting democracy and the people's right to mastery; the 2013 Constitution; human development index reports; and research works by domestic and international scholars related to political philosophy and national governance.

3.2 Methods

To accomplish the research tasks, this article utilizes the methodological system of dialectical materialism and historical materialism, combined with the following specific methods:

3.2.1 Textual Analysis

Used to dissect core concepts such as "*natural rights*," "*general will*," and "*civil liberty*" in the original texts of Locke and Rousseau, ensuring academic objectivity and accuracy.

3.2.2 Comparative Method

This plays a primary role in contrasting the similarities and differences between the two models of freedom, thereby establishing the strengths and limitations of each doctrine when placed in a complex social context.

3.2.4 Logical-Historical Method

Applied to examine the evolution of liberal thoughts from the 17th-18th centuries until their internalization into modern Vietnamese practice, ensuring continuity and suitability with the nation's distinct historical-political characteristics.

3.2.5 Interdisciplinary Approach

The article integrates knowledge from philosophy, jurisprudence, and political science to analyze the dialectical relationship between individual rights and social order, thereby proposing highly applicable recommendations.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. J. Locke's thoughts on human and civil rights

John Locke is one of the foundational figures of the U.S. Constitution and many contemporary bourgeois nations, with his core value being the promotion of individual "*civil liberty*" and the limitation of government power. In the *Second Treatise of Government*, his most important political work, Locke uses natural law and natural rights as the

foundation for the civil rights that humans enjoy, which are respected and protected by the government. However, if natural law and natural rights are to be harmonized, it is necessary to determine which holds the decisive role. According to the tradition of natural law, humans must always uphold certain moral obligations, such as not harming the life or property of others. Conversely, according to the tradition of natural rights, originating from Thomas Hobbes, individuals possess absolute rights to serve their own needs. Thus, if an individual is starving to death and facing someone who is defending their food with their life, that individual must decide either to accept death to preserve natural law, or to disregard natural law and exercise their natural right by any means to seize the food to survive. How did Locke expect an individual to act in such a situation?

According to the author's research, Locke prioritizes natural rights; despite some modifications, his philosophy is fundamentally similar to that of Thomas Hobbes. Returning to Hobbes helps clarify the philosophy of natural rights that Locke inherited. Primarily, Hobbes created a new approach by building his political philosophy not on the foundation of natural law, but on natural rights—the right of each individual to protect themselves and pursue their own good, essentially doing as they please. In Hobbes's state of nature, humans are free and independent, entitled to pursue their own self-interest without obligations to one another. The underlying natural logic is this: the Creator gave individuals the independence and freedom to care for themselves; therefore, the Creator must give them the right to do whatever is necessary to maintain their existence. Hobbes considered this a fundamental moral logic that requires no external validation. Consequently, with such an inevitable and understandable logic, a consequence of the state of nature is the "*war of every man against every man*": natural humans are at war with each other. Therefore, individuals unite based on a common contract to create society and government to establish peace and stability, even if that government may restrict the civil rights people enjoy.

For Hobbes, moral obligations have no place, whereas Locke combined natural rights with natural law—or in other words, a combination of natural rights and innate moral obligations. In Chapter Two of the *Second Treatise of Government*, he asserts that humans in the state of nature are free and equal, and free to do whatever they wish—but only "*within the bounds of the law of nature.*" He wrote: "*The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one: and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions: for men being all the workmanship of one omnipotent, and infinitely wise maker; all the servants of one sovereign master, sent into the world by his order, and about his business...*"ⁱⁱ. Locke argues that natural law dictates that individuals have an obligation to respect the property, life, and liberty of others. However, the natural law Locke refers to possesses immense, overarching power governing human behavior derived from natural rights. A human being has a natural right to freedom, inherently a free creature not born to be subjugated or used by others; from this, it is deduced that each person

ⁱⁱ J. Locke (2006). *Second Treatise of Government*. Knowledge Publishing. p.35-36

possesses freedom but simultaneously holds the obligation to respect the freedom of others. It can be understood that one's rights always exist in correlation with the rest, so that all can achieve their own goals while mutually respecting each other's rights.

Despite these differences, Locke ultimately echoes Hobbes in asserting that the state of nature—even with natural law instructing mutual respect—cannot be a state of eternal peace. Ultimately, the state of nature remains a state full of insecurity. Even if it is not as brutal as Hobbes described, the reality that individuals will defy natural law to protect their natural rights (e.g., I will kill someone who tries to take my life) is not uncommon. The relationship between the government and citizens was framed within the context of the English absolute monarchy facing revolutionary upheaval that was both overthrowing and incomplete; Locke justified the revolution's achievements by supporting a constitutional monarchy that combined royalist power and parliamentary democracy. Clearly, based on Locke's theory, both natural rights and natural law still yield a society where insecurity reigns, and the relationship between people, and between citizens and the state, has not achieved an optimal state of harmony. Such a foundation leads to political systems that protect civil rights but can easily drift toward two extremes: either excessive freedom (anarchy) or a dictatorial government (fascism). Meanwhile, reality shows that in many states, citizens are very eager to protect their rights but superficial in shouldering the accompanying responsibilities and duties. *"I do whatever the law does not forbid because it is my civil right, even if what I do may harm the long-term collective interest."* In unprecedented circumstances, this clearly manifests selfishness in the exercise of civil rights. The way citizens exercised their rights during the recent COVID-19 pandemic in several countries has clearly demonstrated these points.

4.2. J.J. Rousseau's Perspectives on Human Rights and Civil Rights

Succeeding Hobbes and Locke, Rousseau presents a view of civil rights that is not entirely based on natural rights or natural law, but rather on human nature itself. To Rousseau, there is no dictate from the Creator compelling humans to live for themselves or for others. All that nature provides is a benign human being - meaning one who does not yet know how to commit evil to harm others. They wander in the woods, lacking social relationships. Thus, Rousseau's starting point of the *"state of nature"* differs from his two predecessors; he views it as the very beginning of humanity, where natural disposition is most apparent, rather than the pre-state condition conceptualized by Locke and Hobbes. In such a state, humans lack the *"innate morality"* to self-determine mutual obligations as Locke posited; consequently, human natural rights are also very faint, particularly characterized by the absence of the right to private property. Rights associated with humans, such as the rights to liberty, private property, and equality, according to J.J. Rousseau, only truly take clear form when humans enter into the contract, become members of society, and are equally bound under a common legal system. Even a citizen's right to life in society is a right conferred by the contract. When the community requires it, an individual must sacrifice their life as a condition in exchange for having lived in

peace. J.J. Rousseau emphasizes: "*The social contract is the basis of all rights in a state*"ⁱⁱⁱ.

According to M. Simpson, "*Locke establishes his theory based on highly complex ideas about the relationship between humanity and God, which Rousseau and most others do not utilize. Rousseau simplified it significantly by arguing that all rights are established upon the social contract, outside of which people have very few moral obligations to each other*"^{iv}.

Even though Rousseau, similarly to Locke, affirms the unity of human rights and civil rights in the transition from the state of nature to the civil state, his concern about the possibility of rights being distorted in society demonstrates that his critical-historical approach is well-founded. This is why J.J. Rousseau's social contract is the agreement that establishes society while explicitly establishing civil rights. Rousseau not only addresses the consciousness of existence when humans decide to form a voluntary association, but also emphasizes the optimal condition for that association through the integration of human rights from the natural state to the civil state. The convention (contract) agreed upon between individuals is also what is codified into law, allowing the people the right to determine their own destiny, rather than any other derivative branch of power.

Ultimately, the purpose of Locke's "*contract*" is the "*maximum preservation*" of inherent rights in the state of nature, whereas Rousseau's "*contract*," as he asserts, brings about profound changes in human values. The transformation brought by the contract is not simply the institutionalization of rights but the creation of new values, making a true human being: "*The passage from the state of nature to the civil state produces a very remarkable change in man, by substituting justice for instinct in his conduct, and giving his actions the morality they had formerly lacked... Although, in this state, he deprives himself of some advantages which he got from nature, he gains in return others so great... that he ought to bless the happy moment which took him from it for ever, and, instead of a stupid and unimaginative animal, made him an intelligent being and a man*"^v.

Because he affirms that individual rights are clearly established before and outside of civil society, J. Locke views the primary political task as restraining state power, preventing the government from abusing power and infringing upon individual rights. Meanwhile, J.J. Rousseau emphasizes humans' capacity to self-organize political life, independently establishing or promoting rights suitable to their nature with the state's support. The act of using collective force to compel citizens who only think of personal interests to submit to the general will is not a deprivation of individual freedom, but rather the act of placing individual freedom in an organic relationship with the freedom of everyone. The dialectic of freedom and necessity is resolved in the spirit of harmonizing the individual-society relationship. In a social environment, all citizens have social responsibilities, creating a unity of freedom and morality. Every free action of mine is considered so as not to conflict with the freedom of others. This harmonious relationship becomes a human guiding principle in acknowledging the law of the

ⁱⁱⁱ Rousseau. (2020). *On Social contract*. (Hoang Thanh Dam translate). The World Publishing. p.80

^{iv} M. Simpson. (2006). *Rousseau's theory of freedom*. MPG Boos Ltd Press. p.85

^v Rousseau. (2020). *On Social contract*. (Hoang Thanh Dam translate). The World Publishing. p.78-79

conscious development of the socio-historical subject. Here emerges the dialectical relationship between the citizen and the state: the State is a means for a good life, and the life of each citizen is a part of that very life. J.J. Rousseau desires to build an order that achieves harmony and unity among the state, society, and the citizen, replacing an order fraught with wariness, imposition, and mutual constraint. In *Emile, or On Education*, J.J. Rousseau asserts that a good social order knows how to transform humans to fit the whole. He writes: "Good social institutions are those that best know how to denature man, to take his absolute existence from him in order to give him a relative one and transport the I into the common unity, with the result that each individual believes himself no longer one but a part of the unity and no longer feels except within the whole"^{vi}. These are the ideas that imbue J.J. Rousseau's political-legal philosophy with a spirit distinct from J. Locke's, despite the significant inheritance from him.

In terms of historical value, the ideas of Locke and Rousseau helped people understand that being human inherently entails natural freedom and equality; nature did not originally divide humans into hierarchies to mold them into different roles upon entering society. Instead, it was the political institutions erected by humans that pushed people into slavery, with subsequent philosophical doctrines merely emerging to justify the existing institutions. Therefore, all institutions or doctrines aimed at stripping away human freedom and equality are fundamentally absurd. And since they are all human-made products, they can also be abolished by humans. On the other hand, the continuity and development of thought on freedom from Locke to Rousseau not only reflects the evolution of philosophical and political thought but is also an element of culture—political culture. This is most evident in the demands both Locke and Rousseau place on individuals when participating in political life as citizens or rulers. Rousseau's development over Locke shows his emphasis on the importance of each individual with an independent, educated consciousness in "constructing" political life, rather than merely acting as an overseer like Locke. This provides a crucial implication for constructing political life in contemporary society, where the material conditions of economic life increasingly obscure human participation in the political sphere.

4.3 Implications for Resolving Issues Related to the Relationship Between Individual Liberty and Political Stability in Vietnam in the Current Context of Media Explosion

Political reality in contemporary Vietnam poses a key problem: resolving the relationship between individual liberty and political stability in a context where individual liberty is framed with broader and deeper connotations alongside the development of digital media and artificial intelligence. Therefore, reflecting the philosophical thoughts of John Locke and J.J. Rousseau onto the current Vietnamese context goes beyond academic research; it carries profound practical significance in the process of building a socialist rule-of-law state. During the phase of digital transformation and deep international

^{vi} Rousseau. (2008). *Emile, or On Education* (Le Hong Sam – Tran Quoc Duong translate). The Knowledge Publishing. p.35

integration, Vietnam faces the challenge of harmonizing the individual's increasing need for freedom of thought with the requirement to maintain political stability—the prerequisite for all development. Reality in Vietnam shows a strong resurgence of individual awareness regarding natural rights, which John Locke once considered inviolable. With the popularization of the Internet and social media platforms, the space for citizens' ideological expression has expanded unprecedentedly. This creates significant momentum for social critique and intellectual contribution to national governance. However, viewed from Locke's perspective, freedom of thought and expression can only exist sustainably when protected by a transparent legal system, where the "red line" between individual rights and state power is clearly defined. In Vietnam, perfecting the legal system, such as the 2013 Constitution or the Cybersecurity Law, is a concrete effort to delineate this boundary, ensuring that individual freedom does not become an arbitrary infringement on the common good. On another dimension, Rousseau's idea of the "General Will" provides a crucial framework for explaining and consolidating political stability in Vietnam. According to Rousseau, individuals are only truly free when they obey rules they themselves participated in establishing for the common good. In the Vietnamese political system, this "General Will" is manifested through the mechanism of socialist democracy with the motto "*People know, people discuss, people do, people check, people supervise, people benefit*".

When State policies accurately reflect the aspirations and interests of the vast majority of the people, a social consensus will be established. This is the highest form of political stability: a stability not based on coercion, but on the voluntary embodiment of the individual within national and ethnic interests.

However, the challenge is how to avoid the risk of the "*tyranny of the majority*" or the abuse of power in the name of the common good to stifle individual thought. To address this, Vietnam needs a harmonious combination of Locke's "tolerance" and Rousseau's "*communitarianism*." Political stability should not be understood as ideological uniformity, but as unity in diversity. The State needs to create mechanisms so that critical opinions, even if divergent, can find appropriate access channels to contribute to common development. This requires a transparent administration and an open political culture, where the individual's freedom of thought is viewed as a creative resource propelling society forward, rather than a threat to the existing order. The convergence between the ideas of the two Western philosophers and Vietnamese reality leads to a crucial realization: individual liberty and political stability are not mutually exclusive, "zero-sum" categories. Conversely, they are two sides of a sustainable development process. Individual freedom of thought (per Locke) provides the energy and creativity to prevent social stagnation, while political stability based on the general will (per Rousseau) creates a safe framework so that this freedom does not lead to chaos. In the current period, resolving this relationship is the key for Vietnam to continue successfully implementing the *Đổi mới* (Renovation) process, building a society characterized by a prosperous people, a strong nation, democracy, justice, and civilization.

In Vietnam, the institutionalization of human rights in the 2013 Constitution creates an intersection between natural rights and civil rights. In Locke's philosophical tradition, the rights to life, liberty, and property are natural rights predating the state. Contrasted with Vietnamese reality, the 2013 Constitution marked a significant shift in thinking by transitioning from the approach of "*rights granted by the State*" to "*human rights recognized, respected, and protected by the State.*" Specifically, in Chapter II, provisions on freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and access to information (Article 25) are the concretization of individual liberty thought: "*Citizens have the right to freedom of speech, freedom of the press, access to information, assembly, association, and demonstration. The exercise of these rights is prescribed by law*"^{vii}. However, the "Rousseauian" nature is clearly articulated in Article 15, establishing the principle: "*The exercise of human rights and citizens' rights may not infringe upon national interests or the lawful rights and interests of others*"^{viii}. This is exactly the self-regulating mechanism of the social contract, where individual freedom is placed in harmony with public order. The 2013 Constitution helps affirm that Vietnam does not mechanically adopt Western ideas but has internalized them in alignment with the goal of building a socialist rule-of-law state.

Freedom of thought and social consensus serve as a "*soft power*" resource helping Vietnam maintain stability and development amidst a complex and volatile world. A nation's power in the 21st century is measured not only by its arsenal or GDP but also by its ability to win the trust and creativity of its people. If Locke's thought emphasizes unleashing individual energy to create prosperity, Rousseau's consensus (General Will) is the glue that binds society. In Vietnam, when freedom of thought is guaranteed within the legal framework, it creates conditions for intellectuals, entrepreneurs, and the youth to contribute breakthrough initiatives. A society with openness in thinking will project a dynamic and progressive national image internationally. Conversely, political stability based on high consensus (General Will) makes Vietnam a safe destination for investment and cooperation. Combining these two elements is the optimal way to maximize national "*soft power*," turning the diversity in individual thought into the synergistic strength of the great national unity bloc.

The next issue is the boundary between social order and the right to expression in the context where social networks have become a vibrant space in Vietnam. Cyberspace today is a new kind of "*state of nature*," where ideological currents clash most fiercely. Here, the governance challenge emerges clearly: how to protect freedom of speech (Locke) without letting it mutate into chaos that threatens national security (Rousseau). The enforcement of the Cybersecurity Law in Vietnam can be viewed as an effort to establish a "*civil contract*" in the digital environment. The State acts as an arbitrator to prevent privacy violations, fake news, and extremist ideologies that could disrupt

^{vii} National Political Publishing House. (2023). *Vietnamese Constitutions Through the Ages (the constitutions of 1946, 1959, 1980, 1992, and 2013)*. p. 200.

^{viii} National Political Publishing House. (2023). *Vietnamese Constitutions Through the Ages (the constitutions of 1946, 1959, 1980, 1992, and 2013)*. p. 197.

political stability. However, to be truly effective, cyberspace governance cannot solely rely on technical measures or administrative sanctions but must aim at building "*digital citizenship awareness*." When each individual realizes that their freedom ends where the rights of the community begin, we will achieve the ideal state that both Locke and Rousseau aimed for: a free society under the rule of law. This is an issue the Vietnamese government must resolutely implement and legislate to maximize the effectiveness of political stability in harmonizing individual liberty.

5. Recommendations

Based on the analysis of the similarities and differences between the thoughts of Locke and Rousseau, this article proposes several orientations to harmonize individual liberty and political stability in the context of Vietnam:

First, continuing to perfect the legal mechanism for protecting human rights. Applying the spirit of Locke's "*natural rights*" requires legal regulations to be specific, transparent, and predictable. The State needs to continue reviewing and clearly legislating prohibited acts based on the principle: individuals are permitted to do everything that the law does not forbid. Simultaneously, it is necessary to build independent oversight institutions to ensure that freedom of thought is not infringed upon by the abuse of power by law enforcement agencies.

Second, democratizing social life to establish the "*General Will*". In the spirit of Rousseau, the most sustainable political stability must be based on social consensus. It is crucial to expand channels for direct dialogue between the Party, the State, and all strata of the people, especially intellectuals and the youth. The substantive implementation of the mottos "*people benefit*" (*dân thụ hưởng*) and "*people supervise*" (*dân giám sát*) will help transform individual demands for freedom into civic responsibility, thereby generating the strength of voluntary solidarity.

Third, enhancing cyberspace governance capacity in conjunction with digital citizenship education. Instead of relying solely on technical measures for control, emphasis should be placed on fostering the "*capacity for responsible freedom*." The State should encourage the formation of ethical standards in cyberspace, where individuals are self-aware of the boundary between freedom of speech and the responsibility toward overarching stability. Creating a healthy digital environment is precisely the way to enforce the "*social contract*" in the new era.

Fourth, promoting a culture of constructive criticism. The diversity in individual thought (Locke) must be viewed not as a threat to stability, but as a creative resource. Establishing open scientific and social forums will help filter dedicated contributions, thereby assisting the State in making policies that closely align with reality and further consolidating the people's trust in the political system.

6. Conclusion

The study of freedom of thought in the philosophies of John Locke and J.J. Rousseau not only holds historical significance but also carries profound contemporary value for Vietnam's development process. Despite differences in their approaches—one emphasizing the protection of the individual from government interference, the other elevating the individual's integration into the community—both converge on the ultimate goal of building a civilized and progressive society. In Vietnam, resolving the relationship between individual liberty and political stability is essentially a process of seeking a dynamic balance. Stability is not the ultimate end, but rather the condition for the individual to develop freely; conversely, individual freedom is the intrinsic driving force that consolidates social stability. The selective inheritance of progressive values from Western philosophy, combined with current cultural characteristics and political institutions, will help Vietnam build a sustainable development model. It is a society where every individual has the right to think, create, and express themselves, while simultaneously remaining closely tied to the common interests of the nation within a durable and humane social contract.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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