

NEW POLITICS FOR NEW PEOPLE: A SYNTHESIS OF THE POLITICAL THOUGHTS OF MACHIAVELLI, LA BOÉTIE AND JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the political philosophies of Niccolò Machiavelli, Etienne de La Boétie, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, proposing a synthesized framework for understanding and reforming modern governance. The study aims to address the persistent tensions between authority, liberty, and equality by integrating key insights from these thinkers into a cohesive model of political leadership and citizen empowerment. The research problem centers on the challenges posed by authoritarianism, civic disengagement, and systemic inequality in contemporary politics. Machiavelli's realism highlights the necessity of pragmatic authority, advocating for adaptive leadership to ensure stability while cautioning against the excesses of unchecked power. La Boétie's concept of voluntary servitude interrogates the legitimacy of power, emphasizing the role of citizens in perpetuating or resisting oppression. Rousseau critiques structural inequalities and champions a vision of egalitarian democracy where individual freedom aligns with collective well-being. The central argument of the paper is that effective governance in the modern era requires a synthesis of these perspectives: Machiavelli's practical leadership, La Boétie's challenge to passive compliance, and Rousseau's egalitarian ideals. The methodology involves a critical comparative analysis of their works to construct a tripartite vision of governance that balances authority with empowered citizenship and ethical leadership. The findings suggest that integrating these philosophical insights can inform the development of a political ethos that prioritizes human agency, equality, and social cohesion. The paper concludes by proposing pathways for reimagining governance in an era increasingly defined by disempowerment and inequality, advocating for a politics that fosters a conscious and engaged populace.

Keywords: Citizenship, Power, Freedom, Oppression, Realism, Governance.

Introduction

What is politics, and what does it entail? What are its essential characteristics? In an age defined by rapid cultural shifts and technological advancements, there is an urgent need to rethink politics for "new people"—the diverse, globally connected, and technologically driven populations of the 21st century. This work engages with the political philosophies of Niccolò Machiavelli, Étienne

de La Boétie, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau to synthesize an innovative concept: "new politics" for "new people." By drawing on key ideas from works like *The Prince*, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* and *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*, this article seeks to examine how their timeless insights into power, governance, and citizenship can address the complexities of our present era.

The question at the heart of this article is: *How can the political theories of Machiavelli, La Boétie, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau inform a framework for governance that is relevant and effective in the 21st century?* Scholars have long analyzed these philosophers individually, focusing on their specific contributions to political thought. However, there has been limited exploration of how their ideas might be synthesized into a cohesive model of governance that addresses both the challenges of modern authoritarianism and the potential for civic empowerment.

This article introduces an innovative contribution by proposing a synthesis of Machiavelli's pragmatic realism, La Boétie's critique of voluntary servitude, and Rousseau's key perspectives on inequality to create a framework for "new politics." This approach is necessary because the persistent issues of inequality, disempowerment, and authoritarian governance require not just a critique of existing systems but actionable insights rooted in historical and philosophical understanding. While recognizing the contextual limitations of these thinkers, this synthesis aims to adapt their principles to contemporary challenges, offering practical and ethical pathways for reform.

To guide readers, the article is organized as follows: the first section defines the concept of "new people and new politics" and their implications for governance. The second section explores the core ideas of Machiavelli, Rousseau and La Boétie, focusing on their relevance to current political contexts. The third section integrates these ideas, highlighting their potential synergy in addressing modern governance challenges. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the applicability of this synthesized framework, acknowledging its limitations while emphasizing its value as a foundation for further exploration.

Towards Understanding the Concept of New People and New Politics

The Concept of New People

In this work, by using the term 'New People', I am referring to the peoples and cultures of this present millennia, although it is noteworthy to point out that in our present age there are diverse cultural practices and diverse technological innovations, so it is possible that the concept of new politics that I will attempt to bring about from the synthesis of the various political philosophical thoughts of the aforementioned philosophers may not work very effectively in all cultures and

social conditions because the political theory of these philosophers also sprang up as a result of the existing political turmoil of their time, however as the famous British writer and philosopher Aldous Huxley said, 'That men do not learn very much from the lessons of history is the most important of all the lessons that history has to teach', it is therefore noteworthy for me to assert that even if these concept of “New politics” may not effectively work in every cultures of the 21st century, there are still some various facets of these concept of New politics that these cultures and societies can emulate for the betterment of their society.

On the Concept of New Politics

In this work “New politics” refers to the new political theory that I will attempt to theorize by the synthesizing the political theory of aforementioned philosophers. From the etymology of the word, Politics stems from the Greek word πολιτικά (politiká) which means 'affairs of the cities', the most widely used definition of politics was provided by Easton and he defined politics as the “authoritative allocation of values for a society”.¹ Politics, in essence, boils down to collective decision-making and power dynamics within a group. It is not just about voting and governments, but also about how individuals interact, influence each other, and share resources or prestige.

The Core Ideas of Machiavelli, Rousseau and La Boétie

The political theory of Niccolò Machiavelli as enshrined in his work *The Prince*.

Niccolò Machiavelli was a Florentine statesman, diplomat, and writer who lived during the turbulent Renaissance period. He received a humanist education, possibly attending Florence University, and in 1498, his public life began with a diplomatic appointment for the Republic. He served Florence for 14 years and travelled far and wide, however in 1512, the Medici returned to power, shattering Machiavelli's political career. He was dismissed, imprisoned, and even tortured for suspected conspiracy. Forced into retirement, Machiavelli turned to writing, composing "*The Prince*" in 1513. This controversial treatise, initially intended for Giuliano de' Medici, sought to regain his favor, the treatise presents a pragmatic, and often ruthlessly realistic, take on statecraft. It wasn't published until 1532, after his death, he furthermore wrote various works like, *The Art of War*, *Discourses on Livy*, which was a work exploring republican principles disguised as a commentary on Roman history. In essence, Machiavelli's life was marked by his active involvement in Florentine politics, followed by a period of forced exile that became a springboard for his enduring literary contributions.²

^{1.} Isaak, Alan C. 1975. *Scope and methods of political science*, rev. ed. Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press, 20.

^{2.} Nederman, Cary, "Niccolò Machiavelli", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), Retrieved on January 2, 2024 from URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/machiavelli/>

In his book the prince Machiavelli examined the qualities and methods necessary for a successful ruler, regardless of morality. The book's frank, pragmatic advice, advocating for ruthlessness and deception, if necessary, sparked controversy and earned Machiavelli the reputation of a cynical "father of modern politics."³ "Forget about morality. In the real world of politics, power, not virtue, is king. That's the message Machiavelli delivers in his famous book *The Prince* and he asserts that:

Power and authority are two sides of the same coin. Whoever holds the reins has the right to command, regardless of their moral character. Being good doesn't guarantee power, and power doesn't need goodness to be legitimate. Forget about "shoulds" and "oughts." Politics is about one thing, acquiring and keeping power. Machiavelli focuses on "maintaining the state," not power itself, but it's all about the same thing. Morality is irrelevant. Rulers shouldn't worry about being nice. Fear, not love, is the glue that keeps people in line. They obey because they're scared, not because they admire you. Laws are just threats with teeth. They only work because force backs them up. Forget about "rightful" authority; it's all about who has the biggest stick, and he asserted that "It is far safer to be feared than loved if one cannot be both."⁴

Machiavelli isn't advocating for tyranny, but rather for a pragmatic approach to politics. He believes that rulers need to understand the realities of human nature -selfishness, deceit, fear and use these to their advantage. He sees politics as a game of power, and he provides a playbook for those who want to win. He dismantled the idea of authority as something separate from power. He argues that might and power makes right, and 'good guys' don't always win in the game of thrones. His focus on raw power and control has been both praised and condemned, but it remains a powerful critique of how politics, stripped bare, truly operates.⁵ Also his brutal realism exposes the bare bones of politics: power is king, and morality is just a pretty ribbon you tie around it. He bases his argument on observed human behaviour and political realities, not idealistic notions. He believes rulers need to understand and wield power effectively to be successful.⁶

Furthermore, *The Prince* criticizes the traditional link between morality and legitimate political authority. Machiavelli argues that power, not virtue, is the true foundation of authority. He emphasizes the importance of force and fear as tools for control. Machiavelli argues that power is the true goal of politics, not morality. His work went on to emphasize the importance of force and

³. John M, Najemy. 2011. *Machiavelli: A biography*. Princeton University Press. 52.

⁴. Niccolò Machiavelli. *The Prince*, Transl. by Harvey C. Mansfield Jr. 2nd Ed. University of Chicago Press, 1998. 66

⁵. Harvey C, Mansfield. 1996. *Machiavelli's Virtue*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 129.

⁶. Nederman, Cary, "Niccolò Machiavelli", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. “

fear in maintaining control. His cynical view of human nature paints a realistic picture of political life. The prince offers a practical guide to acquiring and wielding power in a ruthless world. He introduces virtue, a unique blend of skill, talent, strength, and intelligence. This virtuosity allows the prince to adapt to changing circumstances, make ruthless decisions, and ultimately conquer and control his territory.

In general Machiavelli offers a brutal but honest analysis of power dynamics. He argues that morality is irrelevant in the ruthless game of politics, and only those who master the art of wielding power can truly succeed, however *The Prince* offers a fascinating, but ultimately precarious, model of rule, raising questions about its practical applicability and the very possibility of creating a truly flexible, all-powerful prince.

The Political theory of Étienne de laBoétie as Enshrined in his work *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*

Etienne de La Boétie, a French political philosopher born in 1530 in Sarlat, he left a lasting mark on the world through his unwavering commitment to freedom and human dignity. He studied law and became a counsellor, navigating the turbulent political landscape of 16th-century France. He actively sought tolerance and understanding, aligning with the policies of the chancellor Michel de l'Hôpital. His personal beliefs remain a subject of debate, with some suggesting a possible connection to Marrano Judaism. His work titled *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*, became a landmark defence of human dignity and freedom, he died in the year 1563.⁷

In his work La Boétie boldly addresses the question of why people willingly submit to oppressive rulers even when they have the power to resist., challenging the legitimacy of tyranny. He argues that tyrants have no inherent power over us; our consent and obedience fuel their strength. He proposes that recognizing the voluntary nature of servitude is the first step towards reclaiming freedom and building a just society. His work offers insights into the nature of power, freedom, and the human condition. The essay's central thesis is that tyranny only exists because people choose to obey it. La Boétie argues that tyrants have no inherent power over us; their strength comes solely from our consent and submission.

People often justify their obedience by citing the benefits offered by the tyrant, such as protection or order. La Boétie exposes these benefits as mere illusions, arguing that tyrants only provide a semblance of security while stripping away true freedom and dignity. Obedience, over time, can become a habit, a comfortable routine that blinds us to the chains that bind us. La Boétie emphasizes the importance of questioning and challenging established power structures, even if

⁷ La Boétie, Etienne de ." Encyclopaedia Judaica. Encyclopedia.com. Retrieved on January 2, 2024, from <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encycopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/la-boetie-etienne-de>

they seem familiar or inevitable.⁸ La Boétie offers no easy solutions, but he suggests that the path to freedom begins with awareness. Recognizing the voluntary nature of our servitude is the first step towards reclaiming our power and forging a just society.⁹ La Boétie emphasizes the importance of unity and solidarity in resisting tyranny. When people come together and refuse to obey, even the most powerful tyrant can be overthrown.

He draws a stark contrast between our natural state of freedom and the artificial constraints imposed by tyranny. He argues that living under a tyrant is unnatural and contrary to our basic human desire for liberty. A crucial element of La Boétie's argument is the emphasis on individual self-worth. He believes that every person deserves to be treated with dignity and respect, and that surrendering to tyranny diminishes our inherent value. While the essay focuses on individual responsibility, La Boétie recognizes the importance of collective action. He suggests that the only way to effectively resist tyranny is through solidarity and shared awareness. He encouraged individuals to withdraw their support and refuse to collaborate with the oppressive regimes, suggesting that a collective refusal to obey can undermine tyrannical power.

Also, La Boétie's arguments are based on several key observations which are:

Human Nature: He believes that humans are naturally inclined towards freedom and self-determination. To give up this freedom voluntarily is unnatural and harmful.

The Nature of Power: Tyranny relies on deception, manipulation, and the threat of force. It is not a natural order, but a system imposed on people by those who seek to control them.

The Importance of Individual Choice: La Boétie argues that each person has the choice to resist or submit. True freedom comes from recognizing and exercising this choice.¹⁰

In general, La Boétie argues that any [tyrant](#) remains in power while his subjects grant him that, therefore delegitimizing every form of power. The original freedom of men would be indeed abandoned by society which, once corrupted by the [habit](#), would have preferred the servitude of the courtier to the freedom of the free man, who refuses to be submissive and to obey.¹¹

The Political Theory of Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, born in Geneva in 1712, experienced a challenging early life marked by

⁸. Murray Rothbard, *Introduction to The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude by Étienne de la Boétie*, Transl. by Harry Kurz, New York: Free Life Editions.167.

⁹. De La Boétie, Estienne (1942). *Anti-dictator: the Discours sur la servitude volontaire of Étienne de La Boétie*. Edited by Harry Kurz. New York: Columbia university press. 67

¹⁰. De La Boétie, Estienne 1942. *Anti-dictator: the Discours sur la servitude volontaire of Étienne de La Boétie*. 79.

¹¹. Murray Rothbard, 1975. *Introduction to The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude by Étienne de la Boétie*. 201

the loss of his mother and an irregular education. As a young man, he traveled across Europe, taking on diverse roles such as servant, musician, and tutor, which fueled his passion for music and literature. Rousseau gained fame in 1749 with his provocative essay on the arts and sciences, which argued that progress in these fields often corrupts moral virtue. This work brought him into the spotlight and sparked controversies that would follow him throughout his life. In 1755, Rousseau expanded on these ideas in *his Discourse on inequality*, where he criticized social hierarchies and argued for the preservation of natural virtue. Music remained a lifelong passion, and his opera *Le Devin du Village* enjoyed significant success. His emphasis on melody influenced broader debates in music theory and composition.

Rousseau later reclaimed his Genevan citizenship and reconverted to Calvinism, which shaped his evolving intellectual and spiritual outlook. In 1762, he published several of his most influential works, including the novel *Julie, or the New Heloise* and the philosophical treatises *Emile, or On Education* and *The Social Contract*. These texts explored themes of individual freedom, education, and the relationship between citizens and the state, solidifying Rousseau's reputation as a revolutionary thinker in both philosophy and literature. These works brought both acclaim and condemnation, leading Rousseau to flee persecution and seek refuge in England. Plagued by paranoia and mental instability, he spent his later years writing autobiographical pieces like the *Confessions*, exploring political theory, and pursuing his love for botany and music. Rousseau died in 1778, but his legacy as a champion of individual liberty, social critique, and natural virtue continues to influence political and philosophical thought.¹²

His work on *The Social Contract* focused on the concept of the general will, for he believed that legitimate authority is based on the collective will of the people and individuals should submit to the general will for the common good. His central doctrine in politics is that a state can be legitimate only if it is guided by the “general will” of its members. Jean-Jacques Rousseau grapples with a fundamental question: how can individual freedom and state authority coexist? He argues that humans, once able to live independently, have reached a point where cooperation is crucial for survival and well-being.

Furthermore, Rousseau, in *The Social Contract*, proposes three levels of will:

Private Will: individuals pursue their own selfish interests. **General Will:** citizens, identifying with the collective, desire laws promoting universal freedom and equality. **Corporate Will:** subgroups within the population impose their own interests on the state.¹³ Rousseau's political

¹². Bertram, Christopher, "Jean Jacques Rousseau", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), Retrieved on January 2, 2024 URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2023/entries/rousseau/>

¹³. Canon, J.S., 2022. Three General Wills in Rousseau. *Review of Politics*, 84: 35.

philosophy is known for its emphasis on individual freedom and the general will. However, one of the least persuasive aspects of his thought for later thinkers is his doctrine of sovereignty and representation. Rousseau rejects the idea that a people's legislative will can be vested in some group or individual that then acts with their authority but rules over them. Instead, he argues that to hand over one's general right of ruling oneself to another person or body is a form of slavery, and that to recognize such an authority would amount to an abdication of moral agency. Rousseau alternative for this is direct self-rule by the entire citizen body. He believes that this is the only way to ensure that laws are truly representative of the general will. However, he also recognizes that this is impractical for large states.¹⁴

One of the key distinctions in *The Social Contract* is the tension between the sovereign and the government. The sovereign, composed of the people as a whole, promulgates laws as an expression of its general will. The government is a more limited body that administers the state within the bounds set by those laws, and which issues decrees applying them in particular cases.¹⁵

Even in the case of the best-designed and most perfect republic, Rousseau is pessimistic about the prospects for long-term stability. He believes that it is almost inevitable that the government will eventually usurp the sovereign power of the people and substitute its corporate will for the people's general will. Rousseau rejects the idea that individuals associated together in a political community retain some natural rights over themselves and their property. Rather, such rights as individuals have over themselves, land, and external objects, are a matter of sovereign competence and decision. Individual rights must be specified by the sovereign in ways that are compatible with the interests of all in a just polity, and Rousseau rejects the idea that such rights could be insisted on as a check on the sovereign's power.¹⁶

Rousseau's commitment to the freedom and equality of citizens is marred by the fact that he envisages those citizens as exclusively male. Women are subject to the authority of the state but have no voice in the determination of the general will.¹⁷ Rousseau's doctrine of sovereignty and representation is a complex and controversial one. While it has been criticized by later thinkers for its impracticality and its exclusion of women, it remains an important contribution to political thought. Rousseau's emphasis on the importance of the general will and the need for citizens to be actively involved in their own governance is still relevant today.

¹⁴. Masters, R.D. *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968.164

¹⁵. Williams, D.L., *Rousseau's Social Contract*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.2014, 167.

¹⁶. Bertram, Christopher, "Jean Jacques Rousseau", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

¹⁷. Rousselière, G., 2021, Rousseau's Theory of Value and the Case of Women. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 29: 285.

How the Synthesis of these Various Political Theories Can Bring About A New Politics for New People

This section sets out to address the theoretical and practical framework for a "new politics" designed for the complexities and demands of 21st-century societies. It synthesizes the insights of Étienne de La Boétie, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Niccolò Machiavelli to propose transformative principles aimed at redefining governance and citizen participation. The primary focus is on bridging the gap between authority and the agency of the people, proposing actionable steps for creating an equitable, participatory, and sustainable political system.

The 21st century society, marked by diverse cultures and rapid technological advancements, presents unique challenges and opportunities for shaping a "new politics." By synthesizing insights from Machiavelli, La Boétie, and Rousseau, one can envision a political landscape that fosters freedom, collaboration, and justice in this complex new context.

La Boétie's vision of transformation is pivotal in redefining the relationship between power and authority. His critique of voluntary servitude inspires a shift away from hierarchical power structures toward systems that encourage active participation and equity. The "new politics" proposed here builds on his insights, advocating for a more participatory and inclusive framework where citizens collectively shape their political realities.

Rousseau's concept of the "general will" complements this vision by providing a philosophical foundation for forging a collective future. In this framework, citizens actively participate in crafting laws and policies that genuinely reflect the aspirations of all, regardless of their background, gender, or beliefs. However, Rousseau's ideal of direct democracy—self-rule by the entire population—requires adaptation for large and complex societies. To address this, the section emphasizes effective forms of representation and participatory democracy that can practically channel the general will while maintaining inclusivity and fairness.

Key Pillars of "New Politics" for the 21st Century

1. **Active Citizenship:** Citizens must engage as active participants in shaping their political destinies, challenging established power structures and advocating for meaningful change.
2. **Global Perspective:** Recognizing the interconnectedness of nations, this politics fosters international cooperation to tackle shared challenges like climate change and global inequality.
3. **Technological Literacy:** Technology should enhance transparency, accountability, and participation in political processes, while also being vigilantly managed to prevent misuse.

and manipulation.

4. **Cultural Sensitivity:** Acknowledging the richness of cultural diversity, this politics aims to respect and value different ways of life, promoting dialogue and mutual understanding across divides.
5. **Focus on the Collective Good:** Balancing individual rights with communal well-being, this framework advocates for policies that serve the interests of all, not just a privileged minority.
6. **Rousseau's Social Contract:** Freedom is inseparable from responsibility. This vision promotes individual liberty within a just society where everyone contributes to the common good, ensuring that laws reflect the people's true needs, not just elite interests.

New Politics” advocates mechanisms for increasing citizen involvement in decision-making, moving beyond traditional representative systems that often concentrate on power. Drawing on La Boétie's insights, this paper stresses the importance of resisting the passive acceptance of tyranny. Citizens are urged to actively resist surrendering their agency and critically examine power structures. A modern example of this principle is the #EndSARS movement in Nigeria, which demonstrates the power of collective action in challenging oppressive governance and advocating for accountability despite the outcome. By integrating these perspectives, this paper lays the groundwork for a "new politics" that fosters empowered citizenship, equitable governance, and a commitment to the collective good.

Conclusion

This paper set out to explore how the political philosophies of Niccolò Machiavelli, Étienne de La Boétie, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau can inform a "new politics" for the 21st century an era characterized by global interconnectedness, technological advancements, and persistent social inequalities. The aim was to synthesize these thinkers' insights into a framework that balances effective governance with active citizenship, ethical leadership, and a collective vision for social cohesion. The central argument of the paper revolved around three key contributions: Machiavelli's pragmatic approach to power and leadership, La Boétie's critique of voluntary servitude as a foundation for civic resistance, and Rousseau's concept of the general will as a basis for egalitarian democracy. By integrating these perspectives, the paper proposed a transformative model of governance that emphasizes participation, collaboration, and the balance between individual rights and collective responsibilities.

The philosophical underpinning of this work is its emphasis on the dynamic relationship between

power and agency, authority and liberty. What makes this paper unique is its effort to adapt classical political philosophy to contemporary realities, offering practical pathways for addressing modern challenges like authoritarianism, civic disengagement, and systemic inequality. Unlike other research that often examines these thinkers in isolation, this paper presented a synthesis that demonstrated the complementarity of their ideas in envisioning a more just and participatory political order.

To provide balance, it is important to acknowledge potential counter-arguments. Critics may argue that Machiavelli's pragmatism can justify authoritarian tendencies or that Rousseau's ideal of the general will risks suppressing minority voices. Furthermore, La Boétie's call for civic resistance may be criticized for lacking practical strategies to overcome entrenched power dynamics. However, this paper addresses these concerns by advocating for checks and balances, inclusive representation, and a focus on continuous dialogue and action to refine and adapt these principles to different contexts.

The conclusion underscores that the "new politics" proposed here is not a utopian ideal but a pragmatic framework. It acknowledges the need for continuous negotiation between effectiveness and ethics, between individual freedoms and collective well-being. It is rooted in principles of active citizenship, technological literacy, cultural sensitivity, and global responsibility. Ultimately, it challenges individuals and societies to question traditional power structures and to collaboratively forge a politics that prioritizes equality, freedom, and the common good.

In summary, this paper has demonstrated the enduring relevance of classical political philosophy while offering innovative insights for contemporary governance. It invites further exploration and critique, emphasizing that the pursuit of "new politics" is not an endpoint but an ongoing journey toward a more just and inclusive world.

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