

From Feudalism to Statism: How the Social Contract as Commonly Construed Paves the Way to Democratic Despotism

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The modern social contract is often viewed as a vindication of the rights of the individual and his freedom to shape his own political future by consenting to a constitution or State in conjunction with his peers. The general idea is that the individuals who inhabit a territory jointly authorise a government or State to exercise coercive power over society for the general welfare. The social contract may be viewed as a symbol of the escape from feudalism: individuals are no longer tied down to their local lord, bishop or prince. On the contrary, they can now choose their own master and keep him on a tight leash. But is the modern social contract as liberating as this story suggests? I want to suggest that while it may indeed free individuals from certain undesirable sorts of feudal bondage, it goes too far in writing social groups out of the founding myth of political order. By imagining the founding partners of political order as individuals scattered across a territory rather than associations, municipalities, schools, churches etc., the social contract story renders the individual participants in the social contract vulnerable to a new form of despotism: not that of the lord or bishop, but that of the sovereign demos and its agents.