Abstract

Western political philosophy owes a great debt to social contractualism. In particular, the liberal tradition that is often lauded as a guarantee of justice, liberty, and equality for all finds its roots in the social contracts of John Locke and Jean Jaques Rousseau, and later, John Rawls. Yet the implications that each of these social contracts have for race is troubling, even as the social construct of race emerges and develops throughout time. I argue that each of these social contracts perpetuates a given understanding of race that creates subordinating dynamics between white and non-white individuals. Specifically, Locke’s proto-racialized contract excludes non-Europeans from personhood on the basis of labor and rationality; Rousseau’s racialized contract excludes non-Europeans from full personhood on the basis of climate and civilizational potential; and Rawls’ neoliberal social contract allows for the neglect of entrenched inequalities. I argue that understanding the racialized underpinnings of one aspect of western political philosophy is one of many steps necessary to establishing a theoretical framework for government, social institutions, and the legal field that is not based on subordination.

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