

An anthropology of the social contract: The political power of an idea

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Abstract

The idea of the social contract resonates in many societies as a framework to conceptualise state–society relations, and as a normative ideal which strives to improve them. Policy-makers, development organisations, politicians, social scientists (including anthropologists), and our interlocutors all live with contractarian logics. While generations of political philosophers have debated the concept and its usefulness, the term has also travelled beyond academia into the wider world, shaping expectations, experiences, and imagined futures of state–society relations. An anthropology of the social contract explores ethnographically how this pervasive concept, laden with assumptions about human nature, political organisation, government, and notions such as freedom, consensus and legitimacy, impacts state–society relations in different settings. In this way, the social contract itself – its many emic instantiations, and its political effects – becomes the object of study.

Keywords

agonism, citizenship, consensus, contractarianism, equality, government, legitimacy, liberalism, political philosophy, state–society relations

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In 2020, as the global coronavirus pandemic erupted, and governments worldwide attempted and failed to protect the health of their populations and economies, the term ‘social contract’ circulated widely in academic, political and popular spheres. It was used to evoke the sense of something being broken, and needing to be built anew. Baroness Minouche Shafik, Director of the London School of Economics, argued emphatically in the *Financial Times* that the pandemic was a chance to envision a new and fairer social contract in societies around the world, not only to address global healthcare needs, but to repair systemic harms and vulnerabilities that have been ‘festered for decades’ (Shafik, 2020). The Development Bank of Latin America’s (CAF) annual conference featured a panel titled ‘Economic Recovery from Covid-19 and the Future of the Social Contract’, where speakers, including Nobel Laureate in Economics Joseph Stiglitz, argued that rebuilding social contracts was key to ensuring future prosperity in the region (CAF, 2020).

This talk about broken contracts, and calls for new or repaired ones, has proliferated since the start of the century, amidst global discourses expressing concern for the future of humanity in the face of a diverse and interlocking set of issues: the climate crisis; the increase of populism and right-wing extremism; fears about lost sovereignty and national identities; polarisation and disinformation; several migration crises; austerity politics; rising inequalities; and the impact of global finance on domestic economies, among others. Voter dissatisfaction and disbelief in ‘the system’ has flourished, given the lacklustre performance of governments on different continents and across the political spectrum, and their failures to respond to their societies’ needs in these crises. The liberal consensus, which many, at least in the global North, believed to be hegemonic since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989 (Fukuyama, 1989), is claimed to have been eroded, if it was ever hegemonic in the first place.

But what is meant by the social contract in such contexts? Is it a normative ideal, or a descriptor of society? The classic contractarian thinkers were highly specific in their definition, while disagreeing with each other. By contrast, contemporary usage is frequently broad-brush and vague. The social contract has become a convenient vessel, often filled with notions of political legitimacy and consensus. Both the use of this vessel and its shape require attention, as they embed assumptions regarding the nature of states, consenting individuals, freedom, and common goods – which all structure political thought and possibilities. This introduction aims to explore this predicament, by analysing the political power of the *idea* of the social contract, and its effects.

As exemplified by the CAF’s annual conference, the mobilisation of the social contract is particularly common in the international development sector, as a lens through which to assess failing state–society relations, (re-)build consensus, and promote pathways for a better future. The World Bank interpreted the 2011 Arab uprisings as protests against the erosion of the social contract in the region (World Bank, 2019). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) advised designing a new redistributive social contract to tackle inequalities in Europe and Central Asia (OECD, 2019). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution (NOREF) used the social contract as a framework to analyse UNDP’s

governance and peacebuilding practices in fragile and conflict-affected contexts (UNDP and NOREF, 2016).

Within academia the term has also become increasingly widespread: Alex de Waal (1996) analysed a country's capacity to prevent famine as an 'anti-famine social contract', a concept he later updated to a 'political contract against famine' (de Waal, 2000), emphasising the political nature of state–society relations and policy-making. Development scholars have suggested that the breakdown of social contracts can explain the root causes of civil wars and social unrest (Addison and Murshed, 2001; Azam and Mesnard, 2003).

While contemporary political philosophers have argued that the social contract has perhaps outlived its usefulness (Lessnoff, 1990: 4), the idea clearly abounds in popular, academic and political imaginaries, and is regularly employed to understand live issues and propose solutions. However, few of the afore-mentioned scholarly and policy publications define the term, and instead invoke it to refer broadly to state–society relations. In comparative politics, Markus Loewe et al. (2020: 3) do offer a definition: the 'entirety of explicit or implicit agreements between all relevant societal groups and the sovereign (i.e. the government or any other actor in power) defining their rights and obligations towards each other'. This definition is problematic from an anthropological perspective because it is simultaneously normative and illustrative – encompassing assumptions around agreements, power, rights and obligations and the value of these, yet is also broad enough to appear all-inclusive.¹ This is the crux of the current widespread usage of the social contract: it mobilises the concept as an apparently apolitical framework that resonates as 'natural', yet it both obscures and creates political relations (see also Sheild Johansson, 2020).

This special issue interrogates ethnographically the real-world effects of the political and popular usage of the social contract as a polysemic notion, present among multiple social groups, including academics. We consider manifestations both of the explicit term, 'social contract', and of the implicit framework we call 'contractarian thinking'. To interrogate the mechanics of the social contract as a polysemic notion we draw on Bonnie Urciuoli's (2005) concept of 'strategically deployed shifters', a term which describes words and expressions used in different everyday contexts in ways that seem the same but in fact have different meanings, serving to align people's own position as much as to communicate information. This concept is useful as it simultaneously highlights the contextual truth of any term and the fact that the indeterminacy of 'shifters' can be mobilised strategically. Hand in hand with a focus on the many usages of the term 'social contract', we also pay attention to how the broader framework of contractarian thinking is deployed to different political ends. Our definition of contractarian thinking builds on Nicolette Makovicky and Robin Smith's (2020) work on tax; one of few anthropological interrogations of the social contract. They argue that 'social contract thinking could be understood as an assemblage that "travels" across regulatory systems and societies, shaping the practices and policies of tax authorities and the emic understandings of tax among populations across the globe' (2020: 12). We conceptualise contractarian thinking as a set of expectations and assumptions about how state–society relations *should* be, and

a discursive and conceptual framework through which people interpret their lived experiences as meeting or failing to meet those standards.

The original contractarian philosophers sought to examine reality using deductive reasoning and logic, and propose normative principles for human coexistence. Anthropology, by contrast, seeks to produce knowledge from below, by looking at lived experiences and the meanings people ascribe to them. The social contract has become a pervasive way to think about state–society relations by slipping into common parlance, unmoored from the specificity of its philosophical heritage and no longer bound by its original logics or methods. It is an example of a powerful idea rooted in social theory, with variations on a theme formulated by specific thinkers in different socio-historical settings, which today shapes people's normative beliefs and perceptions of reality in multiple settings. Philosophical ideas like the social contract demand attention as they inspire the political and social worlds in which we live. They populate curricula worldwide and are read by generations of people who create the legal and political infrastructures and repertoires that produce sociality. Their influence can be found both in legacies of colonialism and democracy, as well as in projects of revolution and resistance. Finally, philosophical ideas are also everyday interpretative resources for people around the world, including our ethnographic interlocutors, many of whom participate in the same intellectual traditions as we do.

The many versions of the social contract as lived experience intersect with the diverse understandings of the social contract within the philosophical canon. The manner of this slippage between academic and lay instantiations of the concept demands further attention. Looking at real-world contractarian thinking invites anthropology and moral philosophy to work together more productively, keeping in view both those historically enduring theories which animate people's normative models, and the local specificities which lend such models their force. Contractarian thinking and its real-world effects demand ethnographic engagement, connecting the top-down theoretical perspectives with their bottom-up instantiations to analyse the complex relationships between philosophical traditions, which are themselves varied, and everyday practices, which may draw on different intellectual underpinnings. Interrogating the social contract ethnographically is not about exploring the ways in which society may or may not be contractual, but rather analysing how people conceive of, appropriate and reinvent these models of socio-political life that circulate so widely; essentially, how people live with ideas.

The social contract merits renewed attention, not to revive an outdated theory and begin new disputes over its common precepts, but to recognise it as a sticky, alive concept, which travels and reappears in different guises, both hotly appropriated and enthusiastically refuted in different intellectual and lay contexts. It is at once an elusive concept, and impressively persistent, the first characteristic enabling the second. The pervasiveness of the idea shows that:

the ideal of political life as an agreement on fair terms of association between individuals who have a recognized status as free and equal is a moral ideal that has a very deep resonance in modern culture, and it is one that has proved a great inspiration to those who do not enjoy the recognition of that status. (Boucher and Kelly, 1994: 28)

It is also a slippery idea to grasp: emic uses of the ‘social contract’, and implicit contractarian thinking in real-world contexts, come in and out of dialogue with academic thought, blurring the boundaries between theoretical and political, descriptive and ideal. Ethnographies of the social contract must contend with both, and this requires understanding the historical contexts in which the canon developed.

The proliferation of an idea

Contractarianism has an extensive intellectual and political history, spanning ancient Greece and Rome, the ‘classic’ contractarianism of the Enlightenment, and revivals in the 20th century, while also manifesting beyond the bounds of Western political theory, for example, within some Islamic thought (Loewe et al., 2020: 5). There is no unified model nor unbroken genealogy of social contract theory, and it has been used for different intellectual agendas. The term, ‘social contract’, is itself enigmatic; apart from Rousseau, most classic contractarians did not use the phrase, speaking rather of compacts, pacts, covenants and contracts, but not *social* contracts (Lessnoff, 1990: 2).

Broadly speaking, social contract theory is the idea that organised society is formed by individuals who make a common agreement to regulate their coexistence, and likewise found and legitimate an authority under whose rule and laws they consent to live and abide by, and with whom they establish reciprocal rights and obligations (Lessnoff, 1990: 4). The contractarian philosophers had divergent assumptions about human nature, leading often to quite conflicting conclusions. Common to all contractarians, however, was the idea of the pre-cultural and pre-political individual, free and able to choose to make agreements with others. They also shared a belief in the possibility of consensus in society (Lessnoff, 1990: 23).

Contractarianism consolidated as a major strand of European political philosophy in the 17th and 18th centuries, in an environment of monarchies and uprisings against despotism, but its roots are even older. Some scholars identify earlier traces in the ancient Greek differentiation between a law of nature (sometimes seen as divine) and the laws of political society (Gough, 1936: 2–8). In the 11th century, amid the Investiture Contest over whether government could intervene in ecclesiastical affairs and vice versa, German thinker Manegold of Lautenbach (1891 [1085]) wrote that if a king became a tyrant, he should be deposed, making sovereignty conditional on fulfilment of responsibilities to the people.

Social contract theory had its heyday in the Enlightenment. Although not all contractarians were liberals, it was a major cornerstone of liberalism, which, as a practice of politics and philosophy rooted in the 17th century, has had an enduring influence over global political and moral thought, and over our contemporary political forms – including the ideal of society as a common agreement among rational individuals, governed by a neutral state (Burnyeat, 2022, this volume).

The first classical contractarian was Johannes Althusius (1990 [1614]), who based the authority of kings on an original contract between a people and their ruler. Althusius’ ideas reflected the era’s widespread theoretical individualism, according to which all men were naturally free and equal, therefore society must have been formed by a deliberate act,

first agreeing to form an association (society), then appointing and regulating a government (Gough, 1936: 78–9).² This idea was explicitly articulated in the founding constitutions of many New England colonies; Oliver Cromwell used it to justify the deposition of kings; and it was debated throughout the English Civil War, with the Parliamentarians contending that the monarchy's power had limits, determined by a contract between king and people, while the Royalists held that the king was accountable only to God (Gough, 1936: 84–93).

Thus far, contract theory was mainly invoked to justify resistance to rulers, but then came Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes (1998 [1651]) gave the state a personality, the great *Leviathan*, formed to rescue men from their violent 'state of nature', where everyone was free, but selfish, hedonistic, driven purely by self-interest and desire. Hobbes believed this state of nature was replaced by a contract forming a sovereign government, to which men ceded some of their liberty, in exchange for a ruler who enforced laws that could guarantee security for all, and avoid war and suffering.

By contrast, in John Locke's (1988 [1689]) 'state of nature', men cohabited without an authority, guiding their behaviour by reason. He believed civil society was formed by men seeking peaceful communion, creating the state, and establishing and consenting to its laws. Locke, unlike Hobbes, held that revolution was justified if the government broke its side of the contract and failed to act for the public good. He argued that an individual's consent could be tacit or implicit, suggesting that if he did not like the rules of a society, he could leave, thereby withdrawing his consent.

Multiple thinkers in Europe and America in the late 17th and early 18th centuries adopted versions of the idea that a contract of popular submission was the foundation of a government's legitimacy. They were mostly unconcerned with the historical impossibility of this (although the North Americans did have recent referents of founding constitutional moments), but rather took the contractarian apparatus as an imaginary construction, rooted in the idea that the individual existed prior to the community (Gough, 1936: 147).

Rousseau popularised these ideas with his book *Du contrat social* (1994 [1762]). His 'state of nature' was neither a Hobbesian state of war, nor a Lockean age of reason, but a condition of brutish isolation, from which nomadic families evolved into a society with private property, after which states were created by the rich and powerful to safeguard their own possessions at the expense of the poor. He believed that societies founded on this basis had engendered inequality, despotism, corruption, and a new state of nature. His famous opening sentence, 'Man is born free, but is everywhere in chains', anticipated his conclusion: insurrection was necessary. For Rousseau, the social contract was the act of people coming together to create a new and ethical body politic governed by the general will, and ultimately, an agreement with the self to live a moral life.

With Immanuel Kant, the contract idea lost all pretence of historical reality. Kant held that society was based on a contract, but one founded on 'merely an *Idea of Reason*', albeit one with a 'practical reality' (Kant, 1891 [1793]: 43, 46). It was a principle according to which legislators should only enact laws that theoretically *could have* arisen from the united will of rational people; and that citizens should be able to regard the law *as if* they had consented to it. Kant did not seek to explain the origin of the state, but to justify political obligation in the present, which he anchored in universally binding morality – his

categorical imperative. His notion of the contract was both hypothetical and normative: he believed that genuine ‘civil’ society would only exist when people recognised the universality of reason, and therefore came to conceive of themselves as being bound by such an original contract (Williams, 1994: 137).

Throughout its heyday, social contract theory was subjected to multiple disputes and critiques. One common criticism was the implausibility of societies, states and their governments actually originating in a historical agreement between pre-political men in a state of nature. Most contractarians, however, did not take this literally. Other critics complained that the legal category, ‘contract’, could not have existed prior to political organisation. Yet most philosophers agree that the important thing is not the word but its implications. As Gough (1936: 5–6) writes, ‘the real question is not so much that of the exact terms in which the analogy is expressed as whether the analogy itself is justifiable’.

Contractarianism was also attacked as a logical explanation of political authority and obedience. David Hume (1741) accepted the idea of the free individual founding a state on an ‘original contract’, although he said that all historical records revealed governments founded on usurpation or conquest. However, he strongly objected to the notion that state–society relationships remained contractual in perpetuity, and argued instead that popular acquiescence led to ‘habitual obedience’ (Hume, 1741: 97–107). He disagreed with the idea that citizens could tacitly consent to and thereby legitimate their government, emphasising that most people do not have the option of leaving in order to withdraw from the social contract.

Social contract theory declined in the 19th century with the prominence of utilitarianism and the rise of Darwinism; as biological metaphors replaced the legalistic interpretations associated with the contract; and with the idea that society had evolved rather than being founded (Gough, 1936: 188). Utilitarian Jeremy Bentham followed Hume in arguing that political obedience in the present does not emerge from an original contract in the past, but results from habit, which he believed would continue so long as the government acted to maximise the greatest happiness for the greatest number (Boucher and Kelly, 1994: 21). Utilitarianism thus countered contractarianism on two grounds: first, the contract model’s theoretical individualism; second, its theory of human nature as grounded in habit, rather than rationality.

G.W.F. Hegel (1991 [1820]) presented one of the most searing critiques of contractarianism. He saw the state as an absolute ethical order in which individuals realise their capacities and potentialities. He argued that people do not *choose* the state; instead, by being born into it, they acquire the rights and duties associated with political society and modern personhood (Boucher and Kelly, 1994: 23). To Hegel, the contract idea was an inferior basis for political legitimacy because it relied on individual autonomy, and Hegel believed that the collective *enabled* individual autonomy, meaning that autonomous decision could not pre-date the collective as the contractarians claimed. Karl Marx also denied that individuals could have a pre-social existence, and, like Hegel, criticised contract theory for transposing self-seeking individualism, an economic (capitalist) notion, into the political realm, and compared Rousseau’s social contract to Adam Smith’s individualistic economic theory of free competition (Lessnoff, 1990: 16). Marx held that any political arrangements legitimised by pacts would simply reflect the imbalance of

forces in the capitalist mode of production (Boucher and Kelly, 1994: 23). For Hegel and Marx, contractarianism obscured historical, political and material realities, and could therefore never be the basis for ethical coexistence.

Following a century of being out of favour, contract theory was revived in the 20th century by political philosopher John Rawls. Rawls used the social contract to repudiate utilitarianism and proffer a liberal conception of 'justice as fairness' as a moral basis for society. He derived a Kantian logical abstraction from contractarianism, designing a thought experiment in which a group of equal, rational individuals met behind a 'veil of ignorance', which prevented them knowing any of the characteristics and status determinants they would be assigned at birth. From this 'original position' (a key concept in earlier contractarian thought indexing the pre-social human) they deliberated over the distribution of basic rights, duties and social benefits, and formed the 'foundational charter of their society' (Rawls, 1971: 10–11). Rawls argued that these individuals would choose two principles to regulate all future agreements: first, that basic rights and duties would be assigned equally; and second, that social and economic inequalities would be justified *only* if everyone benefited, thereby ruling out any argument about the hardships of some being offset by maximising the overall good – a utilitarianist tenet (Rawls, 1971: 13). These were the principles, Rawls argued, which free and rational individuals would accept in an original position of equality.

Rawls acknowledged his thought experiment did not correspond to actual scenarios, but he argued that beginning with an ideal-type theory would provide a systematic grasp of real-life problems (1971: 8). He believed that if it could be shown logically that this conception of justice would be chosen by men in an original position, then public recognition of this would provide the basis for its general acceptance (1971: 12) – in other words, a social contract. Like other contractarians, Rawls' proposal contained a theory of human nature, in which human beings were assumed to be both rational and moral, with an a priori sense of justice that does, he claimed, manifest in the real world, but is obscured by our socially situated behaviour (Rawls, 1971: 16).

With the return of social contract theory came fresh critiques. Feminists such as Carol Pateman (1988, in *The Sexual Contract*) objected, not only because the classic contractarians explicitly excluded women from the category of rational subjects able to consent to political rule, but because their very idea of free and equal individuals was based on a gendered division of labour in which men were free to engage in public deliberation in the *polis* because women took responsibility for the domestic realm. Similarly, Charles Mills (1997) argued in *The Racial Contract* that the moral, political and epistemological terms of contractarianism were premised on white supremacy.

The social contract has also been criticised for concerning itself exclusively with nation-states. Rawls was critiqued for premising his original position on the nation-state as a closed system (Nussbaum, 2004). Thomas Pogge (1989) modified Rawls' model, adding nationality to the status determinants excluded behind the 'veil of ignorance', to build a universal social contract. Others have suggested that supra-national social contracts could be fostered through transnational organisations such as the European Union (Closa, 1998).

Perhaps the most anthropologically minded critique of the social contract was communitarianism. Drawing on Hegel and Marx, communitarians such as Michael Sandel (1982) and Alisdair MacIntyre (1981) advanced the embeddedness thesis: the idea that neither the individual nor their conception of the good can exist outside society, and autonomous choice cannot be exercised in abstraction from context, rendering useless Rawls' exercise (Boucher and Kelly, 1994: 26). These communitarian challenges to social contract theory dovetail with contemporary anthropological theories about the impossibility of the pre-social individual and culturally universal personhood.

However, Jean Hampton (2007) and other anti-communitarians (e.g. Young, 1990), believed there was something worth rescuing in contractarianism's individualist conceptions of personhood. Hampton (2007: 27) proposed a feminist contractarianism which prioritised care for all individuals in both public and private relationships, *contra* utilitarianism which focuses on the greater good in the public realm, by extracting from contractarianism the idea that all individuals have intrinsic, non-instrumental value which resists aggregation. Hampton and Young both see the reification of community and the favouring of a socio-centric perception of personhood as flattening diversity and obscuring power, just as much as rigid contractarian approaches to individual personhood. As such, normative communitarianism may result in exclusion of unassimilated others (Young, 1990).

Different instantiations of the contract idea throughout the ages involved speculations about the nature and origins of society and socialness, as Bruno Latour and Shirley Strum (1986) have pointed out, while calling for reflexivity, as 'the science of our social origins should be extremely careful to acknowledge, understand, and discuss its own social construction' (Latour and Strum, 1986: 172). From these speculative origin accounts and assumptions about human nature, and explanations of human cooperation and organisation, the contract idea derives its political and moral normative ideals. Contractarian and anti-contractarian thinking, in whatever form they take, evolved within specific socio-political contexts, and have real-world enduring political effects.

Towards an anthropology of the social contract

This special issue proposes that the dynamics of state–society relations can be productively analysed through an anthropology of the social contract. In contrast to positivist employment of social contract theory (e.g. Loewe et al., 2020), we propose to treat the social contract as an interpretative resource that impacts the lived experience of state–society relations, and contractarian thinking as a powerful and pervasive mindset that shapes both governments' approaches to society, and how people experience their wider political community.

Anthropology of the state has done much to deconstruct the state as a taken-for-granted category, questioning what the state actually *is*, how people experience it, and how imaginaries about the state are formed and reproduced in everyday encounters between citizens and state officials and processes (Sharma and Gupta, 2006). Yet experiences of state–society relations are also animated by many ideas from political theory, such as sovereignty, citizenship, reciprocity and rights. We ask specifically, what makes us

imagine that our state–society relationships are, could, or should be contractual, and how does this idea resonate in different contexts? An anthropology of the social contract involves exploring how many variations and reappropriations of the contract idea have become common referents in social thought, strategically deployed by both scholars and our research participants, and ‘shifting’ in meaning and inflections across contexts (Urciuoli, 2005). We invite attention to how the social contract idea intersects with contemporary systems and ideologies such as neoliberalism and capitalism, and how it is expressed, reproduced and altered in diverse historical and political contexts.

Our contention is that an anthropology of the social contract can unveil the implications of persistent contractarian thinking. This project links up to multiple conversations in anthropology scrutinising the political effects of prevailing ideas and ideologies connected to contractarian assumptions, such as ‘responsibility’ (Trnka and Trundle, 2014), ‘public goods’ (Bear and Mathur, 2015), and ‘resilience’ (Bowles, 2022, this volume). All these authors bump up against the social contract in their analyses, but apart from Bowles, do not explicitly deal with it as an idea. Meanwhile, present-day policy-oriented appropriations of social contract theory, like those with which this introduction began, tend to focus narrowly on state–society relations, often conceiving of them in the neoliberal terms which Trnka and Trundle (2014) criticise, in which citizens have rights and responsibilities in their relationship with a neutral state, betraying a reductive, depoliticised interpretation of what is actually a rich and expansive field of social thought.

The way that the social contract as an idea relates to other ideas also raises the question of how ideas travel. Aihwa Ong has described neoliberalism as a mobile technology, something which resonates with our interpretation of the social contract as a strategically employed shifter or referent (Ong, 2007). Science and Technology studies (e.g. Behrends et al., 2014) and Organisation studies (Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005) have paid particular attention to how models and ideas travel, as part of larger conversations about globalisation and local appropriations (e.g. Collier and Ong, 2005). As many of these authors argue, engaging with travelling ideas enables anthropologists to analyse global problems and recognise the imperialism of ideas while focusing on the particular interpretations and iterations of these ideas in specific contexts. Our focus here is not so much to understand local appropriations but rather to analyse how people live with ideas, and to highlight the ongoing negotiations we all enter into with these theories that circulate and produce our socialities.

Philosophical contractarian frameworks often flatten lived realities and messy politics, and construct unrealistic theories of social cohesion based on agreement and harmonised consensus across difference. In this way, contractarian thinking occludes the confrontationality of social and political life, with two effects: first, the belief that society should be rational and harmonious often means that outlets are not created for processing conflict in a peaceful (or agonistic) way (Mouffe, 2005). Thus, contractarian thinking can contribute to generating further conflict (Burnyeat, 2022, this volume). Second, governing through the notion of consensus enables the hiding and bracketing off of discontent. We suggest that an anthropology of the social contract can do the opposite – highlight conflict between members of a society and in state–society relations, and reveal contractarian thinking as a potentially oppressive technology of governance.

The articles in this special issue attend to the ways that contractarian thinking hides and produces political clashes, frictions and disjunctures in state–society relations, while also exploring how the social contract as an idea manifests on multiple scales in society. Each article explores how assumptions core to the social contract (e.g. consent, consensus, the state, sovereignty, legitimacy, the rational political subject) play out in everyday relations. For instance, Sara Lenehan’s interlocutors, Afghan refugees who left Iran for Germany in the hope the German state would be more ‘caring’, became confused, indignant and deeply distressed when their experiences of state–society relations diverged from their expectations. She analyses how this refugee population, the Iranian state, Islamic jurisprudence, and the German state’s refugee laws, all produced divergent emic understandings of social contracts (Lenehan, 2022, this volume).

Our argument goes against the classic liberal ideal of co-responsibility for a co-constituted public sphere (see also Bear and Mathur, 2015), and the state as a rationally functioning machine. The confrontational struggles of national politics are ever-present in the way citizens perceive their rulers and construe their (il)legitimacy (Pardo and Prato, 2019), and the state–society relationship itself is one of conflictive (sometimes violent) actual and potential contestation. The tendency of state officials to be blind to the political nature of their exercise of power is evident in Benjamin Bowles’ article, which describes how the UK government works to legitimise the privatisation of public goods through a rhetoric of resilience, thereby shifting responsibility onto citizens through reifying liberal values of independence and freedom.

Similarly, Gwen Burnyeat, (2022, this volume) article explores the Colombian government’s assumption that rational communication about a complex peace accord would convince society of its benefits, and, after the public rejected the deal in a referendum, the officials’ analysis that they had failed because their communication was ‘not emotional enough’. She shows how these officials held a contractarian ideal of state–society relations as above politics, which both contributed to the loss of the referendum, and confounded their attempts to analyse the result. She argues that their contractarian thinking is enmeshed in the wider cultural and ideological framework of liberalism, showing how ideas ‘travel’, not in isolation but within webs of associated assumptions. Both Burnyeat and Bowles illustrate the embeddedness and effects of contractarian thinking in state institutions, and the way it conjures a false idea of state–society relations as politically neutral.

In Dave Cook’s article (2022, this volume) we meet the ‘digital nomads’, people who view themselves as free and globally mobile, the archetype of liberal individualism. These digital nomads are firmly committed to their freedom and right to choose where and how to live, but find that as they attempt to exercise what they see as their right to ‘opt out’ of state–society relations and become untethered from their nationalities, they become entrenched in the complex bureaucracies of the multiple states and multinational companies with which they engage. Thus they shatter the Lockean idea of the possibility of exiting society through physical mobility, even when individuals have sufficient privilege to enable global travel. Cook offers insight into how individuals and groups live with both their own ideas of the social contract, as well as those of others, including the states they move between.

Meredith McLaughlin's ethnography of the goings-on in a village council and administration building in Rajasthan also traces how citizens negotiate multiple and provisional contracts, this time within a single state, and how they attempt to meet and surpass the shifting terms of these relationships and obtain tangible ends (McLaughlin, 2022, this volume). She analyses how the post-liberalisation state in India is characterised by temporary contracts, involving the labour market and the state, which citizens navigate pragmatically in context-dependent ways, rather than through acts of deliberative consent or contestation.

Providing a comparative perspective from the discipline of Geography, Ayesha Siddiqi and Sophie Blackburn (2022, this volume) explore the idea of social contracts in 'the margins' in two postcolonial and post-disaster response contexts, the Andaman Islands in southern India and Mindanao in southern Philippines. They demand a cross-disciplinary emphasis on 'intimate social contracts', which they understand as the ways that people experience and perceive the intertwining of central government policy, personal relationships and organisational abilities of local community leaders. Through this focus, they highlight the relevance of spatial analysis for an anthropology of the social contract, complicating the categories of 'local' and 'national' levels of state-citizen relations.

All the articles offer ethnographic examples of how contractarian assumptions about human nature, rationality, and freedom feed into the actions of citizens and states, and how contractarian expectations of state-society relations frequently clash with real-world experiences. The classic contractarian philosophers were concerned with how society was organised, and on what basis rulers were legitimated and citizens consented to their rule in the formation of the nation-state, as part of a wider interrogation of the political and social nature of human beings. Their ideal of consenting individuals, if not equal in society then at least equally able to consent, coming together to form a political community with a ruler, was a hypothetical notion that did not map onto any real-life situation, but the stickiness of this ideal pervades all the contexts analysed in this collection, and many others worldwide. Each article charts an iteration of the social contract idea in a particular setting, how it is employed by citizens and/or state officials, and how divergent and fluid assumptions, expectations and experiences of the social contract produce everyday life and political relationships.

Conclusion

With the multiple political uncertainties and social unrest of the 21st century, thinkers in many contexts – academic, policy and lay – seeking a vocabulary and a framework with which to express the perceived failures of their states, found it in the idea of the 'social contract' – either using the term itself, or employing language and logic which evoked contractarian ways of seeing political community and state-society relations. The social contract as an idea has been strategically deployed by governments, international organisations, scholars and activists to conjure a sense of a relationship rooted in legitimacy through consent, yet which often simultaneously enables an occlusion of the reality of state-society relations. While it is clear that the contract is not an apt allegory for society, it

remains unclear what impact this persistent contractarian thinking has on our everyday political lives and imaginations of alternative futures.

An anthropology of the social contract does not aim to elucidate the historical or logical origin of the state, nor to ascertain political legitimacy, but takes the social contract as an object of study and a lens through which to view state–society relations: to explore how contractarian thinking impacts society and is itself reaffirmed, developed and changed by emic expectations, assumptions and experiences of state–society relations. At first glance this may appear a different task to that of contractarian philosophy, but in some senses, our focus is actually closer to classic contract theory than to the usages employed in contemporary political anxieties over the vulnerability of the global political structure with which we began this introduction. Like the classic contractarians, our interest lies in how people imagine their relationship with each other and the state, and how this is embedded in larger questions of social life and coexistence. Our aim is to explore how state–society relations are interpreted in different contexts, and how the popular idea of the social contract shapes the way many states and citizens conceptualise the political legitimacy of governments on one hand, and the obedience, acceptance and loyalty (or otherwise) of populations to their rulers on the other, in the context of wider sociality.

Seen this way, the expressions of disillusionment with the fracture of the global liberal consensus with which we opened are a poignant example of contractarian thinking in the real world. They beg the obvious question: is the (Western) social contract broken? Our intervention seeks to reframe this type of question, and ask instead, how do we socially construct the idea of there *being* a social contract there to break in the first place, what about our everyday experiences makes us believe it is broken, and what does this emic framework reveal about the people using it, and the situations they are referencing? The history of humanity has been riven with inequalities and conflict, so what, exactly, is new now? The notion of the social contract has become more visible in tandem with its increasingly evident impossibility as an explanation for social organisation, formulated as a falsely nostalgic past, not unlike some instantiations of the contractarian philosophers' 'state of nature'. Why is there so much talk about broken social contracts today, how does contractarian thinking vary and shape people's behaviour differently in different contexts, and what are the political effects of this powerful idea? These are questions that anthropology is well-placed to engage with. Ultimately, an anthropology of the social contract reveals how the philosophical ideals held by the original contractarian philosophers and today's social contract-inspired policy-makers may not account for the messiness of actually existing social life and state–society relations, but that the way we live with and through these ideas has profound political effects.

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Notes

1. Their framework includes that provided to society by the sovereign (protection, service-provision, spaces for citizens to participate in political decision-making processes), and that given to the sovereign by citizens (compliance with governmental rule, confirmation of the government's legitimacy, loyalty if conflict with other states arises, and taxes or other national services) (Loewe et al., 2020: 6).
2. The term 'man' is here employed by conscious choice. It is the term the classic contractarians used, and although they used it as a generic plural for 'humans', they also (explicitly and implicitly) excluded women from this arrangement. As such, it would be misleading to update the term into modern currency.

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