

An Appraisal of the Concept of Sovereignty in the Social Contractarian Thoughts of Jean-Jacques Rousseau

SUNDAY, EDOH ODUM

Department of Religion and Philosophy, Benue State University, Makurdi-Nigeria

Abstract

The concept of sovereignty is one of the major concepts that have elicited response from political thinkers in one form or the other throughout the ages. Discourses and contributions by thinkers as it were are divided into two strands, the classical theory of sovereignty and the constitutional theory of sovereignty. The difference that exists between these schools of thought ramifies the question of how the concept of sovereignty relates to state authority. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) also contributed to discourse on the concept of sovereignty. This he did while putting forward his thoughts on the social contract. In Rousseau's contractarian thought, sovereignty is popular, unlimited, inalienable, and resides within the people and as such, the people in Rousseau's thinking "calls the shots" in any democratic political configuration. This paper engages the expository and analytic method of data analysis in its bid to appraise the Rousseauan conception of sovereignty with the intent of bringing to the fore, its inherent merits and demerits and to accordingly extrapolates its implications for democratic legitimacy in an age where democracy has been accepted in the world over as the world-best practice in governance. In the final third, the paper holds that the inherent demerits of the Rousseauan conception of sovereignty notwithstanding, Rousseau seems to have laid down the prototype of all legitimate government through his exclusive conferment of sovereignty on the people. It concludes that legitimate democratic regimes can be realized in Africa through the adoption of the Rousseauan model of contractual governance.

Keywords: Sovereignty, Social Contract, Consent, People, Legitimacy.

1. Introduction

The concept of sovereignty, properly situated was introduced into the realm of socio-political reflections in 1576 by the French thinker Jean Bodin in his work entitled *Six Books on Commonweale*. The positions of scholars on the subject matter of sovereignty are in two fronts and this is in line with the division of the concept into two large and opposite theories- the classical theory of sovereignty and the constitutional theory of sovereignty. The main difference between these two theories as it were is concerned with how the concept of sovereignty is related to state authority.

Sovereignty itself as a concept presupposes and precludes unlimited power. As regards the classical theory of sovereignty which is also referred to as the traditional doctrine of sovereignty, Andrew Heywood (1994) distinguished its three main elements to be the unlimited power, the second is that sovereign power is the source of the right in the state and the third being the fact that the state authority is the bearer of sovereignty, not the people, some legal document (like the constitution of modern nation-states or any other actor. On the other divide, the main feature of the constitutional theory of sovereignty, just like the name stipulates is that sovereignty can be divided, that is to say that it rest with the legal document, like the constitution which according to Heywood "apportions power to each level". Deducible from the above is the fact that the power of the state's authority is derivable from the constitution.

Several writers and thinkers have contributed to discourse on the on the concept of sovereignty and have accordingly, developed theories in that regards. Amongst them are Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), John Locke, Thomas Hobbes and Jeremy Bentham. For Grotius, sovereignty is eternal. Appadoria (2003) corroborated the above when he asserted that "the importance of Grotius in the development of the theory is that he emphasizes external sovereignty, that is, the independence of the state from foreign control". Sovereignty for Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), being a champion and strong defended of political absolutism is "absolute and located in the ruler, basing his theory on a social contract". John Locke (1632-1704), a liberal thinker and one whose philosophizing became the foundational ideology of the United States, however did not technically use the term sovereignty at all, in so far as there was a supreme power in his state. For Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), sovereignty is unlimited by the law, but it is not morally unlimited; for, in practice, it is limited by the possibility of resistance and there are conditions under which resistance is morally justifiable.

In Rousseau's thinking, sovereignty is both absolute and unlimited. A critical review of Rousseau's theorization of the concept of sovereignty in respect to the two broad classification of the concept of sovereignty reveals that Rousseau's thought is attractive in the sense that it has or possesses within itself, two opposite elements: the first completely belongs to the classical theory of sovereignty (that is, the fact of its been unlimited power) and the second being the fact that it contradicts it (popular sovereignty). It is in this sense that it is both impossible to place the concept of sovereignty in Rousseau (which is distinctively unique) in either the sphere of

the classical theory of sovereignty or the constitutional theory of sovereignty.

The thematic preoccupation of this paper is an appraisal of the concept of sovereignty in the social contractarian thoughts of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Consequently, as part of the build up to this appraisal, an exposition of the Rousseauian conception of sovereignty will also be attempted in brief after which the appraisal will be carried out for the purpose of bringing to the fore, the merits and demerits of the same. In the final third, the implications of the theory in the search for democratic legitimacy and sustainable development in modern nation-states will be accounted for before bringing the paper to a close.

2. Understanding Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Concept of Sovereignty

Sovereignty in the general sense means supremacy. D.D. Raphael (1979), while linking sovereignty to the state and as well as in legal authority asserted that "to say that a state is sovereign is to say that its rules, the laws, have a final authority; there is no appeal from them to any more ultimate set of rules, while the rules made by other associations and communities are subordinate to the authority of the state". Corroborating D. D. Raphael, Pollock (1895) notes that "Sovereignty is that power which is neither temporary nor delegated nor subject to particular rules, which it cannot alter, nor answerable to any other power on the earth".

Before Rousseau, Jean Bodin has invested the king with sovereignty, but since the right inherent in the idea of sovereignty seems to dangerously absolute, he rather unclearly limited it by natural law. With a more rigorous logic, Hobbes removed all limitations, though it must be added that he believed that sovereignty would in fact be limited by pragmatic consideration (John Noone: 1970). Such approaches to sovereignty are completely unacceptable and against the spirit and the later of the thinking of Rousseau. "natural law is irrelevant, even if there is such a law, either because it is not known, or if known, is not only in such a general way that its application in a given case is doubtful, or if clearly applicable, because there is no higher power to enforce it. Rousseau (1987) rejected Hobbes' version because sovereignty, conceived as a moral property, can never be an attribute of a person or a group no coextensive with the people as a whole". It is on the basis of his enduring rebuttal of the thinking of Thomas Hobbes on the concept of sovereignty that Rousseau began his theorization on the concept of sovereignty, the exposition of which this section proposes to undertake.

In the *Geneva Manuscript* (1993a) already, Rousseau defines sovereignty as the notion that cannot belong to the individual: "From this it becomes clear that the sovereignty is, by its nature, only a corporate entity, that it has only an abstract and collective existence, and that the idea which is attached to this word cannot be united to that of a single individual". Rousseau (1987) in the *Social Contract* is not so resolute, but he gives the following statement from which the popular sovereignty can be deduced: "Each of us places his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will; and as one we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole. ...this public person, formed, thus, by union of all others formerly took the name city, and at present takes the name republic or body politic, which is called state by its members when it is passive, sovereign when it is active, power when it is compared to others like itself. As to the associates they collectively take the name people, they are called citizens insofar as participants in the sovereign authority..."

The sovereign came into existence from the sanctity of the Social Contract. Rousseau made allusions to that in chapter VII of book I when he stated that "since the body politic or the sovereign derives its being exclusively from the sanctity of the contract, it can never obligate itself, not even to another power, to do anything that derogates from the original act, such as alienating some portion of itself or submitting to another sovereign. Violation of the act whereby it exists would be self-annihilation, and whatever is nothing produces nothing" (1987: 149). He further asserted that "since the sovereign is formed entirely from the private individuals who make it up, it neither has nor could have an interest contrary to theirs. Hence, the sovereign power has no need to offer a guarantee to its subjects, since it is impossible for a body to want to harm all of its members, and, as we will see later, it cannot harm any one of them in particular. The sovereign, by the mere fact that it exists, is always all that it should be". What this translates to invariably is that Sovereignty is the General Will in action. Thus it cannot be altered from the people. Only the power transmitted to or through another, but not the General Will.

Rousseau corroborated the fact that sovereignty is the exercise of the general will and argues for its inalienability when he posits that "since sovereignty is merely the exercise of the general will, it can never be alienated, and that the sovereign, which is only a collective being, cannot be represented by anything but itself. Power can perfectly well be transmitted, but not the will" (1987:153). He also argues for the indivisibility of sovereignty. For him "sovereignty is indivisible for the same reason that it is inalienable. For either the will is general, or it is not. It is the will of either the people as a whole or of only a part. In the first case, this declared will is an act of sovereignty and constitutes law. In the second case, it is merely a private will, or an act of magistracy". Commenting on the conception of sovereignty as indivisible in the thoughts of Rousseau, John Noone (1970) asserted that "this means that one part of the assembly cannot be charged with some matter of legislation and other part with others. All people must have a legislative say in all areas of legislative concern".

Rousseau (1987) further stated that the conception of the divisibility of sovereignty stems from the fact of

“not having formed precise notions of sovereign authority, and from having taken for parts of that authority what were merely emanations from it. Thus, for example, the acts of declaring war and making peace have been viewed as acts of sovereignty, which they are not, since each of these acts is not a law but merely an application of the law, a particular act determining the legal circumstances, as will be clearly seen when the idea attached to the word *law* comes to be defined”.

Rousseau, while trying to argue for the absolute nature of the sovereign power asserted that “just as nature gives each man an absolute power over all his members, the social compact gives the body politic an absolute power over all its members, and it is the same power which, as I have said, is directed by the general will and bears the name sovereignty”. He concluded his thinking about the limits of the sovereign power by stipulating that “the sovereign power, absolute, wholly sacred and inviolable as it is, does not and cannot exceed the limits of general conventions, and that every man can completely dispose of such goods and freedom as has been left to him by these conventions. This results in the fact that the sovereign never has the right to lay more charges on one subject than on another, because in that case the matter becomes particular, no longer within the range of the sovereign's competence”. It is in Rousseau's conception of sovereignty having conferred it on the people that one of the major indications of his departure from the thought of Hobbes is clearly revealed and can be deciphered.

3. An Appraisal of Rousseau's Concept of Sovereignty

Rousseau's theorization of the concept of sovereignty, as those of many other modern thinkers and philosophers, is full of contradiction and often irreconcilable elements. For example, Hearnshaw (1930) thinks that Rousseau was an “unsystematic thinker, untrained in formal logic”. For T. W. Jones (1968), Rousseau's style of writing “is confused and puzzling, ambiguous and contradictory, an almost hopeless maze of impassioned and violent assertions leading off in various directions, no one of which is pursued to its logical conclusion”. The above quotations accounts for the perception of scholars on Rousseau's thoughts.

The above notwithstanding, this paper share the sentiments and position of John Noone (1970) who alluded the fact that “an organic character in the works of most great thinkers makes it extremely difficult to isolate a part and explain it without multiple references to the whole. The problem is, I believe, especially acute in the case of Rousseau, and a failure to recognize it is the probable cause of so many unsatisfactory and even absurd interpretations of his basic principles”. Hence, the imperativeness of an appraisal of Rousseau's political thoughts, and here specifically, as concerns his conception of sovereignty.

This section concerns itself with an appraisal of the Rousseauin understanding of the concept of sovereignty which as have been argued above ramifies a “popular sovereignty” that is inalienable, indestructible and does not err. This appraisal will bring to the fore the various arguments that have been put forward against the Rousseauin conception of sovereignty as well as attempt rebuttals against same if need be. It also seeks to bring to the fore, the merits and demerits of the thoughts of Jean-Jacques Rousseau on the subject matter on review. This will serve as building blocks the next section which will advance the implication of same for the search for democratic legitimacy and sustainable development in African modern nation-states.

One of the merits of the Rousseauin conception of sovereignty can be seen in the fact that with the conferment of sovereignty on the “people” who reserves the right to consent to any chosen trustee and at the same time the right to withdraw their consent whenever they conceives of any regime of having violated the terms of reference and the rules of engagement of the social pact, Rousseau seems to have presented a prototype of all legitimate government. Again, Rousseau's social contract theory, to some extent can be said to have been employed and deployed in the task of social engineering as is evident in the overthrow of the despotic monarchy in France during the French revolution of 1789 as well as other pockets of revolutions here and there in history. It is in line with the above that Appadoria (2003) stated that Rousseau's thoughts have “inspired the French Revolution of 1789 which was a revolt against French despotic monarchy, it also supplied the basis of the theory of popular sovereignty”.

While appreciating the advantages of a Democratic form of government, Rousseau found serious lapses in the Representative model. Here the citizen exercises his sovereign right only for a few seconds - during voting in the electioneering process. At that point of time he has absolute freedom to transform his sovereignty to whomsoever he likes. But, then till next elections he is only a mute spectator to all the misdeeds of his representative to whom he has willingly delegated his power of sovereignty. To overcome this short coming, Rousseau visualized a system where government affairs are run on regular referendum with the “people” calling the shots. People will be actually governing themselves not through their representatives. The essence of this philosophy is the capacity of human beings to manage their affairs. The basis of the state is the popular will, not mere law or force. Herein lays yet another outstanding merit of the Rousseauin conception of sovereignty.

A critical appraisal of Rousseau's social contractarian theorization on the concept of sovereignty reveals that it is the social contract that indisputably bears out the whole of Rousseau's decisiveness to constructing unlimited sovereign power. Rousseau (1987) devised the social contract as the basis whereby individuals give up

or lay down all their natural rights before the sovereign. As Rousseau put it, by contracting, “people alienate all their natural rights and give them to the sovereign”. There is, however, considerable inconsistency in this statement. First, Rousseau says that in the state of nature there are no any rights, he then says that by contracting, people alienate all their rights. If there are no rights in state of nature, how can people lay them down? As soon as one escapes this initial confusion, one encounters another. Rousseau asserts that the main goal of sovereign power is to establish freedom. Even if people do not want to be free, the sovereign will force them to this.

Rousseau believed that the main goal of the sovereign was to secure the political state in which we would have complied with ourselves, as we had in the state of nature. If so, why did Rousseau need a social contract? Why, in order to get the same result, are we to travel the whole way from renouncing our rights only to regain them? If we agreed to renounce our rights in the first place, why we would need them again? Is it just because we have to meet the first difference between natural and political freedom and become moral beings? If this was what Rousseau had in mind, he did not have to compel us to travel this long road. Laying down rights has nothing to do with morality. Besides, Rousseau (1993b) himself regarded morality as something what cannot be achieved overnight. “To form a citizen is not work of a day,” he wrote.

Talmon’s critique of the Rousseauan conception of sovereignty attempts to corroborate the argument that popular sovereignty in Rousseau’s political philosophy does not exist and is indeed impossible. Talmon set forth his argument in *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, which presents not only one of the most serious and powerful critiques of Rousseau’s concept of popular sovereignty, but also of the whole enlightenment, especially the French revolutionaries. Basically, Talmon (1952) has two sets of arguments he uses in order to obliterate Rousseau’s popular sovereignty. The first is empirical, the second ideological.

His main empirical argument is that the concrete order of totalitarian democracy has its roots not outside the Western political tradition, but inside it. The era of enlightenment brought forth two schools of thought: a liberal and a totalitarian one. Both these schools held liberty of the individual as their main value. “But whereas one finds the essence of freedom in spontaneity and the absence of coercion, the other believes it to be realized only in the pursuit and attainment of an absolute collective purpose”. Thus, the product of the second school was something Talmon calls “Totalitarian Messianism”.

Now, Talmon does not, actually, argue that these two schools were schools of thought. Rather, he affirms that the two schools were ones of practice. In the set of ideas of the French enlightenment that Talmon examined, he says that liberal and totalitarian elements were mixed in the thoughts of 18th Century French thinkers. While they were the ardent champions of the idea of liberty, they were ardent champions of virtue and reason. Soon, these two irreconcilable lines of ideas came into conflict: “When the eighteenth-century secular religion came face to face with this conflict, the result was the great schism. Liberal democracy flinched from the spectre of force and fell back upon the trial-and-error philosophy. Totalitarian Messianism hardened into an exclusive doctrine represented by a vanguard of the enlightened, who justified themselves in the use of coercion against those who refused to be free and virtuous”.

Here, one can notice a shift in the object of Talmon’s analysis. At first he speaks of the enlightened thinkers who mixed two opposite sets of ideas, but when speaking about Totalitarian Messianism, he points at practice, that is, at the revolutionaries and politicians. And when he says that “Modern totalitarian democracy is a dictatorship resting on popular enthusiasm” which is, furthermore, nothing but “a synthesis between the eighteenth-century idea of the natural order and the Rousseauan idea of popular fulfillment and self-expression”, Talmon confirms nothing but the fact that the parts or the elements of *philosophes* and Rousseau were conducive to the concrete political order that emerged after the French revolution. Hence, when analyzing Rousseau’s political ideas, Talmon does not make any inherent analysis. Rather, what he does is point at those elements of the thought of *philosophes* and Rousseau that were used by French revolutionaries. In effect, he analyzes revolutionary practice, not Rousseau’s theory. Hence, Talmon’s conclusions concerning the negation of popular will and the superiority of the state are true, but only within an empirical context. For instance, he says that “The (Rousseauan) state takes the place of the absolute point of reference embodied in the universal principle”

In the opinion of this paper, such a conclusion cannot be inferred from Rousseau’s theory. In fact, it is contrary to the letter and spirit of Rousseau’s thought. Talmon instead inferred it from the post-revolutionary practice. In a long discussion, Talmon explicitly demonstrates how French revolutionaries interpreted the thoughts of *philosophes* and Rousseau. All things considered, Talmon’s observation about the supremacy of the state over its citizens is accurate at the post-revolutionary and empirical level. However, it cannot inherently verify the conjecture that Rousseau’s theory implied state sovereignty in lieu of popular sovereignty.

Talmon’s second argument is an ideological one. He disputes Rousseau’s idea of popular sovereignty because it was not in accordance with the sovereignty of the individual. Talmon says: “As in the case of the materialists, [in the case of Rousseau] it is not the self-expression of the individual, the deployment of his particular faculties and the realization of his own and unique mode of existence, that is the final aim, but the loss of the individual in the collective entity by taking its color and principle of existence”. Thereafter, he proceeds: “Exercise of sovereignty is not conceived here as the interplay of interests, the balancing of views, all equally

deserving a hearing, the weighing of various interests”. Finally, he concludes: “On closer examination the idea of natural order reaches the antithesis of its original individualism.” According to Talmon (1952), popular sovereignty can only exist if the individual is sovereign. Since Rousseau negated the individual’s right to self expression, there can be no popular sovereignty

Talmon’s argument is persuasive only if we accept the liberal and individualistic points of view as the measure for what is morally and politically good. Doubtless, from these ideologies it follows that the individual always comes first when formulating his or her own interests. In his defense of Rousseau’s Popular sovereignty which is people centered, Plamenatz (1963) holds that Rousseau had in mind the idea according to which mere participation in public affairs created virtuous persons out of citizens: “Equal and active participation in public business makes for virtue, which is the love of justice, and justice is the common good; so that the virtuous man, even though he sometimes has desires incompatible with justice, wants justice to prevail over all such desires”. Hence, he concludes that Rousseau “very probably meant” that justice and equality were achieved as soon as people were equal in partaking in the decision-making process. If it happens, people will regard every law as just, since it is the product of their equal participation in making it.

This paper, in its interrogation of Talmon’s refusal and denial of the possibility of popular sovereignty holds that the inadequacy and problem with Talmon, as well as with many other critiques of Rousseau and his concept of popular sovereignty is that they were constantly mixing the empirical and ideological point of view. The reasons that led Talmon to discredit Rousseau’s idea of popular sovereignty were specific to him.

Talmon was a champion of liberal ideology. Not in terms of its creator, but of its advocate. Hence, Talmon’s entire critique of Rousseau was nothing but an examination from a liberal vantage point. He believed that there was only one ideology from which perspective every particular theory should have been investigated and criticized. This is maybe acceptable and recommendable if viewed from a pragmatic angle directing our attention towards avoiding the consequences of totalitarian orders in which popular sovereignty is negated. Despite such pragmatic value implicit in Talmon’s critiques, Rousseau’s concept of popular sovereignty still remains undamaged. It is in agreement with the above that Barber asserted that “it is debatable if this charge of totalitarianism is justified, and, indeed, plausible. Totalitarianism is characterized by a deliberate attempt to change people to fit a political system or a historical development”. Proponents of the thesis that Rousseau was a totalitarian seems to overlook or are oblivious of the fact that Rousseau explicitly set out as captured in the opening lines of book one of the *Social Contract* to “inquire whether there can be some legitimate and sure rule of administration in the civil order, taking men as they are and laws as they might be”.

4. Implications of Rousseau’s Concept of Sovereignty for Democratic Legitimacy and Sustainable Development

The implications of Rousseau’s concept of sovereignty for the search for democratic legitimacy and sustainable development in most modern nation-states, upon a critical evaluation and reflection are crystal clear and lend themselves to easy understanding. In Rousseauan contractarian thoughts, the concept of sovereignty is one of the major concepts that can be considered an integral part of his social contract is the concept of sovereignty. Sovereignty which is both inalienable and indivisible belongs exclusively to and resides with and in the people. What that translates into is that “people” in African socio-political configuration should be held in a very esteem. Put differently, Africans should realize their position in the political space, stand up to it, jettison all forms of political apathy and be alive to their responsibility of consenting to and conferring legitimacy on successive government and withdrawing same at anytime they conceive of any regime as of having deviated from the terms of reference as well as the rules of engagement of the social pact,

In the above sense, no politician who is disinterested in the public common good which is all that is needed to place Africa in the path of sustainable development but rather interested in the private personal gain will be allowed to hold the reins of power, causing damages in the process for so long a time. It is in consonance with the above that Ifechukwu J. Ndiamefo (2016) asserted that:

Africans must take advantage of the philosophical insight that political power is contractual and as such should be employed only towards securing a just and viable society. Such philosophical insight would reverse the current obsession with political power and its perpetuation by all means.

The withdrawal of consent can be done through such democratic frameworks as the periodic elections and in critical situations, the activation of such lawful frameworks as provided for by the constitutions of modern nation-states in Africa as constitutional recall rather than activating the African religious tendency of invoking and deploying the apparatus of prayers and supplication while suffering in excruciating pains and poverty and waiting for God’s intervention or the expiration of the tenure of such a regime.

This will no doubt alter the trajectory and the tapestry of the political dramatist personals in the African political space as well as change the thinking of African politicians which have largely being that of “sitting tight” in line with the philosophy of “wanting to die with the baton of leadership” as evidenced in some form of

master-slave relationship between leaders and the led as opposed to a relationship that should be hinged on social contractual terms and basis.

In the above sense, the frontiers of the inherent crisis of legitimacy, be it in terms of the acquisition of political powers or sustaining same will be pushed back and consequently pave way for the institutionalization of true democracy as well as legitimate democratic regimes in Africa that are in line definition and the “people centered” nature of democracy. It is only when sovereignty, which in Rousseau’s contractarian thought belongs to the people in exclusive terms resides truly within the people who reserve the right to elevate a sheriff or a regime as well as sack same that the above can be achieved. Again it is on the above basis that the ruling class in Africa will be susceptible to accountability and hence, will be committed to fulfilling their part of the social contract entered into with the people for self-preservation and consequently the development of their nation-states.

As intimated by Ozumba (2010), it is evident and crystal clear that the world has indeed again been split into two classes, the-haves and the-haves-not, the rich and the poor, the colonizers and the colonized, the strong and the weak etc. the strong is seen as a colossus trampling on weak nations with reckless abandon. Threat, intimidation, coercion, outright war, extermination, sabotage, economic sanctions, blockades etc are some of the weapons of infringement of the world superpowers on the sovereignty of weaker nations. Most modern African nation-states belong to this group of weaker nations and the derogatory club of the third world nations. Hence, they suffer more from this crisis of infringement. These infringements are constantly shrouded in secrecy and are portrayed as altruistic attempts at making the nations better which in the actual sense are exploitative in all fronts.

The implications of Rousseau’s conception of sovereignty within the matrix of the above reality is that African nation-states should resist with all vehemence and with every fiber of their being, all forms of over lordship and dictatorial tendencies of the world superpower that are geared towards undermining or infringing on the sovereignty of their respective nation-states. They should rather build enduring synergy amongst them develop a philosophic temper, work along the lines of the philosophy of self-reliance and accordingly, sever all the ties that have hitherto proven to be fertile grounds as well as made them susceptible to infringements on their sovereignty which according to Rousseau is the act of the general will of the people in a particular state.

5. Conclusion

This paper has attempted an appraisal of the concept of sovereignty in the contractarian thoughts of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The high point of the above discourse is deducible in the fact that Rousseau conceives of sovereignty as distinctively popular, unlimited, absolute, inalienable and unerring. For Rousseau, sovereignty belongs to the people and the people reserves the exclusive and inalienable right to confer it on whosoever they will and at the same time to withdraw same when they conceive of any regime as deviating from the terms of reference as well as the rules of engagement of the social pact.

It is stating the obvious to conclude at this point that the conception of the concept of sovereignty as presented and defended by Rousseau, as plausible as it seems is not without flaws, that notwithstanding, the vehemence with which he rejected the absolutism of Thomas Hobbes and the systems that existed before his theorization of the *Social Contract* is quite commendable and in line with the maxim of philosophy which is taking nothing for granted. Again, what should be noted is that the central importance of the political thoughts of Rousseau is attested to by the long-standing controversies it has engendered and by its impact on a broad range of thinkers and on social political reflections even in the 21st century.

The implications of Rousseau’s theory of sovereignty for the African search for democratic legitimacy and by extension, sustainable development are not in doubt. However, it is here considered necessary to rehearse one. It implies the fact that sovereignty belongs to the people and as such their wish as expressible in their consent and in their choice of whom to confer sovereignty to or not should be respected and held in high esteem. This and the adoption of the Rousseauian model of contractual governance, in the opinion of this paper will push back the frontiers of the pockets of crisis of legitimacy; undermine the *sit-tight* mentality and the philosophy of wanting to die with the baton of leadership. In the final third, the submission of this paper is that Africa should allow philosophy to do for it, what it has done for the west in her time of need as acquiring such a philosophic temper will help Africans find a way around its perennial leadership and developmental problems.

Furthermore, this philosophic temper will also lead to the institutionalization of true democracy in terms of its being a system of government that is “people centered” in Africa. And as part of it concomitant effect which spans the elevation of true democrats, altruistic and accountable leadership, will undoubtedly lead and place Africa not just on the path of development but on a developmental path that is both sustainable and possess the propensity of delivering Africa from the jigsaw of institutionalized corruption, excruciating poverty and startling hunger.

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Sunday Edoh Odum was born in Makurdi on the 2nd of April, 1989. He attended the Benue State University, Makurdi-Nigeria and obtained a Bachelors of Arts (B.A Hons) degree in Religion and Philosophy (second class upper division) 2012 and a Masters of Arts (M.A) degree in Philosophy (with specialization in Social and Political Philosophy). He is a member Nigeria Philosophical Association (NPA) and has Social and Political Philosophy, Philosophy of Law and Logic as his areas of research interest.