How do the Social Contract theories of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau differ?

Social contract theory focuses on the origination of laws and states, and the influence states or regulated communities have on the individual. All forms of social contract theory can be ultimately boiled down to this: The individual desire for security, or safety, demands fulfillment through a collective agreement. This collective agreement transforms the human realm from the "natural, primordial state" into an organized society.

Although the concept of the social contract is recognizable in the works of some of the ancient Greek philosophers, and Rousseau was the first to coin the term “social contract”, Thomas Hobbes is widely recognized to be the founder of social contract theory in western philosophy. The theories of Locke and Rousseau can thus be seen as - to a degree - based on Hobbes disquisitions. However, the latter two have transformed Hobbes' concept to fit into their respective perspectives on human nature and society. The differences between the philosophers’ view on social contract, as you will have noticed, mainly spring from differences regarding their view on human nature. The differences in the proposed role of the state in the three theories follow these conflicting views.

Thomas Hobbes' illustrious quote "Homo homini lupus est" - "A man is a wolf to another man" accurately describes Hobbes image of the "natural state". In a world characterized by a state of anarchy, people will only act in their personal best interests. Hobbes describes the natural state as a "war of all against all". ‘Morality is non-existent, and every individual lives in fear. The most abundant fear is the fear of death fueled by the omnipresence of violence. Living in fear is considered no free way to live, so people give up the use of violence. This however, entails a variant of the prisoner’s dilemma: If I give up violence but my neighbour does not, my safety is not guaranteed. A ruler – Hobbes names this ruler “Leviathan” – is installed to enforce the renunciation of violence by the people. This Leviathan may use force, even against its own population, as long as the benefit of the population is pursued. In Hobbes' view, the states' main role is to maintain and impose law and order, and to prevent the situation of war of all against all.

Hobbes is very pessimistic about the nature of man, and imagines a pre-societal Armageddon of egocentric, aggressive people. Man needs to be protected against itself by the state, if needed through force. People do not have to be represented by the government or ruler, as long as the government fulfils its primary task of protection.

John Locke envisions a much less frightening natural state. People live in ultimate freedom. The natural state is morally right nor wrong, but very chaotic. To limit this chaos, people decide to abandon some of their freedoms to regulate life. The population asserts power to a ruler or government, and the governments' sole purpose is to enforce safety and the possessions of citizens. When the government is no longer capable of fulfilling its task, it can and should be overthrown.

Locke is more confident of mans' ability to live together, and thus sees mainly this last point entirely different. A government or ruler should be a representation of the population, on order to prevent suppression. If the people sense that the government no longer represents them, they should have the right and possibility to dispose of the leader. The government or ruler is no almighty entity as in Hobbes theory.
Rousseau views man in the natural state as a “noble savage”. People will be inclined to cooperate rather than conflict. **Society, he argues, has corrupted man. He sees violence as a result of political life and its institutions.** Rousseau is very critical of governments, and one could argue this to be a result of his consideration of pre-revolutionary France. A governments’ purpose should be to strive for a harmonious society. Rousseau idealised a basic form of **direct democracy. The “will of the people”,** which can best be explained as the desire of the majority of the people in a society, is what is best for the population and should be pursued by the state. This makes his ideas hard to accomplish, because of the practical difficulties urging an entire population to “vote” entail.

Where Locke’s theory implies a more bidirectional relation between the population and the state than Hobbes’, Rousseau in his turn called for a considerably more **active role for the population** than the former. The political process should not be dominated by the state, but should be actively participated in by the population. If everybody expresses his desire, the **will of the people can be determined** and thus the course of policy can be ensued.