

THE POLITICAL IDEAS OF J. J. ROUSSEAU

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This is an essay on the political ideas of J. J. Rousseau. I shall endeavour to present as clearly as possible what Rousseau himself thought and what others have thought about him.

All my life I have been an admirer of Rousseau. The first phrase of the Social Contract, "Man was born free and everywhere is in chains", has always had warm reception in my heart since High School days. I considered Rousseau the apostle of liberty, the great inspirer of democratic principles. From my Latin American history, I learned that Rousseau's writings had planted the seed of liberty in many a liberator's heart. Simón Bolívar, the greatest of Spanish American liberators, knew his Rousseau by heart. Simón Rodríguez, his teacher, saw to it that his pupil got a good dosis of the ideas of the French writer. Hidalgo, the revolutionary priest of Mexico, read Rousseau surreptitiously, and his ideas so inflamed his heart that he led the first social revolutionary movement of Mexican history.

Salvador de Madariaga, the famous Spanish historian, has said that logically Montesquieu should have been the idol of Spanish American liberators. Montesquieu was conservative yet liberal; at heart he was aristocratic. Yet Montesquieu was too systematic, too cut and dry to suit the imagination of a revolutionary era. It was Rousseau that won the hearts of the creoles.

The liberators were looking for a great name, for great ideas, for great phrases. All this and more they found in Rousseau. He suited perfectly the traditional Spanish anarchism. Angel Ganivet has said that every Spaniard carries in his pocket a constitution that reads as follows: " Este español tiene el derecho a hacer lo que le da gana donde quiera." (This Spaniard has the right to do what he pleases, wherever he is.) This sounds like Rousseau.

It is with this kind of background that I have approached Rousseau. For me he stood in a great pedestal. Whoever spoke to me against Rousseau was a reactionary, a hater of liberty. Setting aside such ideas I decided to read Rousseau himself. The result has been most surprising. Rousseau is still a great man for me, but his greatness has somewhat decreased. I have come to realize that his writings are not all of one piece, but that there is much room for divergent interpretations. Someone has even gone to the extreme of asserting that one can get out of Rousseau what he is looking for. This is very close to the truth.

Rousseau is an enigmatic figure. Paradox may well his life be called. He was a man of contradictions both in life and thought. Many call him an anarchist, an extreme individualist. Others scream to the high heavens because in his political thought there appears the seed of collectivism and ultimately of totalitarianism.

Freedom and order, these two eternal concepts appear in his works.

A case can be made for each.

In life he was always carefree, restless, fickle, always ready to run away when the going got tough. He was a lover of women, yet never got married. Part of his life he spent trying to win acceptance in society. But always his idiosyncracies, his lack of taste, and social manners, his anarchism would show up at the wrong moment to create enemies, to alienate friends. While Rousseau sought society, society ran away from him. Again paradox appears. When Rousseau leaves society, when he retires to live to himself, to enjoy the beauty of nature, to give outlet to his passion and feelings, society runs after him. We see the spectacle of some of the great families of France paying their respects and admiring a man with whom they could hardly get along. This state of affairs did not last. Society got after him again. Rousseau was the victim of a persecution complex the last years of his life.

Let us see what his political ideas actually were.

The political writings of Rousseau appear at first sight to be a mass of contradictions. In his dissertation "On the Origin of Inequality", he appears as an extreme individualist, a passionate lover of anarchic freedom, a mourner over lost liberty, an enemy of anything or anybody that would restrict his soul's eccentricities. On the other hand, his article on "Political Economy" and the latter sections of the Social Contract present a different picture. Here he stands for a collectivism so complete that it establishes the

unqualified authority of the state over the citizen. He goes to the extreme of advocating the death penalty for nonconformity to the civic religion.

In some places he praises the pre-social state of nature, while in others he exhorts the organized and highly developed state of political society. The family for him is fundamental to maintain the purity of all institutions, but he himself lived with a woman he never married and the five children he had from her were sent to an orphanage as soon as they were born. In his Emile Rousseau advocates a type of education that consists mainly in preventing any interference with the free operation of nature in the adolescent mind. Yet when he framed constitutions for Corsica and Poland, the education was state-controlled and directed mainly toward civic ends.

Rousseau was many things at the same time: a recluse yet an ardent politician; a lover of humanity yet a misanthrope; a man of ecstatic piety yet of sensuality. It is not surprising that he is a man of contradictions.

Professional critics differ in their evaluation of Rousseau. M. Henri Sée stands for the unqualified individualism of Rousseau. Says he:

C'est une conception individualiste, presque anarchiste, qui a inspiré le Discours sur l'inégalité. Mais, dans le Contrat Social

Rousseau, dépit des apparences, reste individualiste: il se préoccupe aussi et surtout d'assurer à l'individu le plein développement de sa liberté, et ce sera l'organisation elle-même, ce sera le pacte social qui garantira aux citoyens le maximum de liberté. C'est en ~~vue~~ de son individualisme que Rousseau a le premier nettement dégagé la doctrine démocratique de la souveraineté. (Sée, p. 146)

Professor C. E. Vaughn, on the other hand , goes to the other extreme. He says:

Strike out the Discours sur l'inégalité with the first few pages of the Contrat Social, and the individualism of Rousseau will be seen to be nothing better than a myth. (Vaughn, vol. 1, p.1)

We shall find out that there is room for both interpretations.

The principle of the social contract has been a matter of much contention. Professor Vaughn considers it secondary and non-essential. (Vaughn vol. 1, p. 235) We believe that in this respect he is mistaken as we shall have occasion to point out latter. Others maintain that ~~the~~ social contract is the center and keystone of the whole political structure of Rousseau.

It is obvious that Rousseau emitted contrary opinions from time to time about the same thing: the individual and the state, liberty and equality, toleration and persecution, primitive man and civilized society. Of all of this Rousseau utters at times diametrically opposed concepts. It is not to be forgotten that Rousseau was an untrained man. He did not have the education of

a Montesquie or a Voltaire. He read a lot but apparently without system. He remained throughout his life an unsystematic and untrained thinker. Many of his works were written on the spur of the moment in typical romantic fashion. His mind was moved by feeling and passion rather than by logic and truth. Yet in spite of his irresponsibility as a writer, he had a special gift for epigram. His phrases have become the slogans for revolutionary movements. The phrase "Man was born free and everywhere is in chains" is similar in revolutionary possibilities to that other phrase uttered in 1848 in the now famous Communist Manifesto, namely, "Workers of the world unite; you have nothing to lose but your chains". This is part of the stuff out of which revolutions are made.

Rousseau never gave roundness to his ideas. His system is chaotic. Yet it is possible to gather a general outline of his political ideas from his works. A basal factor in all his thinking was the Bible, which was the foundation of all Genevan education. In his system Rousseau shows himself through and through a Genevan. The best state for him was one after the pattern of the Genevan Republic. At the heart of Geneva was the Bible. Rousseau as a youth dreamed of becoming a Calvinistic preacher, and later made the effort to qualify for the Catholic priesthood. Many critics

agree that Rousseau was never able to rid himself of his theological background. To the scheme of salvation propounded by the preachers of Geneva Rousseau added some of the ideas of Locke, Hobbes, Montesquieu, and Plato. No wonder there was confusion in his system. Yet there is some coherence. The Bible might help us to understand his ideology. It should be pointed out that Rousseau did not use the Bible in the Calvinistic way. It was the broad general outline of Bible history that influenced him.

It is well known that the Bible begins and ends with a picture of an ideal state, a Golden Age. In the Garden of Eden, according to the Old Testament narrative, our fathers lived in complete freedom and innocence. Their life was very simple and their needs were all met. All was perfect; God was in his throne; man was in fellowship with ^{him} that sweet and loving fellowship that existed before the fall. The New Testament also presents a picture of a Golden Age. The visionary of Patmos has an apocalyptic vision of the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem, in which the host of the redeemed are to be gathered together to live in everlasting purity and happiness. Thus the human story is not meaningless and cyclic. It has, according to the Biblical view, a beginning and an end. Paradise lost, paradise regained, this summarizes in two bold strokes the Biblical story. How was paradise lost and how it can be regained that is the theme of Christian theology.

Rousseau was always interested in religion, and although he abandoned Christianity and became a Deist, his Biblical background was always with him. To the end he thought in terms of paradise lost and paradise regained. It goes without saying that his thinking was secular and political at heart rather than essentially religious. Generally speaking his system can be divided into four parts: (1) the primitive state of innocence (2) the fall and the condition of sin and misery (3) the mode of redemption (4) the new state of virtue and felicity. (Hearnshaw, p.187)

Before proceeding to treat these parts in detail, we shall say something about the method that Rousseau used in arriving at his conclusions.

Rousseau appealed less to experience and science than to reason and sentiment. Sentiment and imagination had a preponderant influence in the elaboration of his political doctrine. Rousseau almost never appeals to history. When he studies the foundations of society, he is not concerned about real historical origins. In his dissertation on "The Origin of Inequality", he says:

Let us begin then by laying facts aside, as they do not affect the question. The investigations we may enter into, in treating this subject, must not be considered as historical truths, but only as mere conditional and hypothetical reasonings, rather calculated to explain the nature of things, than to ascertain their actual origin; just like the hypotheses that our physicists daily form respecting the formation of the world.

It seems that Rousseau only pretends to set up hypotheses

concerning the origin of society. In actual practice however he considers those hypotheses as scientific truths. When he tries to determine the different states through which man has travelled from the state of nature to the state of political society, he proceeds as if what he says is true rather than hypothetical.

It is his method that strikes the modern historian as unsound. Rousseau knew little about history and cared little about it. He was concerned about drawing conclusions from things as he saw them without taking the pains to do any research or inquiry. This is most unsatisfactory for the political science of our present day. It is interesting to note that Karl Marx, although more concerned with history than Rousseau, has done essentially the same thing. Marx starts with a primitive state of communism and ends with a state communism. All this is highly hypothetical. Marx uses to support his thesis the history of Europe since 1500, a rather short span of history* to serve as a basis for such a sweeping philosophy of history as his is. Marx starts with a hypothesis and believes it to be true. Rousseau does the same thing in spite of his official denial.

Let us see how Rousseau's system unfolds.

(1) The state of nature. In the second dissertation the subject was "The Origin of Inequality". This is the Genesis of Rousseau's rationalized and secularized scripture. This is his Garden of Eden. The theme of the dissertation was that the

origin of inequality lies in the institution of private property, and that there is in the nature of things no justification for private property.

In the state of nature man was an innocent and happy savage because his needs were limited. This noble savage, product of the imagination of the eighteenth century, lived a simple, care-less, 'sinless existence. Domination and servitude were unknown notions in the state of nature. This savage was essentially solitary, living without any form of social life. He wears no clothing and feels no need for them; he has no property and wants none. His necessities are met by the bounty of nature. In his heart he has no awareness of bad and evil. He is free of most of the diseases of civilization, and has little consciousness of the approach of death. His liberty is perfect: Equality reigns supreme. No wonder Rousseau says:

In this primitive state men had neither houses, nor huts, nor any kind of property whatever; every one lived where he could, seldom for more than a single night; the sexes united without design, as accident opportunity, or inclination brought them together.... The produce of the earth furnished them with all they needed, and instinct told them how to use it.

No sweeter picture could be presented of the original state of man.

(2) The fall and the condition of sin and misery. The first transformation from the state of nature takes place. It is a downward movement. Man begins to have social instincts without

being yet perverted. There is an intermediate state between the state of nature and the real fall with the institution of private property. This has no counterpart in the Biblical narrative. It is a sort of glorified Golden Age. There is some social contacts between individuals but no corruption yet.

The fall of man is due to the growth of inequality, and the growth of inequality is due to the abandonment of solitude for society. The institution of society was due to the institution of private property.

The first man, who having enclosed a piece of ground, besought himself of saying "This is mine," and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society. From how many crimes, wars, and murders; from how many horrors and misfortunes might not any have saved mankind by pulling up the stakes or filling up the ditch, and crying to his fellows: "Beware of listening to this impostor; you are undone if you once forget that the fruits of the earth belong to us all, and the earth itself to no one."

Thus the institution of private property created political society. Under the pretext of trying to prevent wars, the powerful men convinced the weaker ones that they should form a society capable of guaranteeing property. Thus the original usurpation was transformed into an irrevocable right. Even the wise men accepted this arrangement in order to preserve part of their liberty. In this fashion it was that law in order to satisfy the ambition of a few persons has subjected the human race to work, to servitude, and to misery. The earth became a place

where only societies of enemies existed, in everyone of which economic, political, and civil inequality existed. The final stage of inequality is despotism, that monster that swallows up everything.

Of course, to present a picture of sin and misery Rousseau had only to look around him to see the conditions of the peasants, the relations between nations, the misery of his own life.

But if men know that they have fallen from a state of grace- the state of nature, Why do not they ^{go back} to that original position? It is impossible says Rousseau. The Garden of Eden is closed, and an angel with a flaming torch prevents all approach. No longer are there enough forest to permit the savage to roam; no longer is the population small to allow him to live in solitude; no longer is it possible to dispense with clothing without embarrassment and inconvenience. Nor can the knowledge of good and evil, and the fear of death be removed from the human mind. In short man has crossed the boundary of the state of nature and now there is no possibility of returning. The New Golden Age must be different from the first. It must recognize science, the existence of private property, allow for the advancement of the arts and crafts of civilization. An above all it must recognize the existence of society.

(3) Redemption by means of the social contract.

Rousseau is now in a predicament. There is no going back. His problem may be thus stated: how to recover pristine

liberty without the abolition of law, or how to restore equality without the surrender of property. It is the old problem between individualism and communalism, between anarchic man and organized society. How can there be harmony? Rousseau was indeed faced with a crucial problem in political science, namely, the relation of personal freedom to collective authority.

We have pointed above how Henri Sée is of the opinion that in solving this problem Rousseau remained an individualist through and through. His purpose was to save individual freedom at all cost. Rousseau is thus mainly concerned in assuring the individual the full development of his liberty. The social contract will be the protective device used to safeguard liberty.

According to Sée the individualism of Rousseau stands out in the Social Contract because of his conception of natural rights. In his dissertation on "The Origin of Inequality" Rousseau asserts that such rights do not rest in the primitive state of man, but rather in the innate sentiments of the human heart. He perceives two principles that antecede reason and serve as a basis for natural rights, namely, egoism or self-preservation, and compassion or sympathy. Out of these two principles all the rules concerning natural rights proceed. Natural rights are, in other words, dictated by the inclinations of human nature.

The liberty of the individual is thus the essential basis of the social organization. The social contract from which

the social organization derives its being cannot alienate natural rights according to Sée's interpretation. (Sée, pp. 146-148)

This is one possible position.

How can we find a social organization that protects the natural liberty of man? Rousseau shows in the Social Contract that authority can not be based on the right of the stronger. This has no meaning. To give in to force is an act of necessity and not of free will; it is an act of prudence and not of duty. Authority can only be based on "conventions". Thus Rousseau states the case:

The problem is to find a form of association that will defend and protect with the whole common force the person and goods of each associate, and in which each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone, and remain as free as before. (Social Contract, Book I, Chapter 6)

The social contract is essential to Rousseau's scheme of political theory. This in spite of professor Vaughn's opinion. The contract is as essential as the cross is to Christianity. Rousseau describes the process by which the individuals agree to divest themselves of their individual rights. Says he: " Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will, and in our corporate capacity we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole." This involves " the total alienation of each associate together with all his rights to the community."

Rousseau adds:

At once in place of the individual personality of each contracting party, this act of association creates a moral and collective body, composed of as many members as the assembly contains votes, and receiving from this act the unity, its common identity, its life, and its will. This public person, so formed by the union of all other persons, formerly took the name of Cité, and now takes that of Republic or Body Politic. It is called by its members State when passive, Sovereign when active, and Power when compared with others like itself. Those who are associated with it take collectively the name of People and severally are called Citizens as sharing the sovereign power, and Subjects as being under the laws of the state. (Social Contract, loc. cit.)

In spite of Sée's contention, it seems to me that this body politic of Rousseau is the great Leviathan of Hobbes without its head. We shall see later how in the course of history the theory of popular sovereignty came to be identified with the totalitarian state.

(4) The new social state. The main portion of the Social Contract is devoted to the unfolding of the implications of the social contract, and by the consequent creation of the new social organism. Here is where Rousseau speaks of paradise regained.

Individuals associate and form the social contract. The first fruit of the contract is the sovereignty of the people. The sovereign- the people- represents the general will, and therefore it follows that sovereignty is inalienable and indivisible. Since sovereignty proceeds from the will of the people it can never be alienated in favor of any private individual. If it

were the social pact would be broken. As soon as there is an absolute ruler, there is no longer a social community; there is only a lord and slaves. Such a ruler is only a private individual whose interest is alien to the common interest, and probably hostile to the general welfare.

Sovereignty is also indivisible. In this respect Rousseau disagreed with Montesquieu who held to the theory of the separation and balance of power.

For Rousseau the state could only have one power, the legislative power, which had all authority. He was against representative government as we know it today. He believed that sovereignty could not be delegated. For this reason he was critical of the English nation. He asserted that Englishmen deceived themselves if they thought they were free. According to Rousseau they were only free during the election of the members of parliament.

In reality Rousseau believed that no law was valid unless ratified by the people. Thus the best form of government was that permitted the people the full exercise of their rights. How is it possible to have such a system in large states where it is impossible to gather all the people together? Rousseau saw the solution of this problem in a federal system of small states. We see that he can only think in terms of his native city. He always admired Geneva and was proud of being a citizen of that famous city. Geneva was his model.

Sovereignty is in the people and therefore not in the government. Yet government is necessary. For Rousseau government was in charge of executing the laws and of maintaining liberty, political as well as civil. But government has no power of itself. It is the commissar, the functionary of the sovereign- the people. The government has charge of all administration, even the judicial function.

Rousseau attaches only mediocre importance to government. He divides them into three principal forms: (1) democracy (2) monarchy (3) aristocracy. Democracy is a dangerous form because it might end in tyranny as it happened in the ancient Greek cities. Monarchy is usually hereditary and there is little chance of having a good king always. Also the choice of ministers in a monarchy is guided by favoritism and not by ability.

The aristocratic government is the best of all because it is to the best elements of society that the administration is trusted. Rousseau is thinking again of Geneva and its aristocratic government.

It should always be remembered that Rousseau distinguished sharply between sovereignty and government. The people is always sovereign. In final analysis it is only the eternal vigilance of the people that is able to maintain liberty and justice. The citizen desires above everything the obedience of the laws. The

leaders are not always watchful of the common good. They want laws to favor their own interests and to acquire rights and privileges, which thing is contrary to the social pact. In case the government is pursuing private interests instead of following the mandate of the general will, at that very moment the social union shall be dissolved. This does not mean that the government is the result of a pact between the people and the magistrates. The latter are always officers and servants that must obey. The government, be it aristocratic, democratic, or monarchical, is always a provisional administration that the people choose, until they decide to have another kind.

The people should act in such a way that their power is never alienated. But how is this possible? From time to time the people should meet in assembly to answer two questions: (1) Does it please the sovereign to keep the present form of government? (2) Does it please him to allow the same officers to continue in the administration?

Society according to Rousseau must rest on the principle of the social contract. This implies that men must at least tacitly consent to the rule of the majority. The members of society must be bound by the will of the majority when that majority commands things which are really for the best of all the members. Rousseau makes an important distinction between what he calls the "will of all," what any actual democratic vote decides, and the "general will," which is really an ideal, that which is best

for all the members. By definition the general will aims at the social well being of all. The will of all is the record of what the majority actually desires. The basic problem of government would then be to determine and bring about the conditions under which the will of all shall coincide with the general will. These are those conditions in which the majority actually desires the precise measures that are actually best for it. Rousseau thinks that under certain definite conditions the majority vote will actually coincide with what is best for the people. Says he:

When in the popular assembly a law is proposed, what people is asked is not exactly whether it approves or rejects the proposal, but whether it is in conformity to the general will, which is their will. Each man, in giving his vote, states his opinion upon that point; and the general will is found by counting votes. When therefore the opinion that is contrary to my own prevails, this proves neither more nor less than that I was mistaken, and that what I thought to be the general will was not so. If my particular opinion had carried the day, I should have achieved the opposite of what was my will; and it is in that case that I should not have been free. This presupposes, indeed, that all the qualities of the general will still reside in the majority; when they cease to do so, whatever side a man may take, liberty is no longer possible.
(Social Contract, Book IV, Chapter 2)

How can Rousseau be sure that the majority can be trusted to know what really is best for it? Only when they are educated and wise can the majority vote be intelligently cast. Majority rule is impossible without an intelligent citizenry. Rousseau

thought that such happy conditions could exist in a city-state of intelligent voters like Geneva. Says he:

How many conditions that are difficult to unite does such a government presuppose! First, a very small state where the people can be readily got together and where each citizen can with ease know all the rest; secondly, great simplicity of manners, to prevent business from multiplying and raising thorny problems; next, a large measure of equality in rank and fortune, without which equality of rights and authority cannot long subsist; lastly, little or no luxury-- for for luxury either comes of riches or makes them necessary. (Ibid., Book III, Chapter IV)

It has been said that the concept of the general will as the single and simple volition of the body politic regarded as a living entity is Rousseau's greatest contribution to political science. This theory of the state ~~that~~ inevitably leads to collectivistic and even socialistic conclusions. Scholars trace the source and origin of the Hegelian system of politics and of the Marxian system of economics to this organic theory of the state. This is the reason why we said before that in spite of the assertions of Henri Sée there are collectivistic seeds in Rousseau.

This then is the political philosophy of Rousseau. As we said at the beginning Rousseau remains still a great man for us. Nobody can deny his great contribution to the science of government, to education, to literature. But he is no longer an idol. He is man of contradictions, that in spite or because of these contradictions, has influenced the Western world considerably.

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