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Rousseau and Revolutions

Richard Whatmore

Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains. One believes himself the others' master, and yet is more a slave than they. How did this change come about? I do not know. What can make it legitimate? I believe I can solve this question.

If I considered only force, and the effect that follows from it, I would say; as long as a People is compelled to obey, and does obey, it does well; as soon as it can shake off the yoke, and does shake it off, it does even better; for in recovering its freedom by the same right as the right by which it was robbed of it, either the people is well founded to take it back, or it was deprived of it without foundation. But the social order is a sacred right which provides the basis for all the others. Yet this right does not come from nature; it is therefore founded on conventions. The problem is to know what these conventions are. Before coming to that, I must establish what I have just set forth.¹

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's commencement of the *Social Contract* is among the most memorable in the history of political writing. As a statement with revolutionary implications it would be hard to better 'Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains'. This is certainly how many have read and have been inspired by Rousseau. Rousseau has been variously associated with the most radical creeds of the Enlightenment, has been described as a luminary of the Counter Enlightenment, has been blamed for the French Revolution and has been called the arch-advocate of democratic politics and at the same time a precursor of twentieth-century totalitarianism. One of the reasons for Rousseau's unquestionable capacity to inspire devotees is the vibrancy of his prose. Perhaps this is also the reason why his ideas are so regularly misunderstood and more often than not associated with political causes that Rousseau himself would have

rejected. What everyone can agree on is the influence of Rousseau's politics. As Etienne Dumont once put it, people associated the eighteenth century with Voltaire, but in literature and in ideas he was a pygmy by comparison with Rousseau. People were, Dumont said, living through 'the age of Rousseau' from the late eighteenth and into the nineteenth century.² Working out what this meant, for those who understood Rousseau as well as those who followed a shadow, is the goal of this chapter.

The *Social Contract* was published in 1762 from a manuscript that Rousseau had been working on since at least the mid-1750s. As he noted in the foreword, his 'small treatise' was part of 'a longer work undertaken many years ago without consulting my strength and long since abandoned.' The *Social Contract* was therefore a fragment 'the least unworthy of being submitted to the public'. The greater work, tantalizingly, Rousseau said 'no longer exists' (40). The fact that the *Social Contract* was unfinished is of the greatest significance. It did not affect its popularity. By the time Rousseau published the book he was already famous across Europe as an author. He had been born in the tiny city republic of Geneva in 1711 and his mother died in childbirth; he was brought up by his watchmaker father and apprenticed to an engraver as a youth. At the age of sixteen Rousseau rebelled against his father and his Protestant faith by running away from Geneva and converting to Catholicism on reaching nearby Savoy. He found work over the following years as a servant and as a secretary, as a copyist of musical scores and as a tutor. He travelled and came of age at Paris in the 1740s, where he became a close friend of the polymath Denis Diderot and wrote a number of entries, mainly on music, for the latter's *Encyclopédie*. Rousseau's fame as an author, however, came overnight, when he was given the prize of the Dijon Academy for his response to their essay competition asking whether the arts and sciences had been responsible for societal progress. In 1750 Rousseau answered no, and his critique of contemporary manners and mores was recognized to be more profound and more extreme than that of any other observer.

The eighteenth century was a time of crisis during which everyone anticipated change. It was a time of war and economic difficulty, of uncertainty about religion and above all about the future of politics. In consequence, Jeremiahs abounded. But Rousseau's was the voice that condemned everything and gave a grim picture of the way people behaved and of the likely consequences of their fraudulent and unnatural lives. His next essay, now called the *Second Discourse*, addressed the question of the origins and consequences of inequality. This time, in 1755, Rousseau did not win a prize. But he did create a following across Europe. He was recognized by some to be a cynic. Others were concerned about his unorthodox

religious stance. The quality of his writing and the depth of his ideas could not be challenged. Rousseau argued that the original humans had lived a life close to nature. They were solitary animals who came together fleetingly only for sex. Their passions, other than the urge to procreate, were self-preservation and pity, the feeling that brought them into contact with other human beings in deprived or dangerous situations. Sociability was not implanted by nature. Nor was it imposed by God. Pity created the first societies. They maintained themselves because of a fourth passion, that of perfectibility, or the constant desire for self-improvement, to better the human condition. Basic societies, where people lived close to nature, either roaming around or in small units, living either in villages or in caves, were where people were at their happiest in history.

The great disaster for early humans was the unleashing of the unnatural passions, the greatest of which was what Rousseau called '*amour propre*' or egotism. Natural self-love, '*amour de soi-même*', entailed self-preservation and was altogether compatible with the natural passions. But egotism was different and the source of pride, envy, hatred, bitterness and war. Rousseau's most radical claim was that egotism emerged when property became a permanent part of social living. Erecting a fence and stating 'this land is mine' was a symbol of gargantuan and ultimately deadly social change. Rousseau remained convinced that the best way for modern humans to become happy was to return to nature. This was far from easy. Language and culture were altogether corrupted. Rousseau was famously accused of wanting people to abandon society and go and live in the woods. His enemy Voltaire said after reading the *Second Discourse* that Rousseau wanted people to walk on all fours.³ Rousseau was consequently accused of being the author of a dreadful paradox. All humans were corrupted and there was nothing that they could do about it. Rousseau claimed that his actual message was subtle. It was never going to be possible to go back in time. Nor was it possible to abolish property. Going to live in the woods or imitating the animals that Rousseau lauded (especially horses and orangutans) was pointless. It was impossible to abandon existing ways of living or to reject centuries of human history. The question was whether modern humans could adapt their ways of life so that they were closer to the natural and gradually change human history so that a return was made to forms of life that made people happy?

As noted above, Rousseau was accused of not giving people any choice other than accepting contemporary corruption, after the publication of the *Second Discourse*. The *Social Contract* was his response and the goal of the book was to describe the kinds of politics that were legitimate in the sense that they would bring humans closer to nature. It has to be remembered that Rousseau

also published a far more successful book in 1762 than the *Social Contract*; entitled *Emile, or On Education*, the intention of this novel was to describe how an individual could be educated to be happy, in other words to live a natural life. *Emile* was a publishing sensation, and profound social change, concerning how to be a parent, has been ascribed to it. The contents of the book will not be considered here, although there is a lot of overlap in terms of the argument of the *Social Contract* in the fifth book of *Emile*. The point is that in each book Rousseau was trying to respond to the criticism that he was purely a cynic. His approach was to identify the worst, in the sense of most unnatural, human practices and to condemn them. At the same time, he identified natural, or in Rousseau's language 'legitimate', modes of behaviour that could be considered most natural to humans gathered together in society.

With regard to politics, Rousseau's argument was complex to say the least. This is evident from the first sentences of the *Social Contract* (copied above). Rousseau stated that modern humans had been enslaved without realizing it. Rousseau did not know how 'this change [had] come about'. But he was certain he could identify the kinds of corruption that led the contemporary rejection of natural life to be legitimized. The first step was to reject any argument from strength alone. The dictum that might was right was everywhere denounced by Rousseau. Those who lived by it were the most deluded of people. The right of the strongest was straightforwardly unnatural. The 'social order' was a 'sacred right that is the basis of all other rights'. Rousseau might have been expected at this point to assert an argument from nature in order to refute the right of the strong. Instead he did the opposite. One of the reasons the *Social Contract* is such a complex and fascinating book is because Rousseau followed the author whom readers may have considered to be his nemesis, Thomas Hobbes, and stated that 'right does not come from nature'. Social rules and political laws could not be founded on nature because the first humans were not social beings. Rather, the 'principles of political right' were to be 'founded on conventions'. Rousseau was seeking what conventions could be found to make contemporary people most happy. Rousseau's practical politics were as radical as his philosophical principles.

Perhaps the most radical statement of any Rousseau made was that states, if they were going to be ruled in the interests of the people who formed them, had to be small. Rousseau was always and straightforwardly antagonistic towards large states. Above every other he detested France, believing that it was the most corrupted country, being the most civilized in the world, and with the worst capital city in Paris, a true source of evil and iniquity. When it was suggested that Rousseau might contemplate the reform of France his response was the same: it

was not possible in large states and never possible in corrupt states. France was beyond the pale. This is important for those who have drawn a line between Rousseau's work and the French Revolution.⁴ The basic fact is that Rousseau would always have opposed revolution or rebellion in France, and especially any reform project that anticipated maintaining France as a large state, as all of the revolutionaries did in 1789. Rousseau was acutely aware that small states were in crisis during his lifetime. Their traditional survival strategies, from economic specialization to confederation, diplomacy and the balance of power, were insufficient before the vast resources and ambition of the centralized monarchies. Rousseau blamed commerce.

Commerce was the force that was transforming the eighteenth-century world. David Hume had written in his essay 'Of Civil Liberty' that commerce had become 'a reason of state'.⁵ What he meant was that all states sought ever-greater commerce. It allowed them to project tax revenue into the future and to borrow accordingly to create huge armies supported by military technologies capable of destroying the walls of any small city and of laying waste to large areas as they battled their rivals across states and continents. Bernard Mandeville, in his famous prose poem 'The Fable of the Bees' (1705, revised 1711), wrote that commerce ought to be lauded for the wealth that came with it. The price was the growth of luxury and above all the loss of the traditional virtues, because commerce was inspired by greed and selfishness and any state that clung to ideals of self-sacrifice and dedication to the public good would quickly become poor and wretched.⁶ Rousseau adopted Mandeville's view of commercial society in his description of contemporary Europe. The difference was that he disparaged the result, arguing that the loss of virtue and the growth of luxury were destroying the world. His claim was that bankers and merchants were ruling the world, with monarchs and politicians their lackeys. Something had to be done.

Rousseau's solution in the *Social Contract* was to envisage a state that was run for the people and thereby avoided the excesses of commercial society. The key was to allow the people a voice without allowing them to constitute a government. Rousseau argued that this vision could be realized by distinguishing between sovereignty and government. In the third book of the *Social Contract* he argued that the people as a whole should be sovereign. What he meant was that they should consider laws and give their consent to them gathered together in an assembly. They should never, however, put the laws into practice or propose them. This was the job of the government, the executive that ruled the small state on a day-to-day basis. The government should ideally be aristocratic, which meant for Rousseau, in Platonic register, an ideal of the rule of the worldly and

the wise. Harmony was anticipated between government and people through the general will that would emerge from the laws passed by the assembly. Acknowledging the quality of their polity and the resulting legitimacy of general laws that applied to every person in the state, a common culture would emerge that for Rousseau would stand for all that was moral, virtuous and healthy. Rousseau asserted his best-known paradox in consequence. The general will, because it could be trusted neither to entail persecution or corruption, had to be adhered to by every citizen, who had of course had the chance to determine its content in the assembly. It was legitimate therefore to ensure that everyone abided by the general will. In short, it was entirely proper for people to be ‘forced to be free’.

Many commentators on Rousseau during his lifetime and after have been certain that his ideal state was Geneva.⁷ Genevan government embodied the distinction between sovereignty and government (having a small council of twenty-five that ran the state and a large assembly of 1,500 persons who gathered twice a year to accept or reject laws). Rousseau returned to Geneva in 1755 and was given permission by the Consistory of Pastors to return to the faith of Calvin. He praised Geneva above other places in the preface to the *Second Discourse*. The *Social Contract* was written in the aftermath of Rousseau’s return. But Rousseau was never happy with the state of Geneva. He felt that it was overly commercial and corrupted by wealth. He was also certain that while many pastors were virtuous, and became his close friends and disciples, the church as a whole was not doing enough to stem the torrent of moral and political corruption within Geneva and beyond. Rousseau’s ideal was actually the Alpine cantons, such as Zug or Appenzel, where labour was necessary to scrape a living from the land and where, as a result, people lived with nature and could never afford or imagine the luxuries of life. The Genevans and the French recognized how radical his vision of a transformed world was after the publication of the *Social Contract* and *Emile*. Soon after their appearance in 1762, both books were burnt for attacking religion and government.

Rousseau’s *Social Contract* inspired legions of lovers of liberty to imagine an anti-commercial state ruled for the people. He was an enemy to democratic government, which he considered ‘for Gods rather than for men’. He also opposed equality, believing that societies had to be divided into ranks, with the rich and able, naturally heads of families, contributing far more to politics. Women, he was certain, would be most happy in ruling the domestic realm and ought to focus on being mothers. Yet, for all of this, Rousseau’s refusal to become the lackey of nobles and kings, his refusal to bow down to Protestant

or Catholic authorities and his consistent condemnation of commerce, luxury, war and empire won him admirers everywhere. The precise nature of his politics was deemed uncertain, however, by many. This was because Rousseau, when called upon to judge contemporary conflicts, as he was in Geneva in the 1760s or Poland or Corsica, always avoided the revolutionary path. His deep sense that there was no point trying to reform what could never truly be changed was ever to the fore. This raised the question of whether he really was just a cynic. The fundamental problem was that the *Social Contract* remained unfinished. Rousseau promised in the book a second volume. The first part of what he called his 'Political Institutions' had described what a free state would look like. It was crucial, however, to explain how it might survive in a world of large and powerful states. Rousseau promised that he would deal with diplomacy and international relations in the second volume. His failure to publish it was a real problem for reformers. Rousseau had given them a vision of an altered world but had not explained how to get there. That is one of the reasons why Rousseau inspired revolutionary feeling while the practices that followed these sentiments were, in France, so far from anything Rousseau himself would have justified.

Further Reading

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