

Notes on ROUSSEAU: *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* and *Social Compact*
:

"THEY ALL RAN HEADLONG TO THEIR CHAINS, IN HOPES OF SECURING THEIR LIBERTY."

[notice that there are two different moods in these essays: in the *Discourse*, Rousseau laments the transition from the wild to society; in the *Social Compact* he seems to approve it...]

It strikes me that this whole vision is like looking at the dawn of the human world from the back of a speeding train. Is it a true vision of what was? Or an illusion produced by the speed of the train?

I. WHO WAS ROUSSEAU AND WHY DOES HE MATTER

A. The dude

1700s Geneva: a society with numerous independent, democratically-run small communities

Close by major powers England and France (and declining Spain)

Wrote political theory, fiction, composed music.

B. Why he matters

Romanticism

Concern with the "true youth of the world"—love of an innocent nature

Considering society as the source of all ills

Populism: the noble sentiments are more apparent in the populace than in the upper classes. They're the ones who stop street fights.

Centrality of the *feeling of the power of liberty*

Lamenting a bent society within which the strong somehow serve the weak

Sentimental tendencies, for example about the family

Revolutionary Theory

The French revolutionaries especially reading Rousseau, but the Americans too
Marx rooted largely in the *Discourse*

The origin of injustice is *property*

II. THE NOBLE SAVAGE AND HUMANITY'S ORIGINAL TRAITS

- ### A. The world of the noble savage: The "State of Nature"; the "youth of the world"
- everybody naked
 - great forests

wandering
total immersion

B. The original essence of man:

1. LIBERTY –distinguishes us from animals: it's "the noblest faculty of men"

We have: "the power of free choice" AND "*the feeling of this power.*"

2. tendency to SELF-PRESERVATION

3. COMPASSION: a capacity to "*feel-with*" others, to perceive commonality. The greater the commonality, the greater (should be) the compassion. Compassion for Rousseau is the root of all the other social virtues, like generosity (compassion for the weak), clemency (compassion for the guilty), humanity (compassion for people in general), benevolence and friendship (compassion towards particular individuals)... *note that morality therefore does not stem from reason*

III. THE NATURAL VS THE ARTIFICIAL; THE ORIGINAL [AND PURE] VS THE LATER [AND FALLEN]

Feeling (and compassion)	Reason (and isolation) ... <i>wards off identification and allows ills</i>
Immersion in the present, like animals and children...	Ideas about the future
No knowledge of death	Knowledge of death
Little language	Developed language
Little conceptualization—no <i>comparing</i> of things to one another... no <i>abstract notions</i> ... living primarily via the senses... particulars, no universals (no perceiving "species")	Concepts, comparison, abstract ideas... living via the mind
Strong body, undeveloped mind	Developed cognitive faculties, sickly body
Strong vision, hearing, "coarse" touch	Overly-sensitive touch, weak vision and hearing
Happiness	Misery. Only in society do people kill themselves. What a sick species.
No good or bad (these involve comparison)	Ideas of good and evil
Peaceful	Violence: from a mass of passions (developed by competition for honor and by mass luxury-production)...

IV. STAGES AND TRANSITIONS: HISTORY IS A PROCESS OF MORAL AND BODILY DECAY.

Truly, or originally: *The earth belongs to no one, and the fruits to all!*
and... *It's accidents, really, that get this whole unfortunate thing going. Maybe it happened on islands... Accidents and population growth...*

possession	PROPERTY. This is the first step toward civil society, and out of the state of nature. It implies <i>distribution</i> , which has to be unequal, to some degree...
small population	growing population
no tools or houses, strong bodies	metallurgy... agriculture... tools and houses, and atrophying bodies (claim: tools <i>make us weaker, not stronger... and they also make us horribly dependent</i>)
no pride or competition	emergence of pride, with differentiations in property and with the emerging tendency to <i>compare</i> one person with another, for example in sexual competition
no associations or families	1 st : emergence of limited associations, based on mutual interest—they last only as long as the interest (<i>this will become a sort of anarchist ideal—is it cool?</i>) 2 nd : longer-term associations (communities, states)... from <i>the wealthy</i>
no obligations	obligations to recognize the dignity of others... leading to revenge... morality... (<i>are there two moralities here?</i>)
innocence	desire to appear as we are not (in order to achieve respect)... pomp, trickery
little desire	more wants... insatiable ambition

V. THE ORIGIN OF ("MORAL") INEQUALITY (= inequality in wealth, power, honor)

- As above... but then a second phase:
- WAR: battles between the strongest and the first occupiers (rooted in property)
- Then the RICH get a nasty little idea: hey, let's have "rule of law"—we'll make allies out of our adversaries, at the same time that we *make laws favorable to ourselves*
- Here's the key transition into full "civil society" as we know it...
- It's founded in lies:
- We'll "guard the weak from repression"
- "Restrain the ambitious"
- "Secure possessions"
- ...

- LET'S PRODUCE A SOVEREIGN
- **AND "ALL RAN HEADLONG TO THEIR CHAINS, IN HOPES OF SECURING THEIR LIBERTY"**
- now, NEW FETTERS ON THE POOR
- NEW POWERS FOR THE RICH (e.g. prisons, police, armies of the poor to fight their battles)
- ...
- Now violence *between* nations, and massacre on an unprecedented scale

THEY CALL IT SOCIETY, BUT IT'S REALLY TYRANNY. IT'S JUST A NEW "STATE OF NATURE."

VI. THE TRUE SOCIETY: A COLLECTIVE BODY / A PUBLIC PERSON, WITH A "GENERAL WILL" (=sum of all member wills): (*DIRECT*) DEMOCRACY

A. CONDITIONS FOR A TRUE SOCIETY (A DEMOCRACY)

- must be **autonomous**: no outer control
- no particular interests in control
- *no "representatives": all must participate in the "general will"
- no factions, or a maximum number
- minimal differences in wealth and power

B. HERE WE'RE DOUBLE

- in decision-making, we're "sovereign," **active** citizens with rights
- in rule-obedience, we're **passive** subjects with duties...

C. RECIPROCITY OF SOCIETY AND INDIVIDUALS: THEY'RE MUTUALLY PRODUCTIVE OF ONE ANOTHER

- Society produces citizens; citizens produce society
- we're **inscribed with the society's patterns** in our morality, in our **habits**

D. ROLE OF GOD AND RELIGION HERE!

- The "legislator" needs to say he's been speaking with God
- Everybody needs to be taught basic religion: there's a god, there's an order... though otherwise we should be tolerant of all practices

VII. ANYTHING ELSE IS TYRANNY, NOT SOCIETY, AND JUSTIFIES INSURRECTION

VIII. QUESTIONS

- Was there ever such an original world? Or is it totally a fiction?
- Do you buy the idea that society or "civilization" *corrupts* an original human nature?
- Who's right about human nature, Machiavelli or Rousseau?
- Do you agree with Rousseau about the optimal human community? Are all other communities tyranny, state of nature, and hence illegitimate?
- Is the general will just?

- Are animals and humans as easily distinguished as Rousseau suggests?
- When is insurrection called for?
- What do we owe to our present government?