

Rousseau: Conjectural History and the Political Theory of Organic State

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LEONARDO S. MILANI, APR 20 2012

The hypothetical trends in contractarianism, the theory of political authority's legitimacy, consists of two theoretical spectrums: on one side stands the liberalist anti-state Anglo-American tradition, associated with notions of private property and individual liberties articulated by thinkers such as Hobbes, Locke and Rawls; on the other side is the state-centric Continental tradition, emphasized on the notion of society as an organic entity with teleological moral functions, mainly theorized by the incendiary Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Developing a multifaceted theory of social contract, Rousseau's moral/political philosophy utilizes an astonishingly wide range of theories and concepts: conjectural history of human evolution, moral psychology, theory of social classes and critical analysis of interactive social development. His approach, while challenging the general assumptions of English social contract theorists (especially Hobbes) through reconstructing the generally accepted perspective of fundamental concepts of state of nature and human nature, is in fact Rousseau's strategy to merge his political theory with what can be formulated as his socio-moral philosophy of justice, leading to an entirely different normative prescription of a government's form than that of Hobbes and Locke. This utopian prescription has since separated critiques in categorizing him either as an authoritarian or liberal.[1] Using a more modern language, it can be argued that Rousseau's entire socio-political philosophy resembles a form of policy analysis of the discontents of human civilization and socialization, designed to discover a remedy for our 'miseries': the philosopher's model of government (his policy recommendation) is the logical extension of his method of developing 'problem definition'. This essay is an attempt to discuss Rousseau's political philosophy and its systemic recommendation(s) through examining the structure of his argument's premises. The essay endeavours to explain the philosopher's perspective of justice, legitimacy and state.

Rousseau's first step in constructing his political philosophy and the 'dilemma of social life' is representing a theory of conjectural history, a philosophical reconstruction of history of human evolution, which describes humanity's multi-stage evolution from the most primitive conditions to modern complex societies. Elaborated in the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, Rousseau's depiction of the natural human condition in the original state of nature is of man as a solitary animal, with no intellectual faculties (refuting Locke), no command of language or *logos* (refuting Aristotle) and most importantly, with no inclination toward conflict with other humans (refuting Hobbes). According to Rousseau's narrative, in the initial stage of human evolution, humans live solitary lives since they are relatively capable of self-preservation regardless of co-operating with other humans. Similar to other animals, humans possess the instinctual drive towards self-preservation and are individually well-equipped with the means to satisfy their natural needs. The animal-like human can physically survive without cooperating with his kind.

However, in spite of Rousseau's evident inclination toward animalizing us, he distinguishes humans from other animals by attributing to them two fundamental qualities of freedom and perfectibility. For Rousseau, while nature completely directs the operation of machine-like animals, humans are free in the sense that they are able to contribute to their operation as free agents. Closely associated with freedom is the characteristic of perfectibility as humans' unlimited openness and capacity to change, and to evolve. The closely linked qualities of freedom (i.e. the ability to choose what to do) and perfectibility (i.e. the ability to choose what to become), Rousseau observes, can only actualize in an interactive social context where they initiate human's exclusive faculties such as morality, self-consciousness and rationality. Obviously, in the absence of social relations, humans without these qualities are mere

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beasts. Since the original condition of human nature is far more like an animal than anything identifiably human, the only path for 'humanizing' humans is through the process of socialization. It is crucial to note that Rousseau implicitly emphasizes that in the absence of interaction and social relations, no trace of conflict between humans exists. While the philosopher asserts that humans do not subsist in the solitary condition since certain biological urges of reproduction coerce humans to a minimal level of interaction, the theoretical emphasis remains on the notions of absence of endemic conflict and the inevitability of socialization in the process of actualizing human potentials. The implication of the Rousseau's account of the preliminary stage of conjectural history is essential in his argument for illustrating the origins of human discontent.

In contrast to the conditions of the state of nature, the subsequent stages of human evolution are inevitably associated with a constant pace of moral corruption and growing inequality, with human faculties ironically generating dependence, oppression and domination. In Rousseau's account, the central transitional moment in human history occurs at a stage of society marked by small settled communities.[2] Emerging out of primitive cooperative activities such as hunting and the subsequent need for simple co-operations, the pattern of social interaction in small communities represents the direction of humans' psychological and behavioural evolution onwards to modern society itself. According to Rousseau's theory of moral psychology, the dual qualities of freedom and perfectibility activate within this context, making humans' self-conscious. As the result, humans' natural instinct of self-preservation evolves from its initial simple notion of caring for oneself to a more intricate sense of competition concerned with humanity's comparative success or failure. Originally triggered by sexual rivalry but later expanding to include almost all human activities, Rousseau calls this new 'poisonous' self-interested drive *amour propre*, a term which can be best translated to self-centrism or self-love. Strategic to Rousseau's theory of human nature, *amour propre* is the central operator in human behaviour: it makes the core interest of humans the need to be recognized and respected by others. In the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau explicitly emphasizes that since *amour propre* is a 'comparative' psychological operator, mere recognition of others cannot provide a sustainable sense of content for individuals, thus coercing them to seek superiority over others. In this context, Rousseau considers the immediate consequence of *amour propre* to be limited conflict among individuals, yet far from a Hobbesian condition of endemic conflict. In addition, parallel to humans' competition for satisfying their self-love drive, social interdependence deepens: through remaining within the boundaries of society, humans begin to gradually lose their previous capability for independent survival. Therefore, Rousseau's account of the intermediate stage is that humans, under the venomous influence of *amour propre*, begin to compete for recognition; conflict becomes evident and dependency grows further.

The final stage of Rousseau's conjectural history consists of two interrelated steps that facilitate the emergence of modern complex society, a dramatically unequal society plunged into endemic conflict among its human members. The general characteristics of this final moment of evolution are dependency, inequality and specialization, all reinforced by economic innovations.[3] As for the first step, through the introduction of farming (or cultivation) and metallurgy, the notion of private possession rises. Since ownership is a symbol of one's capability and power (thus exacting others' respect), owning private property becomes the centre of competition among self-loving humans with natural inequalities between them. Therefore, when all land is possessed by the intellectually or physically superior, slavery or theft remains as the only options for the disadvantaged.[4] Echoing a Hobbesian condition of insecurity, Rousseau seems to argue that it is the state of society which is the state conflict. Finally, Rousseau's last stage of human social evolution is the usurper's reaction to the endemic security by devising the notion of consensual state authority and law. In an anticipation of Marx, Rousseau locates the origin of state in the property owners' fear of insecurity in the light of the absence of any moral justification for their right of private ownership. Such a state is nothing but a class state, designed for protecting the rich by imposing subordination and unfreedom on the poor through a law which is meant to convert usurpation to right. According to Rousseau's analysis of class state, illegitimacy is its most prominent feature: fearing a Hobbesian state of conflict, the propertyless consent to the establishment of state authority while ignoring the new system's mechanism of exploiting and enslaving them: 'all ran headlong to their chain believing they were ensuring their liberty'.[5] This process of systematic enslaving is complete with the transfer of public authority from the people to an individual, thus removing all notions of freedom.[6] In this stage, Rousseau has successfully framed his definition of the problem: since the loss of initial capacities for independent survival due to social interdependencies, humanity is sentenced to live within the boundaries of unequal society which systematically denies it a natural freedom. Since freedom is a fundamental characteristic of humanity,

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without it we are less human. In addition, under the poisonous influence of *amour propre*, fully flourished within the social context, we have lost our moral capacities in exchange with those rational faculties required for social recognition, making us even less human. In a competition to overcome each other, private property has become the hallmark of power and competence, reinforcing natural inequalities among men. Conflict looms between the propertied and propertyless, causing a state of endemic conflict. Craving security, we accept a trade-off between freedom and security. The result is a dystopia without liberty and equality. Rousseau, however, is unwilling to accept such a trade-off and argues that it is possible to have both security and freedom. Rousseau's refusal of such trade-off is his political philosophy, all determined by the pattern of his criticism of the mechanisms he is opposing.

Rousseau's alternative to the described dystopia is a model of state where freedom and authority are reconciled through the operation of the collective will of the citizens, or the general will, as the sole source of law. Strategic to Rousseau's alternative, the general will is the source of state legitimacy and citizens' freedom simultaneously. In the *Social Contract*, Rousseau recognizes three types of wills in a social field: first, individuals' private self-oriented wills; second, individuals' wills that are in accordance with the collective will of the community they are citizens of; and third, the will of an individual which is in accordance with the will of a subset of population. Therefore, Rousseau defines the general will as the property of the collective and the individual as long as the individual recognizes himself as a part of the collective. Rousseau assumes that while an objective common good exists separated from the selfish interests of a society's citizens, under any circumstances there are policies, which if implemented, will be in terms with that objective good.[7] Therefore, if the general will is realized, all the laws extracted from it are in fact citizens' own will. Since obedience to such laws is equal to obeying their own will, the citizen's freedom (or as Rousseau puts it, their 'moral freedom) remains intact. Setting the general principle, the question of how the general will should be identified remains. Rousseau's answer to this question determines the form of the political institution capable of identifying the general will, thus the type of government he advocates.

In the *Social Contract*, Rousseau offers a more detailed description of his favourite system's operation. He argues that it is only through a direct democracy that the general will and the objective common good can be realized. Advocating a system similar to the model of Athenian direct democracy of general assemblies where sovereign citizens were constantly engaged in the process of self-legislation, Rousseau argues that only such system is legitimate and able to ensure the freedom of its citizens. Central to his view, is the rejection of the notion of representative democracy as a method of representing citizens' wills and views through certain individuals or assemblies. Rousseau argues that surrendering the general right of self-ruling to any representative body is to submit to a form of slavery, an act of moral decline, violating one's moral freedom. Therefore, the immediate consequence of the new system would be political equality. Rousseau instantly adds that in order to achieve full socio-political equality, economic equality should necessarily be enforced too. Economic dependencies enslave humans to others' wills through making them dependent upon those economically superior, thus critically undermining the very existence of Rousseau's equal society. Therefore, economic equality is the very pre-condition of Rousseau's state.

Finally, Rousseau sets his constitutional manual for the operation of his model. He offers three institutional settings for maximizing the level of popular sovereignty necessary for realizing the general will. First, warning against the third type of will, is his opposition to what can be framed as party politics and pluralism: possessing 'mini general wills', political parties and certain groups' preferences are capable of overriding the general will.[8] They must be avoided. Second, and closely linked to his fears of political activity, Rousseau argues that individuals must not be swayed by others and retain independent thinking. Echoing Rawls' notion of the 'veil of ignorance', the philosopher asserts that, if in the legislation process, fully-informed individuals vote without communication, then the general will surely emerge. The second setting is Rousseau's tactic for neutralizing, or at least minimizing the negative and corrupting effect of *amour propre*. [9] Third, and finally, it is essential that legislators be present and vote publicly, in each session of assembly. While citizens' private wills cannot be represented, Rousseau reluctantly allows the representation of private 'interests'. The last setting seems to contain elements of totalitarianism: first, citizens are being 'forced to be free' through their obedience to the general will; second, Giovanni Sartori's renowned argument that Athenian city-states were not democracies but totalitarian systems since their citizens were denied the right of non-participation can also be applied on Rousseau's model. While these criticisms seem logical, Rousseau believes that the implementation of these three settings assists the realization of the general will. The result, he claims, is freedom for men without endangering security.

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In practice, Rousseau's political philosophy shows various systematic inconsistencies. First, the sovereignty of the individual in his system diminishes as the state grows larger and more diffuse. The growth of the state leads to increased disproportionality in the relation between one's obedience to the state and his role as sovereign.[10] For example, while an individual citizen's share of popular sovereignty in a society with 1000 members is 1/1000, in much larger societies with a million members, the level of the same individual's sovereignty dramatically decrease to a minimal amount. Therefore, Rousseau's model fails to provide his desired outcomes in demographically large states. Second, Rousseau's argument in favour of the abolition of individual rights is in fact a route to totalitarianism: if individual rights are to be specified by the sovereign (i.e. the will of majority) to be compatible with the collective interest in a just society, then no check on the power of sovereign remains. Rousseau's argument for refusing this collective tyranny of majority is weak and insufficient. The result is more likely to be a state of terror than a state of freedom: states such as the Soviet Union and North Korea where their fundamental project for implementing morality, freedom and equality closely resemble the principles of Rousseau's utopian state. The result, however, has been one of George Orwell's *1984* totalitarian state of institutionalized fear, systematic prosecution and organized oppression.

In conclusion, this essay reviewed Rousseau's political philosophy through examining the philosopher's conjectural history of human evolution, his theory of moral psychology and his conception of justice. The essay argued that while Rousseau believes that humans are bound to remain within the boundaries of society, *amour propre* (or self-love) has introduced the element of conflict among them, turning the state of society to the state of conflict. Competing for recognition and respect, humans' faculties evolved into enabling them to dominate each other. As the result of economic innovation, the notion of private property emerged, thus reinforcing natural inequalities. While the strong occupied all lands, conflict occurred between the propertied and propertyless, causing a state of endemic conflict. Humans then accept a trade-off between freedom and security in fear of a state of war. The result is a class society, dramatically unequal and with no freedom. The essay then reviewed Rousseau's alternative for establishing a state in which both security and freedom can exist by analysing the concept of the general will and its implications. The essay concluded with a brief evaluation of Rousseau's argument, implying that while such a system may work in smaller societies, its efficiency in larger societies is questionable.

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[1] For example see: John W. Chapman, *Rousseau: Totalitarian or Liberal?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), pp.151-152.

[2] Christopher Bertram, 'Jean Jacques Rousseau', *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, updated 2011, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rousseau/>> [accessed 15 June 2011].

[3] Iain Hampsher-Monk, *A History of Modern Political Thought: Major Political Thinkers from Hobbes to Marx* (London: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 1992), p. 170.

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[4] *Political Writings of Rousseau*, 'Discourse on the Origin of Inequality', ed. by C. E. Vaughan, 2 vols (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 1915), i, p. 96.

[5] *Inequality*, p. 98.

[6] *Inequality*, p. 102.

[7] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and the Discourses*, Trans. G. D. H. Cole (London: Dent, 1973), p. 200.

[8] *The Social Contract*, p. 204.

[9] *The social contract*, p. 235.

[10] Hampsher-Monk, p. 186.

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