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In The Beginning: Rousseau's Discourse On the Origin of Inequality & The Socialist Book of Genesis

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Abstract

The following article makes the connection between the work and thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and socialism. Rousseau invalidated the concept of original sin where God punished man with labor. Not only did he invalidate original sin in his personal life, but he went a step further: he invalidated the entire creation myth from the Book of Genesis. Rousseau then supplanted that creation myth with his own origin story, one he outlined in great detail in an essay called, *This Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*. This work contains the creation myth of socialism, and is the socialist book of Genesis. Essentially, what we know and understand as socialism is predicated on the invalidation and negation of the premises, conclusions, and implications of the Biblical creation myth. Socialism emanates instead from the premises, conclusions, and implications of Rousseau's creation myth, where neither labor nor private property are *de facto* and mandatory aspects of the human condition.

Keywords

political theory Rousseau Socialism utopianism biblical creation myth

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Introduction

Those conversant with socialism likely recognize a connection between socialism and labor. There are many political parties connected to socialism called the labor party, the working party, or the workers party; The Communist Party USA formerly published a newspaper called *The Daily Worker*.¹ To appreciate the reason for this connection, we must investigate the work and thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Through his writings, Rousseau established the foundations of socialism.

To understand the source of this link, we must examine, *The Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755), a.k.a., “the second discourse.” However, before an examination of the second discourse occurs, a brief look at a quote from Rousseau’s, *Letter to Beaumont* (1762A), will provide the necessary segue to the second discourse and the germination of socialism. In this letter, Rousseau conveniently summarized the essence of his thought with what he believed to be his quintessential values. He wrote that:

The fundamental principle of all morality, upon which I have reasoned in all my writings and which I developed with all the clarity of which I am capable is that man is a being who is naturally good, loving justice and order; that there is no original perversity in the human heart, and the first movements of nature are always good.²

The salient clause regarding socialism is, “that there is no original perversity in the human heart.”

¹ *The Daily Worker* was a communist newspaper from 1921-1958 (The Daily Worker, 2022).

² Rousseau, 1762A, p. 28.

The words “original perversity” are a Biblical allusion to the concept of “original sin.” Original sin emanates from the creation myth from the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament. Original sin’s punishment for man’s transgression against God was a simple one-word judgment: labor. Adam must labor by the sweat of his brow, and Eve must labor via childbirth. Rousseau invalidated not only the concept of original sin, but he went a step further: he invalidated the entire creation myth from the Book of Genesis. Rousseau then supplanted that creation myth for man with his own origin story, one he outlined in great detail in the second discourse. *The Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* is the socialist book of Genesis; this work contains the creation myth of socialism. If you want to understand socialism- past, present, and future- then you must have a firm command of the concepts and ideas in this essay.

The Discourse On The Origin OF Inequality And Socialism

In the second discourse, Rousseau replaced the Garden of Eden with his own version of utopia, one he called, “the state of nature.” In the state of nature, human beings lived without the need to labor, without private property, and the human condition was utopian. The state of nature unfortunately ended when one individual said, “mine,” and acquired private property by using labor to overcome the conditions of the state of nature. Rousseau’s description of this occurrence from the second discourse is quoted in full below:

The first person who, having enclosed a plot of land, took it into his head to say this is mine and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society. What crimes, wars, murders, what miseries and horrors would the human race have been spared, had someone pulled up the stakes or filled in the ditch and cried out to

his fellow men: “Do not listen to this impostor. You are lost if you forget that the fruits of the earth belong to all and the earth to no one!”³

In the state of nature, private property did not exist. It was not until one person selfishly said, “mine,” and acquired private property did civil-society begin, and with it, Rousseau’s version of our fall.

Rousseau did not believe that private property was a mandatory aspect of the human condition: “For this idea of property, depending on many prior ideas which could only have arisen successively, was not formed all at once in the human mind.”⁴ Rousseau also believed that during the period of time prior to the inception of private property, labor- the punishment for original sin- did not exist either. Pay close attention to Rousseau’s syntax:

But as soon as one man needed the help of another, as soon as one man realized that it was useful for a single individual to have provisions for two, equality disappeared, property came into existence, labor became necessary. Vast forests were transformed into smiling fields which had to be watered with men’s sweat, and in which slavery and misery were soon seen to germinate and grow with the crops.⁵

Note Rousseau's insistence that once, “property came into existence, labor became necessary.” Rousseau reiterated this position several times, noting that property and labor truly went hand-in-hand: “This origin is all the more natural as it is impossible to conceive of the idea of property arising from anything but manual labor.”⁶

³ Rousseau, 1755, p. 44.

⁴ Rousseau, 1755, p. 44.

⁵ Rousseau, 1753, p. 51.

⁶ Ibid, p. 52.

Property and labor detrimentally effected the world, as they:

gave new fetters to the weak and new forces to the rich, irretrievably destroyed natural liberty, established forever the law of property and of inequality, changed adroit usurpation into an irrevocable right, and for the profit of a few ambitious men henceforth subjected the entire human race to labor, servitude and misery.⁷

Property and labor caused the world to descend into misery and servitude. This descent occurred because property and labor were not *de facto* aspects of the human condition: “Such was the condition of man in his nascent stage . . . limited at first to pure sensations, and scarcely profiting from the gifts nature offered him, far from dreaming of extracting anything from her.”⁸

Once private property and labor came into existence, civil-society as we know and understand it today commenced. Present with civil-society, according to Rousseau, came corrupting elements absent in the state of nature. Among the new elements introduced was inequality. Remember, the formal title of the second discourse contains the words, “the origin of inequality.” Rousseau told his readers in the second discourse how inequality was absent in the state of nature, but was introduced during the formation of civil society: “Having had the good fortune to be born among you, how could I meditate on the equality which nature has established among men and upon the inequality they have instituted.”⁹ Rousseau reiterated this point, noting that, “After having proved that inequality is hardly observable in the state of nature, and that its influence there is almost nonexistent, it remains for me to show its origin and progress in the successive developments of the human mind.”¹⁰

⁷ Ibid, p. 57.

⁸ Ibid, p. 45.

⁹ Rousseau, 1755, p. 1.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 43.

By establishing the belief that we are naturally equal creatures, but our natural equality was corrupted by society, there now exists the possibility of recuperating our natural equality. This is the type of equality the socialists believe in: *restorative* equality. So long as the socialist believes that we are equals naturally, equal results and outcomes are a possibility.¹¹ The way to restore man's naturally equal state is by fixing the newly introduced corrupting aspects of society. Fixing society is the key to this process. To understand how Rousseau came to this conclusion, we must return to a clause from the block-quotation at the beginning of the article.

To reiterate a clause from that first block-quotation, Rousseau strongly felt that, "man is a being who is naturally good." In addition to being naturally equal in the state of nature, we were also naturally benevolent. Our natural goodness, like our natural equality, was corrupted by society as well. Rousseau consistently pontificated in his writings throughout his career that, "man is naturally good, and that is solely by these institutions that men become wicked."¹²

Irving Babbitt, a critic of Rousseau's, understood the nuances and subtleties of Rousseau's ethic. According to Babbitt, society fixing implies the following:

What evidently underlies the mythology that Rousseau is thus creating is a new dualism.

The old dualism put the conflict between good and evil in the breast of the individual . . .

with Rousseau, this conflict is transferred from the individual to society.¹³

¹¹ Not only is equality a possibility because of this premise, but it inspired French Revolutionaries to make equality a right guaranteed by the government: "The French innovation was to include 'equality' among the essential purposes of government" (Muravchik, 2002, p. 4). An equitable world is not only possible, but also necessary: In the, *Manifesto of Equals* (1796), Sylvain Marechal, a man often described as one of the founding fathers of socialism, wrote that, "Equality! The first wish of nature, the first need of man." (Muravchik, 2002, p. 12).

¹² Rousseau, 1762B.

¹³ Babbitt, 1924, p. 99.

The old dualism Babbitt referred to is the figurative angel on one shoulder, and the figurative devil on the other. Rousseau eliminated the devil and transferred that evil to society; only man's good inclination and natural benevolence remain. Arthur Melzer, another scholar of Rousseau, interpreted Rousseau's philosophy of society corrupting man in the following way: "evil derives from society rather than from their sinful natures and that it may be cured or ameliorated through human . . . action."¹⁴ Tinkering with society will restore our natural goodness (and natural equality) from the state of nature that was corrupted by society. Through the appropriate manipulation of environmental factors, we can eliminate the corrupting influences of society, and restore the lost conditions of the state of nature due to the introduction of labor and private property.

Rousseau's articulation of the non-*de facto* nature of both labor and private property led his train of thought to important places. Specifically, one important place was Rousseau's emphasis on labor's implementation as it related to the social aspect of man's reality. He proclaimed that, "For the poet, it is gold and silver; but for the philosopher, it is iron and wheat that have civilized men and ruined the human race."¹⁵

Gene Starobinski, a professor and noted Rousseau scholar, explained the implication of Rousseau's phrase:

Why this unfortunate consequence? Because men, able now to produce more than they really need, fight over possession of the surplus. They want not just to enjoy the fruits of

¹⁴ Melzer, 1990, p. 19.

¹⁵ Rousseau, 1755, p. 51.

their labor but to own them. And they want not only actual goods but the abstract signs of possible or future goods.¹⁶

Ownership, possession, and surplus emerged once man began using labor to overcome the original conditions in the state of nature. The implementation of labor produced a disorder not present in the state of nature:

Things in this state could have remained equal, if talents had been equal, and if the use of iron and the consumption of foodstuffs had always been in precise balance. But this proportion, which was not maintained by anything, was soon broken.¹⁷

Prior to the concepts of labor and private property, there existed a delicate balance and a sense of order in the state of nature. Professor Frederick Neuhouser interpreted Rousseau's thoughts in the following way:

Rousseau tends to think of nature, unadulterated by human intervention, as an ordered and harmonious realm, governed by the eternal, beneficent laws its Creator imposed on us. Human action . . . invariably disrupts this order . . . and . . . unintentionally introduces into nature . . . contingency, discord, and evil.¹⁸

The order that Neuhouser speaks of is the very same order that Rousseau stated in the original block-quotation: "that man is a being who is naturally good, loving justice and order." That delicate order eventually gave way to disorder. This new disorder created economic conditions absent in the state of nature prior to labor: scarcity and surplus. Labor, private property, surplus, and scarcity dramatically impacted social relations. Rousseau believed that people now take

¹⁶ Starobinsky, 1971, p. 298.

¹⁷ Rousseau, 1755, 53.

¹⁸ Neuhouser, 2014, p. 94.

pleasure in owning things simply to lord over those who are without. This ownership was not based on utility, but rather on greed and cruelty. The following is an example of Rousseau's interpretation of this phenomenon:

Are you unaware that a multitude of your brothers perish or suffer from need of what you have in excess, *and that you needed explicit and unanimous consent from the human race*¹⁹ for you to help yourself to anything from the common subsistence that went beyond your own?²⁰

Possession of a surplus supply by some caused the suffering of others. People took more than they needed, and not everyone consented to this new aspect of social life.²¹

Other aspects of social life were negatively affected by the introduction of private property and labor, according to Rousseau. The introduction of surplus, labor, scarcity, and private property introduced this negative social aspect to the human condition:

Finally, I would prove that if one sees a handful of powerful and rich men at the height of greatness and fortune while the mob grovels in obscurity and misery, it is because the former prize the things they enjoy only to the extent that the others are deprived of them; and because, without changing their position, they would cease to be happy if the people ceased to be miserable.²²

¹⁹ Emphasis mine.

²⁰ Rousseau, pp. 55-56.

²¹ A socialist society would eliminate this social dilemma caused by desire. Muravchik, in, *Heaven on Earth: The Rise, Fall, and Afterlife of Socialism*, explained that, "an egalitarian society would . . . serve to eliminate want. . . . an egalitarian society would turn scarcity into abundance" (Muravchuk, 2002, p. 12).

²² Rousseau, 1755, p. 67.

A masochistic cruelty is now an aspect of social life that did not exist in the state of nature prior to the introduction of these elements. Truly, iron and wheat civilized man, but ruined mankind.²³ These unruly desires present in society absent in the state of nature created a problematic chain of causality, all based on the economic condition of scarcity.

The covetous nature of private property created the unnecessary economic condition of scarcity. If a person owns something that is not being used and is saved for the future or sold for profit, it is not freely available; it is guarded and coveted. These resources that were otherwise abundant have since grown scarce. And again, as labor did not exist in the state of nature, the scarcity caused by labor and private property did not exist either. This was in part because labor did not exist, but it was also due to the way we lived in the state of nature: we lived as isolated atomized human beings belonging neither to families, nor groups.²⁴

Rousseau's articulation of the way man lived in the state of nature is quite revealing. He believed that man had neither, "a fixed dwelling, nor any need for one another, they would hardly encounter one another twice in their lives."²⁵ We lived solitary lives, without the need of others, and we would barely ever encounter other human beings. Rousseau then made a leap in logic as he hypothesized that due to this atomized and isolated nature, man only desired and consumed that which was in his immediate grasp at the immediate moment:

His desires do not go beyond his physical needs. The only goods he knows in the universe are nourishment, a woman and rest; the only evils he fears are pain and hunger. I

²³ This is why Francois-Noel Babeuf, a peer of Marchel's, and an author of, *The Conspiracy of Equals*, knew that, "Society must be made to operate in such a way that it eradicates once and for all the desire of man to become richer, or wise, or more powerful than others" (Babeuf, as quoted by Muravchuk, 2002, p. 13).

²⁴ Rousseau, 1755.

²⁵ Rousseau, 1755, p. 29.

say pain and not death because an animal will never know what it is to die; and knowledge of death and its terrors is one of the first acquisitions that man has made in withdrawing from the animal condition.²⁶

We only desired what we needed at that exact moment. No one ever desired anything more: “His modest needs are so easily found at hand, and he is so far from the degree of knowledge necessary to make him desire to acquire greater knowledge, that he can have neither foresight nor curiosity.”²⁷ In the state of nature, not only did we only desire what was immediate, but we had no sense of the future, nor how to plan for it: “a precaution quite far removed from the mind of the savage man, who, as I have said, finds it quite difficult to give thought in the morning to what he will need at night.”²⁸

In practical terms, what this means is that if someone happened upon an apple tree in the state of nature and saw apples on the ground next to it, this person would take one and only one, if and only if, he was hungry at that exact moment. No one ever had even the slightest sense of foresight to say something along the line of, “I’m not hungry now, but I might be later. I’ll take two and hang on to them.”

This is what made scarcity such a novelty in the state of nature. No one ever took two when they were only hungry for one, nor did anyone take two when they were not hungry at all. A delicate orderly balance existed. What Rousseau really meant was that human beings:

²⁶ Ibid, p. 26.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 27.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 52.

lacked the capacity to desire anything that was not immediately present, they made no demands on nature that nature could not fulfill. For them, the miserliness of nature passed unnoticed. Scarcity was neither a spur to development nor a source of social instability.²⁹

People began taking without consent,³⁰ which destroyed the well-ordered delicate balance that existed prior to the inception of civil-society.³¹

Rousseau's Influence On Socialism

Rousseau's terminology for this concept and chain of events was iron and wheat civilized man, but ruined mankind. The importance of Rousseau's phrase and the implicit concept it embodied was not lost on Rousseau's followers, most notably, Karl Marx. Marx paraphrased Rousseau's adage of iron and wheat with his own famous aphorism: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs."³² However, Marx was not the only one to further Rousseau's aphorism and create an additional iteration of iron and wheat. The contemporary socialists have a version of their own: "hoarding wealth." The next time one hears a socialist talk about hoarding wealth, this is what they are implying. Surplus, possession, private property, and taking more than you need while others are lacking are not mandatory and *de facto* aspects of the human condition; we can live without them. No one needs two when someone has none. No one requires a billion for anything ever.

Contemporary socialists did not only borrow this one idea from Rousseau. Rousseau's notion of the invalidation of original sin is present in something they advocate for called, "a

²⁹ Levine, 1993, p. 44.

³⁰ This is a reference to a previously quoted paragraph from the second discourse: "and that you needed explicit and unanimous consent from the human race."

³¹ This is why the previously referenced *Manifesto of Equals* exclaimed that, "the equilibrium is broken: crime and misfortunate are on earth" (As quoted by Muravchik, 2002, p. 12).

³² Marx, 1875.

living wage.” A living wage is essentially advocating for increased wages merely for existing; it is not a request to compensate people in exchange for their labor. Two examples are providing someone with a salary and benefits for working a minimum-wage position, like a cashier at a grocery store,³³ or a guaranteed job including job security provided to you by the government. Rudyard Kipling captured the essence of this rationale in his poem, “The gods of the copybook headings:” “And that after this is accomplished, and the brave new world begins, When all men are paid for existing and no man must pay for his sins.”³⁴ The sins referred to allude to original sin. Without a belief in original sin, labor is optional, and people can be compensated not for laboring, but merely for existing. Things can be provided for us as they were in the Garden of Eden. This is the essence of a living wage.

This unwillingness to accept labor as mandatory and original sin’s negation are the sources of the utopianism that accompanies socialist thought. Once again, by not only invalidating original sin in his personal life, but invalidating the original creation myth in the Book of Genesis, Rousseau opened the possibility to an entirely new and utopian mode of existence.

To understand how an existence without the implications and legacy of the Biblical creation myth can foster a sense of utopianism, we must return to the Biblical creation myth. The scripture at the end of chapter three of the Book of Genesis concluded the creation story with the following foreboding warning:

³³ This is not to demean or insult this position or other positions of this type. It is merely a statement of fact that working as a cashier is not a position that can command a \$40,000 salary, health insurance, and a 401K.

³⁴ Kipling, as quoted by Kirk, 1984.

23: So the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. 24: After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side[e] of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.³⁵

This is a firm and clear warning sign that man is banished from the utopia that is the Garden of Eden here on Earth. The angels with flaming swords preventing man from returning make it axiomatic that utopia is no longer an option. As utopia is no longer an option, this makes the human condition tragic by default.

The tragic nature of the human condition is one of the legacies of the biblical creation myth. Specifically, what is meant by the tragic nature of the human condition, is that life will not be easy, it will be hard. We must work and toil for our sustenance, and whether we like it or not, pain and suffering are inescapable aspects of the human condition. As Pope Leo XIII knew, ever aware of original sin: “To suffer and to endure is the lot of humanity. Let men try as they may, no strength and no artifice will ever succeed in banishing from human life the ills and troubles which beset it.”³⁶ Edmund Burke, a contemporary of Rousseau’s, shared the Pope’s sentiment, albeit at an earlier date:

I have sometimes been in a good deal more than Doubt, whether the Creator did ever really intend Man for a State of Happiness. He has mixed in his Cup a Number of natural Evils . . . and every Endeavor which the Art and Policy of Mankind has used from the

³⁵ Genesis 3:23-24.

³⁶ As quoted by Molnar, 1961, p. 175.

Beginning of the World to this Day, in order to alleviate, or cure them, has only served to introduce new Mischiefs, or to aggravate and inflame the old.³⁷

More succinctly, economist, Milton Friedman, knew that, “the typical state of mankind is tyranny, servitude, and misery.”³⁸ Each of these thinkers articulated the idea that the human condition is tragic. Professor Thomas Molnar explained the role of original sin in this thought process:

inspired by the Christian concept of original sin, whose social significance is that it warns man to look for the cause of his misery into himself, into his own disobedience to the divine decree. It is also a warning not to listen to those who would willfully upset the order of things.³⁹

When you believe in original sin and the Biblical creation myth, one understands this.

However, without the biblical creation myth, the possibility of engineering a utopia on Earth in the present is now an option. For an example of this thinking, note the writings of the Abbe Sieyes, a disciple of Rousseau.⁴⁰ Sieyes expanded off Rousseau’s foundational ideology. He proclaimed that

religion . . . was the first enemy of man. . . . the perfectibility of man is arrested, his efforts diverted; rather than increasing his knowledge and his pleasures on earth, these are transported and led astray in the heavens.⁴¹

³⁷ Burke, 1756, para. 3.

³⁸ Friedman, 2019, p. 19.

³⁹ Molnar, 1961, p. 175.

⁴⁰ Stanlis, 1967.

⁴¹ Sieyes, as quoted by Sewell, Jr. 1994, p. 12.

Or once again, as Karl Marx put it, “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.”⁴² The meaning of this idea is that by embracing the Judeo-Christian ethos and original sin, we know we cannot have utopia here on Earth. We are aware that it exists exclusively in the afterlife. Religion thus acts like a drug, getting us high, numbing us to the pain and suffering of the present by promising us a better afterlife. We can tolerate the miserliness of nature and the tyranny, suffering, and misery of the human condition, so long as there is something better awaiting us in the world to come. Professor Jonathan Turner understood Marx’s assertion to mean that, “it encouraged them to accept their situation in the present (with false promises for a better future).”⁴³ To those who invalidate original sin, they believe we can bring utopia and heaven here on Earth in the present. Why wait until the afterlife?⁴⁴

Original sin’s absence means more than just a utopia on Earth in the present is a possibility. Now, every aspect of labor is open for a new and creative interpretation. Consider the socialist talking point relating to the, “redistribution of wealth.” This stance is predicated on the belief that wealth is distributed in an inequitable fashion, and should be redistributed more equitably. The implication here is that someone, or something “distributed” wealth in the first place. It implies that we have a “Department of Wealth Distribution” in the same way we have the Post Office, the Internal Revenue Service, and the Department of Motor Vehicles. The Department of Wealth Distribution accidentally erred in distributing wealth, giving a few too

⁴² Turner, 2003, p. 74.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Russell Kirk’s interpretation of socialism now makes perfect sense. Kirk conveyed socialism as, “the belief that this world of ours may be converted into the Terrestrial Paradise through the operation of positive law and positive planning” (Kirk, 1984, p. 154).

much, and the majority of the population too little. The quarrel is then with a fictional branch of the government that distributes wealth.

Unfortunately for the socialists, no such department exists. Thomas Sowell, professor of economics, set the record straight on this act of equivocation in, *The Vision of the Anointed: Self-Congratulation as the Basis for Social Policy*: “To say that ‘wealth is so unfairly distributed in America’ is grossly misleading when most wealth in the United States is not distributed at all. People create it, earn it, save it, and spend it.”⁴⁵ Wealth is not distributed; it is earned through labor. So long as one does not believe in labor- or more aptly, that the concept of labor is not essential to the human condition- then the origin of wealth is open to interpretation.

Rousseau’s Socialist Solution To Our Fall

Rousseau’s beliefs concerning the optional nature of labor are what caused man’s fall from grace in the state of nature. Rousseau diagnosed this fall from a historical perspective in the second discourse. Specifically, Rousseau emphasized how labor detrimentally impacted our social relations. Interestingly, the second discourse was not Rousseau’s only important work on the issue. Rousseau more than just restated the demise of the state of nature, and how society poisoned our utopia. Rousseau wanted to do something about this decline caused by society. Rousseau therefore devised a plan to mitigate these disturbing aspects of contemporary life and help restore the natural order we lost from the state of nature.

The name of his plan? *The general will*, which he devised in his most celebrated work, *The Social Contract*. The general will was Rousseau’s, “rigidly egalitarian doctrine,”⁴⁶ that he,

⁴⁵ Sowell, as quoted by AEI, 2014.

⁴⁶ Melzer, 1990, p. 155.

“realistically clung to,”⁴⁷ throughout his life. The general will⁴⁸ (the state/government) is Rousseau’s safety-net and shield designed to protect us from the harsh realities of society absent in the state of nature. Neuhouser explained that:

the only hope Rousseau sees for restoring a benign order to a world that has been modified by human freedom is for humans themselves to impose (artificial) laws on the social world- laws that order the very disorder they have unintentionally produced.⁴⁹

The general will’s use is both an enactment of justice and a restoration of the order we lost in our fall from grace.

In, *The quest for community*, Robert Nisbet articulated his interpretation of Rousseau and the general will in truly illuminating fashion. He explained that: “The State is the means by which the individual can be freed of the restrictive tyrannies that compose society.”⁵⁰ Not only is the state the means to securing our freedom, equality, and safety from the corrupting influences of society, but it is the only means to achieve the goal: “For Rousseau, there is no morality, no freedom, no community outside the structure of the State.”⁵¹

In Rousseau’s eyes, the state is all encompassing. Not only in our national political issues, but in our individual personal lives: “Rousseau is the first of the modern philosophers to see in the State a means of resolving the conflicts, not merely among institutions, but within the

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ To oversimplify, the general will is best understood as the collective will of the people manifested through the state/government.

⁴⁹ Neuhouser, 2014, p. 95.

⁵⁰ Nisbet, 1953, p. 133.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 130.

individual himself.”⁵² We no longer need to depend on ourselves or others to solve our personal problems, but will instead rely on the state. Hear it directly from Rousseau:

Each citizen would then be completely independent of all his fellow men, and absolutely dependent upon the state: which operation is always brought by the same means; *for it is only by the force of the state*⁵³ that the liberty of its members can be secured.⁵⁴

Rousseau thought all forms of dependence⁵⁵ and social relations were corrupting and enslaving. This is the reason why he wanted each citizen to, “be completely independent of all his fellow men,” like they were in the state of nature:

the bonds of servitude are formed merely from the mutual dependence of men and the reciprocal needs that unite them, it is impossible to enslave a man without having first put him in the position of being incapable of doing without another. This being a situation that did not exist in the state of nature, it leaves each person free of the yoke.⁵⁶

He famously opened, *The social contract*, by saying, “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.”⁵⁷ Here’s one who thinks he is the master of others, yet he is more enslaved than they are.”⁵⁸ What Rousseau meant by this claim is a concept he elaborated on in the second discourse:

On the other hand, although man had previously been free and independent, we find him, so to speak, subject, by virtue of a multitude of fresh needs, to all of nature and

⁵² Ibid, p. 130.

⁵³ Emphasis mine.

⁵⁴ Rousseau, 1762C, p. 56.

⁵⁵ In the second discourse, Rousseau discusses at length the problems of either depending on someone or having someone depend on you. These relationships are enslaving and corrupting to him and necessitate removal. He did not distinguish between types of dependency, like positive or negative, but maintained that dependency was absent, and when present, harmful.

⁵⁶ Rousseau, 1755, p. 43.

⁵⁷ Marx again made similar statements to Rousseau: “The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win,” in the *Manifesto*.

⁵⁸ Rousseau, 1762C, p. 1.

particularly to his fellowmen, whose slave in a sense he becomes even in becoming their master; rich, he needs their services; poor, he needs their help; and being midway between wealth and poverty does not put him in a position to get along without them.⁵⁹

No matter the position a person is in, whether rich and powerful, or poor and powerless, any dependence on another human being is a form of misery and servitude. Even the rich and powerful depend on the poor and powerless to perpetuate their fortunes. This dependence is a form of slavery for Rousseau. This is the very dependence the general will is designed to free us from. Rousseau and his disciples will use the general will to cast off these chains of dependency and social relations with force,⁶⁰ if necessary.

Nisbet understood Rousseau's use of the government in securing our independence as, "independence for the individual . . . not from the state, but from fellow members of society."⁶¹ Rousseau wants to use the force of the government to eliminate our social attachments to our friends, neighbors, and coworkers. Man will return to our isolated and independent existence from the state of nature, and this will improve our individual lives and the health of our societies at large.

Rousseau's recommendation to improve our wellbeing is to take these dependencies and relationships from us. This alienation and estrangement from our neighbors is compulsory, and if not willingly accepted, then force is mandated:

In order that the social contract shall be no empty formula it tacitly implies that obligation which alone can give force to all the others: namely that anyone who refuses

⁵⁹ Rousseau, 1755, p. 54.

⁶⁰ This is a reference to this quote from note #53: "for it is only by the force of the state."

⁶¹ Nisbet, 1953, p. 133.

obedience to the General Will is forced to do it by the whole body. *This means nothing less than he will be forced to be free.*⁶² For this is the condition which, by giving each citizen to his countrymen secures him against all personal dependence.⁶³

Obey the government or else you will be forced to. Rousseau's belief is that if we obey the government and cut off all social relationships and the dependencies they form it will liberate us. This will atomize humankind in a similar fashion to the state of nature. Once returned to our atomized state, the general will forces us into a mass collective, unable to find attachments.

Nisbet astutely recognized this formation of the masses, and the implicit tenets the masses, as a concept, contain. He identified the following as the conditions necessary to create the masses: "What is crucial for the formation of the masses is the atomization of all social and cultural relationships within which human beings gain their normal sense of membership in society."⁶⁴ The masses are less about statistical thresholds, and more about the inability to associate and attach ourselves to entities in society: "The term masses applies only where we deal with people who either because of sheer numbers, indifference, or a combination of both, cannot be integrated into any organization based on common interest."⁶⁵ Rousseau's use of the general will forcefully takes our attachments and displaces everyone from the stability of their traditional networks. According to Nisbet, if Rousseau is able to accomplish this goal, there will be negative consequences. When we, "Mutilate the roots of society . . . the result must inevitably be the isolation of a generation from its heritage, the isolation of individuals from their fellow

⁶² Emphasis mine.

⁶³ Rousseau, 1762, p. 18.

⁶⁴ Nisbet, 1953, p. 198.

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 198.

men, and the creation of the sprawling, faceless masses.”⁶⁶ Nisbet understood it to mean that, “True freedom consists in the willing subordination of the individual to the whole of the State. If this is not forthcoming, compulsion is necessary.”⁶⁷ Obey the government and cut ties to everyone else. You will depend on no one, and no one will depend on you.

The general will is Rousseau’s effort at freeing us from all social relations and any form of dependence.⁶⁸ The only dependence that is acceptable to him is dependence on the government. Rousseau knew it was, “therefore essential, if the general will is to be able to express itself, that there should be no partial society within the state, and that each citizen should think only his own thoughts.”⁶⁹ The implicit idea embodied in the phrase, “no partial society within the state,” is that there can be no intermediary bodies between the individual and the state. The church, the family unit, trade-unions, our schools, the parent teacher association, bowling leagues, flag-football teams, the scouts, gymnasiums, and our bars and social clubs all create dependency relationships that are incongruent with the dependency-free goal of the general will. Nisbet’s thoughts on the issue are pertinent: “There is to be no bond of loyalty, no social affiliation, no interdependence save what is symbolized by the General Will. Society is to be an aggregate of atoms held rigidly together by the sovereign will of the State.”⁷⁰

As our intermediary bodies disappear, their authorities and functions are absorbed by the state. The state then grows larger and ever more present in our lives. The slang term for this ever-growing government is the “leviathan.” The growth of the leviathan and the dwindling of our

⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 25.

⁶⁷ Nisbet, 1953, p. 140.

⁶⁸ I want to reiterate Rousseau’s intense distaste for any form of dependency. Any form of dependency, like asking someone to pass the salt at the dinner table, is an evil to him.

⁶⁹ Rousseau, 1762C, p. 32.

⁷⁰ Nisbet, 1953, p. 136.

middle-institutions is the thrust of so many books singing the elegy of our vanishing communities. Nisbet's, *The quest for community*, Tocqueville's, *Democracy in America*, and Robert Putnam's, *Bowling alone*, are three that come to mind. Rousseau and those who believe in the general will are convinced this is a positive development: "The more numerous the public administration, the smaller becomes the relation between the prince and the subjects, and the nearer it comes to equality, so that in democracy the ratio is unity, or absolute equality."⁷¹

Really, what Rousseau is getting at here, is that the greater the size of the administrative body of the government, the more the people will grow to love their government. Inversely, he believed that, "There is then too great a distance between the prince and people, and the State lacks a bond of union."⁷² By eliminating the middle-institutions that serve as a buffer between the individual and the state, the government will grow, usurping the roles and functions of our middle-institutions. With the growth of the government, the bond and love the people have for the state will grow commensurately. To put this into context, if Rousseau is correct, then nothing would make the heart swell with warmth and fondness for your country quite like a long line at the Department of Motor Vehicles. The more impersonal and complicated filing our taxes becomes, the more we will grow to love our government.

Despite the fact that these government bodies like the DMV and the IRS feel like alienating faceless masses, they ultimately must be occupied by individuals. Rousseau recognizes this necessity, and then describes who exactly it is he wants running his general will. To establish his social contract, he needs a person who is of:

⁷¹ Rousseau, 1762C, p. 77.

⁷² Ibid, p. 77.

superior intelligence beholding all the passions of men without experiencing any of them would be needed. This intelligence would have to be wholly unrelated to our nature, while knowing it through and through; its happiness would have to be independent of us, and yet ready to occupy itself with ours; and lastly, it would have, in the march of time, to look forward to a distant glory, and, working in one century, to be able to enjoy in the next.⁷³

It would take a being of supernatural and god-like abilities to fit this description. This type of person is a Christ-like figure, albeit a secular one. This is why, according to Rousseau, “It would take gods to give men laws.”⁷⁴

The average person reading this synopsis of Rousseau’s thought likely feels that Rousseau’s being of superior intelligence is out of the grasp of just about any living person or people. It would appear establishing a social contract dictated by this type of person is an impossibility. Contrary to this likely sentiment, Rousseau believed finding this person is a possibility because he believed he can change human nature. What gave Rousseau the hope he could accomplish his goal in changing human nature? The answer is progressivism, as ideology.

Rousseau repeatedly mentioned, “progress in the successive developments of the human mind,”⁷⁵ and, “the progress of the human mind,”⁷⁶ in the second discourse. Rousseau believed that once the state of nature ended, human nature began progressing and moving forward: “the

⁷³ Rousseau, 1762C, p. 42.

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 42.

⁷⁵ 1755, p. 43.

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 71.

human race of one age is not the human race of another age.”⁷⁷ This is why Rousseau believed he could change the very nature of man and the human condition itself. His boldness is stark:

He who dares to undertake the making of a people’s institutions ought to feel himself capable, so to speak, of changing human nature, of transforming each individual, who is by himself a complete and solitary whole, into part of a greater whole from which he in a manner receives his life and being.⁷⁸

The progressive character of human nature makes this possible. Rousseau believed he is capable of altering man’s nature and steering it towards his ideal for the human condition. Rousseau is:

altering man’s constitution for the purpose of strengthening it; and of substituting a partial and moral existence for the physical and independent existence nature has conferred on us all. He must, in a word, take away from man his own resources and give him instead new ones alien to him.⁷⁹

Rousseau’s objective was to fundamentally alter human nature through his laws. Through legislation, Rousseau could ensure complete independence from other human beings, while inculcating exclusive reliance on the government. Once Rousseau accomplishes this goal, we reach his endgame. Read his hypothetical best-case-scenario:

if each citizen is nothing and can do nothing without the rest, and the resources acquired by the whole are equal or superior to the aggregate of the resources of all the individuals, it may be said that legislation is at the highest possible point of perfection.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 69.

⁷⁸ 1762C, pp. 42-43.

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 43.

⁸⁰ Rousseau, 1762C, p. 43.

Rousseau's social engineering will lead to a perfect government.⁸¹ Rousseau knows he needs a being of superior intelligence and god-like ability to make it happen, he knows human nature is progressive and malleable, and that through the appropriate manipulation of environmental factors, he can bring a perfect government to the world.

Once again, this all stems from Rousseau's invalidation of original sin and the creation myth from the Book of Genesis. Rousseau knows that utopia on Earth is a possibility, and that he can create it here and now. The method of achieving it? Politics, as Rousseau is no longer constrained by Biblical shortcomings. Ernest Cassirer, a philosopher, distilled the nuances of Rousseau's newfound secular redemptive theology:

No God can grant it to us. Man must become his own savior and, in the ethical sense, his own creator. In its present form, society has inflicted the deepest wounds on humanity; but society alone can and should heal these wounds.⁸²

Traditional Judeo-Christian morality is no longer an obstacle in Rousseau's mind. Now, salvation and redemption can be found through politics and the general will:

Rousseau signals a profound and radical transformation of man's whole perspective on his existence. 'Salvation' is no longer entrusted to religion but to politics. Redemption is no longer attainable by external aids ('no god can give us it'), but only by man.⁸³

If all goes according to Rousseau's plan, man is now his own savior, and the government is running our lives. We are alienated from our neighbors, and there are no intermediary bodies standing between the ever-growing centralized authoritative government and the masses.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Cassirer, 1989, p. 76.

⁸³ Colletti, 1972, p. 146.

Humankind finds redemption and salvation through our government and individuals of superior abilities, all attained through Rousseau's ability to alter human nature.

Conclusion

Remember, all of Rousseau's machinations and goals are only possible by invalidating original sin, making man naturally benevolent, transferring the struggle for good and evil from the breast of the individual to society, and tinkering with society. Again, all of this sounds highly difficult to accomplish, and highly improbable to achieve efficacy. Pope Leo XIII, Molnar, and Burke explained that the terms of our existence were dictated to us by God through scripture. Any effort to deny these terms will result in even greater difficulty than had we accepted these terms in the first place. Burke reiterated this point in his, *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, noting both the mandatory aspect of labor, and the terms of our existence dictated to us by God:

It is the common doom of man that he must eat his bread by the sweat of his brow, that is, by the sweat of his body, or the sweat of his mind Every attempt to fly from it, and to refuse the very terms of our existence, becomes much more truly a curse.⁸⁴

However, as Rousseau invalidated not only original sin, but the creation myth, he was able to create new terms for man's existence. These terms are the basis of socialism.

Socialism is a direct negation of the Judeo-Christian creation myth, its premises, conclusions, and implications. Socialism's essence is basically the negation of the Serenity Prayer:

⁸⁴ Burke, 1797, pp. 267-268.

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference . . . taking this world as it is and not as I would have it . . . so that I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with You forever in the next.⁸⁵

With socialism's tenets in mind, the Serenity Prayer really stands out. The socialist is unwilling to accept the terms of our existence, and is not at all interested in pleasing God in the present for the promise of a better afterlife.

The socialist believes utopia on Earth in the present is possible, so why wait until the afterlife to find out? The socialist believes heaven is waiting for us here and now. By altering society in accordance with the socialist's terrestrial machinations, we can realize it. This is ultimately what socialism is all about. It is the belief that by negating the original creation myth from the Book of Genesis, and through the appropriate manipulation of environmental factors, we can invalidate and supplant the tragic nature of the human condition and replace it with a utopian version.

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⁸⁵ Niebuhr, as quoted by Cincinnati Children's, 2021.

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