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JEAN JACQUES ROUSSEAU

The Social Contract, 1762

Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) was one of the leading thinkers of the Enlightenment, whose ideas were as central as those of Diderot (with whom he studied and quarreled), Voltaire (next to whom he is buried in the Pantheon), and Hume (who sheltered him in England toward the end of his life). Rousseau's indifference to formal religion both reflected and influenced French Enlightenment thought, and his political ideas affected the radicals of the French Revolution, though he died eleven years before its outbreak. In both his native Geneva and France, where he spent most of his life, Rousseau's work was often banned. In fact, most of his work was not published until after his death.

The Social Contract, Or Principles of Political Right (1762) challenged the monarchy and called for a government of the people, a force Rousseau saw not in individuals or the competing classes of a society of unequals, but in a "general will" that was greater than any institution or the sum of the people. Which ideas expressed here would be a threat to the French monarchy or establishment? Why would Rousseau's writing appeal to people who wanted to overthrow the regime?

THINKING HISTORICALLY

The power of Enlightenment thought was its radical willingness to ask, and try to answer, fundamental questions. What are some of the fundamental questions this selection grapples with? What does Rousseau mean by such phrases as the "state of nature," the "social compact," and the "general will"?

Source: Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract, Or Principles of Political Right*, trans. G. D. H. Cole. Rendered into HTML and text by Jon Roland of the Constitution Society. Available at www.constitution.org/jjr/socon.htm.

Book I

I mean to inquire if, in the civil order,¹ there can be any sure and legitimate rule of administration, men being taken as they are and laws as they might be. In this inquiry I shall endeavor always to unite what the sanctions with what is prescribed by interest, in order that justice and utility may in no case be divided.

I enter upon my task without proving the importance of the subject. I shall be asked if I am a prince or a legislator, to write on politics. I answer that I am neither, and that is why I do so. If I were a prince or legislator, I should not waste time in saying what wants doing; I should do it, or hold my peace.

As I was born a citizen of a free State, and a member of the Sovereign,² I feel that, however feeble the influence my voice can have on public affairs, the right of voting on them makes it my duty to study them: and I am happy, when I reflect upon governments, to find my inquiries always furnish me with new reasons for loving that of my own country.

1. *Subject of the First Book*

Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains. One thinks himself the master of others, and still remains a greater slave than they. How did this change come about? I do not know. What can make it legitimate? That question I think I can answer.

If I took into account only force, and the effects derived from it, I should say: "As long as a people is compelled to obey, and obeys, it does well; as soon as it can shake off the yoke, and shakes it off, it does still better; for, regaining its liberty by the same right as took it away, either it is justified in resuming it, or there was no justification for those who took it away." But the social order is a sacred right which is the basis of all other rights. Nevertheless, this right does not come from nature, and must therefore be founded on conventions. . . .

4. *Slavery*

Since no man has a natural authority over his fellow, and force creates no right, we must conclude that conventions³ form the basis of all legitimate authority among men. . . .

So, from whatever aspect we regard the question, the right of slavery is null and void, not only as being illegitimate, but also because it is

¹ Civil order: opposed to the state of nature; civic society, the world of citizens. [Ed.]

² The ultimate authority, which Rousseau says should be the General Will. [Ed.]

³ Agreements, compacts. [Ed.]

ward and meaningless. The words *slave* and *right* contradict each other and are mutually exclusive. It will always be equally foolish for a man to say to a man or to a people: "I make with you a convention wholly at your expense and wholly to my advantage; I shall keep it as long as I like, and you will keep it as long as I like."

6. The Social Compact

I suppose men to have reached the point at which the obstacles in the way of their preservation in the state of nature⁴ show their power of resistance to be greater than the resources at the disposal of each individual for his maintenance in that state. That primitive condition can then persist no longer; and the human race would perish unless it changed its manner of existence.

But, as men cannot engender new forces, but only unite and direct existing ones, they have no other means of preserving themselves than the formation, by aggregation, of a sum of forces great enough to overcome the resistance. These they have to bring into play by means of a single motive power, and cause to act in concert.

This sum of forces can arise only where several persons come together; but, as the force and liberty of each man are the chief instruments of his self-preservation, how can he pledge them without harming his own interests, and neglecting the care he owes to himself? This difficulty, as bearing on my present subject, may be stated in the following terms:

"The problem is to find a form of association which will defend and protect with the whole common force the person and goods of each associate, and in which each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone, and remain as free as before." This is the fundamental problem of which the *Social Contract* provides the solution. . . .

[F]or, in the first place, as each gives himself absolutely, the conditions are the same for all; and, this being so, no one has any interest in making them burdensome to others. Moreover, the alienation being without reserve,⁵ the union is as perfect as it can be, and no associate has anything more to demand: for, if the individuals retained certain rights, there would be no common superior to decide between them and the public, each, being on one point his own judge, would ask to be so on all; the state of nature would thus continue, and the association would necessarily become inoperative or tyrannical.

Finally, each man, in giving himself to all, gives himself to nobody; and as there is no associate over whom he does not acquire the same right as he yields others over himself, he gains an equivalent for everything he loses, and an increase of force for the preservation of what he has.

⁴A hypothetical or primitive existence before government; a frequent starting point in Rousseau's thought about government. [Ed.]

⁵Each gives his freedom to the whole freely and completely. [Ed.]

If then we discard from the social compact what is not of its essence, we shall find that it reduces itself to the following terms:

"Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will, and, in our corporate capacity, receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole."

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