

J. J. ROUSSEAU (1712 –1778)

Jean Jacques Rousseau was one of the greatest political philosopher that the French has produced. In the entire history of political theory he was the most exciting and provocative. He was a genius and a keen moralist who was ruthless in his criticism of 18th century French society. He was one of the most controversial thinkers, as evident from the conflicting, contradictory and often diametrically opposite interpretations that existed of the nature and importance of his ideas. He is best remembered for his concept of popular sovereignty, and the theory of general will which provide a philosophical justification for democratic governance. He was the intellectual father of the French Revolution as well as the last and perhaps the greatest of the modern contract theorists. Rousseau was born in Geneva to an artisan family. His mother died of complications arising from his birth, a tragedy that filled Rousseau with a lifelong sense of guilt and in all probability lay behind much of his neurotic behaviour and personal unhappiness. As a young man he was apprenticed in several trades, and in 1728 he set out for a period of travel during which he engaged in an extensive process of self education.

He was not like Hobbes and Locke, formally trained in the university, nor did he consider himself a philosopher in any formal sense. In 1742 Rousseau set out for Paris where he met the leading cultural, scientific and philosophical luminaries of Enlightenment France. Among them was Diderot, a leading philosopher and the founder of the encyclopedia, a multi-volume work that aimed at encompassing all knowledge. Rousseau contributed several articles to the encyclopedia, the most important of which was the Discourse on Political Economy. This work along with the first and second discourses, and most importantly the social contract, constitutes the basic source of Rousseau's social and political thought, although he wrote several other minor political works, such as the Government of Poland. In addition, Rousseau wrote several novels and numerous essays, and he produced three autobiographical works, the most important of which is the

Confessions. In 1761 Rousseau published Emile perhaps the most famous work on education ever written. STATE OF NATURE Rousseau built his political theory on the conception of pre-political state of nature. The reason is that he grew up in the rigorously Calvinist atmosphere of the small city of Geneva.

Throughout his life, in spite of his conversion to Catholicism and a great humiliation which he suffered in Geneva, his love for his home strongly shaped his political thought. As he was restless man by nature he was never completely at home in any profession. He could never tolerate external restraint. In the Discourse on Inequality published in 1754, Rousseau started with the analysis of human nature. He considered the natural man, living in natural surroundings or in the state of nature as a noble savage. Man, as a natural animal lived the happy and care free life of the brute, without fixed abode without articulate speech, with no needs or desires that cannot be satisfied through the mere instinct. According to him, men in the state of nature were equal, self sufficient and self controlled. Their conduct was based not on reason, but on emotions of self interest and pity. Man's first feeling was that of his own existence, and his first care that of self preservation. Hunger and other appetites made him at various times experience various modes of existence. According to Rousseau, men in the state of nature lived in isolation and had a few elementary, easily appeased needs. It was neither a condition of plenty or scarcity, neither there was neither conflict nor cooperative living. There was no language or knowledge of any science or art. In such a situation man was neither happy nor unhappy, had no conception of just and unjust virtue or vice.

The noble savage was guided by two instinct self love or the instinct of self preservation and sympathy or the gregarious instinct. As these instincts are always beneficial, man is by nature good. But self love and sympathy often come in to clash with each other hence, according to Rousseau , man takes the help of a sentiment to resolve the clash, which men can conscience . But since conscience is only a blind sentiment, it will not teach men what is in fact right. Conscience, therefore, requires a guide and that guide is reason which develops in man as alternate

courses of action present themselves before him. Rousseau's taught that reason was the outgrowth of an artificial life a man in organized society and that the results of its development were calamities. The noble savage was Rousseau's ideal man. State of nature did not last forever. In course of time the noble savage who lived in isolation discovered the utility and usefulness of labor which gave rise to the idea of property. Property led to the domination of one man over other. SOCIAL CONTRACT Though Rousseau criticised civil society, he did not suggest man to choose the savage existence, as some of his contemporaries mistook him. The main concern of the social contract is the central issue of all political speculation: Political obligation.

'The Problem' Rousseau says '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'. Like his predecessors, Rousseau uses the conceptions of the state of nature and the social contract that puts to end to it. Rousseau's conception of man's life in the state of nature is not quite so gloomy as that of Hobbes' nor as optimistic as that of Locke. Each man pursues his self-interest in the state of nature until he discovers that his power to preserve himself individually against the threats and hindrances of others is not strong enough Rousseau's social contract opens thus: 'Man is born free and he is everywhere in chains' His purpose is how to make the chains legitimate in place of the illegitimate chains of the contemporary society. The purpose of the social contract is thus to combine security which comes from collective association, with liberty which the individual had before the making of the contract. But the social contract consists in the total alienation of each associate, together with all his rights, to the whole community.' Each man gives himself to all, he gives himself to nobody in particular.

In Rousseau's social contract man does not surrender completely to a sovereign ruler, but each man gives himself to all, and therefore gives himself to nobody in particular. Rousseau shows in the social contract a much greater appreciation of civil society as compared with

the state of nature than he showed in his earlier writings. As a result of the contract, private person ceases to exist for the contract produces a moral and collective Body, which receives from the same act its unity, its common identity, its life and its will. This public person formed from the union of all particular individuals is the state when it is passive,; the sovereign when it is active, a power when compared with similar institutions.

CRITIQUE OF CIVILISATION

Rousseau protested against intelligence, science and reason in so far as they destroyed reverence faith and moral intuition, the factors on which society was based. His protest was a “revolt against reason, for he regarded the thinking animal as a depraved, animal”. His conviction was reflected by his unhappiness with Grotius, because his usual method of reasoning is constantly to establish right by force. Rousseau attacked civilisation and enlightenment in a prize winning essay written in 1749 on the question : Has the progress of science and arts contributed to corrupt or purify morality. Rousseau argued that science was not saving but bring moral ruin upon us. Progress was an illusion, what appeared to be advancement was in reality regression. The arts of civilised society served only to ‘ cast garlands of flowers over the chains men bore . The development of modern civilisation had not made men either happier or more virtuous. In the modern sophisticated society man was corrupted, the greater the sophistication the greater the corruption.

Rousseau wrote thus: “our minds have been corrupted in proportion as the arts and science have improved”. In surveying history to support of his cult of natural simplicity, Rousseau is full of enthusiasm in for Sparta, a “republic of demi- gods rather than of men”, famous for the happy and ignorance of its inhabitants. By contrast, he denigrates Athens, the centre of vice, doomed to perish because of its elegance, luxury, wealth, art and science. Rousseau sees a direct casual relation between luxury constantly expanding needs, and the rise of art and science after which true courage flags and the virtues disappear. According to Rousseau, arts , manners, and politeness not only destroyed martial values but also denied human nature, forcing individuals to

conceal their real selves' In modern society happiness was built on the opinions of others rather than finding it in one's own hearts. Thus he dismissed modern civilised society as false and artificial for it destroyed natural and true culture.

GENERAL WILL

The doctrine of general will occupies a prominent place in Rousseau's political philosophy. In the *Discourse on Political Economy* Rousseau had already dealt with the problem of general will. He sees the 'body politic' "possessed of a will and this general will, which tends always to the preservation and welfare of the whole and of every part, and is the source of the laws, constitutes for all the members of the state in their relation to one another and to it, the rule of what is just or unjust". By introducing the concept of General Will, Rousseau fundamentally alters the mechanistic concept of the state as an instrument and revives the organic theory of the state, which goes back to Plato and Aristotle. In order to understand the meaning and importance of general will it is necessary to understand the meanings of related terms and concepts.

According to Rousseau, the actual will of the individual is his impulsive and irrational will. It is based on self-interest and is not related to the well-being of the society. Such a will is narrow and self-conflicting. The real will of the individual is on the other hand, rational will which aims at the general happiness of the community. The real will promotes harmony between the individuals in society. Rousseau believes that an average man has both an actual and real will. The general will is the sum total or rather synthesis of the real wills of the individuals in society. It represents the common consciousness of the common good after proper discussion and deliberation.

The chief attribute of the general will is not its sovereign power but its pursuit of common interests and its public spiritedness. The character of the general will is determined by two elements: first it aims at the general good, and second, it must come from all and apply to all. The first refers to the object of the will; the second, to its origin. Rousseau

also makes differences between will of all and general will. There is often a great deal of differences between the will of all and the general will. 'the latter considers only the common interests, while the former takes private interest into account and is no more than a sum of particular wills. Thus the will of all is the aggregate of all the wills of the individuals of the community about their private interest into account and is no more than a sum of particular wills. Thus the will of all is the aggregate of all the wills of the individuals of the community about their private interest, wills which partly clash and partly coincide mutually. But the general will represents the aggregate of these wills which is common to all the citizens. In other words, the essential difference between the will of all and general will is one of motivation, i.e., service to the community without any prejudice or discrimination. Unlike nearly all other major political thinkers, Rousseau considers the sovereignty of the people inalienable and indivisible. The people cannot give away or transfer to any person or body their ultimate right of self government of deciding their own destiny. Whereas Hobbes identified the sovereign with the ruler who exercises' sovereignty, Rousseau draws a sharp distinction between sovereignty, which always and wholly resides in the people and government which is but a temporary agent of the sovereign people. Rousseau believes that the general will would be the source of all laws. The human being would be truly free if he followed the dictates of the law. He was categorical that the General will could emerge only in an assembly of equal law makers.

CHARACTERISTICS OF GENERAL WILL

The following are some of the important features of general will. Firstly, Rousseau's general will is permanent It is rational and not impulsive. It is not eternal but permanent and imparts stability to national institutions. Secondly, Rousseau locates sovereignty in the general will. General will and sovereignty are inalienable just as life of the individual is inalienable. Whereas in Locke the people transfer the exercise of their sovereign authority, legislative, executive and judicial to organs of government, Rousseau's concept of inalienable and indivisible sovereignty does not permit the people to transfer their legislative

function, the supreme authority in the state. As to the executive and judicial functions, Rousseau realises that they have to be exercised by special organs of government but they are completely subordinate to the sovereign people. Thirdly, Rousseau's general will is unitary because it is not self-contradictory. It gives a touch of unity to national character.

Nextly, general will is unrepresentable because sovereignty lies in the community which is a collective body and cannot be represented but by itself: As soon as a nation appoints representatives, it is no longer free, it no longer exists. Finally, the general will is infallible. Rousseau means little more than that the general will must always seek the general good. He says the general will is always right and tends to the public advantage. If the general will is always right, it is not always known. It does not follow that the deliberations of the people are always equally correct. Rousseau saw the government as an agent of the General will, the sovereign entity in the body polity. Like Montesquieu, he believed all forms of government were not suited to all countries. A government had to reflect the character of a country and its people. According to William Ebenstein, Rousseau's concept of sovereignty differs from both Hobbes' and Locke's. In Hobbes the people set up a sovereign and transfer all power to him. In Locke's social contract, the people set up a limited government for limited purposes, but Locke shuns the conception of sovereignty - popular or monarchical - as a symbol of political absolutism. Rousseau's sovereign is the people constituted as a political community through the social contract.

Rousseau's theory of popular sovereignty is not only different from Locke's, it is in fact a thoroughgoing critique of the whole tradition of Lockean liberal democracy. For while Locke recognises the principle of popular sovereignty in theory, he rejects it in practice, says Rousseau. In point of fact, Locke's contract does not give the legislative power to the people, but to a representative legislature. As such, sovereignty belongs to the elected representatives, or more precisely to a majority of representatives rather than to the community as a whole.

Thus, Locke actually puts sovereignty in the hands of a very small minority, thereby denying to the people that political liberty that a correct reading of the contract shows they rightfully ought to possess.

ASSESSMENT

There was no denying the fact that Rousseau's political philosophy was one of the most innovative striking and brilliant argued theories. His most important achievement was that he understood the pivotal problem that faced individuals in society - how to reconcile individual interests with those of the larger interests of the society. Rousseau is the first modern writer to attempt, not always successfully to synthesise good government with self government in the key concept of General will. Rousseau's influence has changed over the last three centuries. In the 18th century he was seen as critique of the statusquo, challenging the concept of progress, the core of the enlightenment belief structure. In the 19th century, he was seen as the apostle of the French revolution and the founder of the romantic movement. In the 20th century he has been hailed as the founder of democratic tradition, while at the same time assailed for being the philosophical inspiration of totalitarianism.

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