Unit Five: Part 13  
Rousseau and Contemporary Political Theory

Introduction

Personal Biography: Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) was born and grew up in early youth in Geneva, Switzerland. No doubt the local self-government of the Swiss cantons influenced Rousseau’s political thought. Rousseau’s personal life promoted a neurotic mindset. His mother died at his childbirth and his father abandoned him to an orphanage at age 10. From age 16 to 26 he was something of a vagabond, but at age 26 in 1738, after recovering from a serious illness, and supported by the patronage of Madame de Warens, Rousseau became an autodidact whose philosophical-political thought would rank him among the top theorists of the contemporary world. Rousseau’s scope of thought not only treated political philosophy as such but background foundations in history and anthropology.

Rousseau settled in Paris in 1742, and in 1745 entered into a lifelong relationship with an attractive peasant woman, Thérèse Levasseur, who became his common law wife and whom he formally married in 1768. The couple had five children, whom Rosseau allowed to be placed in orphanages. Rousseau’s personal neglect of his offspring tormented his conscience throughout his life. Rousseau was forced into exile to Germany and England after the publication of his Social Contract in 1762, which was banned in Paris and Geneva, most notably on the basis that it called for a “civil religion” of mankind, rather than adoration of a theological Creator Being. Rousseau was only allowed to return to Paris in 1770, where he lived in poor physical and mental health until his death in 1778. Rousseau’s major works include: Discourse on the Sciences and Arts (1750), Discourse on Political Economy (1752), Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men (1755); The Social Contract (1762); and Emile (1762)

Historical and Philosophical Background

Rousseau on Social Anthropology: Rousseau postulated a period of early human existence in which humans except for procreation lived a mostly solitary life-style supported by the immediate abundance of nature. And within this pre-societal setting humans had a natural feeling of empathy (pitié) with the well-being of others. But in such pre-societal existence such a natural feeling of empathy does not carry moral virtue because it requires no personal self-sacrifice to accommodate the good of others.

But the increasing pressure of an enlarged population that could no longer be supported by the immediate bounty of nature compelled humans to work up nature by an arduous labor within a division of productive talent. And the institution of private property followed based on the possession of scarce goods; and private property included not only the means of consumption but also the means of production. This meant that those who came to possess greater wealth from the greater productivity of their own labor as capitalists were enabled to gain greater and greater ownership of the industrial means of production. And this, in turn, meant that the capitalists were enabled to exploit the hired labor of workers in wages representing less than the embodied labor value that the hired workers produced for the capitalists.

The many suffering economic hardship were beguiled into accepting a first social contract authorizing government enforcement of their economic exploitation by the few on the proposition that such government enforcement of private property rights of the rich also protected the right to the potential acquisition of high-level economic wealth of the poor.

Rousseau’s Critique of “Bourgeois” Values: Rousseau concluded that modern bourgeois society based on the physiocratic theory of private ownership of the means of production and market place economic competition, although it might enhance the productivity of labor and the national social wealth, not only led to the economic deprivation of the many but a false sense of consciousness in society as a whole. The false sense of consciousness extolled a pretentious sense of self in outdoing others in the trappings of economic wealth and a sense of
jealousy in others in their own wish to outdo others. Rousseau identified this false sense of consciousness as an “amour propre” as a social alienating pretentiousness, and this as being characteristic the ethic of bourbon monarchal rule in France, as represented by the rule of Louis XIV (1643-1715) and Louis XV (1715-1774).

Rousseau achieved national attention in presenting his thesis in a prize winning essay submitted to the Academy of Dijon in 1749 entitled “Discourse on the Arts and Sciences.” Rousseau then followed up his same line of argument in his “Discourse of Political Economy” (1752) and Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality Among Men (1755). Rousseau’s critique of bourgeois society contradicted the progressive theme of the French Enlightenment holding that physiocratic capitalist theory was a breakthrough in discovering the scientific laws of nature leading to a secular eschatology governing both natural and social phenomena, whereby humankind would ultimately be liberated from all suffering in a historical end-time of secular well-being. Such a progressive theme of history was classically identified with the thought of the Marquis de Condorcet (1743-1794) as set forth in his work Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind (1795).

Rousseau in his critique of economic hardship and a false sense of consciousness under physiocratic capitalist society was therefore seen to be a revolutionary thinker in challenging the merit of physiocratic capitalist society as a component of 18th century French progressive enlightenment thought. His challenge was recognized as worthy of debate by such authors of the Encyclopédie of the French Enlightenment as Voltaire (1694-1778) and Denis Diderot (1713-1784). Rousseau came into even greater national prominence with the publication of his most famous work The Social Contract and Emile in 1762 when he advanced the proposition of a new social contract that would supersede the false sense of consciousness of bourgeois capitalist life.

The New Social Contract and the General Will

The New Social Contract: In The Social Contract (1762), Rousseau argues that the human division of labor is an organic development of the division of human nature to meet the physical and cultural needs of an ever increasing population that can no longer be supported by the immediate abundance of nature. In this, humans more and more become aware of others as their social selves and call for all individuals to seek the common good of one another in their social self-identity. This demanded a certain self-sacrifice to respect the rights of others in one’s social self-identity and transforms the instinctive feeling of empathy of primitive existence into a moral commitment of intellectual reason (cf. David Hume). And this, in turn, demanded a new social contract based on the moral respect for the general will.

The Nature of the General Will: The “general will” (volonté générale) would be realized as the popular expression of what the body politique believed to be in best interest of the common good. While unanimity would be the ideal expression of the general will, a majority consensus would be the normal course of determination of the general will. And those not initially subscribing to a majority consensus, in their desire to be a moral being, must come to not only to accept but self-identify with the majority consensus as the only objective register of the general will. This is the thrust of Rousseau’s very controversial declaration that “man can be forced to be free.”

In his work Emile, also written in 1762, Rousseau set forth an extensive program of education of the youth that featured a role-playing model of the self-alienating culture of bourgeois society and the happy moral person subscribing to the general will.

The Political Institutions of the Social Contract

Popular Democracy: Rousseau insisted that the general will could only be ascertained by some form of direct democracy as opposed to representative government. Not citizen could entrust others to speak for their own moral consciousness. But how could direct democracy be established in the modern nation-state such as France in the 18th century with a geographical area of some 250,000 square miles and a population of some 15 million?

The answer for Rousseau seemed to lie in a bottom-up federated structure of Swiss cantons in Switzerland where he lived in the early party of his life, as opposed to the top-down unitary structure of government of 18th
century France. Some see the Paris Commune, which lasted for just 72 days from March 15 to May 26, 1871, as approximating a Rousseauean bottom-up federated structure of government.

**Parliamentary Democracy:** In calling for direct democracy, Rousseau called for the supreme authority of the legislative branch of government in direct contrast to separation of powers as advocated by Montesquieu. The executive function of government would be exercised by a committee of the civic general assembly. In making the executive branch of government a constituent unit of the legislative branch of government and directly responsible to removal by the legislative branch of government, Rousseau was setting forth the fundamental principle of parliamentary democracy. And all court authority would be strictly charged with the judicial application of the legislative provisions of the general will; the courts would enjoy no independent authority of substantive due process to strike down laws seen by the courts to be in opposition to the natural rights of life, liberty, and property in the Lockean-American tradition.

To ensure a proper civic spirit to comply with the general will Rousseau also endorsed a rather extensive censorship code against any form of sedition against the legislative authority of civic general assembly.

**The Role of a Grand Legislator:** Rousseau prefaced his call for direct popular democracy with the notion a "Grand Legislator." The Grand Legislator would have the preliminary function of convincing the body politique to transform its mindset from bourgeois culture to the moral imperatives of the general will.

Then, somewhat paradoxically, the Grand Legislator would not only continue to reinforce a proper moral consciousness but also provide guidance to the popular civic assembly on what might should the proper content of its general will. This has led many analysts to question a Rousseauean ambivalence between the rule of popular democracy and that of the Platonic philosopher kings.

**Rousseau’s Impact on French Politics**

**Ideology and Regime Change:** Rousseauean thought helped spark the popular democratic challenge of the “third estate” of the popular masses to monarchical absolutism in the French Revolution of 1789. But it also played a major role in the establishment of the dictatorial rule in the First Republic of 1793 under a Committee of Public Safety headed by Maximilien Robespierre to safeguard what Robespierre called a “Republic of Virtue” based on the moral imperative of the general will, against counterrevolution. The upshot was the summary execution of some 20,000 suspected counterrevolutionaries from the nobility and many other of a differing political stripe. Many saw Robespierre’s action as acting in consort with the Rousseauean dictum that “man can be forced to be free.”

The legacy of revolutionary and counterrevolutionary regime changes with reference to executive power of the Ancien Regime and parliamentary power of the First Republic resulted in ongoing civil conflict in France through the 19th and 20th centuries. Between 1789 and 1958 France was ruled under five different republics, two monarchies, two Napoleonic empires, and a quasi-fascist Vichy Regime during the Second World War.

**Conflict between Church and State:** Rousseauean thought also promoted conflict with Catholic Church doctrine in France. In basing all human morality on the positive law of a secular general will without reference to divine law and natural law based on transcendental reason, Rousseau was seen as establishing a civil religion based on the exclusive morality of the general will. This contributed to an anti-clerical split between the Jacobin left and the traditional Catholic right.

**Rousseau’s Impact on Later Political Thought**

**Socialist Thought:** Rousseau’s critique of working-class exploitation by private ownership of the means of production was followed by the development early socialist thought of French writers such as Pierre Proudhon. In his work What is Property? (1840), Proudhon called for factory ownership of the means of production by the
laborers themselves so that the exchange value of their labor could be properly apportioned among the laborers themselves.

Later, international Marxist doctrine would treat Rousseau’s “false sense of consciousness” as stages of a dialectical development of historical consciousness leading to a socialist-communist secular eschatology based on the national public ownership of the means of production. And V.I. Lenin would often cite his Russian Bolshevik political faction as following in the “Jacobin tradition.” In this, Lenin treated majoritarian proletariat class rule as the de facto majoritarian general will and called for the rest of society to endorse the moral imperative of the common good of socialist-communist rule by reeducation or police terror (cf. Rousseau’s Grand Legislator and Lenin’s Dictatorship of the Proletariat).

**Democrat or Totalitarian:** Rousseauian thought has left an ambivalent political legacy. On the on hand, his call for direct democratic input into public policy-making, especially in a bucolic peasant political setting of relative equality of subsistence wealth, harkens to early American Jeffersonian democracy. But at the same time, Rousseau’s willingness to accept a draconian imposition of the “general will” against any critical political opposition looks toward modern totalitarian thought control of a uniform social consciousness.

Such an imposition was expressed in the notion of gleichauchang (getting-in-step) in Nazi Germany and partinost’ (Communist Party consciousness) in the Soviet Union. The idea is not only to impose a uniform social consciousness by any necessary physical coercion, but the promotion of an attitude of social ostracism by the rest of society against any deviant social consciousness. Such an imposition has raised serious objection to the Smith Act of 1940 in the United States, which makes it a federal crime to “advocate” or be a member of any organization which advocates the overthrow of the government of the United States by “force or violence” organized for the purpose of the overthrow of the government of the United States (see Dennis v. United States, 1951 and Brandenburg v. Ohio, 1968).

**Questions for Reflection**

1) On what basis did Rousseau critique the social consciousness of 18th century French bourgeois society? On what basis did Rousseau critique the first social contract that protected the interest of physiocratic capitalist society?

2) On what basis did Rousseau ascribe a moral norm of economic justice to one’s fellow human in modern society as opposed to the simple feeling of pitié of primitive society?

3) On what basis was Rousseau’s notion of the “general will” founded? What type of political participation under what type of government structure did Rousseau envision as necessary to ascertain the general will?

4) How has Rousseau thought influenced modern socialist thought? How can it be said that Rousseau advocated a strictly civil religion? And how can it be said that Rousseauian thought can be identified with modern totalitarian thought?
The psychology of latter attitude can even affect free societies from engaging in general critical social thought as depicted in The Organization Man (1956) by William H. Whyte and A Nation of Sheep (1961) by William J. Lederer.

Rousseauian Institutions of Government:

- **The Political Basis of the General Will:** For Rousseau, ascertaining the general will requires the direct input of all members of society. Ideally, Rousseau saw this as historically existing in the Greek city-states, but it would seem to be impracticable in the modern nation state. But Rousseau presumably saw something of a compromise in the cantonal federated structure of the modern Swiss state in reference to his native Geneva. Many latter embraced the Paris Commune of 1871 as a modern model of local and regional self-government that Rousseau would have endorsed. Likewise, the legislature as the policy-making branch of government expressing the general will must be the supreme branch of government. Thus, as opposed to any form of separation of powers, Rousseau called for a parliamentary democracy wherein the executive branch of government would be only a committee of the legislative branch of government, and directly responsible to it in discharging the general will.

- **The Role of Education and the Legislator:** Also like Plato, Rousseau stressed the role of education in inculcating into the entire body politque the moral imperative of the general will as the basis of their own moral selves and happiness. Rousseau’s work Emile is devoted to the doctrines underpinning his philosophy of education. To achieve this end, Rousseau was prepared to call for a rather extensive regime of intellectual censorship. Likewise, Rousseau called for the existence of a supreme Legislator, who would presumably intellectually reinforce the foundation of the general will as the well-being and happiness and of one’s fellow man as the basis of one’s own moral self and well-being and happiness. Ironically, this sounds more like Plato’s philosopher king than a democratic legislative body.

- **The Historical Legacy of Rousseau on French Politics:** Rousseauian thought has had an enormous impact on subsequent French political philosophy and political institutions. This impact addresses:
  (1) The Reign of Terror from 1793-94 under Maximilien Robespierre in the French Revolution of 1789 in which some 20,000 were executed to suppress any political opposition to the moral self as expressed in the general will, and the general will itself came to be circumscribed to a five-member Committee of Public Safety under Robespierre.
  (2) The enduring peasant culture and that of the small shop keeper well into the latter twentieth century to preserve an egalitarian household economy is also seen as having a background in Rousseauian thought.
  (3) The Paris Commune of 1871 built on a federated model of 81 district communes is seen as reflecting a Rousseauian commitment to local participatory self-government in an age of the modern nation state.
  (4) The dominance of the legislative branch of government in the Third and Fourth Republics from 1875 to 1958 in which the executive branch of government was accorded little policy-making authority also stemmed from the Rousseauian outlook of a parliamentary republic.
  (5) The authoritarian rule of the two Napoleonic empires made extensive use of national plebiscites to justify their power along Rousseauian line of the general will.
The conflict between church and state which raged from the French Revolution of 1789 into the first part of the twentieth century was also in large measure owed to Rousseaeuan thought. The French left saw the Catholic Church as the teaching authority of Divine Law of God as conflicting with the happiness and well-being of the moral self experienced in the public policy of the general will. Rousseau himself posed the supremacy of a “civil religion” to that of the supernatural authority of the Catholic Church.

**The Historical Legacy of Rousseau on Socialist Thought:** Although Rousseau himself defended the institution of private property in small peasant household agriculture, his opposition to the vainglorious accumulation of private wealth also encouraged the development of later socialist thought, not only in France but in more general Marxian socialist theory. With respect to Marxist theory, Rousseau notes that:

1. The quest for greater social wealth led to division of labor in the modern industrial system between capitalist ownership of the means of production and hired labor working for subsistence minimum wages promoting class warfare.
2. That the poor experience a false sense of social consciousness in accepting their plight as hired laborers on the proposition that it was necessary to protect their own minimal ownership of property and the potential for they themselves to become wealthy capitalists in the future.
3. The happiness and well-being of the moral self at the expense of the individual’s self-interest may initially have to be imposed from without, e.g., Rousseau’s Great Legislator, this approach directly addresses Marx’s of an elite Communist vanguard to enforce socialist law under the heading of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

**Rousseau and the Notion of Citizen:** A final word must be said on the Rousseaeuan notion of “citizen” (Fr. citoyen). It was only with Rousseau that the modern notion of the law abiding subject takes on a moral identity, as was the case of the classical political theory of Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas. With Hobbes, Locke, and Montesquieu the law abiding citizen was strictly identified with individual economic self-interest. With Rousseau it takes on the distinct identity with the realization of the moral self.

**De Tocqueville’s Reservations about Democracy:** In his first volume of *Democracy in America* (1835) Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) was quite positive about political democracy in America, and thus follows Rousseau in his endorsement of democracy. This was because he saw the early colonial tradition of self-government as having inculcated in the American mindset a spirit of compromise, both in terms of reaching a governing majority and relinquishing political power in light of civic preference for a new governing majority.

But in his second volume of *Democracy in America* (1840) de Tocqueville took a much less sanguine outlook. This was because he saw a certain threat of despotism in democracy engendering a sense of mind conformity. Mind conformity entails not just submission to the will of a political majority but the subjugation of the expression of all independent thought under the threat of moral ostracism by the ruling majority. This form of mind control was evident in the “McCarthyism” of the twentieth century, and depicted in the novels *The Organization Man* (1956) by William H. Whyte and *A Nation of Sheep* (1961) by William J. Lederer. Some have argued that de Tocqueville found such a fear of mind conformity implicit in the Rousseaeuan notion of the moral authority of the general will.

**Questions for Reflection:**

1. What was the thrust of Rousseau’s argument in *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (1749) that caused such consternation among thinkers of Enlightenment philosophy?
2. How did Rousseau see the economic status of industrial ownership and hired labor under capitalism?
(3) What did Rousseau see as the basis of the real happiness and well-being of the individual (as opposed to Hobbes, Locke, and Montesquieu)?

(4) What type of economic society and institutional powers of government did Rousseau see as being necessary to establish a new social contract to realize the real happiness and well-being of the individual?

(5) How did Rousseau’s basis of moral authority come into potential conflict with the Catholic Church?

(6) What three aspects of Rousseauian thought came to be reflected in Marxian thought?

(7) Why did de Tocqueville come to have reservations about democracy in reference to Rousseau’s notion of the general will?

**Extras:** See Rousseau in the Dictionary on Hegel. (See Boucher – Rousseau). Reason versus passion. Passion = subrational necessity. Amour propre = make people think to be like us (learn that it never makes us happy because people want to be like themselves). Free thought - moral will versus drives – demonstrate our real criterion as a person. Respect of other. Reason = better than affectatiousness (bourgeois) – mutual self-respect as persons, and this in seeking the common good = general will. (Note also: historical materialism = basis of historical development of consciousness).