

JEAN JACQUES ROUSSEAU: ABOVE ALL ELSE AN APOSTLE OF DEMOCRATIC FREEDOM

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Introduction

Rousseau, the intellectual father of the French revolution, a representative of the 18th-century enlightenment, but a trenchant critique of modernity, was brilliant, though notoriously controversial, and yet an influential philosopher. Rousseau aired his disquiet about the enlightenment project, as he could with acuity foresee, which his contemporaries could not, the consequences of progression in rationalism, developments in science and technology, and the emergence of increasing social inequalities in bourgeois society. That was Rousseau's extraordinary achievement. Yet, he was ridiculed and slighted by his contemporary *philosophes*. But in the annals of the history of ideas, Rousseau's prescience stands out shiningly and his brilliant contemporaries appear somewhat dim. This paper is an attempt to understand and critically appreciate the political thought of Jean Jacques Rousseau, as well as the influence he had on western political thought, and to posit that he was above all else an apostle of democratic freedom and trail blazer of Republicanism.

Rousseau's central problematic is to find a solution to the predicament of the civilized man in a modern society characterized by alienation, 'unfreedom', and inequality. Rousseau argues that a solution is possible through a new kind of politics when the state is reconstituted in a fashion wherein it is always guided by the 'general will' of its members. The concept of 'general will' is Rousseau's original contribution to political philosophy.

Rousseau was a prolific writer¹, and 'he left the stamp of his strong and original genius on politics, education, religion, and literature. One can find Rousseau at the 'entrance of all the paths leading to the present'(Wayper:1971,136). But he leaves behind an ambivalent, ambiguous legacy, partly because of the eclectic nature of his work, and partly because of his epigrammatical writing, which produced an effect, but also controversies. '[T]here is no writer about whom it has been more difficult to find an agreement than about Rousseau'.(Wayper,1971:136). This is evident from the fact that scholars have often interpreted Rousseau in contradictory ways. Cassirer saw him as an incomparable democrat. 20th-century critics Cobban, Talmon, Berlin find Rousseau's political theory highly authoritarian. Talmon indicts Rousseau as a totalitarian theorist, prepared to coerce individuals in the name of social justice and public freedom. (Talmon, 1960, 74-88). Plamenatz (1975) considers Rousseau as Marx's precursor. Colletti (1969) thinks Rousseau to be on the doorsteps of socialism. Vaughan detects a logical discrepancy between Rousseau's earlier and later writings. The first phase of his work, *Discourse on Inequality* is marked with defiant individualism, while in the later phase, *The Social Contract* there is defiant collectivism. (Vaughan,1962, 21-22). Wayper (1971) finds Rousseau astride two traditions of political theorizing- the will and artifice tradition, as well as the organicist theory of the state.

His notable work in political philosophy includes – '*Discourses on the Origins of Inequality*, '*Discourse on Political Economy*, '*Social Contract*, and '*Considerations on the Government of Poland*'. He also wrote on musicology, educational theory, botany, and literature. He produced popular literature, such as *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, as well as operas and studies of music. *Emile* is considered to be the best ever tract on education. One can categorize Rousseau's political writings into two periods. In the first period that saw *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, and *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, Rousseau is a romantic rebel who attacks the morally decadent *ancien régime*, lends qualified support to modernity, laments reason's artificiality, and the eclipse of sentiments. He finds progress in arts and sciences to have corrupted humanity. In the second period that saw *The Social Contract*, Rousseau is sober, trying to build up a torn-down unjust society in tune with the age of reason. There is only an apparent contradiction between the two phases. In fact, the first phase serves as a prelude to the second wherein the theory of General Will is expounded. To understand his purpose and theory we need to begin with Rousseau, the man, and his times.

Jean Jacques and his times

Rousseau was born in 1712 in Geneva, a republican city-state² to Issac Rousseau and Suzanne Bernard. His father was a watchmaker with very modest means. Rousseau lost his mother a few days after his birth. His father had a hard time raising him in any coherent fashion. He was exiled from Geneva when Rousseau was ten years old. From the age of twelve, Rousseau began an apprenticeship under various masters, but he could not establish himself in any trade or art. (Ebenstein, 1966, 433). Rousseau left Geneva when he was sixteen and took refuge under a Swiss baroness, Madame de Warrens, under whose tutelage he read widely, and developed expertise in music and musicology. His '*Confessions*' provide the details of his life.

He moved to Paris in 1742, and while earning a living in opera and music, befriended leading *philosophes* of Enlightenment, such as Diderot and Voltaire. He contributed articles to *Encyclopedie* of Diderot and d'Alembert. He moved in the circle of the leading encyclopedists, influential men, and charming women, but he never became a part or wanted to belong to that 'exalted' society, as psychologically and temperamentally he felt uncomfortable. Rousseau 'never shed his plebian, puritanical background of a low-middle class family in Geneva'. (Ebenstein, 1966, 433).

Rousseau got noticed when his essay, 'A Discourse of the Arts and Sciences' won the first prize in an essay competition organized by the Academy of Dion in 1751. In a span of 12 years, he wrote copiously. In 1762 the *Social Contract* and *Emile* were published. Both were controversial. *Emile*, a treatise on education was publicly burned. French Parliament censored *Social Contract* and *Emile*, and he was forced to flee France and Geneva. (Jha, 2010, 143). Rousseau went to England, stayed with David Hume, but argued with him and fell out. He returned to France in 1767, married Therese Lavoisier, and lived a secluded though prolific life before dying aged 66.

The France of his time was under the reign Louis XV, who was presiding an absolutist feudal order. The king, clergy, and the nobility had all the political power, privilege, and social prestige. They lived off extravagantly at the sufferance of the toiling masses, who lacked even the basic minimum required for a decent living. Discontent, the desire for change, and defiance were building up among the masses. The newly emergent French bourgeoisie too wanted a change of the extant socio-economic-political order. In building up a spirit of revolt against the ancient regime, the French Enlightenment was playing an instrumental role. Rousseau had an ambivalent attitude towards enlightenment. He neither accepted nor rejected enlightenment wholly. He agreed with *philosophes*' desire for change, and their faith in man as a free agent, but had strong reservations about their idea of progress implied in their modernity³ and had greater regard for feeling, than their (*philosophes*) respect for rationality. (Sabine, 1973, 530). His lament was the loss of feeling in the modern man, and *Philosophes*' insensitivity towards that loss, which led him to 'revolt against reason' (Sabine 1973). Rousseau aroused a lot of hostility. His masterwork, *Social Contract*, and *Emile*, both published in 1762 were condemned by the French parliament and he had to flee to Switzerland.

Revolt against reason

Rousseau wrote a prize-winning essay (1751) on the question: "Has the progress of science and arts contributed to corrupt or purify morality?"⁴ He argued that science had brought moral ruin, and progress was an illusion. It was rather a regression. The 'arts of civilized society served only to cast garlands of flowers over the chains men bore'. Modernity 'had not made men either happier or more virtuous'. Rather, he had been corrupted in proportion to his sophistication. As Rousseau remarked, 'our minds have been corrupted in proportion as the arts and sciences have improved, and 'the progress of arts and sciences has added nothing to our real happiness, it has corrupted our morals'. (J.J. Rousseau, 1973, 7, 24). Further, Rousseau showed disdain for modernity's promise of creating abundance on earth, as it was an invitation for evil and ruin, and against man's nature suited to the simple life and easily satisfiable needs. Rousseau reminded that abundance and accompanying luxury had brought ruin to Athens, Rome, and Egypt.

Whereas the enlightenment *philosophes* believed that the hope of modern civilization rested on the growth of knowledge, intelligence, and progress in sciences, Rousseau was dismissive of them. For Rousseau, the hope of the sick modern society lay in the enthronement of 'amiable and benevolent sentiments, goodwill, and reverence', as he privileged sentiments and conscience over reason. Intelligence, science, and reason all had baneful effects on modern man because intelligence undermined reverence; science took away faith, and reason set 'prudence against moral intuition'. 'Without reverence, faith, and moral intuition', Rousseau believed, 'there is neither character nor society'.

In many senses, in his critique of materialistic and technological civilization, often understood as progress, Rousseau was anticipating the postmodernist perspective which, to begin with, had resonance in the 'other' of the west, represented by Thoreau, Tolstoy and others to which Gandhi was also drawn and that which shaped Gandhi's episteme as evident in his *Hind Swaraj* (L.I. Rudolph 2007).

Critiquing civil society

Rousseau wrote his second essay (1754) on, "what is the origin of inequality among men, and is it authorized by natural law?" The themes introduced in his first essay were further developed here. This essay titled: '*Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*',⁵ is also called the *Second Discourse*. It discusses how the natural man and his nature got corrupted as he became civilized. The transition from the original/natural position to civil society was necessitated by the emergence of the institution of private property, the growth of social inequality, consequent conflicts, and the need to defend private property by institutionalizing social inequality through 'law'.

Rousseau made a distinction between natural inequality and moral/political equality. Natural inequality, which consists of differences in age, health, qualities of mind, and bodily strength is not substantial and not a problem at all. The problems in society arose from moral/political inequalities which arose from social institutions/arrangements and consists in privileges of wealth, power, and honor. The social inequalities had brought a fall in man, as it distorted his nature. Rousseau explains that nature had destined man to live a simple, healthy life, and satisfy essential needs (food, a female, and sleep), but the man in society, the 'civilized man' developed unhealthy habits and therefore had to countenance pain, anxieties, and torments of civilized living. The idea that human beings are good by nature but are rendered corrupt by society is central to his worldview. Civilization was a hopeless race to discover remedies for the evils it produces.

In the pre-civil society state of nature (SON), the 'man was a noble savage'. He lived in isolation, had a few elementary, easily appeased needs, and 'was guided not by reason but by two instincts: self-love or the instinct of self-preservation, and sympathy or the gregarious instinct'. In SON there was neither conflict nor cooperative living. There was neither plenty nor scarcity. '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 and vice'.

The SON, which was one of innocence did not last forever. The transition from the SON to 'civil society, however, took a long time. Rousseau discusses this transition in *The Second Discourse*. The transition is as follows:

[1] In the SON, the noble savages live in isolation, have few elementary, easily appeased needs, but after some time they discover the value of labor and begin to work together occasionally.

[2] With technical progress, the first revolution comes about. Men begin building shelters for themselves and families begin to stay together- a stage Rousseau calls the patriarchal stage. If there is a golden age worth regretting, Rousseau thinks it is this.

[3] But as he consolidates his first social relations, the use of reason and language begins. This brings in the first fall for man, from the happiness of the 'patriarchal stage'. Then, by an 'unhappy chance' men discover the advantages of the division of labor, which enables men to pass from a subsistence economy to an economy of productive development. At this stage, the emergence of metallurgy and agriculture brought a great revolution. Property and inequality began to emerge. As Rousseau puts it : "The first man, who having enclosed a piece of ground, bethought himself of saying *This is mine*, and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society".[quoted in Ebenstein 1966: 435]. But iron and corn, which civilized men, ruined humanity.

[4] Now producing more than they really need, men vie for the surplus. They want not only to use things but to possess them. They want not only present goods but the abstract tokens of possible and future goods. The very idea of possession excites men's passions and provokes competition and conflict.

[5] A stage is now reached, which is unstable, as men are at war with one another -a Hobessian SON- which necessitates the creation of civil order so that there is order and tranquility. The rich especially need this civil order, because violence while it threatens everyone's life, it also additionally threatens their possessions. The 'rich (therefore) devised a plan by which they could better enjoy their power and possession without the threat of constant war.' (Ebenstein,1966, 435).

This plan was to 'employ the forces of the poor for the creation of government, under which all would be protected and their possessions safeguarded.' The idea was that the "the strength of all", the 'public power' would be placed at the service of private property as the contract would become the instrument legalizing each man in the possessions of his own - the rich of their wealth, and the poor of their poverty, and thus, the law, the common rule, would thus become the law of property and inequality". (Colletti, 1971, 165) . The result of this social compact is the origin of civil society and laws. The *Second Discourse* shows in conclusion that the compact was an iniquitous one. 'Instead of founding the just society, it perfects and consecrates the bad socialization'. (Colletti, 1971,153)

The contract, in effect, " bound new fetters to the poor, and gave new powers to the rich; which irretrievably destroyed natural liberty forever, externally fixed the law of property and inequality, converted clever usurpation into unalterable right, and, for the benefit of a few ambitious individuals, subjected all mankind to perpetual labor, slavery, and wretchedness."(quoted in Ebenstein, 1966, 435).

Rousseau suggests, however, that things need not have turned out as badly as they had. The contract confirmed and reinforced the state of competition and inequality with the power of 'law' rather than abolishing it. (Colletti, 1978, 165) . With the establishment of government, men had 'ran headlong into chains'. They had 'bungled an opportunity to create a just order. It happened because 'men had the sense to see the advantages of political institutions, but not the experience to foresee the dangers'. Rousseau pursued this theme some years later in *The Social Contract*.

Before we move to Rousseau's *Social Contract*, one may note here that Rousseau in the *Second Discourse* was not depicting the transition from SON to 'civil society as a historical fact.[Sabine,1973; Wayper,1974; Colletti,1968] It is more in the nature of hypothetical reasoning calculated to explain the nature of things rather than to ascertain their actual origin. The condition of the civil society surely was, according to Ebenstein, alluding to the injustices of contemporary France. (Ebenstein 1966:436).

Rousseau's social contract

Rousseau's critique of 'civil society' raised heckles against him. Voltaire inappropriately ridiculed Rousseau for 'wanting us to walk on all four'. However, for Rousseau, there was no going back to the SON , as society was inevitable, and without which man could not fulfill himself or realize his native potential. As he was not suggesting 'go -back' to SON,

Rousseau's task, therefore, was to find a new socio-political order which will help resolve the paradox of 'Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains', and enable individuals to fulfill themselves and live with freedom.

To such a task Rousseau devoted himself in *Social Contract*. Rousseau's theoretical problem then, is: "...to find a form of association which will defend and protect with the total 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". [quoted in Ebenstein 1966 436].

The social contract for such as an association that Rousseau suggests involves: "the total alienation of each associate, together with all his rights, to the whole community." (quoted in Ebenstein 1966,437)⁶ Since each man gives himself to all, he gives himself to nobody in particular: "As there is no associate over whom he does not acquire the same right as he yields over himself, he gains an equivalent for everything he loses, and an increase of force for the preservation of what he has." (quoted in Ebenstein 1966,437). Reduced to its essence, the participants of the social contract agree amongst themselves that: "each of us puts his person and all his power to the common use under the supreme direction of the General Will, and as a body, we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole. "

As a result of the contract, in place of the private person of each contract-ant, this 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.

After the social contract, Rousseau visualizes a great transformation taking place in man. It substitutes in his conduct a rule of justice for the rule of instinct and gives to his action a moral character which theretofore he had lacked. . Rousseau goes to the extent saying, he is transformed from a stupid and limited animal into an intelligent creature and man. Such a transformation, however, would be fantastic, quite improbable if the contract is conceived as a single, specific occurrence. For Rousseau, the contract is not a single event, but a way of thinking. Thus conceived, the contract becomes a process and we can think of alteration of human nature as also being gradual and not instantaneous. Here we have a conception of a man whose moral sensibilities and intellectual prowess gradually evolve and develops *pari pasu* with the widening and deepening of man's social relations brought about by continuous participation in the General Will.

Rousseau also mentions certain conditions that he thinks are propitious to the generation of the general will and the operations of his imagined political community and ideal state (Jha, 2010). One such condition was equality because economic disparities could make people naturally feel that there is no common interest and therefore when taking decisions, begin to focus only on their particular interests. The second facilitative condition was that the political community must overlap with a small culturally homogeneous society. The assumption is that it will be easier for general will to exist if people are already united in terms of cultural factors like religion and language. Rousseau in fact suggests the necessity of civic religion.⁷

Theory of General Will

By making the General Will sovereign and individuals as participants in the General Will, Rousseau reconciled authority with freedom as none before him had been able to do. To understand how Rousseau achieved this end, we need to appreciate the nature of the General Will. In the *Discourse on Political Economy*, where he had first discussed the concept of General Will, Rousseau says that "General will tends always to the preservation and welfare of the of the whole and of every part and is the source of the laws, constitutes for all the members of the state, in relation to one another and to it, the rule of what is just and unjust." (quoted in Ebenstein 1966, 438) ⁸ It aims always at the public good and is different from the Will of all, for while the former aims at the common interest, the latter aims only at the private interests and is a sum of particular wills.

"The generality of the will is not so much a matter of numbers as of intrinsic quality and goodness." (Ebenstein, 1966, 438). It is 'not an empirical fact so much as a moral fact'.(Ebenstein, 1966,438) It is an outcome of 'the moral attitude in the hearts of citizens' to act justly. (Ebenstein, 1966 438). It is produced whenever all individual members of the group, sacrificing their private interests, unite in aiming at some object believed to be good for the whole group. The General Will comes from all and applies to all and embodies the free rational will of all.

Rousseau however recognizes that unanimity amongst members on general will may not be possible at times, because while people may be willing the good, they might not always be understanding or knowing it correctly. This happens, particularly when factions make it difficult for independent citizens to pursue the common good. In such a situation, Rousseau suggests that if we "...take away from the wills the various particular interests which conflict with one another, what remains as the sum of the differences is a general will." But there is one important condition here: the result will be general will, only if and so far as, all the individuals of a group are moved (even in the pursuit of their private interest) by the thought of themselves as members of a group, all of whose members have interests deserving respect and consideration.

Such being the nature of General will, there is no problem in obeying the General Will, but if someone refuses to obey it, Rousseau says that he will be compelled to do so: “This means nothing less than that he will be forced to be free”, otherwise the social contract will become an empty formula. Such compulsion is justified because the individual has given his prior consent for being restrained by the state, knowing well that socially cohesive conduct in the long-run best promotes his own interests, and knowing also that he will occasionally find the attractions of some more immediate selfish good too strong to resist and therefore he should be restrained whenever he yields to such temptation.

In other words, when a man is being compelled to obey the general will, by the whole body of citizens, it only means that he is being asked to follow his own best interest, which he at a particular instance is unfortunately unaware of. Obeying the General Will is then, an expression of the moral freedom of the individuals. Thus, when the General Will rules over the people, the latter should not grumble about the corrosion of their liberty. Because obedience to the sovereign is no longer obedience to any external authority or arbitrary rule by one or few; it is actually obedience to the rational part of their own selves or to self-government— a government that would do what one’s rational self would, indeed, want to do.

General Will as the Sovereign

Rousseau’s conception of sovereignty is different from both Hobbes and Locke. In Hobbes, by a social contract, people set up a sovereign and transfer all powers to him. In Locke’s social contract the people set up a limited government for limited purposes, but transfer the exercise of their sovereign authority to the three organs of the state. On the other hand, Rousseau’s sovereign is the people, constituted as a political community through social contract.” (Ebenstein 1966 ,437). Secondly, “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 (as in Locke’s conception) of the sovereign people. 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 realizes that they have to be exercised by special organs of government, but they are completely subordinate to the sovereign people and that there is no hint or suggestion of separation or balance of powers.” (Ebenstein, 1966 , 437). Further, 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.”(Ebenstein, 1966, 437). As Sovereignty of the General Will is inalienable and indivisible, it cannot be represented, for at least reasons. One, a will is unrepresentable. Second, representative assemblies tend to develop particular interests of their own, forgetting those of the community. Nor can the General Will be delegated in any way whatever. Any attempt to delegate will mean its end. As he said: “The moment there is a master, there is no longer a sovereign.” It is only the “voice of people” that is “the voice of God.” It was for reasons such as these that Rousseau had little regard for the British parliamentary system of government. It gave illusion to freedom, whereas English people were free only during the election period, and ‘as soon as the Members are elected, the people are enslaved; it is nothing (Rousseau 1958: 141). Rousseau favored participatory democracy over representative parliamentary democracy.

Critical Appreciation

Prima face Rousseau uses the language of social contract tradition, but in *Social Contract*, he disengages himself from its systematic individualism, because he did not concur with human nature, the way he understood it. Moreover, he also thought that it was absolutely false to think that reason by itself would ever bring men together if they were concerned only with their individual happiness because even the idea of self–interest arises from the communities in which men live. Secondly, he rejected the idea that self-interest is any more natural than the need to be together, or revulsion against sufferings in others. It is feeling , not reason that explains sociability. As Vaughan opines The *Social Contract* sounded the death-knell of individualism that was influential since Locke. (Vaughan, 1962,138)

In developing his counter-philosophy, Rousseau drew upon classical Greek thought: (1) that it is natural for man to associate with others so that the development of each is dependent upon the development of all. Such organic relations are essential for a man to attain his full stature as a man; Robinson Crusoe is thus a false model;(2) that man acquires right, freedom and morality, only in society; (3) that it is the community that makes a man; if the socialization is bad, his nature will be twisted and warped;(4) that community is the chief moralizing agent ,and (5) political subjection is essentially ethical and only secondarily a matter of law and power. (Sabine,1973, 534).

Drawing upon Classical Greek philosophy and its insights, Rousseau worked out his political theory while engaging with problem of consent in social contract theory. In Hobbes and Locke, consent was a one-time affair, at the time of the social contract, and secondly, it opened the possibility of the tyranny of the majority. In responding to this problem Rousseau was led towards his theory of General Will. It solved the problem of consent, even as it rejected systematic individualism, the idea of individuals as atoms and that public good is produced through pursuit of private interest. Only when individuals think in terms of public good, that authority, needed for order and, freedom, needed for felicity or self –development, can be reconciled. Both Locke and Hobbes failed in authority-freedom reconciliation as they had a false theory of man. Locke became fearful of sovereignty while securing liberty, Hobbes for the sake of order sacrificed individuals at the altar of the sovereign. Rousseau succeeded in reconciling liberty with authority through General Will.

The theory of General Will led to an alternative conceptualization of state as an organism. But unfortunately, it also provided a pretext for any arbitrary ruler to coerce recalcitrant subjects, pleading that they, much as they are enslaved to their particular wills, do not know what the general will is. As Rousseau became the spiritual father of French revolution, many of his ideas were put into practice during “the later and more terrible phase of the revolution”. (Vaughan 1962:21-22). Rousseau became for many an apotheosis of modern totalitarianism. (Talmon,1960; Berlin, 1969). His ‘the paradox of freedom’ acquired dangerous propensities. ‘Liberty became an “honorific” word, the name for a sentiment with which even attacks on liberty could be baptized’ (Sabine, 1973, 543). It spawned a dangerous view that if a person’s moral conviction went against the community, s/he was capricious, and needed to be suppressed. As Sabine comments, this was ‘perhaps not a legitimate inference from the abstract theory of General Will, because freedom of conscience really is a social and not merely an individual good’ (Sabine,1973, 543). At the same time to link Rousseau with modern totalitarianism is unjustified, as such allegations go against the grain of Rousseau’s political thought.⁹ The centerpiece of Sovereign as General Will is consent and the Sovereign is not an autonomous power but relied on the general will. Yet, such abuse happened as the theory of general will was too abstract, and the ‘general will’ was difficult to locate or identify. Second, the idea that ‘general will’ is always right is only a truism as it stands for social good, but the problem arises when there are different judgements about social good. Who is entitled to decide what is right? Sabine(1973) writes that Rousseau’s attempt to answer these questions produced a variety of contradictions and evasions. Similarly, Wayper (1974) comments that unfortunately, Rousseau cannot help us here. “He can never tell how we can be sure of finding the General Will. ...So much vagueness about something as important as the finding of the General will is to be regretted.”¹⁰

Notwithstanding such criticisms, the significance of Rousseau cannot be ever diminished. In praise of Rousseau, it may be said, as Ebenstein has observed, that he was the “first modern writer to have attempted, though not always successfully, to synthesize good government with self-government in the key concept of the General Will: the realization of what is best for the community is not enough; it must also be *willed* by the community.”(Ebenstein, 1966, 440]. The classical doctrine of Plato and Aristotle had emphasized good government at the expense of self-government. ¹¹ Whereas Locke and the liberal school were concerned principally with self-government; it relegated the problem of good governance into the background.¹² There is another insight in Rousseau’s theory of General Will, duly validated by the record of free governments since the 18th century, namely that reliance on institutions alone do not suffice to keep individual liberty safe. Liberty is safe, in the ultimate analysis by the presence of those moral qualities that Rousseau calls General Will, or Justice or Virtue. The general will like virtue cannot be defined in detail, but it is an impulse that animates and guide public action. It receives its ultimate valid definition in the lives of free men rather than in philosophical distinctions. Secondly, “Rousseau also saw more clearly than the conventional liberal doctrinaires that the end of government is not confined to the protection of individual liberty but also includes equality, because ‘liberty cannot exist without it’”. (Ebenstein,1966, 440). In the *Social Contract*, one may not notice the hostility that he showed to the institution of private property in the *Discourse on Inequality*, but he does not abandon the ideal of economic equality. No citizen “shall be ever wealthy enough to buy another, and none poor enough to be forced to sell himself.” “Rousseau realizes that in practice it is very difficult to maintain the ideal of equitable distribution of property, but it is precisely because the force of circumstances tends continually to destroy equality that the force of legislation should always tend to its maintenance.” (Ebenstein 1966, 440). “Whereas Locke failed to see property as a relation of domination of man over man, Rousseau clearly recognized the property as a form of private domination that had to be kept under control by the General Will, the public interest of the community.”(Ebenstein,1966,440)

Third, although Rousseau was not a socialist in the modern sense of the term, he indirectly with his emphasis on equality, has aided the development of the socialist sentiment.¹³ He sharpened ‘the awareness that political liberty and crass economic inequality are ultimately incompatible if democracy is to survive and expand.’[Ebenstein; 440]. And secondly that all rights, including those of property, are rights within the community and not against it. The sharp focus on inequality and social divisions that he brings in *A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* resonates with Marxist thought. Plamenatz (1975) regards Rousseau as a precursor of Marx. Plamenatz argues that ‘Rousseau’s diagnoses of alienation that is constituted by the divided self of modern society, which is shaped by social forces that it cannot control, anticipates Marx’s sense of alienation of the proletarian labor from its own products under a capitalist mode of production.’ Colletti opines that Rousseau much before Marx, was exploring the conditions of a post-representative and post-bourgeois democratic society, as the modern world was limiting and the limits arose from the very processes that appeared to enhance the possibilities.

Fourth, Rousseau himself was in no sense a nationalist, though his philosophy contributed to nationalism. By reviving the intimacy of feeling and the reverence connoted by citizenship in the city-state, he made it available, at least as an emotional coloring, to citizenship in the national state. The cosmopolitanism implied by natural law he chose to regard as merely a pretext for evading the duties of a citizen.

Fifth, Rousseau, unlike others in the social contract tradition, stressed the importance of community on the ground that interdependence and cooperation enhanced the powers of human beings, and that socialization enabled them to acquire consciousness and rationality. Ills of society were best handled when individuals came closer to one another and their interdependencies increased rather than withdrawing from social engagement and heading for a solitary life. As Wolin remarks: “Rousseau’s solutions for the ills of society was not to beckon men to the woods, nor to advocate the destruction of all social inter-dependencies. He proposed, instead, a paradox: let us create a society which causes men to grow close to one another, to become so strongly solidary that each member will be made dependent on the whole society, and by

that very fact, be released from personal dependencies “ (Wolin 1960, 371). Rousseau was laying down the philosophical ground for the 20th-century emergence of communitarianism.

Sixth, his other achievement was that he could understand well the pivotal problem that faced individuals in every society – how to reconcile individual interests with those of the larger interests of society. Rousseau’s solution was to think of human nature as under the sway of an all-comprehensive political structure. If the political structure is transformed, Rousseau would argue human nature too would change to the extent that for the individual there is no conflict of interest with the community/ society at large.

Rousseau’s influence has changed over the last three centuries. In the 18th Century, he was seen as a critic of the status quo, challenging the concept of progress, the core of 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 the democratic tradition, while at the same time assailed for being the philosophical inspiration of totalitarianism. All this implies that it has not been possible to interpret Rousseau within a single frame of analysis.

For our present times, Rousseau’s ideas are still very relevant: for how often we have lamented the unrepresentative character of the representative, party-democracy and feared the state turning against the people. Citizens feel unrepresented, and fear lobbies of special interests displacing the common good. And like a bulwark against such depredation, have wished to strengthen civil society for the sake of protecting and retrieving our freedom. No less frequent has been the lament that the problems of our society caused by the spawning of several primordialities have arisen because of the failure to take the value of citizenship seriously. His theory of popular sovereignty is a constant reminder to citizens to guard against the usurpation of power by the executive. “[T]he record of free government everywhere has proved that there can be no reliance on contrivances and institutions alone in the eternal struggle for liberty and that its survival depends, in the last analysis, on those moral qualities that Rousseau calls General will, justice, virtue”. (Ebenstein, 1966,440). Rousseau directly speaks to all protests movements, against the state’s (executive and legislative) excess. In addition, we also find the presence of Rousseau in Rawlsian theory of distributive justice, in the conception of development as expansion of human capabilities, and perhaps it would not be wrong to suggest that Rousseau as a critic of civil society in some sense anticipates post-modernism. He animates the philosophical debates between liberals and communitarians and argues that freedom and equality are not always in contraction, especially when understood as part of a collective enterprise. Further, his exploration of an individual’s place in society is timeless. He illuminates some of our worries – social inequality and dysfunctional democracy, and growing income inequality which is generating many ills. Rousseau may not be providing us with the solutions that we need, but he often asks the right questions that illuminate our predicament. How do we reconcile individualism with the interest of society? How do we organize political life around a common .

Concluding Remarks

Rousseau was an Enlightenment thinker, but one who was also highly critical of the enlightenment and modernity in general. Rousseau thinks that civilization corrupts human beings. He equated civilization with vanity and arrogance. Rousseau believed that what was wrong with the modern man was that he had lost touch with his feelings. Rousseau’s regard for rationality is mixed with an equal or greater regard for feeling. Critiquing the civil society of his contemporary times he pointed out that the social order was founded for the protection of private interest and property; that private property was at the root of social inequality, injustices, and exploitation, and that such a civil order was contrary to man’s nature and his freedom. Since society was inevitable; man couldn’t unlearn himself to return to the woods; and the realization of man’s nature depended on the nature of socialization, the task for him was to suggest the just principles upon which to found a social-political order that would be conducive to the realization of human freedom. Rousseau accomplishes this task in his *Social Contract*, wherein he lays down the blueprint of the required political society. This ideal political society is set up through a social contract, in the image of a community, possessing a General Will, which is sovereign and which while always aiming at the general good, comes from all and applies to all equally. In Rousseau’s theory of General Will, freedom and authority automatically get reconciled, as there is no tension between the two. The earlier theories, which were premised on individual separatism, and the need to preserve and protect private interests through setting up an authority, failed to properly reconcile authority with freedom because it had a faulty theory of man and society.

Rousseau’s understanding of human nature, and moral psychology puts a premium on the role of ethics in politics. He maintained that human nature was transformable from a narrow self-seeking being into a public-spirited person. Further, Rousseau rejected the notion of individuals being entirely selfish, rational, and egoistic. He viewed the individual as “partly rational, partly emotional, influenced by considerations of utility, but even more swayed by passions and prejudices, at bottom moral and virtuous, but easily corrupted by bad institutions, and in most cases, dependent for the maintenance of his virtue on good ones. He brought to fore the importance of ethics in politics, as he was not interested merely in happiness or utility. (Cassirer 1946:70). It is said that Rousseau in his political philosophy discussed subject matters of the twentieth century- such as nationalism, state sovereignty, the need for economic equality, the state’s role in guaranteeing freedom, the bases of popular politics, participatory democracy, and politics based on a rational, self-determining individual. The vitality and persistent timeliness of Rousseau’s message are doubtless. He speaks to us on many matters. His writings will continue to inspire those concerned with democratization, constitutional change, and the weakness of liberal democracy.

END NOTES:

- ¹ Some of Rousseau's work are : Discourse on the Arts and Sciences(1750), Discourse on Inequality (1755), Emile (1762), Constitution of Corsia (1765), Confessions (published posthumously 1782-89),Rousseau: Judge of Jean Jacques(1776), Reveries of a Solitary Walker (1776). He also wrote 'Political Economy' (1955) for the Encyclopedia edited by Diderot and d'Alembert. These are works besides those mentioned in this chapter.
- ² Rousseau was fascinated by the city and its Calvinist disciplinarian republicanism, and it figures prominently in his political imagination, as an exemplar republican form of virtue, which along with paradigms of Sparta and Rome, provides and exemplar contrast to the dissolute, centrifugal forces of modernity.
- ³ Rousseau's attitude towards French Enlightenment is well-discussed in J Schmidt, 'The Autocritique of Enlightenment: Rousseau and the Philosophes', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol.no.34,no.3, 1996,pp.465-6.
- ⁴ In 1749 the Academy of Dijon had announced the essay competition. Rousseau's award winning essay was titled: 'A Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences.'
- ⁵ This essay was also written for the essay competition held by the Academy of Dijon in 1953. According to Ebenstein , this essay is important in relation to the development of Rousseau's political ideas , and is a much more systematic essay than the first one , and also 'one of the most influential in the history of democratic and socialist thought.' (Ebenstein,1966:434.).
- ⁶ Here a parallel with Hobbes is obvious as there is total surrender of the individual to the Sovereign. Yet, in Rousseau, since the nature of the Sovereign is so different than Hobbes's Leviathan, an individual's surrender to Sovereign as General Will of the community turns out to be freedom -realizing rather than freedom constraining in Hobbes.
- ⁷ Rousseau maintains that "Civic religion is good in that it unites the divine cult with the love of laws , and making country the object of citizens' adoration , teaches them that service done to the state is service done to its tutelary God" (J.J Rousseau, the Social Contract, trans. G.D.H Cole , in J-J. Rousseau, The Social Contract and Discourses, p.272]
- ⁸ By bringing in the concept of General Will, Rousseau departs from the mechanistic theory of state ,found in Hobbes and Locke , and revives the organic theory of the state which goes back to Plato and Aristotle.
- ⁹ To bracket Rousseau with modern totalitarianism is to place him in contexts that postdate his reflections. Moreover, Rousseau's imagination is of simple, small state with and artisanal economy, very unlike the totalitarianism of the 20th century that imagines large state, sophisticated technology as force multiplier for industrialization, national security and glory.
- ¹⁰ J. Shklar maintains that *The Social Contract* might not have been envisaged as a blueprint for practice. [see. Shklar, 1969)
- ¹¹ The aim was the good life, not the government of the people by people.
- ¹² 'It was assumed that good government would result from a combination of public laissez faire and private pursuit of individual advantage.' (Ebenstein,1966,440)
- ¹³ Rousseau was not socialist in the modern sense because he was not engaging with an industrial society. His ideational horizon was limited to communities of small peasants and craftsmen , as in Switzerland, in which individual economic independence and an approximation to the ideal of equal property was possible.

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