



P E N G U I N C L A S S I C S



JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU

THE SOCIAL CONTRACT



THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU was born in Geneva in 1712. Abandoned by his father at the age of ten he tried his hand as an engraver's apprentice before he left the city in 1728. From then on he was to wander Europe seeking an elusive happiness. At Turin he became a Catholic convert; and as a footman, seminarist, music teacher or tutor visited many parts of Switzerland and France. In 1732 he settled for eight years at Chambéry or at Les Charmettes, the country house of Madame de Warens, remembered by Rousseau as an idyllic place in the *Confessions*. In 1741 he set out for Paris where he met Diderot, who commissioned him to write the musical articles for the *Encyclopédie*. In the meantime he fathered five children by Thérèse Levasseur, a servant girl, and abandoned them to a foundling home. The 1750s witnessed a breach with Voltaire and Diderot, and his writing struck a new note of defiant independence. In his *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* and the *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité* he showed how the growth of civilization corrupted natural goodness and increased inequality between men. In 1758 he attacked his former friends, the Encyclopaedists, in the *Lettre à d'Alembert sur les spectacles*, which pilloried cultured society. In 1757 he moved to Montmorency and these five years were the most fruitful of his life. His remarkable novel, *La nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), met with immediate and enormous success. In this and in *Émile*, which followed a year later, Rousseau invoked the inviolability of personal ideals against the powers of the state and the pressures of society. The crowning achievement of his political philosophy was *The Social Contract*, published in 1762. That same year he wrote an attack on revealed religion, the *Profession de foi du vicairé savoyard*. He was driven from Switzerland and fled to England where he only succeeded in making an enemy of Hume and returned to his continental peregrinations. In 1770 Rousseau completed his *Confessions*. His last years were spent largely in France where he died in 1778.

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INTRODUCTION

THE *Social Contract* is, as Rousseau explains in his preface, a fragment of something much more ambitious – a comprehensive work on *Institutions politiques* which he began to write in 1743 but never finished. In 1743 Rousseau was thirty-one years old, and working as private secretary to the Comte de Montaigu, French Ambassador to the Venetian Republic. This place gave Rousseau his first intimate acquaintance with politics and government. The Ambassador was a retired general with no qualifications or aptitude for diplomacy. Rousseau, who was quick and capable, and could speak Italian, performed the duties of Embassy Secretary. Unfortunately, he had no official status; he was not a diplomatist; he was the Ambassador's personal employee; he was, as the Ambassador tactlessly reminded him from time to time, a domestic servant. Rousseau felt cheated and humiliated. To do the work of a diplomatist and be treated like a lackey was unbearable.* Within a year, he was gone, dismissed, and not even given his promised wages.

What made the Comte de Montaigu's attitude the more unbearable to Rousseau was not only the injustice, but also the underlying reality: Jean-Jacques *was* a servant, and he had never been anything much better. He had the soul and the mind, as the whole world was soon to recognize, of an exceptional and superior being, but his rank and condition were humble. He had been born in Geneva on 28 June 1712, the second son of Isaac Rousseau, a spirited and irresponsible watchmaker of that city. His mother died a few days after

* Indeed Voltaire put about the false story that Rousseau had been the Ambassador's valet, not his secretary. For evidence of Rousseau's duties at the Embassy see R. A. Leigh, ed., *Correspondance complète de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, Geneva, 1965 (hereinafter abridged as *Corr. complète*), vols. 1 and 2.

giving him birth. He was brought up, together with his elder brother, by an aunt and a nurse maid. Isaac Rousseau, who had a passion for books, entertained his sons by reading them novels, histories and the heroic biographies of Plutarch, so that Rousseau could afterwards boast, 'I was a Roman before I was twelve.' In fact, by the time he was ten, the readings from Plutarch had come to an end; his father had fought a duel which obliged him to quit Geneva, and the sons were boarded out with a Calvinist pastor and his sister. At the age of thirteen Rousseau was apprenticed to an engraver, at whose house he lived.

'My trade,' he recalled many years later, 'did not displease me in itself. . . . I should perhaps have succeeded if the brutality of my master and excessive constraint had not disgusted me with the work.'*

Rousseau's very first taste of employment was thus to him an experience of bondage. He had grown up in greater freedom than most children. He had been petted, even spoiled by his father and by the several women who did their best to make up to him for the loss of his mother. Besides, as one of his biographers has noted, Rousseau belonged to a family which had come down in the world, and in his early years 'he suffered from a kind of social down-grading which he was to spend his whole life trying to rectify'.† His father had failed as a watchmaker partly because he was too cultured a man for an artisan's trade and partly because he had not enough strength of character to make the best of his situation. Isaac Rousseau lived in a world of fantasy, he wasted the legacy his wife had left him, and he was finally forced into exile because he insisted on settling a dispute by a 'gentleman's' appeal to the sword. In some ways, perhaps, he was like his son.

* Quoted by Jean Guéhenno in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, trans. J. and D. Weightman, London, 1966, vol. 1, p. 15.

† *op. cit.*, p. 14.

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One Sunday evening in March 1728, when he was not yet sixteen, Rousseau found himself shut out of Geneva after a walk in the country; he had forgotten the time, and the city gates were closed when he reached them. This had happened to him twice before, and his master had beaten him for staying out all night. This time he decided he would not go back at all.* So his life of wandering began.

In the Catholic principality of Savoy, surrounding the city of Geneva, priests were on the look-out for converts among the young people who came from that Calvinist republic. Not only priests; there were proselytizers also among the laity, including a remarkable woman of thirty, the Baroness de Warens, who lived, separated from her husband, at Annecy and specialized in helping young men. It was to Madame de Warens that Rousseau was sent by the first Catholic friend he made in Savoy. To his surprise, she was agreeably unlike the usual charitable lady of the parish. 'What I saw was a face that was charm itself; beautiful, blue eyes, full of sweetness; a ravishing complexion; the curve of an enchanting bosom.'† Madame de Warens was a romantic as well as a pious woman. Her religious sentiments were never perhaps wholly distinct from erotic feelings; one form of ecstasy merged easily into another; but if her converts and her protégés were sometimes also her lovers, her connexion with the priests protected her from scandal. She even received from the King of Sardinia a pension in recognition of her work for the salvation of young Protestant souls.

Madame de Warens did not immediately detain Rousseau at Annecy. She urged him on to Turin, where he was to renounce his Protestant faith and lodge in a Catholic hospice.

* Less perhaps because he feared a beating than because he yearned for adventure. See Georges May, *Rousseau par lui-même*, Paris, 1963, p. 8.

† *Confessions*. See *Œuvres complètes*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris, 1959-65 (hereinafter abridged as 'Pléiade'), vol. 1, p. 49.

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Then to earn his keep he was obliged to become a footman. He disliked the experience and, remembering Madame de Warens, went back to Annecy the following summer to seek her patronage. This time she took him into her household and mothered him; he called her *maman* and she called him *petit*. She also arranged for him to have music lessons, and so provided the training for what was sometimes to prove his chief means of earning a living, a bearable alternative to domestic service: work as a music copyist and music teacher.

Madame de Warens also gave Rousseau access to a substantial library, and thus enabled him to educate himself from books. From time to time, Rousseau wandered away from Madame de Warens' house, working for other employers, travelling in search of adventures, seeking his identity,* but he always returned to what was the only home he had. When he was twenty, Madame de Warens decided, as Rousseau puts it, 'to treat me as a man'. The affair lasted for six years; then Rousseau discovered that Madame de Warens had taken another lover, one Winzenried. Gradually, Rousseau's life ceased to centre on her house in the Savoy. While working as a tutor in the family of Monsieur de Mably, brother of the socialist theorist, the Abbé de Mably, Rousseau conceived the idea of becoming a writer, and this ambition prompted him to seek his fortune in Paris.

Rousseau's first problem as a budding writer was to discover the medium in which to express what he had to say. He had never any doubt that a writer's mission was to give verbal expression to the truth; at the same time he felt that the truth was melancholy and disturbing. He had also the familiar problem of a livelihood. When music copying and music lessons did not bring in enough, he became private secretary to another benefactress, Madame Dupin, wife of a rich tax-

* This last was perhaps a life-long quest. See R. Grimsley, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, A Study in Self-awareness*, University of Wales Press, 1961.

farmer. It was through this connexion that Rousseau gained the opportunity to enter what he visualized as the more distinguished world of diplomacy as secretary to the French Ambassador in Venice.

The year in Venice was miserable. The Comte de Montaigu and his secretary got on one another's nerves. Rousseau became increasingly bitter as he felt more exploited, deceived and abused. The Ambassador found Rousseau impudent, churlish and hysterical. They parted, each thinking the other mad and each accusing the other of robbing him. Besides, Rousseau did not much care for Venice or the Venetians. Architecture did not appeal to him, and Venice lacked nature. Its famous courtesans did not provide the kind of love he wanted; one of them advised him to give up women and study mathematics. His chief consolation was the Italian opera, which he adored. As a republican city-state he considered Venice much inferior, politically, to his native Geneva, but at least the comparison prompted him to start writing what he himself regarded as his most important book:

Of the different works that I had on the stocks [he wrote long afterwards in his *Confessions*] the one . . . at which I worked with the greatest liking, to which I wished to dedicate myself all my life, and which, in my belief, was to set the seal upon my reputation, was my *Institutions politiques*. . . . I had come to see that everything was radically connected with politics, and that whatever was done about it, no nation would be other than what the nature of its government made it. . . .*

After the interlude in Venice, Rousseau made his way back to Paris. He was still angry and indignant about the way he had been treated, but once in Paris his fortunes began to change. He had already made friends with an enterprising contemporary, another young man who had come up from

* *Pléiade*, vol. I, p. 404.

the provinces, Denis Diderot, and the two of them talked of taking the literary world of France by storm. Their dreams were extravagant, but in the event their success was far greater than anything they contemplated. Rousseau first made his mark as a musician. He invented a new system of musical notation. It was not accepted by the Academy, but it gained him an award. His *Dissertation sur la musique moderne* was published, and attracted notice. He also composed operas and ballets in the Italian style. His ballet *Les Muses galantes* was performed in Paris in the autumn of 1745, and enjoyed some success in spite of the open scorn of Rameau, the leading French composer of the time. Rousseau's opera *Le Devin du village* was played at Fontainebleau in 1752 before a delighted audience which included the King. Rousseau might then have had a Royal pension, but, torn by conflicting emotions, longing for the money but proud and contemptuous of kings, he let slip the opportunity.

Diderot in the meantime was making his name as the editor of what was to prove the most significant literary enterprise of eighteenth-century France, the great *Encyclopédie*. All the leading French intellectuals or *philosophes* contributed to Diderot's pages. Rousseau, too, was a contributor, writing at first on musical and afterwards on other subjects. He found the work difficult. 'I am worn out,' he wrote to Madame de Warens, 'but I have given my promise and one must keep one's word. Besides, I want to get at the throats of people who have treated me badly, and bile gives me strength, even intelligence and knowledge.'*

The *Encyclopédie* got Diderot into trouble. He was more of an atheist than Voltaire; he had been trained for the priesthood as a young man, and his anti-clerical materialism had the

* Rousseau to Madame de Warens, 27 January 1749, *Corr. complète*, vol. 2, p. 113. Among the throats Rousseau aimed at was that of the composer Rameau.

sharp edge of apostasy. Under pressure from the religious authorities, Diderot was imprisoned in July 1749 at Vincennes. One memorable afternoon, Rousseau went to visit him there. According to the story Rousseau tells in his *Confessions*, he had a singular experience on the journey. He opened a copy of the *Mercur de France* and read the announcement of a prize essay competition on the question 'Has the revival of the arts and sciences done more to corrupt or purify morals?' Rousseau tells us that it came to him as a sudden revelation what the answer was. Hardly able to breathe, let alone walk, he sat under a tree and wept. When he reached Vincennes, he told Diderot what had happened. His friend encouraged him to enter for the essay competition, and uphold the opinion that the revival of the arts and sciences had only corrupted morals. Diderot did not agree with this at all, but he was a born journalist, and he suggested that such an unfashionable belief would distinguish Rousseau from the other competitors and capture the prize. Diderot was right. Rousseau submitted his essay and won; henceforth, whether he liked it or not, he was a famous man.

The subject of the Dijon essay was nicely designed to make Rousseau realize how different from other men's his opinions were, different not only from those of the majority, but from those of Diderot and the other *philosophes* of the Enlightenment. Whether it all came to him suddenly on the road to Vincennes or whether the thoughts had been slowly maturing in his head for years, Rousseau had now worked out a *Weltanschauung* which was distinctively his own, and which put him at odds with all the prevailing streams of eighteenth-century opinion, both religious and materialistic.

Diderot and the other *philosophes* were all disciples of the English philosopher Francis Bacon. They believed in progress: more precisely they believed that the development and organization of empirical knowledge could immeasurably

improve the life of man on earth. Science would save us. Two steps were needed to realize this project. First, superstition must be banished; traditional philosophy, that unscientific amalgam of Christianity and Aristotle, must be swept away to clear the path to real knowledge. Secondly, the pursuit of such real or empirical knowledge had to be planned, for the conquest of nature was not something that one individual philosopher could accomplish alone in his study; it could only be done by research undertaken by scholars in cooperation. The *Encyclopédie* itself was an example of such collaboration, with experts in different fields each helping to provide a synopsis of all available knowledge. The object was not merely an academic one; as Diderot wrote in the preface to the first volume: 'Our aim is to gather all knowledge together, so that our descendants, being better instructed, may become at the same time happier and more virtuous.'^{*}

Rousseau, in his first prize essay, attacked all these Baconian notions. Science was not saving us; it was bringing moral ruin on us. Progress was an illusion. What appeared to be advancement was in reality retrogression. The development of modern civilization had not made men either happier or more virtuous. Happiness belonged to man's life in a state of nature. Virtue was possible in a simple society, where men lived austere and frugal lives. In modern sophisticated society man was corrupted, and the greater the sophistication the greater the corruption.

The arts of civilized societies served only to 'cast garlands of flowers over the chains men bore'. The sciences were the fruit of their vices. Arithmetic, for example, sprang from avarice; physics from idle curiosity; mechanics from ambition. And this evil in the origin of the sciences appeared again in their purposes. If men were not unjust, they would have no use for jurisprudence; if there were no wars or conspiracies or tyrann-

^{*} *Encyclopédie*, vol. 1, Préface.

nies, there would be no history. Error was unfortunate, but ignorance did no harm. As for the grand Baconian hope of creating abundance on earth, Rousseau saw more evil than good in it. Abundance to him spelt luxury, and luxury was notoriously a breeder of corruption. Frugality, he argued, was equally necessary for a good and upright life in an individual and for a strong and healthy state. Luxury undermined nations as it undermined men.

As an example of a frugal nation Rousseau mentioned Sparta. Throughout his life he continued to regard Sparta as an ideal model of the city-state. Athens he admired less. For Athens had an advanced and sophisticated culture; it made itself a seat of politeness and taste, a city of poets and orators, its buildings as elaborate as its literature. All these Athenian arts and sciences, Rousseau argued, went with moral decay, and he quoted the authority of the Athenian Plato to support him: for had not Plato said that so-called scientific knowledge was not knowledge at all and proposed that poets and artists should be banished from an ideal republic?

To Diderot, a cheerful and tolerant man, these arguments of Rousseau were so many entertaining paradoxes, not to be taken too much to heart. He was inclined to regard them as the product of Rousseau's Swiss origins. Rousseau's love of Sparta and dislike of Athens he saw as an expression of his attachment to Swiss rusticity and estrangement from French civility. And indeed Rousseau's 'rusticity' grew more pronounced when, as a result of winning the Dijon prize, he became a celebrity, and the fashionable hostesses of Paris began to vie with one another for the honour of entertaining him in their *salons*. Diderot, like the other *philosophes*, relished such social success. Rousseau did not. He could get on well with titled ladies on a basis of intimate friendship; Madame de Warens was only the first of a succession of noblewomen who responded to Rousseau's charms and put themselves out to

befriend him. But he was painfully ill at ease in the *salons*, in social gatherings that were governed by intricate rules of behaviour. Lacking the appropriate upbringing, Rousseau was paralysed by what he afterwards called a 'false shame'. Refusing to play the part of a literary celebrity in Paris, he began to live what he spoke of as 'a life of solitude'.

He did not, however, live entirely alone. Soon after he returned from Venice to Paris he formed a union with an unusually ignorant laundry-maid named Thérèse le Vasseur, and thereafter she and her mother were part of his permanent household. Thérèse bore him five children, who were all dispatched to an orphanage as soon as they were born. Late in life Rousseau married her. Possibly it was another sign of what Diderot called his 'Swiss rusticity' that the same Rousseau who fled from the *salons* could feel at home in a kitchen with a girl who was backward and stupid and plain.

Switzerland had undoubtedly affected his thinking. In one of his polemical writings* Rousseau recalled how, as a youth, he had been impressed by a village that stretched up a mountainside near lake Neuchâtel. There, he said, was a community of little wooden houses, each standing in the centre of the piece of land on which the family depended. Each was about the same size. It was a community of equals. The inhabitants were happy peasants, unburdened by taxes and tithes, who supported themselves by their own work. They were all skilled in a great variety of trades; there was no cabinet-maker, locksmith, glazier or carpenter among them, because every man did such work for himself. They built and maintained their own houses. They also provided their own amusements; they could all dance, sing, and play the flute. Moreover,

* J.-J. Rousseau, *Citoyen de Genève, à M. D'Alembert . . . sur le Projet d'établir un théâtre de Comédie en cette Ville* in *Collection complète des Œuvres de J.-J. Rousseau*, Geneva, 1782, vol. II.

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Rousseau added, their taste – unlike that of modern townsfolk – was good.

Rousseau recalled this mountain community in the course of a controversy with D'Alembert, co-editor with Diderot of the *Encyclopédie*, when D'Alembert had proposed that Geneva should improve its amenities by building a theatre. Rousseau replied protesting, first, that dramatic performances were morally harmful, and secondly, that a healthy culture had no need of theatres. The example he gave of such a sound culture was, significantly, not Geneva itself, but this rural Swiss community which had kept its simplicity, and still lived much as it had lived for hundreds of years; it had been spared the corrupting influence of 'progress'.

Neuchâtel was politically a protectorate of the Prussian crown; in other Swiss cantons the rustic culture went together with a form of primitive democracy which held for Rousseau a peculiar interest. These cantons were sovereign political societies united in a loose confederation with their neighbours. They were small enough to have the whole adult male population meet at intervals to legislate. This was democracy somewhat on the lines of that of the ancient Greek city-states, and it was something which survived in Europe only in Switzerland. Allemanic democracy was at least as old as Tacitus, who considered it a typically tribal and barbaric institution. It was a form of government which could only go together with a simple form of culture, a small state, a face-to-face society where everyone knew his neighbours, and where all men were more or less equal.

In other parts of the western world, democracy came to be seen as a progressive, liberal idea; the champions of democracy in America, France and elsewhere were men who wanted to democratize parliamentary or representative government by introducing universal suffrage. The democrats of rural Switzerland had no need to be reformers. They had demo-

cracy already, and their only problem was to keep it. The notion of 'representation' was alien to their direct democracy where every citizen was a legislator. Indeed, progressive, liberal ideas were seen as a threat to Swiss democracy, for they went together with the movement to centralize Switzerland, to set up a national parliament, and merge the independence of the cantons in a large modern state. Democracy in rural Switzerland went logically together with a conservative, even a reactionary disposition; and it should not astonish us to find in Rousseau a similar belief in legislation by the citizens *en masse* coupled with hostility to progressive and liberal opinions.*

In 1754, when he was forty-two, Rousseau wrote a second essay for the Academy of Dijon. This one, which failed to win the prize, was on the question: 'What is the origin of inequality among men, and is it authorized by natural law?' What he wrote had more bearing on the first part of the question than it had on the second. His *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* is largely historical; the question of right and law he reserved for the *Social Contract*, and by the time he came to write the later work his views had to some extent changed.

In the *Discours sur l'inégalité* Rousseau depicts the state of nature as one of innocence. What distinguishes men from beasts is first their faculty of self-improvement and secondly man's only natural moral quality, which is compassion or sympathy. In the state of nature, man lives alone. It is when he becomes sociable that he becomes wicked. In the early stages, when each begins working together with other men in

* 'When we see among the happiest people in the world bands of peasants regulating the affairs of state under an oak tree, and always acting wisely, can we help feeling a certain contempt for the refinements of other nations, which employ so much skill and mystery to make themselves at once illustrious and wretched?' (*The Social Contract*, Book IV, Chapter 1.) The Swiss cantons are not named, but the reference is obviously to them.

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hunting or in joint defence against natural disasters, association sharpens man's feelings of sympathy, and so breeds notions of consideration and obligation. But other things also happen. The cultivation of the earth leads to the enclosure of land, and this necessarily gives rise to the idea of property. As Rousseau puts it in a famous sentence: 'The first man who, after fencing off a piece of land, took it upon himself to say "This belongs to me" and found people simple-minded enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society.'*

Rousseau explains what he means in this way: once men begin to claim possessions, the inequality of men's talents and skills leads to an inequality of fortunes. Wealth enables some men to enslave others; the very idea of possession excites men's passions, and provokes conflict. Society breeds war. This leads in turn to a demand for a system of law to impose order and tranquillity. The rich especially voice this demand, for while the state of violence threatens everyone's life, it is worse for the rich because it threatens their possessions also. Hence the agreement between men to live under a political system.

Such was, or may have been, the origin of civil society and laws, which gave new fetters to the poor, and new powers to the rich; which destroyed natural liberty for ever, fixed for all time the law of property and inequality, transformed shrewd usurpation into settled right, and to benefit a few ambitious persons, subjected the whole of the human race thenceforth to labour, servitude and wretchedness.†

The effect of the establishment of political societies is both to institutionalize and increase inequalities. The establishment of such things as property rights and titles of nobility sets the seal of law on inequality. But 'even without the intervention of government, inequality of credit and authority became

* *Pléiade*, vol. 3, p. 164.

† *ibid.*, p. 178.

unavoidable among private persons as soon as their union in the same society led them to compare themselves one to another'.* In the end society reaches a point where men come to be satisfied with themselves rather on the testimony of other people than on their own. Where the savage 'lives within himself', the social man 'lives constantly outside himself, and only knows how to live in the opinion of others; he acquires, so to speak, the consciousness of his own existence only from the judgement of others'. †Rousseau suggests, however, that things need not have turned out as badly as they have. If, with the establishment of government, men 'ran headlong into chains', that was because men had the sense to see the advantages of political institutions, but not the experience to foresee the dangers. To this theme Rousseau was to return some years later in the *Social Contract*.

When the *Discours sur l'inégalité* was published in September 1755 it carried a dedicatory epistle to the Republic of Geneva, a fulsome tribute to the author's native city:

Having had the happiness to be born among you, how could I meditate on the equality which nature has set between men and the inequality which they themselves have instituted, without reflecting on the profound wisdom by which equality and inequality, happily combined in that Republic, are balanced in the manner that is most in conformity with natural law, and most favourable to society, to the maintenance of government and to the happiness of individuals. ‡

This gesture was one of Rousseau's manoeuvres to recover his rights as a citizen of Geneva. Already at the age of fifteen he had proudly scribbled his name on a country gate: 'Jean-Jacques Rousseau, citoyen de Genève, 1727.' As the son of a citizen he would normally have been entitled to become one also, but when he adopted the Catholic faith in Savoy, he forfeited the right, and it was only when he formally returned

* *Pléiade*, vol. 3, pp. 188-9.

† *ibid.*, p. 193.

‡ *ibid.*, p. 111.

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to the Calvinist fold that he was able to regain it. His association with Thérèse made the Protestant pastor hesitate to administer Holy Communion, but Rousseau protested that Thérèse was only his servant, and in his dedicatory epistle to the Republic of Geneva he went out of his way to proclaim his belief in chastity: 'Lovable and virtuous daughters of the city, it will always be the destiny of your sex to govern ours. Happy we are, so long as your chaste power, exercised solely within the marriage tie, is exercised only for the glory of the state and the happiness of the people.'* Rousseau had not yet put his own union with Thérèse 'within the marriage tie'; but he could plausibly argue that the disease by which he was increasingly afflicted – a constriction of the bladder which forced him to wear a catheter – disabled him from fornication.

Rousseau's stay in Geneva was brief, and any illusions he may have had of finding a congenial form of government in that city were soon removed. Seven years later, when his *Social Contract* and *Émile* were published, both books were burned by the government of Geneva and a warrant issued for the arrest of the author, notwithstanding the fact that the *Social Contract* contained several flattering references to Geneva, notably in the preface to Book I where Rousseau writes: 'Whenever I reflect on governments, I am happy to find that my studies always give me fresh reasons for loving that of my own country.'

It is not difficult to imagine why the *Social Contract* offended the authorities of Geneva. In theory the city was a republic, and the *Social Contract* is an intensely republican book. But in practice Geneva was a patrician gerontocracy, dominated by a few families. It was an example of what is castigated by Rousseau as the worst form of constitution, that is one in which the sovereignty has passed from the people into the hands of an hereditary aristocracy.

* *ibid.*, p. 119.

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The twelve years between the winning of the Dijon prize for his *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* when he was thirty-eight and the publication of the *Social Contract* when he was fifty formed the most creative period of Rousseau's life, in spite of the fact that he suffered during this same period from almost constant pain because of the urinary disease. He worked on *Émile* and his novel, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, at the same time as he was working on the *Social Contract*. In the same twelve years he wrote, besides his *Discours sur l'inégalité* his *Lettre à D'Alembert sur les spectacles*, his attack on the stage, his *Lettre à Voltaire sur la providence*, a defence of religious faith as a rejoinder to Voltaire's *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*; he wrote his *Lettre sur la musique française* to promote the natural melodic style of Italian music against the intellectual, artificial French style (and particularly against the music of Rameau); and he wrote his *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, applying to the theory of communication ideas which he had elsewhere applied to the theory of art.

During these productive years, Rousseau had lived in the country some little distance from Paris, first at L'Hermitage, a cottage in the park of Madame d'Épinay, and afterwards at Montmorency, on the estate of another patron, the Maréchal de Luxembourg. He was deeply wounded when Diderot, as he imagined, mocked him for leading this secluded way of life: 'Only the bad man lives alone,' says a character in Diderot's play, *Le Fils naturel*.^{*} In any case, Rousseau's rural peace came to an end in 1762, when *Émile* was condemned by the *parlement* of Paris, and the author had to flee from France to avoid arrest. He went to Bernese territory in Switzerland, where he learned that he was a wanted man in Geneva as well as in France. Then he was expelled from the canton of Berne. He had offended almost everyone: Catholics, Protestants,

^{*} For Diderot's version of the story see A. M. Wilson, *Diderot*, O.U.P. 1957, pp. 254ff. The incident led to a final rift between the two writers.

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materialists. And so, the last unhappy phase of his life began, when, as the victim of political and religious intolerance, he was harried from place to place in search of refuge.



The political views of the *philosophes* were as distasteful to Rousseau as were most of their opinions. Like their master, Francis Bacon, they believed in strong government; the doctrine of planning called for a ruler with enough power to put plans into effect; and just as Bacon himself once dreamed of converting James I to his way of thinking and then using magnified royal prerogative to enact his proposals, so the *philosophes* of the eighteenth century based their hopes for success on influencing powerful monarchs to do what they suggested. The current name for this was *le despotisme éclairé*; to Rousseau, the champion of freedom, any kind of despotism was anathema, and the so-called enlightened sort seemed rather worse than others.

In 1755 Rousseau addressed a letter to a pastor in Geneva who had conceived the idea of launching a literary periodical: 'Believe me, Sir, this is not the sort of work for you,' he wrote. 'Serious and profound writings may do us credit, but the glitter of that trivial philosophy which is fashionable today is wholly unbecoming to us. Great themes such as virtue and liberty enlarge and fortify the mind; little things, like poetry and the fine arts, give it more delicacy than subtlety.'*

The great themes of liberty and virtue were the themes of the *Social Contract*. This is why Rousseau attached so much importance to the book; and also, perhaps, why it got him into trouble. It might seem to the reader that Rousseau started to write the *Social Contract* as a book about liberty and ended up with a book about virtue; in truth it is the argument of the

* Rousseau to Jacob Vernet, 2 April 1755. Quoted in Georges May, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

whole book that once men have entered into society, freedom comes to be inseparable from virtue.

Some time between the writing of the *Discours sur l'inégalité* and the writing of the *Social Contract*, Rousseau read the works of Thomas Hobbes. His only reference in the *Social Contract* to Hobbes are fleeting and hostile ones, but Professor Robert Derathé* has shown that Rousseau was not in the habit of acknowledging his intellectual debts, and that his debts were particularly great both to the legal theorists, or juriconsults, of earlier generations, to Grotius,† Pufendorf,‡ Barbeyrac,§ and Burlamaqui,|| and also to the political philosophers, especially Hobbes and Locke. The second title of Rousseau's *Social Contract* is the same as the main title of one of Burlamaqui's books: *Principes du droit politique*. This *droit politique*, which I have been obliged for lack of a better alternative (there is no English equivalent of *le droit*) to translate as 'political right', Burlamaqui employed as a semi-technical expression to designate the general abstract study of law and government, and Rousseau uses the word in the same sense.

The main title of Rousseau's *Social Contract* refers to a concept which all these juriconsults and political philosophers invoked. They all believed that the state was the outcome of a covenant or agreement among men. The purpose of the state was the protection of those people to which it owed its being, and the same theorists also agreed that the sovereign must have enough power to provide such protection. Most of

* Jean-Jacques Rousseau et la science politique de son temps, Paris, 1950.

† Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), Dutch jurist; author of *De jure belli et pacis* (1625).

‡ Samuel Pufendorf (1632-94), German jurist; author of *Elementa jurisprudentiæ universalis* (1660), *De jure naturæ et gentium* (1672), *De officio hominis et civis* (1673).

§ Jean Barbeyrac (1674-1744), French jurist, translator and commentator on the works of Grotius and Pufendorf.

|| Jean-Jacques Burlamaqui (1694-1748), Genevan jurist; author of *Principes du droit naturel* (1747), *Principes du droit politique* (1754).

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the theorists sought at the same time to limit this power of sovereigns under one principle or another, and even to divide sovereignty between several elements. Hobbes stood apart from the others in insisting that sovereignty must be unified and absolute. Hobbes said that men must choose: either they were ruled or they were free; they could not be both; liberty went with anarchy and security with civil obedience.

Rousseau accepted Hobbes's argument on one point; he agreed that sovereignty must be absolute or nothing, but he could not bring himself to accept Hobbes's notion that men must choose between being governed and being free. Rousseau, who loved liberty so much, believed he could show that it was possible for men to be at once free and members of a political society. Indeed the *Social Contract* may be read as an answer to Hobbes by an author whose mind was stimulated by the brilliance of Hobbes's reasoning, but who could not stomach Hobbes's conclusion.

It is important to note what Rousseau is doing in the *Social Contract*. He explains it clearly at the beginning: 'My purpose is to consider *if*, in political society, there can be any legitimate and sure principle of government, taking men as they are, and laws as they might be.' The *if* is crucial. Rousseau is not offering a plan for reform,* nor is he writing the kind of history and sociology he provides in his *Discours sur l'inégalité*. He is dealing with *right* rather than with *fact*, though *fact* comes into it, because he undertakes to deal with men 'as they are'. In the *Social Contract* Rousseau is dealing, in the hypothetical mood, with abstract problems which seem to him to emerge from philosophical reflection on the actual nature of man and the possible order of laws and government. The social contract discussed in the *Social Contract* is not the actual

* Rousseau deals with practical politics in his *Projet de Constitution pour la Corse* (written 1764-5) and his *Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne* (written June 1771).

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historical contract described in the *Discours sur l'inégalité*, that *imposture** made to consolidate the advantages of the rich. It is a genuine and legitimate contract, which is to the benefit of everyone, since it unites liberty with law and utility with right.

Now Rousseau not only rejects Hobbes's claim that men must choose between being free and being ruled, he positively asserts that it is only through living in civil society that men can experience their fullest freedom. This is the connexion between freedom and virtue. Here we may detect a modification of the argument of the *Discours sur l'inégalité*. In the earlier work Rousseau stresses both the freedom and the innocence of man in the state of nature. In the *Social Contract* he still says that men have freedom in the state of nature, but he treats it as freedom of a crude and lesser kind. Such freedom is no more than independence. And while he does not accept Hobbes's picture of man in the state of nature as an aggressive and rapacious being, Rousseau (having read Hobbes) speaks less of the innocence and more of the brutishness of man in a state of nature. Man in the state of nature, as he is depicted in the *Social Contract*, is a 'stupid and unimaginative animal'; it is only by coming into a political society that he becomes 'an intelligent being and a man'. Assuredly, as a result of the growth of passions and sophistry which society breeds, men have generally grown worse with the passage of time; but that is because society, instead of improving men, has corrupted them. Society is bound to change men, and if it does not do what it is meant to do, and improve them, it will worsen them. Nevertheless, according to Rousseau, it is only by leaving the state of nature and becoming a social being in the fullest sense, that is to say, in becoming a citizen, that man can realize his own nature as man.

* For a discussion of this see J. Starobinski, 'Du Discours de l'inégalité au Contrat social' in *Journées d'Étude sur le Contrat Social*, Paris, 1964.

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Rousseau never abandons the belief, put forward in his *Discours sur l'inégalité*, that men are happy in the state of nature. He continues to think it possible for them to be good. Men cannot, however, be virtuous in the state of nature, virtue being a characteristic of men who are conscious of morality. Unlike Hobbes, Rousseau does not suggest that it is fear which drives men to quit the state of nature; but he does say that it is man's weakness which makes him social.* Rousseau also suggests both that Providence has to intervene by creating natural disasters and shortages to force men to cooperate and also that there is a certain natural pressure within men to actualize those social and moral qualities which are mere potentialities in a state of nature.

Here one might suspect a certain equivocation in Rousseau's use of the word 'nature'. But what he is saying is that the state of nature is man's *original* state, not his natural state; for man can only realize his full nature as a man by making the social compact and living under law. Rousseau's ambiguity reflects a common ambiguity in the word 'nature', which is sometimes used to refer to what is, and sometimes to refer to what should be. Rousseau uses the word 'nature' at different times in either of these two senses.

In a way, Rousseau's solution to the problem posed by Hobbes is wonderfully simple. Men can be both ruled and free if they rule themselves. For what is a free man but a man who rules himself? A people can be free if it retains sovereignty over itself, if it enacts the rules or laws which it is obliged to obey. Obligation in such circumstances is wholly distinct from bondage; it is a moral duty which draws its compulsion from the moral will within each man. In this argument, we can detect a striking departure from the 'social contract'

* 'It is the weakness of man which renders him social: it is our common miseries which carry our hearts towards humanity.' *Émile*, Book IV, p. 249 Paris, 1524.

theorists who preceded Rousseau. The juriconsults and Hobbes and Locke all rejected the well-established theories that sovereignty was based on nature or on divine right, and they all argued in one way or another, that sovereignty derived its authority from the assent of the people. But these earlier theorists also held that sovereignty was transferred from the people to the ruler as a result of the social contract. Rousseau is original in holding that no such transfer of sovereignty need or should take place: sovereignty not only originates in the people; it ought to stay there.*

Rousseau's solution to the problem of how to be at the same time ruled and free might plausibly be expressed as democracy. I have already spoken of the importance to him of what is commonly named 'democracy' in Switzerland. But Rousseau himself used the word 'democracy' in a rather distinctive fashion,† because of the emphasis he puts on the difference between the two departments, as he sees them, of government. Ruling, in the strict sense of making rules or laws, is the function which he says that the people must retain; for thus, and only thus, does sovereignty express itself. Every act of the sovereign is a law, and anything which is not a law is not an act of sovereignty. From this function of law-making, Rousseau distinguishes the administration, or executive management, of government. And he does *not* demand, as a prerequisite of liberty and legitimacy, that this administration shall be conducted by the whole body of citizens. On the contrary, he thinks it might be best done by a limited number. The conduct of administration by the whole body of the citizens he seems to consider too utopian an arrange-

* See Derathé, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

† In a letter to Madame d'Épinay, dated March 1756, Rousseau wrote: 'Learn my dictionary, my good friend, if you want to have us understand each other. Believe me, my terms rarely have the ordinary sense.' Quoted in C. W. Hendel, *Citizen of Geneva: Selected Letters of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, New York, 1937, p. 140.

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ment. And this is the arrangement which in the *Social Contract* he calls 'democracy', and of which he is thinking when he says that democracy is for gods, not men.*

Rousseau is undoubtedly a democrat in the sense that 'democracy' means legislative rule by the whole body of the citizens; but as he himself used the word in another sense, it might be less confusing to speak of him as a 'republican' or champion of 'popular sovereignty'. One of the reasons why he distinguishes so carefully between the legislative sovereign body and the executive or administrative body is his consciousness of the abiding danger to the legislative which the administrative body constitutes. For while it is convenient that the business of government should be entrusted to a council of magistrates or commissioners, those magistrates will naturally tend, with the passage of time, to encroach on the sacred territory of legislation, and thus to invade the sovereignty and destroy the republican nature of the state. As a matter of empirical fact, Rousseau even suggests that this is bound to happen.†

Nowhere in the *Social Contract* does Rousseau offer any

* See Book III, Chapter 4.

† Bertrand de Jouvenel has drawn attention to a contradiction here between Rousseau as a philosopher and Rousseau as a political scientist. Rousseau the political philosopher argues that legitimate government is possible only if sovereignty remains in the hands of the citizens. Rousseau the political scientist puts forward as an empirical law of development that the executive or administrative body must in the long run invade the legislative body and capture the sovereignty. Jouvenel cites a passage from Rousseau's *Lettres écrites de la montagne* (Part 1, Letter 6): '... since sovereignty tends always to slacken, the government tends always to increase its power. Thus the executive body must always in the long run prevail over the legislative body; and when the law is finally subordinate to men, there remains nothing but slaves and masters, and the republic is destroyed.' Jouvenel stresses that the 'must' in this paragraph is a scientific must; so that Rousseau the political scientist is denying the possibility of the continued existence in the real world of the one form of political association which unites liberty with government. See B. de Jouvenel on 'Rousseau' in *Western Political Philosophers*, ed. M. Cranston, London, 1964, and Jouvenel's introduction to his edition of *Du Contrat social*, Geneva, 1947.

short definition of liberty, although there are several often-quoted epigrams about it. In his *Lettres écrites de la montagne* (published two years after the *Social Contract*) he provides the most succinct account of what he means by this key word:

Liberty consists less in doing one's own will than in not being subject to that of another; it consists further in not subjecting the will of others to our own. . . . In the common liberty no one has a right to do what the liberty of any other forbids him to do; and true liberty is never destructive of itself. Thus liberty without justice is a veritable contradiction. . . . There is no liberty, then, without laws, or where any man is above the laws. . . . A free people obeys, but it does not serve; it has magistrates, but not masters; it obeys nothing but the laws, and thanks to the force of the laws, it does not obey men.*

It is partly because of this intimate connexion between liberty and law that the freedom of man in a state of nature is so inferior. The freedom of the savage is no more than independence; although Rousseau speaks of the savage being subject to natural law, he also suggests that the savage has no consciousness of natural law; thus Rousseau can speak of a man being 'transformed', as a result of his entry into civil society, from a brutish into a human, moral being. A moral being is, or can be, free in another sense than the political; if, instead of being a slave of his passions, he lives according to conscience, lives according to rules he imposes on himself, then he has a liberty which only a moral being can enjoy. The savage has no sense of this; for one thing, the passions only begin to develop with society, which explains why society can mark the beginning of a change for the worse as well as the beginning of a change for the better. One of the new passions which emerges with society is pride or *amour-propre*, which Rousseau sees as an evil mutation of the perfectly innocent sentiment of self-love or *amour-de-soi*. It is a

* *Lettres écrites de la montagne*, Letter 8, Pléiade, vol. 3, pp. 841-2.

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characteristic of modern sophisticated culture to be dominated by pride. The emphasis on 'going back to nature' in Rousseau's treatise on education, *Émile*, is the result of his belief that cultural environment, not natural inclination, breeds such harmful passions. Here we may notice a contrast between Rousseau's views and Hobbes's. Whereas Hobbes holds that pride is natural to man, Rousseau holds that it is artificial; whereas Hobbes says that war prevails among men in the state of nature because of men's pride, Rousseau says that war is a product of conflicts about property, and therefore cannot exist in the state of nature, where there is no property.

On the other hand, Rousseau seems to be entirely at one with Hobbes when he says that under the pact by which men enter into civil society everyone makes a total alienation of all his rights. However, it must be remembered that Rousseau regarded this alienation as a form of exchange, and an advantageous one; men give up their natural rights in exchange for civil rights; the total alienation is followed by a total restitution; and the bargain is a good one because what men surrender are rights of dubious value, unlimited by anything but an individual's own powers, rights which are precarious and without a moral basis; in return men acquire rights that are limited but legitimate and invincible. The rights they alienate are rights based on might; the rights they acquire are rights based on law.

It might be supposed that Rousseau is contradicting Locke when he says that men alienate all their rights when they make the social contract, Locke having said that men make the social contract only to preserve their rights. But Rousseau is really thinking in different terms from Locke. Rousseau does not think that men have in the state of nature the kind of natural rights which Locke supposes – the right, for example, to property. For Rousseau there is only *possession* in the state of nature; property (by definition, rightful possession) comes

'Man was born free, and he is
everywhere in chains'

These are the famous opening words of a treatise that has not ceased to stir debate since its publication in 1762. Rejecting the view that anyone has a natural right to wield authority over others, Rousseau argues instead for a pact, or 'social contract', that should exist between all the citizens of a state and that should be the source of sovereign power. From this fundamental premise, he goes on to consider issues of liberty and law, freedom and justice, arriving at a view of society that has seemed to some a blueprint for totalitarianism, to others a declaration of democratic principles.

P E N G U I N



C L A S S I C S

Translated and Introduced by Maurice Cranston



Cover: Detail from *An Allegory of the Revolution with a Portrait Medallion of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (1794) by Nicolas Henri Jeaurot de Bertry, in the Musée de la Ville de Paris, Musée Carnavalet, Paris. Photo Bridgeman Images.

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