

JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU

Team: Swiss National Bank

Position: Deep gully

Status: Post-premortem

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) wasn't French. While that may seem an odd point to make, I got yelled at for calling him French in the first edition. Yes, he spoke French, wrote in French, and lived most of his life in Paris, which all seems pretty French to me, but he was born in Geneva, Switzerland, and lived there until he was ten and the cops chased his father out of the country. So he was the nearly French son of a petty criminal who lived in Paris, which I think is kind of like being a Canadian draft dodger living in North Dakota, but what do I know?

In the first edition I mistakenly called him French when I was trying to make a point about the normative nature of political theory. The answers an individual gives to questions about what is right or wrong, what is better or worse, what should or should not be, are all profoundly influenced by the culture of the society in which the person thinks and writes. Just as you would not mistake Canadian beer for Mexican beer, you must recognize that English and nearly French political cultures are quite different, resulting in a profound divergence in the political theories produced by their philosophers. Thus, even though Rousseau was not French, he was also not British, and you can see some aspects of that in the way Rousseau's political theory does not stress individualism to the degree that the works of his British predecessors and contemporaries do.

Rousseau did not believe that civilized society is an improvement on the state of nature. In *On the Social Contract*, Rousseau writes—in his characteristic dramatic style—"Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains."^a Rousseau believed that life in the state of nature is not all that bad, because the people may be primitive and simpleminded, but they retain their liberty. Rousseau believed that all of society, not just political society, is corrupt. It makes people focus on their individual desires, robs them of their compassion, and promotes inequality. Unlike Hobbes and Locke, who saw civilization as the answer, Rousseau thought it was the problem.

Rousseau believed that people need to reject societal inequality by placing the common good of all above their own personal interests. When the populace is prepared to make this commitment, it can form a new social contract that is unlike any of those previously discussed. Rousseau is not seeking democracy—at least not liberal democracy, wherein the voice of the majority is considered primary. Rousseau's new contract is formed by the "total alienation of each associate, together with all of his rights, to the entire community."^b In exchange for the surrender of individual rights, each person gets to join in the solidarity of what Rousseau calls "the general will," which is the voice of the majority speaking for the common good. In essence, this is an experience in which participation is not just a means for reaching decisions but a process that is itself enlightening as well. All who participate grow through their participation in the general will. Since the general will is composed of equals with concern for everyone, and since it discounts private wills and personal stakes for the good of all, it can never be wrong.

Furthermore, the general will is the sovereign. Anyone who does not follow its rules will be "forced to be free."^c The general will represents Rousseau's perfect world. It is a government that rules for everyone at nobody's expense. All who participate are enlightened by their participation, as the evils of society are cast aside.

^a Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 17.

^b *Ibid.*, 24.

^c *Ibid.*, 26.