

1274: St. Thomas Aquinas finishes
the *Summa Theologica*

1513: Machiavelli writes *The Prince*

1689: Locke publishes *Two Treatises of Government*

1789: French Revolution

1650

1700

1750

1800

1850

1900

1651: Hobbes publishes *Leviathan*

1762: Rousseau publishes *The Social Contract*

- In the *Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau agrees with Locke and Hobbes that individuals were free and equal in the state of nature
- However, for Rousseau, the state of nature was blissful and innocent
 - Hobbes was wrong to say that humans were at war and competed for goods. They had plenty and took what they needed from nature. Though they avoided pain, they did not have a conception of death.
 - Locke was also wrong: individuals did not have a conception of private property. Their needs were satisfied and did not need one another to trade.
- For Rousseau, Humans were not rational. They were emotional creatures that lacked rationality.
Humans were very similar to animals.
- Both Hobbes and Locke projected in the state of nature things that humans only acquired once they entered society

- While, in the state of nature, humans lived happy and simple lives, they became increasingly miserable once they started to live together:
 - In the state of nature, what individuals wanted and what they needed coincided (e.g., if they felt hunger, they would simply eat)
 - In society, individuals started to compare themselves to other people. If someone is more famous, everyone else wants more fame too. If someone has more wealth, everyone else wants to achieve that same level of wealth.
 - These new desires are *relational*. There is *always* someone that is more wealthy or more famous!
 - What individuals want and what they need is out of balance. They pursue desires that are, by definition, impossible to fulfil.

“As soon as men had begun mutually to value one another, and the idea of esteem was formed in their minds, each one claimed to have a right to it, and it was no longer possible for anyone to be lacking it with impunity. (...) from this every voluntary wrong became an outrage, because along with the harm that resulted from the injury, the offended party saw in it contempt for his person, which often was more insufferable than the harm itself. Hence each man punished the contempt shown him in a manner proportionate to the esteem in which he held himself; acts of revenge became terrible, and men became bloodthirsty and cruel.”

- For Rousseau, even self-esteem becomes something we mindlessly strive for
- There is always someone that has more self-esteem than I do

- What solution does he propose? This is what we will now see with *The Social Contract*.
- For Rousseau, the problem isn't society, owning property, or any of that. The problem is Hobbes' and Locke's specific version of the contract and the way they envision property.
 - Individuals are locked in this idea that they should pursue as much wealth and fame as possible
 - They are locked in a cycle where they become increasingly miserable
 - They are locked in institutions that sanction great inequalities
- Rousseau was a great admirer of the Greek city-state. He argued that, in these cities, things like knowledge, wealth, or fame were not pursued for their own sake. They were pursued in such a way it that made the citizens more virtuous and the political community better.

“Man [is] born free, and everywhere he is in chains. One who believes himself the master of others is nonetheless a greater slave than they. How did this change occur? I do not know. What can make it legitimate? I believe I can answer this question.”

p. 281

- Look at the next paragraph. For Hobbes, the sovereign is legitimate because it is strong enough to hold off the state of nature: *might makes right*.
 - Who ought to rule? For Hobbes, whoever is strong enough should be the ruler.
- What is Rousseau’s response to that notion?
 - “If I were to consider only force and the effect that derives from it, I would say: as long as a people is compelled to obey and does obey, it does well but that, so soon as it can shake off the yoke and does shake it off, it does better.”

- For Rousseau, Hobbes didn't actually explain why a ruler is *legitimate*, he only said that subjects obeyed out of survival
 - It's like saying that someone can legitimately give me orders because they're holding a gun
 - For Hobbes, *might make right*, but Rousseau points out that this is an insufficient explanation of *why* I should obey a sovereign. At the first opportunity, I will disobey.
- Rousseau doesn't talk about Locke directly in the *Social Contract*, but we understand that Locke's notion of private property isn't legitimate for similar reasons
 - When someone takes some land and says "this is mine," they are simply asserting that they took some property
 - You happened to take something and I didn't. Why would that be fair?
- For Rousseau, humans live in illegitimate societies: they were compelled to live in societies and they are not free
 - We saw in the *Second Discourse* that they are unhappy, and now we see that they are compelled to be here

- For Rousseau, what prerequisites do we need to have a legitimate social contract?
One of them is a “startling” prerequisite: pp. 281-283
- He wants individuals to be free both in the state of nature and in society
 - “obedience to the law one has prescribed to oneself is freedom” (p. 283)
- He believes that a social contract can only be legitimate to the extent that each individual gives up all of their rights and property to everyone else
- For now, let’s put aside the following questions. Once we’ll understand what he means, we’ll come back to them.
 - How is this supposed to solve the problem he wants to solve? What are the authoritarian dangers of doing this? How are we supposed to put in practice?

- 284-285: What is the difference between the general will and the will of all?

⚠ This is a difficult concept, interrupt me if you have any questions ⚠

- Rousseau wants something that he calls the general will
 - The general will is the will of all the citizens when they take decisions for the good of the whole and not merely for the sake of their private interests
 - The general will emerges when *everyone* thinks about the good of *everybody else*
- The will of all is merely the sum of all private interests
 - Casting a majority vote won't reflect the general will: if you cast a vote but each individual is merely voting in light of their private interests, then this vote will merely show the will of all
- The government (king, aristocracy, or democracy) isn't the general will

“If, when an adequately informed people deliberates, the citizens were to have no communication among themselves, the general will would always result from the large number of small differences, and the deliberation would always be good.”

- “Large number of small differences” = differences that are merely each person’s individual differences
- The general will are all the decisions that are taken by the people when they think about everybody else
- However, if factions with particular interests emerge (e.g., farmers, young voters, democrats, republicans...), then everyone will stop thinking about the common good

- I always like the example of a group of close friends that have to decide if they're going to bar A or bar B
- Close friends take collective decisions in light of the good of each one of the friends
- For instance, they are aware that Jeff *really* want to go to bar B for a long time!

So, even though the other friends want to go to bar A, they're ok with making Jeff happy

- They're happy to go to bar B because Jeff really wants it
- There's a sense in which collective decisions made with the general will in mind aren't coercive in the way that the will of all is

- What are some examples of groups, organizations, or situations where we see the will of all/the general will?

- General will:
 - Close groups of friends
 - Families
 - Moments of national emergencies when a nation comes together
 - Small associations with large degree of overlapping consensus
- Will of all:
 - Businesses
 - Congress
 - Hierarchical associations (usually big ones)



sheabutterbitch

A long time ago I took a course on the sociology of marriage and my professor said "With compromise, you both lose. As a couple, you must *collaborate* on the best possible outcome." Ever since, I never prioritize compromise in a relationship, only collaboration.



willinwhim

This is probably the best elaboration on "Marriage takes work" that I've come across.

Source: sheabutterbitch

- Would our current liberal democracies be good examples of general will for Rousseau?
 - No, because liberal democracies have parliaments where different interests are represented
 - Furthermore, citizens don't actively participate in the creation of the laws. They elect representatives that do it for them.
- A group of individuals that know one another is more conducive to create a general will
 - A smaller community of people that has many ties and that meets often
- When a political community has a great disaster (e.g., wars), people will often give up on their private interests in a way that is very similar to what Rousseau is talking about

- We saw that, for Rousseau, the societies we have created out of the state of nature:
 - (1) make us increasingly miserable because of the existence of *relational desires*
 - (2) they are *illegitimate* (Hobbes only argued that *might is right*, Locke makes of property a *consumed fact*)
- Rousseau wants a social contract that will (1) make these societies legitimate, (2) preserve the freedom of each individual, and (3) preserve the equality of each individual

- We saw Rousseau's solution, the general will:
 - A group is guided by the general will when each individual takes decision with the good of everyone else in mind (e.g., families, close groups of friends)
 - In contrast, a group is guided by the will of all when its members take decisions in light of their factional and private interests
 - In order to live in a society where they are free and equal, the individuals have to give themselves and their properties entirely to the general will
- We still had a few questions to answer:
- how, then, are the individuals free and equal under the general will? How are you suppose to "give yourself" to the general will?
- Is this idea practicable at all? What are its authoritarian implications?

- For Rousseau, when you're "giving yourself" to the general will, it means that you're not giving yourself to *anyone* in particular
 - The individuals are not literally giving anything away, they are just assenting to the collective contract and giving legitimacy to their possessions
 - They can then legislate even on matters of life and death, i.e., death penalty laws, or they can raise taxes
 - The individuals are agreeing that they can all collectively legislate on one another's lives and properties
- For Rousseau, individuals must create their laws together and, therefore, they would not take decisions that would harm one of them for no reason
 - They could make a law to punish criminals or raise taxes, but they wouldn't make a law that kills or steals for no reason

- For Rousseau, we guarantee equality when we all give ourselves entirely and when we regularly meet to decide our laws in light of the general will
- Freedom is guaranteed in this way: to be free is to obey the laws I have agreed to
 - For Rousseau, when individuals meet regularly and participate in the creation of their laws, they guarantee their freedom
- Is the general will something that a group of citizens creates at once and forever? Is it guaranteed that the citizens will always take decisions in light of the general will?
 - No, the citizens must meet regularly otherwise private interests will emerge and interfere when it will be time to take decisions collectively
 - Private interests are fine for Rousseau, but they shouldn't interfere with the general will

- When they create the social contract, individuals have to create the fundamental laws (constitution) that will regulate the individuals' rights, and they have to establish the type of government that they want
 - Rousseau's *sovereign* is not a king or a council, but the citizens under the general will. The *government* is the executor of the laws that the citizens make, but the citizens must always participate in the laws.
- Rousseau's social contract is very flexible about the type of government that the citizens can create
 - But they cannot completely submit themselves to one individual or one group (a monarch, a dynasty...).
 - Individuals have to be able to change their laws to remain free and equal.
- Rousseau provocatively says that an individual can be "forced to be free." What do you think he means by this?
 - If we all decide on a law (e.g. "whoever steals must go to prison"), then all individuals must follow it even if they don't want to later on. To be free is to follow one's law: these individuals will have to be forced to be free.

- Is Rousseau's idea of the Social Contract realizable in practice?
- Rousseau is actually skeptical that the *Social Contract* could ever work
- His ideal city is very close to the Greek city-state or the Swiss villages where everyone knows each other
- Remember one of the first paragraphs of the *Social Contract*:

“Man [is] born free, and everywhere he is in chains. One who believes himself the master of others is nonetheless a greater slave than they. How did this change occur? I do not know. *What can make it legitimate?* I believe I can answer this question.”

- In his letters, Rousseau sometimes hints at the fact that the social contract might be a fiction (in a way not unsimilar to how he fully assumes in the *Second Discourse* that state-of-nature theories are fictions meant to illuminate something about reality)
- Rousseau's social contract might be a way to *illuminate* how to make institutions legitimate, and what sorts of policies we need to approximate a general will
- For instance, let's imagine a situation where one part of the political community is very poor, working two jobs, and doesn't have time to participate in the democratic process. What would be something conducive to the general will?
 - The citizens have to help this group so that they can participate in the political process

- Rousseau's social contract can give us an idea of the policies that we need to create to prevent citizens from falling into factionalism and only attending to their private interests
- Let's imagine that a group of poorer citizens who hate their wealthier citizens. They're pushing for laws to have complete economic equality. Is following their decision conducive to the general will?
 - On the one hand, that group is only thinking of their private interests, which is already against the general will
 - On the other hand, this policy would abolish all inequalities, even the ones that are good for the community. This is not conducive to the general good.
 - Rousseau is only in favor of equality if it helps *all* the citizens. He is not in favor of equality for equality's sake.
- Any other policies that would promote the general will?

- How is Rousseau's social contract supposed to solve the problem of relational desires? For instance, how does it solve the problem of the relentless pursuit of wealth and the resentment that inequality creates?
- The citizens can agree on what kind of inequalities are good and which ones are bad, and they can legislate on forms of inequalities that they reject
- Rousseau's social contract gives extensive powers to the citizens to legislate against things that they deem harmful
 - For instance: economic help for poorer classes; legislating on fast-foods because they are unhealthy; forbidding filters on social media because they create false beauty standards; etc.

- In what ways can Rousseau's political theory lead to authoritarianism?
- Individuals have to give themselves *completely* to the general will
 - This is shocking from a democratic-liberal point of view
- Rousseau says that the general will can never err (p. 284)
 - It can be "misguided" in the sense that it is not correctly informed
 - But, strictly speaking, if everyone really is thinking about everyone else's good, then the general will ends up making decisions for the good of everyone
- We understand what Rousseau means, but it's easy to see how this can be authoritarian

Rousseau tells this story of a Spartan mother as an example of the perfect citizen:

“A Spartan mother had five sons in the army. A Helot [a Spartan slave] arrived; trembling she asked his news. "Your five sons are slain." "Vile slave, was that what I asked thee?" "We have won the victory." She hastened to the temple to render thanks to the gods.”

Rousseau in *The Emile*

- Rousseau today has the reputation of being a father of totalitarianism
 - Totalitarianism: regimes like the Soviet Union or Nazi Germany that have extended control on all aspects of social life
 - There were effectively no individual rights and the power of the government was substantial
- Many people argue that Rousseau's theory is dangerous because:
 - It gives too much power to the government over the individual
 - The idea of general will easily leads to the idea that some part of the population is being selfish and is acting against the common interest
 - His theory leads to the idea that a leader can supposedly speak for the general will

- These critiques aren't entirely fair since Rousseau did believe in individual rights and in the division of powers
- He also didn't think you could alienate one part of the citizenry, and he didn't think a leader could talk for the general will
 - But it's easy to see how his ideas ended up being abused in these ways