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Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Totalitarian Democracy: A Socio-Political Analysis of Rousseau's Social Contract

A B S T R A C T

This theoretical study deals with the most influential French philosopher of the eighteenth century, namely Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). The study offers a socio-political interpretation of Rousseau's views on general will and sovereignty in his well-known book, 'The Social Contract' descriptively published in 1762. The objective of this study is to elaborate and discuss his major contribution to the field of political philosophy. However, the study aims to problematize the main points on which Rousseau focused in his philosophical argument on citizens, general will, and democracy. Therefore, the study will examine the place of general will in his main contribution to political philosophy. In doing so the study tries to answer the following four questions: Why and with what justice has Rousseau been seen as laying the basis of totalitarian democracy? Is it right to say that Rousseau amidst accusations of totalitarian tendencies? To what extent has Rousseau's General Will been used in a totalitarian manner? How and why does Rousseau attempt to reconcile the sovereignty of law with the freedom of the individual? The study concluded that the generalization of Rousseau's thought will always be problematic. Not only because one can find different meanings in his work depending on what one assumes before reading it, but also because Rousseau recognizes that not all situations are the same, in terms of geography, demography, climate, etc., and adapts his general theory as necessary.

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جان جاك روسو والديمقراطية الشمولية: تحليل سوسيو-سياسي للعقد الاجتماعي عند روسو

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 الخلاصة:

تتناول هذه الدراسة نظرية الفيلسوف الفرنسي الأكثر تأثيراً في القرن الثامن عشر، وهو جان جاك روسو (1712-1778). تقدم الدراسة تفسيراً سوسيو-سياسياً لآراء روسو حول الإرادة العامة والسيادة في كتابه المعروف، "العقد الاجتماعي" والذي نُشر في عام 1762. الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو توضيح ومناقشة مساهمته الرئيسية في مجال الفلسفة السياسية. تهدف الدراسة إلى حل مشكلة النقاط الرئيسية التي

ركز عليها روسو في حجته الفلسفية حول المواطنين، والإرادة العامة والديمقراطية. لذلك، ستبحث الدراسة مكان الإرادة العامة في مساهمته الرئيسية في الفلسفة السياسية. لهذا الغرض، تحاول الدراسة الإجابة على الأسئلة الرئيسية الأربعة التالية: لماذا؟ وهل من العدل بأن يُنظر إلى روسو على أنه مؤسس لمبدأ الديمقراطية الشمولية؟ هل يصح القول بأن روسو قد مهّد الطريق لنشوء فكرة الديمقراطية الشمولية وأن يُنمَّ بها؟ إلى أي مدى تم استخدام الإرادة العامة لروسو بطريقة شمولية؟ كيف ولماذا يحاول روسو التوفيق بين سيادة القانون وحرية الفرد؟ توصلت الدراسة إلى أن تعميم فكر روسو سيكون إشكاليًا دائمًا، ليس فقط لأنه يمكن للمرء أن يجد معاني مختلفة في عمله إعتقادًا على ما يفترضه المرء قبل قراءته، ولكن أيضًا لأن روسو يدرك أنه ليست كل المواقف متشابهة، من حيث الجغرافيا والديموغرافيا والمناخ وما إلى ذلك، ويتكيف مع نظريته العامة عند الضرورة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الإرادة العامة، السيادة، الشمولية، الأفراد، المجتمع المدني

Introduction

Although Jean-Jacques Rousseau lived most of his life in France, he was born in Geneva in 1712. His birthplace Geneva is considered very important in his writings, especially if we know that most of his ideas were more related to the situation of a city-state than to the major monarchies in eighteenth-century Europe. He was greatly influenced by the framework of governance in his hometown of Geneva, which was governed at that time based on an intellectual marriage between the strict Calvinist doctrine and the political administration holding on to the matter. Rousseau was one of the most interesting social and political philosophers of eighteenth-century Europe. It is worth mentioning that he came from no academic or political background, wasn't a member of any cliques that dominated eighteenth-century European society, was at home nowhere in Europe (whether he was expelled or self-excluded), and traveled extensively from one society to another never really fitting into any. He viewed himself as unique, that he should never have been born and he was fully self-conscious at a very early age. Rousseau is considered one of the most important and most influential political philosophers on the ruling systems in Europe. The internal, which had the greatest impact on the development of his thought, so he departed from the enlightenment system of his contemporaries completely and established the trend of romantic political culture that contrasted blatantly with the empirical approach prevailing in Europe and the authoritarian and liberal currents. Perhaps this justifies the difficulty of applying his ideas in general. The opening sentence of the first chapter of *The*

Social Contract – ‘Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains’ (Rousseau, 1997: 6), has been one of the most famous slogans of our modern and contemporary world. The study proceeds in six sections. Section one outlines the main questions of the study while section two explains the objectives of the study and the method in which used. Section three conceptualizes and elaborates on the totalitarian political system. Section four deals with Rousseau’s general will and its relation to society and popular sovereignty. Section five is treating Rousseau’s arguments on individual freedom, civil liberty, and organizations. The last section is devoted to the conclusion.

1- The Main Questions of the Study

To achieve the objectives, the study tries to answer the following four vital questions:

- 1- Why and with what justice has Rousseau been seen as laying the basis of totalitarian democracy?
- 2- Is it right to say that Rousseau amidst accusations of totalitarian tendencies?
- 3- To what extent has Rousseau’s General Will been used in a totalitarian manner?
- 4- How and why does Rousseau attempt to reconcile the sovereignty of law with the freedom of the individual?

2- The Objectives of the Study and the Method

The main objective of this study is to elaborate and analyze Rousseau’s views on general will and sovereignty in his well-known book, ‘*The Social Contract*’ published in 1762. The objective of this study is to elaborate and discuss his major contribution to the field of political philosophy. However, the study aims to problematize the main points on which Rousseau focused in his philosophical argument on citizens, general will, and democracy. Therefore, the study will examine the place of general will in his main contribution to political philosophy. In doing so the study tries to answer the following main questions: Why and with what justice has Rousseau been seen as laying the basis of totalitarian democracy? Is it right to say that Rousseau amidst accusations of totalitarian tendencies? How and why does Rousseau attempt to reconcile the sovereignty of law with the freedom of the individual? Methodologically, the study lies at the intersection of sociology, political science, and political theory. It should be emphasized that this study has been done according to a historical and explanatory approach method, which is applied

in both fields of political theory and political sociology. The explanatory approach is a method to make us understand something by describing and illustrating. Its intent is merely to explore the research questions and does not offer final and conclusive solutions to the exciting questions. Therefore, this study uses literature research and text analysis as a tool for it.

3- Totalitarian Political System: definition and elaboration

Rousseau was a man of many talents; an artisan, a botanist, a composer, and a musician. However, as a political thinker and philosopher, Rousseau has become renowned. The historian Jacob L. Talmon (1916-1980) argues that Rousseau gained the fundamental planks of his philosophy from the latter of these, namely the idea of the importance of the general will (Talmon, 1952: 41). This aspect of Rousseau's thought is the basis for the proposition that Rousseau's thought is the basis for totalitarian democracy. It has been argued that during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries two types of democracy arose; one was liberal democracy and the other totalitarian democracy. The English political philosopher Roger Scruton (1944-2020) points out that the state as being the most important aspect of totalitarianism, whereby it controls all layers and aspects of society. Only the state can allow institutions to exist. It controls society by asserting its dominant ideology via total control of communications. It involves the denial of many natural rights and opposition to the state. (Scruton, 2007: 695-696). Totalitarianism is 'a dictatorial form of centralized government that regulates every aspect of state and private behavior' (McLean, 1996: 501). The American Political Scientist Barbara Goodwin offers several different types of totalitarianism. She outlines- the phenomenological approach in which there is not even the illusion of democracy in a party run ideological state; the socio-historical approach whereby only particular historical events result in mass activities but not necessarily in a socially cohesive manner; the essentialist approach, as expressed by the likes of Jacob Talmon, where political theorists contributed to the onset of totalitarianism; and the psychological approach focusing largely on the authoritarian personality (Goodwin, 1982: 179-194). However, these methods of categorizing systems do not have a common factor in distinguishing totalitarianism. Nevertheless, one can see some recurrent ideas of totalitarianism. Such themes are a strong, centralized leadership; a dominant, all-pervasive ideology, the absence of opposition, a strong state that is above the people, and the absence of freedom. The British Marxist Historian Eric Hobsbawm (1917-2012) asserts that the term totalitarianism was first

used to describe Italian Fascism (Hobsbawm, 1994: 112). However, according to him 'totalitarianism as a term has been invented in the 1920s by the Italian Fascism to describe its objects, and it became popular among critics of communism after World War Two'. Totalitarianism is an 'all-embracing centralized system which not only imposed total physical control over its population but, by using monopoly of propaganda and education, actually succeeded in getting its people to internalize its values' (Hobsbawm, 1994: 393). Rousseau's most influential text and the work for which he gets on totalitarianism was *The Social Contract*. This work was reflective of Rousseau's general train of thought. He is well known for his discomfort with then civil society bore witness to the evolution of humanity and saw humans take on a moral character, they were 'transformed from a stupid animal to an intellectual being and a man' (Rousseau, 1947: 19). However, Rousseau saw much injustice in society, and in it, he saw what a strange way of organizing civil society was. More to the point, for Rousseau, what was for him modern, society was in a state of transition, for the civil society organization had removed 'natural rights from people but had not yet instilled civil liberty. Whereas in nature, humans are free from the dominance of others, humans are independent; in civil society, humans are dominated by others who 'at every turn, thwart our will', and society creates artificial needs, destroying the balance between will and power, losing independence and placing people in chains (Lively and Reeve, 1989: 129-130). Rousseau based his theory on the question of how to gain the most freedom in civil society. His starting point was that 'Man born free, and yet we see him everywhere in chains' (Rousseau, 1947: 5). As mentioned above, Rousseau's main problem was to show 'taking men as they are', a 'just and certain rule' can be established for the administration of the 'civil order' (Rousseau, 1947: 5). For him, a just society would be only where each person is enabled to live with the greatest amount of freedom and where the balance of power between members of the society is even. Early in *The Social Contract*, Rousseau asserts that rule by force is not moral and does not work well even if it was considered so, for when there is no force, there is no obligation and, when highlighting the injustice of slavery, he pronounces that 'no man has any natural authority over his fellows and since force produces no right to any, a justifiable authority among men must be established based on conventions' (Rousseau, 1947: 8-9). It is the bases of this convention that is of utmost importance for Rousseau. The main dilemma for Rousseau however, was 'where shall we find a form of association which will defend and protect with the whole common force the person and the

property of each associate, and by which each person, while uniting himself with all, shall obey himself and remain free as before' (Rousseau, 1947: 14-15).

4- Rousseau's General Will, Society, and Popular Sovereignty

For Rousseau, *The Social Contract* should be organized by his major famous concept the general will. In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau employed the general will to explain how it legitimates law. The General Will is Rousseau's most important contribution to political theory. He suggests that we do not truly remain 'as free as before' because; what man loses by *The Social Contract* is his natural liberty and unlimited rights to everything he tries to get and succeed in getting what he gains is civil liberty. Rousseau does not leave men as free as they were before but gives them a new and higher degree of freedom. This sort of social contract establishes a corporate entity. Moreover, Rousseau distinguishes between the general will and the 'will of all'. The latter is what appears when we all vote following our separate interests. To reach the general will we must ask an appropriate question: what is for the common interests (Thomson, 1966: 96-98). The general will be his answer to civilization, For Rousseau social contract is the right answer or the problem of inequality. Or Rousseau's nature provides no slandered guidelines or determining who should rule. The main question here is how can freedom and liberty exist, as in nature whilst people are organized as a society? Rousseau's answer was by way of contract, a Social Contract which he reduces to one point 'total alienation as each associate, and all his rights, to the community whereby every individual gives them up completely so it would not be in the interests of anyone to render that condition offensive to the others (Rousseau, 1947: 15). The British historian David Thomson (1912-1970), argues that the kind of 'society Rousseau wanted was (a property-owing democracy) a society in which wealth was not necessarily equally distributed, but which knew neither great wealth nor deep poverty' (Thomson, 1966: 104). The people contract in the form of a moral and collective body. The individual is strengthened and their independence is reinforced as part of this collective that is more powerful than anything else in society, which indeed is society. The collective body of the people is the sovereign, the supreme legislator. The sovereign is to exclude what Rousseau calls private interests in its legislation and make only general and therefore just, laws where no partial interests restrict the independence and authority of the people. The collective body then legislates as a collective on general issues and forms laws that are, in Rousseau's mind general and therefore just, to which

all are bound, and will want to be bound. The complexity and seeming inconsistency of *The Social Contract* leaves a great deal of Rousseau's work open. As mentioned above, one of these interpretations that he laid for totalitarianism. Hegel first set about the idea that Rousseau's philosophy may be problematic when in the phenomenology; he accuses Rousseau's idea of the general will of being responsible for the Terror in the French Revolution (Ripstein, 1994: 452). The problem of the general will and The Terror was later taken up by the modern historian professor Jacob Talmon. Talmon was one of the most prominent proponents of this view, and in his very well-known book 'The origins of Totalitarian Democracy' attributes the advent of modern totalitarianism to Rousseau and other thinkers. Talmon and others place a lot of emphasis on the French Revolution and the influence that the writings of Rousseau et al had on the Jacobins in the French Revolution. Talmon asserts that Rousseau falls into all of the criteria of totalitarian thinking. He claims that totalitarianism is not necessarily the denial of liberty, but it is when there is but one plane of existence, where the dominant philosophy reigns supreme over all aspects of life, where there is an absolute collective purpose, where there is a sole and exclusive truth (Talmon, 1952: 2). Rousseau's concept of the general will and its implications are wide open for criticism. What we may see now as totalitarianism – one-party state, elimination of dissenting views and opinions, etc., - are all evident in Rousseau's work. Talmon states that political parties and diversity of interests are now considered an 'essential concomitant of democracy' but was not evident in Rousseau's thought (Talmon, 1952: 44). Groups and associations within society were indeed discouraged because they tended to encourage private interests (Rousseau, 1947: 26). Indeed, Rousseau's argument does sound totalitarian when he uses language that is quite at home in George Orwell's 1984. He talks of people being forced to be free, he places stress on the executive not putting all questions to the people, he advocates a coercive system of administration for large states and he advocates 'taught' political behavior, or indoctrination, or as Talmon puts it 'if the people don't will it, they must be made to will it' (Talmon, 1952: 43). Although Hegel's assertion that the general will led to the terror of the French Revolution can be criticized because of the view that Rousseau's writings had little impact in France until after the Revolution (Ripstein, 1994: 453), he does make some interesting and valid points about the danger of Rousseau's thought. Hegel stresses that Rousseau attempts to find a society devoid of social differentiation and that this attempt can have drastic consequences whereby a specific group can claim to know a general will (Ripstein, 1994: 453). One can see Hegel's influence on Talmon in this, only Talmon assigns the term 'totalitarianism'

to the situation. One may even find the concept of dictatorship in the paternalism of Rousseau. Rousseau was aware of the problems of his theory he knew that ‘man was capable of legislating himself into a beast’ and that people, given absolute sovereignty had nothing and no one to prevent them from harming themselves. Rousseau’s answer to this problem was education, which would now be referred to by sociologists as socialization into what would be essentially a new society. ‘Generating freedom.... (by) penetrating a person’s will at his earliest age through religion and other kinds of appropriate education’ (Lively & Reeve, 1989: 135). Moreover, one aspect of totalitarianism that may arise from paternalism is a strong immovable executive. Talmon seems to think that Rousseau placed importance on a strong executive and uses Rousseau’s shaky notion of the executive putting only general questions to the sovereign to suggest this. However, Rousseau repeatedly asserts the total sovereignty of the people. It cannot be alienated, cannot be represented, is indivisible, and holds total power over the executive with the exclusive right to elect it and to dismantle it. The two questions asked to the sovereign at every assembly would be ‘does it please the Sovereign to preserve the present form of government’ and does it please the sovereign to leave the administration with those who are at the present charged with it?’ (Rousseau, 1947: 91). This is not symbolic of totalitarianism; it is the power of the people in the strictest sense. How can a state be totalitarian when it is fundamentally the unanimous construct of all the people? Talmon argues that it does not matter that the people are involved in politics when ‘they are accepting and endorsing something that is presented to them as a sole truth while believing that that is their free choice’ (Talmon, 1952: 47). Rousseau would have a lot to say about this position. Firstly, it would be unusual for the people not to follow their own choices when educated under *The Social Contract*. He specifically states that the general will can only be legitimate if deliberating on general issues, so the individual can deliberate on individual matters. Secondly, he would reprimand Talmon for suggesting that ‘liberty is safer in countries where politics are not considered all-important.... not so much direct democracy’ (Talmon, 1952: 47) because it was precisely Rousseau’s point that such a place as England where there is a representative elective aristocracy was not democratic and was certainly only nominally free. Where Talmon tries equality with totalitarianism to criticize Rousseau’s call for his equality; one has to mention that Rousseau never called for the total equality that Talmon envisaged in totalitarianism (not that these concepts have anything to do with each other). Rousseau called for more equality, whereby it would allow inequality in the interests of people’s dignity within society: ‘no citizen should be sufficiently opulent to be able

to purchase another and none so poor as to be forced to sell him' (Rousseau, 1947: 47). Totalitarianism constructs a being made up of the ideology of the party extended to all society far most important than an autonomous from the people within it. Rousseau's society, on the other hand, received 'each member as an individual part of the whole' (Rousseau, 1947: 15). Rousseau was not a totalitarian because, as he saw it when looking at any political system, one must 'always go back to a prior convention'. This means that, for example, before a people give themselves to a king, they must have formed a collective that reached unanimity on the decision to give themselves to that king (Rousseau, 1947: 14) as they would when articulating the general propositions of the general will. Indeed, under all systems there occurs the total alienation of all rights other than those prescribed by the state. However, in many modern and contemporary states, those rights are prescribed by the 'elective aristocracy' rather than the people. Indeed, Rousseau asks 'how can we be free yet conform to ideas that are not our own?' (Goodwin, 1982: 237). Whereas in totalitarianism, only the state can allow institutions to exist, for Rousseau only the sovereign, the people, can allow institutions to exist, rather than denying civil liberties, Rousseau set about constructing the blueprint for a system of ensuring the position of real liberty. While many have accused him of being totalitarian in his denial of natural rights, others may accuse him of being a realist, for he realized that people had already lost their natural rights, because of civil society. Rather than making an unrealistic attempt at turning back the clock or emphasizing abstract rights, Rousseau felt that the best method of ensuring justice and rights was to ensure independence and autonomy, to allow people to shape their destiny by way of political participation to prevent just the kind of tyranny that others accuse him creating.

5- Individual's Freedom, Civil Liberty, and Organizations

Regarding Rousseau's denial of group organization, again, his critics have been selective in their reading of Rousseau. Rousseau did not wish to prevent people from organizing autonomously as long as this organization did not dominate over the less powerful organization. He said 'when there are partial societies, it is politic to multiply their number that they may be all kept on equality' (Rousseau, 1947: 27). The idea of a big corporation expressing and being given political weight to sectional interests would be seen as unjust in Rousseau's eyes. It is in this light that one can see Rousseau's attempts to prevent the type of tyranny of the majority, or

minority that utilitarianism or dictatorship, respectively, bring about. For Rousseau, these were not just. It seems that one major aspect of totalitarianism or, indeed, totalitarian democracy is a constraint of some kind. Whether it is constraint by the state, by the government or by majority rule, or by a strong minority it usually means the individual being subservient to the state or the ruler(s). For Rousseau, however, the individual was the focus point. The individual can only live in a state of liberty in civil society if s/he is constrained by impartial laws, authorized by all, and applicable to all equality. It is by the general will that individual autonomy can be achieved. The general will reconciles social discipline with total individual liberty (Lively & Reeve, 1989: 109). Jack Lively and Andrew Reeve suggest that, although the general will have 'illiberal annotations as long as when persons follow the social rules set out in *The Social Contract*, it enhances individuals' freedom, there is no contradiction between the general will and freedom (Lively & Reeve, 1989: 110). Frederick. M. Barnard (1921-2011) a British political scientist writing in chapter three of Lively & Reeve's book mentioned above, set out Rousseau's problem of will and rationality. He recognizes the problems of reconciling paternalism with autonomy and the possibility of a 'serious threat to free choice'. Indeed, Barnard is quite justified in saying this. He certainly doesn't enter Talmon's rather weak, petty, critical psychoanalysis of Rousseau where he accuses him of being 'one of the most ill-adjusted and egocentric natures who have left a record of their predicament (Talmon, 1952: 38). Barnard points out the possible problems of *The Social Contract* and how could be interpreted and misinterpreted, as was Karl Marx's dictatorship of the proletariat which is a far more useful and acceptable critique than Talmon's (Barnard, 1989: 137-139). The American political theorist Sanford Lakoff argues that Rousseau did not favor direct self-government, as distinct from direct sovereignty. Although to a large extent he emphasized citizenship as a means by which people could exchange natural liberty for civil liberty. He adds that Rousseau 'may be considered a democrat to the extent that democracy means popular sovereignty (Lakoff, 1996: 104-105).

6- Conclusion

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was a leading contributor to the philosophy of the enlightenment and had a major effect on the causes and course of the French Revolution in 1789. Rousseau was a product of not a liberal society, but rather of the Ancient Regime (the old regime in France). He lived in the age of transition. The question for Rousseau is 'how to find a form of association

which will defend the person and goods of each member with the collective force of all, under which each individual while uniting himself with others, obeys no one but himself, and remains as free as before. The generalization of Rousseau's thought will always be problematic. Not only because, as mentioned above, one can find different meanings in his work depending on what one assumes before reading it, but also because Rousseau, for a philosopher, recognizes that not all situations are the same, in terms of geography, demography, climate, etc., and adapts his general theory as necessary. He suggests that every form of government would not be proper in every country, that there can be different types of the legislature, and that there can be different types of the executive. Rousseau can be accused of totalitarian leanings in his work. It is doubtless that one can arrive at totalitarianism if one emphasizes particular aspects of Rousseau's work in particular ways. However, if one expresses concern at the rule of unanimity, not only does Rousseau explain that only the major decisions have to be unanimous and that even Monarchic states must have had unanimity at some stage, but one would have to express the same types of concern about utilitarianism. It has to be remembered that arguably the two purist totalitarian regimes in the history of early twentieth-century Europe, the Italian Fascist state and the German Nazi state, were products of utilitarian democracy. Rousseau wanted justice, fairness, and liberty in civil society, which he didn't see existing. For Rousseau, existing civil society was not free; individuals were not free or independent. It was this that he aimed at rectifying and would never have consented to either individual being subjugated or any liberties being taken away other than those necessarily lost under civil society.

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