JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU

A DISCOURSE ON INEQUALITY

TRANSLATED, WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY
MAURICE CRANSTON

JOHN STUART MILL

UTILITARIANISM

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CONTENTS

Foreword 7

Introduction 9

Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality among Men 55

Rousseau's Notes 139

Abbreviations used in Editor's Introduction and Notes 173

Editor's Notes 175

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ROUSSEAU'S *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* is dedicated to the sovereign citizens of Geneva, and pays homage to that republic in language which some readers have considered suspiciously fulsome. Rousseau describes his native city-state as a republic ideal in size, a place where no man is above the law, where age and experience have mellowed the constitution and where the right to legislate belongs to all the citizens:

> The more I reflect on your civil and political arrangements the less can I imagine that the nature of human contrivance could produce anything better ... Your happiness is already achieved, you have only to know how to be satisfied with it ... You have no masters other than wise laws made by yourselves and administered by upright magistrates of your own choosing.[1]

These words may well sound strange to anyone familiar with Rousseau's *Letters from the Mountains*[2] in which he describes the regime in Geneva as an odious and lawless despotism, but it must be remembered that Rousseau wrote these *Letters* when he was aged fifty-two, in 1764, after he and his books had been outlawed by the authorities of Geneva, and after he had been amply briefed on the politics of Geneva by opponents, both moderate and radical, of the regime. Up to the age of forty-two, when he wrote his *Discourse on Inequality*, he was an uncritical patriot.

Geneva in 1712, when Rousseau was born there, was a singular political entity. With an entire population of little more than 25,000, it had been an independent nation for more than a century and a half, one of the few surviving city-states in an age of great kingdoms and royal absolutism. Although it was not an ancient republic like Venice or San Marino, or even a Free City within the Holy Roman Empire, the burghers of Geneva had already in the Middle Ages exploited the rivalry between their two feudal masters, the Bishops and secular lords of Geneva to secure themselves a large measure of civil autonomy. At the beginning of the fifteenth century when their secular lords, the Earls of Savoy, became Dukes and made strenuous efforts to assert their sovereignty in Geneva at the expense of the

1. *OC*, III, pp. 115–16. 2. *OC*, III, pp. 683–897.

Bishop, the Bishop made correspondingly generous offers to the burghers to win their support against the Duke. They backed him in return for a contract which recognized their General Council – the public assembly to which every citizen belonged – as the central legislative body of the city.[3] Thus, Geneva, while still a municipality, acquired the structures and some of the political experience on which an independent republic could be built.

But independence did not come until another century. The Dukes of Savoy, ambitious and successful monarchs, destined in time to assume the full majesty of Kings, continued to assert their claims to Geneva, even though its value as a prize diminished somewhat when it lost to Lyons its pre-eminence as a centre of international trade fairs and its prosperity and population declined in turn. The Dukes used cunning as well as force to uphold their sovereignty; from 1449 until 1522 they had a number of their own family enthroned as Bishop of Geneva to thwart the burghers' manoeuvres to pit one palace against another. Besides, not all Genevans objected to active Savoyard rule, which seemed to some to offer the only hope for economic renewal. Duke Philibert, who entered Geneva in person in 1501, introduced merriment and gaiety as well as more prosperity into the life of the city, and earned some genuine popularity.[4] There emerged among the burghers a faction known as 'Marmalukes', who supported the Savoyard connection; their opponents were called 'Eidgenots' because they favoured instead federation (*Eidgenossen*) with the neighbouring cantons of Switzerland. Neither party at that time – the earlier years of the sixteenth century – proposed what was soon to come about, the institution of Geneva as a fully autonomous republic.

Such an outcome was indeed unlikely to have been desired. For how could Geneva be expected to defend itself? It was not situated like San Marino on the top of a mountain, or surrounded like Venice by water; it was located at the foot of the Alps, accessible by all the roads that had once led to its fairs. If Geneva was no longer to be defended as part of the Duchy of Savoy, the sensible alternative was seen as developing from *combourgeoisie* with the neighbouring cantons of Berne and Fribourg into full membership of the Swiss

3. P. Bertrand, *Survol de l'histoire de Genève*, p. 44.

4. I. Spon, *History of Geneva*, p. 43.

Confederation. The Reformation thwarted this design; for Berne adopted the Reformed religion and Fribourg remained loyal to Catholicism, so that Geneva could not join one canton in its religious settlement without antagonizing the other. In the event, Berne, stronger in military force and offering more help to Geneva in its resistance to the Savoyards, prevailed over Fribourg.

It was in 1534 that the burghers of Geneva rid themselves at once of their Bishop and their allegiance to Savoy, and, by striking money, proclaimed themselves a state. When the Savoyards threatened invasion a year later, the Bernese offered the Genevans incorporation, like that of the *pays de Vaud*, under their government. The Genevans, having no wish to exchange the domination of Chambéry for the domination of Berne, refused; but since the Bernese troops were desperately needed, they could not decently refuse a rapprochement with Berne in the matter of religion, so they declared themselves Protestant, a move which also served usefully to justify the permanent exclusion of the Catholic Bishop. One result of this was to alienate not only Fribourg but all the other Catholic Swiss cantons, so that Geneva's adhesion to that Confederation was vetoed for generations to come. Geneva became an independent republic because it could not become (and did not become until 1817) a canton in Switzerland.

The Reformed religion did not appeal immediately to everyone in Geneva; there were those who felt closer to Fribourg, with its French-speaking Catholic culture, than to patrician, German-speaking Berne; many to whom the theology of Luther and Zwingli was altogether foreign. Providentially, from the point of view of the Reformed religion, a solution to this problem appeared in the person of Jean Calvin, a French theologian of undoubted genius, a great preacher and a systematic thinker, with a different set of Protestant ideas from those of Luther and Zwingli, and also a prophet in the style of Savonarola, with a similar dream of realizing on earth the dream of a truly Christian commonwealth. Here was a man to turn a political necessity into a spiritual achievement, a revolutionary man for a revolutionary moment, a practical visionary who could transform a medieval bishopric into a modern city-state, and reconcile Genevans to the Reformed religion by changing both, remodelling the doctrine and compelling every single inhabitant to stand up and

be converted. Rousseau thought of Calvin as a great Law-giver who had invented the constitution of the republic of Geneva, a founder like Lycurgus or Solon. If modern historians[5] see Calvin rather as one who adapted the traditional municipal institutions to serve the purposes of sovereign independence, Calvin's importance for Rousseau was governed by what he believed to have happened rather than what actually happened. There can be no doubting that Calvin was remarkably successful in presiding over Geneva's formative years as an autonomous state, and he owed his success in part to the lucky circumstances that throughout the years of his residence in Geneva – from 1536 to 1568 – the territories surrounding the city were occupied by Protestant Bernese troops, so that he was able to reorganize Geneva without hostile intervention by the Catholic Savoyards, whose forces at other times stood on the frontiers of the city.

Calvin was fortunate again in that the persecution of Protestants in France brought refugees sympathetic to his purposes into Geneva, which enabled him to enlarge with immigrants a roll of citizens which was diminished by his own harsh policy of expelling from the city all those native Genevans who resisted conversion to the Reformed religion. Geneva became almost as much as was Massachusetts afterwards a commonwealth of exiles united by a puritan ideology. The new men brought new trades, industries and wealth;[6] and Geneva became an industrial, financial and commercial metropolis. Calvin's academies and seminaries attracted scholars from all over Europe, and although one or two such visitors in Calvin's lifetime found that they had only exchanged one form of persecution for another – Michel Servet, for example, being burned at the stake for socinianism, and Jacques Gruet put to death for atheism – religious fanaticism died down as Geneva grew richer.

Calvin no less than Lycurgus and Solon was in Rousseau's mind when he wrote the famous chapter in the *Social Contract* on 'The Law-giver'; and the fundamental laws which Calvin drafted for Geneva were more than anything else the inspiration for the constitution of the republic which Rousseau sketches in that same book: indeed he says as much in his *Letters from the Mountains*, where he tells the

5. See, for example, *Histoire de Genève des origines à 1789*, Geneva, 1951.

6. Louis Binz, *Brève Histoire de Genève*, 1981, pp. 30–37.

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