

JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU

**A DISCOURSE ON
INEQUALITY**

TRANSLATED, WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY
MAURICE CRANSTON



JOHN STUART MILL

UTILITARIANISM

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A DISCOURSE ON INEQUALITY

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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

INTRODUCTION

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.

INTRODUCTION

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.

INTRODUCTION

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

INTRODUCTION

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 historians⁵ 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 re-organize 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.

INTRODUCTION

Genevans: 'I took your constitution, which I considered good, as my model for political institutions.'⁷ There were important differences between the forms of government laid down in the constitution and the ways in which eighteenth-century Geneva was actually run, and although Rousseau was acutely aware of these when he wrote *Letters from the Mountains*, we must remember that at the time he was working on the *Discourse on Inequality* he had not looked far behind the splendidly republican facade.

The main institutions of the Genevan system were the General Council, the Council of Two Hundred and the Council of Twenty-Five, modified forms of the municipal councils of the medieval bishopric. The General Council was composed of all the citizens and burgesses, that is, of every male person over twenty-five years old who had the right to be registered on the rolls. In principle this was the sovereign body of the state, with powers to make laws, to elect the principal magistrates, to approve or reject proposals concerning alliances, the raising of loans, the building of fortifications, the imposition of taxes and the declaration of war. It was required to meet twice a year for the election of magistrates, and otherwise whenever summoned by the Councils of Two Hundred or Twenty-Five. In the General Council there were no debates, and no measure could be initiated. Debates took place in the smaller councils, and the General Council voted mutely on proposals which issued from them. The Council of Two Hundred was designed not only to deliberate on policies to submit to the General Council, but to be the supreme court of justice, to have the power of pardoning, and to elect the Council of Twenty-Five. This Council of Twenty-Five was the executive instrument of the republic. Its members, elected from the ranks of the Council of Two Hundred, were members for life. It was formally responsible for all decisions that did not require the convocation of the Two Hundred; it had the power of judging all criminal causes (without the power of pardon, which the Two Hundred possessed), the hearing of all civil causes, the nomination of public servants, the administration of finances, together with the right to summon the Council of Two Hundred at its discretion

7. OC, III, p. 1660-61. Otherwise, Rousseau adds, his *Social Contract* would only have been another Utopia like Plato's *Republic* (see C. W. Hendel, *J.-J. Rousseau*, vol. II, p. 295).

INTRODUCTION

and to have all the principal magistrates chosen from its own ranks.

This distribution of duties was conceived by Calvin as providing a felicitous balance between the democratic element represented by the General Council and the aristocratic element represented by the life-tenured members of the Council of Twenty-Five, a balance which he considered advantageous from the point of view of the third, and to Calvin, the most important element in the state, the theocratic, represented by the Church and its institutions, the Consistory, which controlled people's morals by elaborate surveillance, the Company of Pastors and the Academy, which guided culture and opinion.

Between the middle of the sixteenth century, when Calvin reformed the constitution, and the early years of the eighteenth century, when Rousseau was born, a number of important changes took place in the city, and these changes were both political and social. Without any formal constitutional change, the powers of the Council of Twenty-Five became systematically enlarged at the expense of the Council of Two Hundred and even more at the expense of the citizenry assembled in the General Council.⁸ The Council of Twenty-Five came wholly to dominate the Council of Two Hundred, and in the end the General Council was summoned only to rubberstamp the decisions of the magistrates.

Social changes added a further dimension to these developments. Among the French and Italian Protestants who found refuge in Geneva were several from noble families who brought with them not only their wealth, but their assumed right to lead and rule. These families monopolized the places on the Council of Twenty-Five, and by excluding all others set up what was in fact the rule of a hereditary nobility – not an open and avowed patriciate like that of Berne, but a patriciate veiled by the ceremonies and styles and language of republicanism. What was not disguised was the social superiority of these patrician families, and Geneva being a city on a hill, they were able to proclaim their superiority by building their elegant houses on the upper levels around the Hôtel de Ville, while the humbler families crowded in wooden dwellings on the damp shores of the river and the lake.

Social change of another kind took place at about the same

8. René Guerdan, *Histoire de Genève*, Paris, 1981, pp. 155–66. See also J. S. Spink, *J.-J. Rousseau et Genève*, Paris, 1934, pp. 1–8.

period. The number of residents of Geneva who qualified as citizens became proportionately smaller as the population grew from about 13,000 in Calvin's time to 25,000 in Rousseau's. In the sixteenth century the great majority of male residents were citizens; by the eighteenth century the citizens constituted a minority. Only about 1,500 of the 5,000 adult males living in Geneva in Rousseau's time counted as citizens, the class to which Rousseau himself was proud by birthright to belong. The others were divided into various categories, not only excluded from civil rights and privileges, but denied access to all the most lucrative trades and professions in Geneva, including watch-making.

For reasons such as these there came to be a great deal of discontent beneath the almost utopian surface of appearances in Geneva.⁹ There were citizens who opposed the domination of their republic by the patrician families, and there were non-franchised inhabitants who opposed the monopoly of rights and privileges by the citizens.¹⁰ The movement of opposition to the patrician regime which developed among the citizens at the end of the seventeenth century was in many ways a Whiggish, or liberal, movement asserting the rights of the citizens in the General Council against usurpations of the patriciate in the Council of Twenty-Five. The leaders of this movement were themselves members of the patrician class; even so, two of them, Pierre Fatio and Nicolas Lemaître, were both put briskly to death by the government in 1707, five years before Rousseau's birth. Fatio had a following among citizens of humbler social status who lived in the lower reaches of the city. Such men were artisans,

9. G. Vallette, *J.-J. Rousseau, Genevois*, Paris, 1911.

10. It has been argued that these two centres of discontent combined to form an important popular and democratic force in eighteenth-century Geneva, based on the 'unity of the artisan class', and that Jean-Jacques Rousseau was nurtured in that intellectual environment, so that his political thought has to be understood against that background. The leading exponent of this theory is Michel Launay, who has set it out most fully in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Écrivain politique*, Cannes, 1971. This book owes some of its arguments to an unpublished Ph.D. thesis by Patrick O'Mara accepted by the University of California in 1952, 'Geneva in the Eighteenth Century', but in my view O'Mara's research does not bear out the conclusions that Launay draws from it. The opposition to the regime in Geneva was not as popular and democratic as Launay makes it out to be, and Rousseau was not influenced by it until the 1760s when, as author of *Émile* and *The Social Contract*, he was persecuted by the Genevan authorities.

INTRODUCTION

but they were in no way proletarian. As a result of Calvin's system of public instruction, the artisans of Geneva were educated; they could not only read, several of them possessed books by the great philosophers, historians and political theorists.¹¹ The typical Genevan watch-maker was '*petit-bourgeois gentilhomme*' who modelled his life-style on that of the Genevan patrician.¹² One such man situated between the patriciate and the unfranchised majority of inhabitants was Rousseau's paternal grandfather, David, a follower of Pierre Fatio. If we may use an anachronistic word and call Fatio's supporters 'liberals', David Rousseau is to be numbered among them. In the year 1690, after the victory of William III in the Battle of the Boyne, the 'liberals' of Geneva let off fireworks and lit bonfires in celebration; and we see from the records¹³ that David Rousseau is one of those accused of lighting a bonfire too close to the house of the French Resident and of thus giving offence to France. Some years later, when the dispute between the regime and the opposition became more acute, David Rousseau was deprived of the office of *dizenier*, that is, a subaltern of the militia who was also responsible for the surveillance of the people's morals in his quarter.¹⁴ He was hardly important enough to have been put to death with Fatio and Lemaître in 1707, but he was punished.

There is, however, no evidence to suggest that Rousseau's father Isaac shared the political sentiments of his grandfather David, and much to suggest that he had rather different opinions. At the time of the liberal agitation which culminated in the executions of 1707 Isaac Rousseau was abroad, having gone to work as a watch-maker in Constantinople in 1705. When he returned to Geneva in 1711, tranquillity had been restored, and there was little if any talk of rebellion.

One may wonder at the success of the patrician regime, but it is not unintelligible. The upper classes of Geneva did not quarrel among themselves, like those of Florence, to ruin the republic; they did not exploit the populace as did those of France; they made their fortunes

11. See O'Mara's thesis conserved in the Archives de l'État, Geneva.

12. See Charles Du Bois-Melly, *Les Mœurs genevoises du 1700 à 1760*, Geneva, 1882.

13. *Annales*, XVI, pp. 62-3.

14. See R. A. Leigh, *Annales*, 1979, pp. 106-7.

INTRODUCTION

from foreigners, by banking and commercial activity. Taxes were not only fair, but Geneva, unlike other city-states in Europe at the time, was solvent. Besides the excellent system of public education, the regime provided unusually effective welfare arrangements, and through the *Chambre de blé* assured food at fair prices when other places suffered the effects of bad harvests. The patricians of Geneva were honest, public-spirited and cultured. Nor were they without a certain cunning in forging alliances with the disfranchised majority of inhabitants against the 1,500 citizens. Pierre Fatio and his followers might claim that the law made the General Council the sovereign body of the republic, but the patriciate could reply that the law made the republic sovereign over itself, and that the law also made the Council of Twenty-Five the supreme authority of that republic, with power to decide not only on behalf of the minority on the citizens' roll but of the city as a whole; to this extent there was a 'conservative' as well as a 'liberal' ideology in Geneva.

Rousseau's father Isaac was a socially ambitious man who fretted against the constraints of the artisan's life. He married above himself socially, so that Jean-Jacques was born, not in the artisan parish of St Gervais where his father had been born, but in the elegant quarter near the Hôtel de Ville, in his mother's house. Although Rousseau's mother, born Suzanne Bernard, was not of the social and political élite from which the rulers of Geneva were drawn, she came from the academic élite which Calvin had elevated to a position of distinction which enabled its members to meet social aristocracy on equal terms. It was Suzanne's uncle, Samuel Bernard, a prominent theologian and scholar, who had bequeathed to her the handsome house in the Grand'rue where Jean-Jacques was born and the library which served to lay the foundation of his education, unusual as that education was.

A week after Rousseau's birth, his mother, already in her fortieth year, died of puerperal fever. In an early draft of his *Confessions*, Rousseau wrote 'I cost the life of the best of mothers',¹⁵ but in later versions he removed the hyperbole, doubtless realizing that no mother so soon dead could be the best of them. What perhaps he had done, and was certainly made to feel he had done, was to rob his father of the best of wives.

15. *J.-J.*, p. 13.