

Discourse on the  
Origin and Foundations of  
Inequality among Men  
by Jean-Jacques Rousseau  
with Related Documents

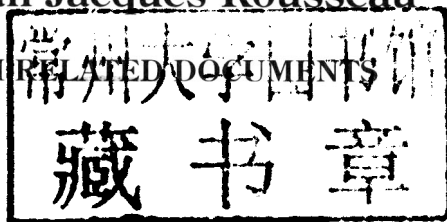
Translated, Edited, and with an Introduction by Helena Rosenblatt

THE BEDFORD SERIES IN HISTORY AND CULTURE

# Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men

by Jean-Jacques Rousseau

WITH RELATED DOCUMENTS



Translated, Edited, and with an Introduction by

**Helena Rosenblatt**

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## Foreword

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The Bedford Series in History and Culture is designed so that readers can study the past as historians do.

The historian's first task is finding the evidence. Documents, letters, memoirs, interviews, pictures, movies, novels, or poems can provide facts and clues. Then the historian questions and compares the sources. There is more to do than in a courtroom, for hearsay evidence is welcome, and the historian is usually looking for answers beyond act and motive. Different views of an event may be as important as a single verdict. How a story is told may yield as much information as what it says.

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## Preface

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This volume is dedicated to one of the most important texts in the Western political tradition: *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men*, by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, which is also known as the Second Discourse. In response to an essay question posed by the Academy of Dijon, Rousseau launched an assault upon the supposedly God-given social hierarchy of the time and questioned the superiority of civilized society. His work provoked the ire of fellow Enlightenment *philosophes* and alienated him from the intellectual world of Paris, yet later democratic and socialist leaders seized upon his assertions and elevated him as a champion of the people. Although Rousseau's ideas were all but dismissed during his lifetime, they ultimately transformed political thinking and helped inspire revolutions.

The Second Discourse will introduce students to Rousseau's radical perspective on concepts such as the state of nature, the social contract, and the general will, which have been essential to the development of modern democratic thought. Students will also encounter Rousseau's devastating critique of private property, which anticipated communism, and his attack on the values of modern "civilization," which is as thought-provoking today as it was in the eighteenth century. They will have the opportunity to grapple with the profound and timeless questions Rousseau raised: Who are we, and where do we come from? What does it mean to be a human being? Why is our society organized the way it is? Could and should it be organized differently? An accessible introduction describes Rousseau's background and life story in a way that illuminates his intellectual development and highlights some of his most radical and innovative ideas. In addition to examining Rousseau's political and moral thoughts, the introduction also addresses his scientific views, such as his perspectives on human evolution and gender, and the reaction to his later works.

Included in this volume are important related documents, including key excerpts from Rousseau's other masterpiece, *The Social Contract*,

which gives students a broader picture of his often paradoxical views. Other selections allow students to compare Rousseau with various great political thinkers. They include excerpts from Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, the divine-right theorist; Thomas Hobbes and Samuel von Pufendorf, two absolute monarchists; John Locke, the constitutional monarchist; and Benjamin Constant, the early-nineteenth-century liberal. Brief selections from George-Louis Leclerc de Buffon, the eighteenth-century scientist, and Maximilien Robespierre, the French revolutionary, are included to remind us of the scientific context in which Rousseau wrote and the political uses to which his ideas could be put. Each document is accompanied by an explanatory headnote that provides historical context as well as biographical information about the author.

At the end of the volume, instructors will find a chronology of the main events in Rousseau's life, a list of questions suitable for discussion or for writing assignments, and a selected bibliography with suggestions for further reading.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Lynn Hunt, who invited me to undertake this project, and also Mary Dougherty, Jane Knetzger, Heidi Hood, and Jennifer Jovin, who helped guide me through it. I am indebted to Shannon Hunt, developmental editor, who has been immensely helpful and pleasant to work with, and Nancy Benjamin for her meticulous care with the proofs. I am also grateful to those reviewers who read and commented on my first draft: Gregory Brown, University of Nevada, Las Vegas; Marybeth Carlson, University of Dayton; Patrick Coleman, University of California, Los Angeles; William Olejniczak, College of Charleston; Timothy Schroer, University of West Georgia; Charlie R. Steen, University of New Mexico; and K. Steven Vincent, State University of North Carolina at Raleigh. Finally I would like to thank Paul Schweigert, a student at the Graduate Center, CUNY, for his feedback on my introduction.

Helena Rosenblatt



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## A Note about the Text and Translation

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This translation is based on the Pléiade edition of Rousseau's *Oeuvres complètes* (vol. III, pp. 109–223), published in 1964 and considered the standard. However, I have also used the Heinrich Meier edition, which contains some important corrections. I have consulted, and learned much from, the translations and annotations of Julia Conaway Bondanella, Donald Cress, Victor Gourevitch, and Roger and Judith Masters, and I acknowledge my indebtedness to them here.

In my own translation, I have tried to stay as close to Rousseau's words and phrasing as possible. This is why I have left a few words or concepts in the original French. They are *amour de soi-même*, *amour propre*, and *mœurs*. Although *amour de soi-même* translates directly to “self-love,” there is no English equivalent for *amour propre*. As Rousseau explains in Note XV, *amour propre* is a “relative” and “artificial” sentiment, “born in society.” It is a socialized form of *amour de soi-même*. Although *amour propre* is sometimes translated as “vanity” in other English-language editions, Rousseau makes it quite clear that vanity is only one type of *amour propre*. For this reason, and in order to respect Rousseau's desire to contrast the two similar-sounding terms, I have left them in French. Neither is there a modern-day English equivalent for the eighteenth-century French word *mœurs*. To translate it as either “manners” or “morals,” as is often done, is to distort the meaning. The word refers to both manners and morals simultaneously—in other words, to beliefs and actions moderated by human customs.

When a second edition of the *Discourse* was published in 1782, Rousseau made a few changes to his text. Those passages appear in bold type. In the related documents, paragraph numbers have been omitted, capitalization has been modernized, and spelling has been Americanized.

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# Introduction: The Life and Thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Anyone asked to compile a list of the ten or even five most important philosophers in the Western intellectual tradition would almost certainly have to include Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). His influence on modern thought has been as broad as it has been deep, mainly because of the extraordinary range of his interests and talents. It would be hard to find another writer who made as many seminal contributions to as many different fields and in as many different genres. At various points in his life he distinguished himself as an essayist, composer, novelist, memoirist, and botanist.

But Rousseau's greatest and most enduring impact is undoubtedly as a moral and political thinker. It is as the author of the *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men* (1755) that he became known as a pioneer of modern individualism on the one hand and the spiritual father of socialism on the other. It is this text, along with his *Social Contract* (1762), that earned Rousseau a reputation for being the most egalitarian and democratic of all political theorists and a tireless champion of the poor, the downtrodden, and the oppressed. It is also in this essay that Rousseau delivered one of the most famous and enduring critiques of modern civilization.

Commonly referred to as the Second Discourse, it is probably Rousseau's most creative and radical work, and broadest in its range of

influence. Not only did it shatter the reigning political ideologies of his time, but it contained seminal contributions to fields in the natural sciences that were just beginning to emerge, such as linguistics, anthropology, sociology, and psychology. His work also anticipated the development of fields like evolutionary biology.

An extremely provocative text, the *Second Discourse* has always triggered strong reactions in readers. Since it first appeared more than 250 years ago, people have responded with emotions ranging from shock and outrage to fascination and quasi-religious reverence. Today, it continues to prod people to think—and to think deeply—about issues of perennial importance in both politics and the sciences.

## **ROUSSEAU'S BEGINNINGS: THE ROAD TO THE SECOND DISCOURSE**

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was born in Geneva on June 28, 1712, to Isaac Rousseau, a watchmaker and citizen of that city, and Suzanne Bernard Rousseau, his beautiful and much adored wife. Suzanne's family was wealthy and well connected, and thanks to her, the Rousseau family first lived in the elegant section of town.

During the Protestant Reformation, Geneva had renounced the Catholic Church and had embraced the theology and strict code of conduct advanced by John Calvin (1509–1564), a French exile in that city. At the time of Rousseau's birth, Geneva was an independent and Calvinist republic, and being a citizen of the city conferred substantial political rights and privileges. In contrast to France, which was ruled by a king who claimed absolute political authority, Geneva's ancient constitution was democratic.<sup>1</sup> Being Genevan was therefore a source of pride to men like Isaac Rousseau, who conveyed his republican and patriotic sentiments to his son. The religious and the political culture of Geneva left a lasting imprint on the young Jean-Jacques.

Very early in his life, however, Rousseau suffered a series of devastating losses that forged in him an acute sense of social and political injustice. His mother died nine days after his birth. Later his father ran into financial difficulties, forcing the family to move to the poorer section of town. Finally, Isaac Rousseau ran afoul of the law in a political squabble: After an altercation with a man who had political connections, Isaac was forced to leave the city at once or face jail. One can only imagine the effects these events would have had on his highly intelligent, and highly sensitive, young son.

Rendered a virtual orphan at the age of ten, Jean-Jacques was now consigned to his maternal uncle, who appears to have offered little in the way of parental affection or guidance. He was placed in the home of a country pastor, where he was reasonably happy. After two years his uncle tried to find him suitable employment, but twice these efforts failed. He was fired from his first job as a legal clerk on the grounds of "incompetence"<sup>2</sup> and soon became miserable in his second job as an apprentice engraver. It was not so much the work that disturbed him as it was his master's tyrannical and abusive behavior. Reduced to stealing food to quell his hunger, he was beaten regularly when his master found out.

Rousseau's unhappiness helps to explain an impulsive decision he made one Sunday evening in March 1728. He had acquired the habit of taking walks outside the city gates on Sunday afternoons. On that particular Sunday evening, he found the gates closed when he returned a bit late. Twice this had happened before and, each time, he had been punished severely by his master the following morning. This time, Rousseau chose to leave Geneva for good. He was only sixteen.

Penniless and without any connections, he wandered around the Genevan countryside for a few days, relying upon the hospitality of strangers. In an act of youthful rebellion, or perhaps out of enlightened self-interest, he converted to Catholicism at the behest of a sympathetic priest. The fact that he thereby forfeited his rights to Genevan citizenship did not deter him. He then led a vagabond life for several years, spending time in and around the provincial towns of Annecy, Chambéry, and Lyons. Forced to live on charity, or on the meager earnings provided by the occasional odd job, he suffered the frustrations and humiliations of being poor.

Eventually, in search of fame and fortune, Rousseau made his way to Paris. When he arrived in 1742, at the age of thirty, Paris was the dominant cultural force in Europe. Moreover, it was the capital of the Enlightenment, an exciting intellectual movement that promoted critical thinking and reform. On the cutting edge of this movement were the *philosophes*, a French term for the thinkers who wished to open people's minds, change the way they thought, and thereby improve society.

Despite his poverty and provincial background, Rousseau encountered early success in Paris. He gravitated to, and was accepted by, the *philosophes*. He frequented the fashionable salons and cafés where the latest, most progressive ideas were being discussed. He met and befriended Denis Diderot and got to know other progressive intellectuals, like Étienne Bonnot de Condillac; Friedrich Melchior, Baron von Grimm; and Jean le Rond d'Alembert.

But these continued to be difficult times for Rousseau. He was still poor and, like other struggling intellectuals, was constantly obliged to find work or wealthy patrons. He found the jobs he was forced to take degrading and the system that provided them exploitative and unfair. In his *Confessions*, an autobiography that he wrote much later in life, he remembered that all of these experiences had politicized him. A year spent as the secretary to the French ambassador in Venice had left in his mind a “germ of indignation against our stupid civil institutions in which real public good and real justice are always sacrificed.” His voracious reading during this period helped him to arrive at an important conclusion: “Everything depended on politics.”<sup>3</sup> When he returned to Paris, all he could see around him was “the oppression of the weak and the iniquity of the strong.”<sup>4</sup>

The years from 1744 to 1749 were especially difficult. Having to struggle against poverty in the midst of so much opulence made Rousseau feel “disgusted with society.” In texts written around this time, he described Paris as a “town where arrogance rules and where the virtuous poor are the object of contempt.”<sup>5</sup> In France’s capital city, learned men were being turned into “base parasites,” forced to sell their witticisms for a meal.<sup>6</sup>

During these hard times, Rousseau took comfort in his growing friendship with Diderot. The two men had much in common. Both were sons of craftsmen, both were from the provinces, and both were brilliant, yet struggling, *philosophes*. In 1747, Diderot began editing what would eventually become a crowning achievement of the French Enlightenment: the twenty-eight-volume *Encyclopedia, or Reasoned Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts and Trades*. Toward the end of 1748, he asked Rousseau to collaborate with him on this project. Rousseau would contribute many articles on music and one on political economy.

No wonder, then, that Rousseau was struck particularly hard when his friend was suddenly arrested and thrown in jail. Without warning, trial, or hearing, royal agents appeared on Diderot’s doorstep one morning in July 1749 and hauled him off to the fortress of Vincennes, where he was placed in solitary confinement. Diderot was arrested because some of his writings had offended the authorities. More specifically, his *Letter on the Blind* had questioned arguments traditionally made to prove the existence of God. Rousseau later described his emotional distress when he heard the news: “I nearly went out of my mind.”<sup>7</sup>

Due to the intercession of friends, Diderot was eventually allowed to receive visitors, and Rousseau began making regular trips to Vincennes. Each time, he traveled the six miles by foot. On one of those long walks,

he had a life-altering experience. He had brought along a copy of *Le Mercure de France*, a popular literary magazine. Pausing a moment to read it under a tree, he came across the announcement of an essay competition sponsored by the Academy of Dijon. The question posed was “Has the Restoration of the Sciences and the Arts Contributed to the Purification of Morals?” Years later, Rousseau remembered the emotions and ideas that suddenly welled up inside him as he read those words. He experienced an “illumination”: “I beheld another universe and became another man.”<sup>8</sup>

Today, the essay question posed by the Dijon Academy sounds fairly innocuous. It seems that contestants were being asked to consider whether the arts and sciences improve us morally. At the time, however, the question was a sensitive one politically. In essence, it invited people to evaluate the merits of the Enlightenment, a movement that many people worried was subversive of tradition. Diderot’s imprisonment for authoring “dangerous” texts exemplified this fear.

Under the circumstances, one might have expected Rousseau to jump at the chance to defend the Enlightenment. After all, he was an aspiring *philosophe* himself. Instead, he did something very different and thereby launched his career as an intellectual provocateur. His *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* attacked the Enlightenment head-on. He accused the movement of being frivolous, vain, and self-serving. Not only was the Enlightenment *not* promoting moral progress, Rousseau wrote, it was fostering the very opposite: moral and political corruption.

The essay, now known as the First Discourse, won first prize; and overnight, Rousseau became a celebrity. Many people were delighted and amused by his essay. They admired his writing style and thought the piece a kind of clever joke. Others were confused and angered. Nobody thought that Rousseau was serious. How could a contributor to the *Encyclopedia* deny the value of the arts and sciences? How could a *philosophe* attack the Enlightenment? Voltaire, the most famous *philosophe* of all, was outraged. At the time the essay appeared, he was living in Berlin, in the entourage of his patron, Frederick the Great. Voltaire wrote contemptuously, “I am hardly in a position, at the court of the King of Prussia, to read themes composed by school boys for prizes offered by the academy of Dijon.”<sup>9</sup>

Having not yet read Rousseau’s discourse, Voltaire probably did not realize how ironic his words were, since the essay contained a political message pointed directly at him. In essence, Rousseau accused the *philosophes* of flattering the rich and powerful and of thereby becoming the props of unjust and corrupt regimes. He singled out Voltaire for



special rebuke. Addressing him as the “Famed Arouet” (Arouet being Voltaire’s real name), Rousseau accused Voltaire of being more interested in his own fame than in anything truly worthwhile. In carefully chosen words and only slightly veiled allusions, Rousseau urged the *philosophes* to become more political. The recent intellectual revival, he wrote, only spread “garlands of flowers over the chains with which [men are] burdened.”<sup>10</sup> In one remarkable passage, Rousseau warned people that governments were only too glad to use the arts and sciences for their own sinister purposes:

Princes always view with pleasure the dissemination, among their subjects, of a taste for the agreeable Arts. . . . For, in addition to fostering in them that pettiness of soul so appropriate to servitude, they know well that all the needs that a People imposes on itself are so many chains that burden it.<sup>11</sup>

Rousseau’s First Discourse launched a debate that would rage for more than a year. Many people responded by defending the Enlightenment, learning in general, and the arts and sciences in particular. Rousseau was accused of being a hypocrite, a scoundrel, an irresponsible provocateur. When he went on to publish a play (*Narcissus*) and then composed a very popular opera (*The Village Soothsayer*), which was performed before the King himself, it only added to the controversy swirling around him. How could a man attack the arts and contribute to them at the same time?

Prompted by the criticism, Rousseau wrote several replies. He refused to back down. Instead, he began to refine his thoughts and deepen his analysis of what he increasingly saw as the political and social sources of society’s corruption. Simultaneously, Rousseau tried to reform himself, so that he might live according to his principles. He withdrew from fashionable society. He refused all gifts and patronage, choosing to earn a modest income as a music copyist. He became more and more estranged from his *philosophe* friends.

Then, in the fall of 1753, the Dijon Academy announced another essay competition. This time, the question posed was “What is the origin of inequality among men, and is it authorized by natural law?” Rousseau later recounted that he was “struck by that great question, and surprised that the Academy had dared to propose it.” He seized the opportunity to develop his principles “more fully” than he had until then.<sup>12</sup> The result was the *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men*.