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THE DISCOURSE ON INEQUALITY : A PRIMER FOR ANARCHISTS ?

Over the years it has become a commonplace to identify Rousseau as the "father" of a wide variety of political movements ranging from the most conservative or reactionary to the ultimate in radical reform. It is not surprising, therefore, that he should have been nominated by some writers as a major precursor of anarchism.¹ According to one authority, for example, "Among political thinkers of the very first rank, Rousseau comes closest to anarchism, and his influence on anarchist thinkers . . . was very great"² Another holds that "much else in Rousseau besides his resounding slogans anticipated the teachings of the anarchists."³ And yet another has observed that the "true eighteenth-century ancestor of anarchism . . . is Jean-Jacques Rousseau . . . ; it is Rousseau who created the climate of ideas in which anarchism was possible."⁴

Not everyone has subscribed to this view of Rousseau. Indeed, some of anarchism's leading lights at best were ambivalent towards his ideas and, at worst, rejected them

1. For my understanding of anarchism I have consulted the issue of *Nomos*, vol. 19, 1978, devoted to the subject, especially the articles by John P. Clark, "What is Anarchism?," pp. 3-28, and Donald McIntosh, "The Dimensions of Anarchy," pp. 239-272. I have also profited from Benjamin R. Barber, *Superman and Common Men. Freedom, Anarchy and the Revolution*, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971); April Carter, *The Political Theory of Anarchism*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971); James Joll, *The Anarchists*, (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964); John Passmore, *The Perfectibility of Man*, (London: Duckworth, 1970); Robert Paul Wolff, *In Defense of Anarchism*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1970); the introduction by George Woodcock to his edition of *The Anarchist Reader*, (Glasgow: William Collins, 1977), and Irving L. Horowitz's introduction to his edition of *The Anarchists*, (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1964). The only sources I have found dealing specifically with Rousseau and anarchism are Carmela Metelli Di Lallo, *Componenti anarchiche nel pensiero di J.-J. Rousseau*, (Firenze: La Nuova Italia Editrice, 1970), a work of which the title promises more than the text delivers, and the excellent article by Aaron Noland, "Proudhon and Rousseau," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 28 (1967), pp.33-54.

2. McIntosh, art. cit., p. 251.

3. Passmore, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

4. Joll, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

entirely. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, the founder of anarchism as a political ideal, who refers to Rousseau more frequently than to any other theorist, is quite inconsistent in his attitude, characterizing him, on the one hand, as "the apostle of liberty and equality," as a "great innovator" and an "admirable dialectician," while, on the other hand, attacking him as a "rhetorician," a "charlatan" and a "scoundrel," and asserting that "the Revolution, the Republic, and the people have never had a greater enemy than Jean-Jacques" who "did not understand either philosophy or economics."⁵ In a similar vein Michael Bakunin, the great Russian pamphleteer, described Rousseau as "the most pernicious writer of the 18th century, the sophist who inspired all the bourgeois revolutionaries."⁶

This mixture of admiration and scorn is due partly to inconsistencies and disagreements within the movement itself, and partly to the different interpretations placed on Rousseau's writings. The work most frequently criticized is the *Social Contract*, which goes to the very heart of the anarchists' attempt to establish individual freedom within a community. Proudhon praises the *Social Contract* for its analysis of the problem but finally rejects it because it incorporates "a permanent executive which by its very nature will tend to usurp power from the people legislating as a body."⁷ Some have seen the general will not as a liberating force but as the destroyer of individual freedom. George Woodcock, among others, has pointed out that Rousseau's "theory of a tacit social contract by which authority was established in ancient times and made binding on subsequent generations was especially repugnant to the anarchists with their concept of an unfettered future, and all the principal anarchist theoreticians from Godwin to Kropotkin criticized him unreservedly on this point."⁸

5. Noland, art. cit., pp. 36-37.

6. Quoted by Eugene Pyziur, *The Doctrine of Anarchism of Michael A. Bakunin*, (Chicago: The Henry Regnery Co., 1968), p. 54.

7. Carter, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

8. Woodcock, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-18.

But whether they be individualists or collectivists, whether they hold anarchism to be the complete absence of political authority or see it as compatible with a minimal form of government, whether they regard it as fundamentally a moral attitude or as a prescription for specific social, economic or political structures, anarchists generally agree on four basic principles that provide a definition of anarchism sufficiently flexible to allow for their many different theoretical approaches. In its broadest sense, then, anarchism contains: (1) a view of man as naturally social and cooperative; (2) a view of an ideal, noncoercive, nonauthoritarian society; (3) a criticism of existing society and its institutions; (4) a revolutionary strategy for radical change. It is not necessary for an anarchist to embrace all four principles but, the fewer he adopts, the more likely he is to become confused with proponents of other revolutionary movements.⁹

Despite their reservations about Rousseau, there is one work from which most anarchists have drawn inspiration, and that is the *Discourse on Inequality*, enshrining as it does the very essence of anarchism, from which all its other elements are derived, namely, the doctrine of the integrity of the individual. The purpose of this paper is to find out if the anarchists are justified in claiming the *Second Discourse* as part of their heritage, and I shall conduct the inquiry by examining to what extent the *Discourses* embodies some or all of the four principles outlined above.

Anarchists generally reject the Hobbesian view of human nature in favour of a more optimistic view of man as fundamentally gregarious and cooperative, and although this was not Rousseau's view there is little doubt that the anarchists were mainly inspired by what they mistakenly took to be his portrait of primitive man. As one authority puts it, "to the belief in the perfectibility of man and human institutions Rousseau added in particular the notion of the Noble Savage, a figure dear to all anarchists' hearts . . . The idea of a happy primitive world, a state of nature in which, so far from being

9. I am indebted to Clark, art. cit., pp. 16-17, for these principles which I have somewhat modified.

engaged in a struggle of all against all, men lived in a state of mutual cooperation, was to have a powerful appeal to anarchists of all kinds."¹⁰ Now there is no need to remind students of Rousseau that there was nothing noble about Rousseau's natural man, who lived originally not in a state of mutual cooperation but in complete isolation, and who had no notion of either happiness or unhappiness since no such ideas could occur in the absence of language and society. It is clear from this that the anarchists disregard the first part of the *Discourse* that is crucial to Rousseau's argument, and confine themselves to the portrait of the golden age in the second part. In fact, they do not accept Rousseau's contention that, in the beginning, man was solitary, nor are they necessarily committed to the thesis that man is naturally good. What they do profess is that man is naturally social and cooperative, and that "his natural form of social organization was that based on voluntary co-operation."¹¹

Rousseau's view of human nature is much more complex. While he is optimistic as far as the individual is concerned, he is pessimistic with regard to the fate of man in society. He talks about "la perfection de l'individu et . . . la décrépitude de l'espèce," (*O.C.*, III, 171) a distinction quite alien to anarchist theory. And this pessimism of Rousseau's operates even in the golden age of civilization, by virtue of the formation of families, "une première révolution . . . qui introduisit une sorte de propriété, d'où naquirent déjà bien des querelles et des combats." (III, 167) The establishment of the basic social unit of the family, so integral to man's development, also gave rise to *amour-propre*, to competition, to love with its concomitant jealousy — "C'est donc une chose incontestable que l'amour même, ainsi que toutes les autres passions, n'a acquis que dans la société cette ardeur impétueuse qui le rend si souvent funeste aux hommes." (III, 158) If Rousseau sees any hope for mankind, it is because of the individual's instinctive compassion that causes him not to love his brother but to feel for him. It is not sufficient for

10. Joll, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

11. Woodcock, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

man to be good, for goodness is a passive quality. Pity, on the other hand, is active and, despite ourselves, prompts us to reach out to our fellow men. Without this instinct, this saving grace, the species would have long since died out: "la pitié est un sentiment naturel qui, modérant dans chaque individu l'activité de l'amour de soi-même, concourt à la conservation mutuelle de toute l'espèce. C'est elle qui nous porte sans réflexion au secours de ceux que nous voyons souffrir." (III, 156) Now this anti-Hobbesian notion of pity as the foundation of society has no counterpart in anarchist theory nor, for that matter, in any other political theory, and it is one of Rousseau's most original contributions to the idea of a democratic community.¹² In short, then, the anarchist's optimistic view of human nature finds only partial support in the *Second Discourse*, where the prospects for the regeneration of the individual seem decidedly bleak.

As to the second principle of anarchism, a view of an ideal society, the *Second Discourse* has nothing explicit to offer. One has to wait for the *Emile* and the *Social Contract* for Rousseau's carefully worked out view of how things ought to be. Whether he ever believed they really could be that way is another matter. However, the *Discourse on Inequality* does contain a brief sketch of a hypothetical stage of man's early development that embodies the nonauthoritarian, noncoercive characteristics of the anarchist dream. I refer to the moment in time that Rousseau calls "l'époque la plus heureuse et la plus durable . . . la véritable jeunesse du monde." This period represents neither the pre-social state of nature nor a fully developed society but a transitional stage "entre l'indolence de l'état primitif et la pétulante activité de notre amour-propre." (III, 171) Here the individual is free, independent and self-sufficient. His simple requirements are perfectly in harmony with his capacity to satisfy them without the help of others. He proceeds at his

12. For the importance of Rousseau's view of compassion see Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Jean-Jacques Rousseau, fondateur des sciences de l'homme," in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, Neuchâtel: La Baconnière, 1962, pp. 239-248; Allan Bloom, "The Education of Democratic Man," *Daedalus*, (Summer 1978), pp. 147-150; and, for a more comprehensive view of the role of compassion in political theory, see Clifford Orwin, "Compassion," *The American Scholar*, vol. 49 (Summer 1980), pp. 309-333.

own pace in his own time. Indeed, the concept of work has not yet appeared on the scene. In short, this primitive society is little more than a loose collection of families with no social structure other than proximity to bring them together. It is important to emphasize here that, though Rousseau's portrait of the so-called noble savage may owe something to the works of the baron de Lahontan, whom he read,¹³ it is quite different in purpose. Lahontan's emphasis is on the threat posed to the culture of the North-American Indians by the arrival of the white man. For this reason he depicts the natives as extremely hostile to the Europeans, much as Diderot later did in the *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*. For example, the frontispiece to Lahontan's *Nouveaux Voyages en Amérique Septentrionale* displays a militant savage, armed with a bow and arrow, with one foot resting on a book of laws and the other on a crown and sceptre. The Latin legend beneath states *Et leges et sceptrum terit*, i.e., he tramples on the laws and the sceptre. Clearly, this is a far cry from Rousseau's idealized, pacific primitive who, in the frontispiece to the *Second Discourse*, shows himself to be confidently impervious to European influence.¹⁴

Rousseau has also another view of an ideal society deriving not from a hypothetical stage of prehistory to which, in any case, there is no going back, as he pointed out in his letter to King Stanislas after the publication of the *First Discourse*,¹⁵ but from documented accounts of Sparta, "cette république de demi-dieux," and Rome, "ce modèle de tous les peuples

13. Rousseau refers to Lahontan in the controversy with Christophe de Beaumont, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. IV, p. 1030.

14. J. E. Roy, "Le Baron de Lahontan," *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, 1st ser., XII, (1894), pp. 63-192, speaks of Lahontan's "doctrine anarchiste," and refers to an engraving that depicts "l'anarchie sous la figure d'une femme dont toute l'attitude annonce la fureur; elle foule aux pieds le livre de la loi et un faisceau de baguettes, symbole d'union; d'une main elle brandit un poignard et de l'autre une torche allumée; à ses côtés gisent un sceptre brisé et un joug rompu." See p. 80 of the introduction to Lahontan's *Dialogues*, (Montréal: Éditions Élysée, 1974), in which Roy's article is reproduced. For the explanation of Rousseau's frontispiece see Note 16 to the *Second Discourse*.

15. "... on n'a jamais vu de peuple une fois corrompu, revenir à la vertu ... en vain même vous ramèneriez les hommes à cette première égalité ... leur cœurs une fois gâtés le seront toujours; il n'y a plus de remède. ..." (III, 56)

libres," (III, 12 and 112) which, by the very fact that they did exist and did survive for centuries, may legitimately be considered as guides to the future. Anarchists, by contrast, have no models to look back on for guidance. It is true that the idea that man can live best without being ruled may be traced to Greek and Chinese philosophy, and that opposition to temporal authority is found in a number of heretical religious sects such as the thirteenth-century Waldensians in northern Italy and southern France who made a cult of poverty, or the Albigensians who rejected all earthly values, or the revolutionary Anabaptist movement of the Reform.¹⁶ Certainly the opposition to authority gained momentum as the French Revolution drew nearer, but no really international anarchist movement was established until the nineteenth century, by which time, as a result of the experience of the French Revolution, the republican cause was no longer espoused. We may conclude, therefore, that the anarchist view of an ideal society does not have its counterpart in the *Discourse on Inequality*.

Where Rousseau and the anarchists come closest together is on the third principle, the criticism of existing society. The critique begins in the *First Discourse* where modern man, in contrast to prehistoric and historic counterparts, is depicted as weak, effeminate, insincere, a slave to opinion, and so on. The attack is conducted on mainly moral terms and demonstrates how man's physical and spiritual decline is a direct result of the progress of his scientific and artistic activities. It is worth noting here that although in the early days of the movement anarchists displayed a certain ascetism of outlook, nowadays most do not reject modernity or the idea of progress. Rather it is the criticism of society in the *Second Discourse* that most appeals to the anarchists. Here the indictment is set out more in political and economic than moral terms. The origins of alienation, coercion and authoritarianism are traced to the introduction of private property that Rousseau, in the subsequent *Discourse on Political Economy*, paradoxically describes as "le plus sacré de tous les droits des citoyens, et plus important à certains égards

16. For details of these heretical movements see chapter one of Joll, *op. cit.*

que la liberté même." (III, 263) According to Rousseau the downfall of man came about through two deceptions. The first was when some individual fenced off a piece of land and claimed it as his own, and found others naive enough to believe him. The second was when the rich and powerful tricked the people into accepting laws and institutions ostensibly for their safety and protection but, in reality, for their enslavement. Whatever reservations the anarchists may have about Rousseau's account of how man lost his freedom, they all subscribe to the vitriolic assault on contemporary society that closes the *Discourse on Inequality*, an assault in which the total subjection of modern man is contrasted with the independent, carefree existence of the self-sufficient Carib who lives in peace and harmony with nature. To sum up, Rousseau and the anarchists are in agreement that "something is rotten in the state of Denmark" and their diagnoses of what is wrong are remarkably similar.

When it comes to the fourth and final ingredient of anarchism, a strategy for radical change, Rousseau's influence is much more difficult to define. The problem is to determine to what extent the *Second Discourse* is a revolutionary document. At first glance the answer seems quite simple since, at the end of Note IX, Rousseau appears to reject categorically all thoughts of an uprising and a return to the state of nature:

Quoi donc! faut-il détruire les sociétés, anéantir le tien et le mien, et retourner vivre dans les forêts avec les ours?... Quand aux hommes semblables à moi... qui sont convaincus que la voix divine appela tout le genre humain aux lumières et au bonheur des célestes intelligences... Ils respecteront les sacrés liens des sociétés dont ils sont les membres, ils aimeront leurs semblables et les serviront de tout leur pouvoir; ils obéiront scrupuleusement aux lois, et aux hommes qui en sont les auteurs et les ministres; ils honoreront surtout les bons et sages princes qui sauront prévenir, guérir ou pallier cette foule d'abus et de maux toujours prêts à nous accabler; ils animeront le zèle de ces dignes chefs, en leur montrant, sans crainte et sans flatterie, la grandeur de leur tâche et la rigueur de leur devoir: mais ils n'en mépriseront pas moins une constitution qui ne peut se maintenir qu'à l'aide de tant de gens respectables, qu'on désire plus souvent qu'on ne les obtient, et de laquelle, malgré tous leurs soins, naissent toujours plus de calamités réelles que d'avantages apparents.

What could be more reasonable, more evolutionary rather than revolutionary, than this programme and strategy for social reform? And what a marked contrast its moderate tone offers to the bitter rhetoric of the *Discourse* itself! One cannot help wondering why Rousseau chose to relegate this crucial proviso to a note to which he ostensibly attached little importance¹⁷ instead of incorporating it in the body of the text as a kind of palliative to what otherwise frequently reads almost as an incitement to riot. After all, the account, however hypothetical, of how men were duped and enslaved by a phony social contract is a clear call to the reader to compare the present state of affairs with Rousseau's account of the past and the prospects for the future.¹⁸ The class system with its inherent privileges and deprivations, the chasm between rich and poor, the luxury and the starvation entrenched so long ago, are more in evidence than ever. The inevitable conclusion is that even if Rousseau were wrong about the aetiology of this pernicious disease his diagnosis was correct, and a remedy had to be found. However moderate Rousseau's attitude appears in the Note, then, his uncompromising exposé of the evils of society completely overwhelms the reader.

And who are the readers to whom this *Discourse* is dedicated? None other than the Conseil général, i.e. the citizens of Geneva, that oligarchy masquerading as a republic, that country in which a handful of men ruled in absolute authority over the people who, twice already in the eighteenth century, had unsuccessfully risen up against their oppressors, and who would use Rousseau's later condemnation by the authorities as an occasion for renewed efforts to overthrow

17. In the *Avertissement sur les Notes* Rousseau writes: "J'ai ajouté quelques notes à cet ouvrage selon ma coutume paresseuse de travailler à bâton rompu. Ces notes s'écartent quelquefois assez du sujet pour n'être pas bonnes à lire avec le texte. Je les ai donc rejetées à la fin du Discours. . . . Ceux qui auront le courage de recommencer, pourront . . . tenter de parcourir les notes; il y aura peu de mal que les autres ne les lisent point du tout."

18. "Mécontent de ton état présent . . . peut-être voudrais-tu pouvoir rétrograder; et ce sentiment doit faire l'éloge de tes premiers aïeux, la critique de tes contemporains, et l'effroi de ceux qui auront le malheur de vivre après toi." (III, 133)

the régime.¹⁹ There are some critics who take Rousseau's dedication at its face value, accepting literally his lavish praise of the Genevan republic, on the grounds that he was unaware when he wrote the *Discourse* of the real situation in his native land.²⁰ But recent scholarship, as well as a close reading of Rousseau's own account of the publication of the *Discourse*, has shown convincingly that Rousseau was well acquainted with Genevan politics through his friend Lenieps, a Genevan exile living in Paris.²¹ We are justified, then, in reading the dedication as a thoroughly ironic and bitter indictment of the system. Why else was Rousseau so devious about its publication? Discussing the affair in the *Confessions* Rousseau says "Comme cet ouvrage était dédié à la République, et que cette dédicace pouvait ne pas plaire au Conseil, je voulais attendre l'effet qu'elle ferait à Genève avant que d'y retourner. Cet effet ne me fut pas favorable, et cette dédicace, que le plus pur patriotisme m'avait dictée, ne fit que m'attirer des ennemis dans le Conseil, et des jaloux dans la bourgeoisie." (I, 395) If it be objected that this account was written years after the event, one has only to read between the lines of Rousseau's letter on the subject, written in November 1754, at the time of the publication of the dedication, to appreciate the revolutionary intent of his text.²² Finally, the dedication is written throughout with considerable use of the conditional mood: "Si j'avais eu à choisir le lieu de ma naissance . . . , j'aurais choisi . . . , j'aurais voulu . . . , j'aurais cherché . . . , j'aurais désiré," and so on. The inference is that had Geneva really been a republic Rousseau would have wanted to live there. In short, then, the *Second*

19. For the most comprehensive account of eighteenth-century Geneva and its influence of Rousseau see Michel Launay, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau écrivain politique 1712-1762*, (Grenoble: ACET, 1971).

20. See, for example, the comments of Jean-Louis Lecercle in his edition of the *Discours sur l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, (Paris: Éditions Sociales, 1965), p. 47, note 2.

21. See Ralph Leigh's edition of Rousseau's *Correspondance complète*, vol. II, letter 167 to which Leigh appends a biography of Lenieps.

22. Leigh, *op. cit.*, vol. III, letter 258. See especially Leigh's astute comments in the "Notes explicatives."

Discourse is decidedly militant in tone, indeed it is, in my view, the most revolutionary of all of Rousseau's writings. It certainly fulfills the anarchist call for change but offers no explicit programme or strategy for bringing it about. When, in later works, such as the *Social Contract*, he does offer solutions, they are not the ones preferred by anarchists.²³

To sum up, of the four principles of anarchism identified at the beginning, the *Second Discourse* seems to embody only one, a criticism of existing society. There is no view of an ideal society unless one counts the loose aggregation of families that constitute the transition from the pre-social to the social stage. But this is a stage to which there is no return. The ideal society of the anarchists is in the future, whereas in the *Second Discourse* it is over and done with. Rousseau's view of human nature in the individual may be said to be optimistic but his portrayal of society and its future is decidedly pessimistic. There is in the *Discourse* an implicit call for radical change but no programme or strategy for effecting it. And even the call for change does not envisage the destruction of the state but rather the elimination of the class system so that equality can be restored. In most respects, then, as has often been observed, the *Second Discourse* is much more a primer for socialists than for anarchists. The anarchists may look back to Rousseau but he certainly did not look forward to them.

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23. Cf. Wolff, *op. cit.*, p. 57: "The problem remains, that those who submit to laws against which they have voted are no longer autonomous, even though they may have submitted voluntarily. The strongest argument for the moral authority of a majoritarian government is that it is founded on the unanimous promise of the obedience of its subjects. If such a promise may be supposed to exist, then the government does indeed have the moral right to command. But we have discovered no moral reason why men should by their promise bring a democratic state into being, and thereby forfeit their autonomy." For a recent discussion as to whether or not Rousseau was a revolutionary see Arthur M. Melzer, "Rousseau's 'Mission' and the Intention of His Writings," *American Journal of Political Science*, 27 (1983), pp. 294-320.