



Rousseau:

The Fall of Man and the Rise of the Free Market

By: Bob Layson

"The masses of men are very difficult to excite on bare grounds of self-interest; most easy if a bold orator tells them confidently they are wronged." **Bagehot**



What are the spiritual costs of material gain? What becomes the nature of a people whose historical development has been within a system of private property, production and exchange?

Although Rousseau, when not seeking to placate the Church, denies the fall of man, he plainly considers that man is not the man he was, and if no wise legislators can be found to prevent it, man is like to go from bad to more so. And why? Because "reason has succeeded in suffocating nature" and simple natural man has become 'artificial' man. Man, who originally thought little - and thought not at all of what others might think of him - is now so civilised, and the being that was content to 'live within himself' has degenerated into a creature of habit, custom, fashion and opinion: an off the-peg 'unique individual' who, for all his selfishness, has neglected to think for himself

"...social man lives always outside himself; he knows how to live only in the opinion of others, it is, so to speak, from

(others) judgement alone that he derives the sense of his own existence." (2nd Discourse, 11)

Yet was this not inevitable? Given that man makes himself up as he goes along, and knows not where he is going or what he will like when he gets there, is he not doing as well as can be expected? As Rousseau rightly says in the first part of the Discourse:

"The beast chooses or rejects by instinct, man by an act of freewill, which means that the beast cannot deviate from the laws which are prescribed to it, even when it might be advantageous for it to do so, whereas a man often deviates from such rules to his own prejudice."

Of all the animals man is the one that, from the moment of birth, has the most need to learn. Man has no instinctual drives to lead him on the path to utility, and almost all he knows he has been taught: how to hunt, how to gain shelter, how to court - even how to procreate - all these means to grow and multiply are socially produced and transmitted. Alone of all the animals, or so it seems, man invents and consciously adapts his way of living, and if he finds a better way rejects the old. With other animals the 'deselection' process operates by way of death and failure to reproduce. With 'natural selection' as Darwin originally called the same thing, new ways of behaving arrive with their new owners, and the bad, or less useful, fixed ideas and old ways are killed off with the bodies they were fixed in. Man's way is quicker and is truly one of selection. Rousseau sees that this is so yet cannot but regard man's gift as an almost unmixed curse:

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"...this distinguishing and almost unlimited faculty (self-improvement) of man is the source of all his misfortunes; that it is this faculty which, by the action of time, drags man out of that original condition in which he would pass peaceful and innocent days; that it is this faculty, which bringing to fruition over the centuries his insights and his errors, his vices and his virtues, makes man in the end a tyrant over himself and over nature." (2nd Discourse, I)

Rousseau's analysis of man the maker and man the educator is an entirely correct one though manifestly incompatible with his fantastic hypothesis of original man as solitary and independent, living a life quite without pictures or conversation. Man is now, and has ever been, gregarious and language using. He originally lived not alone and in the forest, subsisting on nuts and berries, but on the contrary, on the plains living in family groups and stuffing himself intelligent on plenty of fresh meat. Yet whatever the truth of the matter, and the evidence does not support Rousseau's hypothesis, it must be stressed that from an historical 'was'-whatever it was - one cannot derive a political 'ought'. Man remains in his unique predicament: devoid of instinct and in need of a good idea - or at least a useful practice. Which brings us to private property.

Private Property and Progress

Man is the maker of his own 'natural' way of living - in that man invents the means whereby each generation lives and replaces itself - yet also man knows not where he is tending: are these assertions as incompatible as they appear? Indeed not, and for the reason given by Marx - and here paraphrased: man succeeds as best as he knows how in the circumstances, and in so doing both adds to his knowledge and changes the circumstances. For man, a problem solved is but a problem generated. And

the first man to plant a fence-post, and have it acknowledged by his neighbours, was the creator though he could never have foreseen it - of the rich crop of companies, corporations, and city businesses that now adorn the land. Speaking of that happy and longest epoch when, though there was private property, each man worked primarily for himself, and all obtained a sufficiency and none had more than enough, Rousseau regretfully concludes:

"Things in this state might have remained equal if talents had been equal ... but this equilibrium, which nothing maintained, was broken: the stronger did more productive work, the more adroit did better work, the more ingenious devised ways of abridging his labour.... It is thus that natural inequality merges imperceptibly with inequality of ranks, and the differences between men, increased by differences of circumstance, make themselves more visible and more permanent in their effects..." (2nd Discourse II)

In other words, and setting aside the effect of invasion, domination, taxation and privilege, nation states and landed estates, there is within the market system an inherent tendency towards capital accumulation and extremes of individual and family income. And Rousseau is entirely right: the market system knows no equilibrium: it is essentially dynamic and destructive of all settled ways and establishments - including the 'idiocy of rural existence'. Something that was planned by no one. and yet was the result of individual problem solving invention, came to 'dominate' everyone: a vast network of human interdependency was evolved; in which the material activity of each made possible, and necessary, the material activity of all. Though it is, of course, 'necessary' for humans to engage in some material activity, under the rule of the market they are drawn - as if by a progressive Scotsman - into loss-avoiding economisation of resources.

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And all this from the founding of a legal right to freely transferable property. But to whose advantage? Rousseau was in no doubt:

"Such was, or must have been, the origin of society and of laws, which put new fetters on the weak and gave powers to the rich which irretrievably destroyed natural liberty, established for all time the law of property and inequality, transformed adroit usurpations into irrevocable right, and for the benefit of a few ambitious men subjected the human race henceforth to labour servitude and misery". (2nd Discourse II)

(Not to mention the 35 hour week, advanced dentistry and cheap copies of Rousseau's major works.)

Even allowing that market making property rights were the creation of the rich and powerful - although there is good reason to believe that the landed and established actually looked upon them as a dangerous innovation - and were intended to make exploitation all legal and proper, one may yet ask whether that was their long-run consequence. Corruption and ruination, says Rousseau. But Rousseau, as Adam Smith observed in his review, is after literary effect and a cold calculation of the costs and benefits of economic development might well cramp his style and quite spoil the sermon.

Competition and Human Improvement

Despite the mere moralising that fills much of Rousseau's Second Discourse it is undeniable that his depiction of the corruption caused by prolonged public exposure to the concentrated spirit of enterprise is one that many political thinkers have echoed. Let his (paraphrased) indictment of the 'enterprise culture' be placed before us:

"Society corrupts all who enter into it. Society, far from ending the war of all against all, makes perpetual struggle inevitable. Society, modern unstable capitalist society, leads each man to seek to best his neighbour - to do down before being done down. Social living makes for anti-social behaviour. Where personal interests clash people will do likewise: the moneylender prays for drought and the farmer prays that the moneylender might drown. Society reduces honesty to 'efficient PR'; seeming is placed before being, and profit before everything. Social living encourages competitive display and conspicuous consumption - and not only in minor romantic poets."

In short, and the quote derives from Rousseau's note (1):

"Admire human society as you will, it is nonetheless true that it necessarily leads men to hate each other in proportion to the extent that their interests conflict, and to pretend to render each other services while actually doing each other every imaginable harm. What is one to think of a system in which the reason of each private person dictates to him maxims contrary to the maxims which the public reason preaches to the body of society, a system each finds his profit in the misfortunes of others?"

A bleak picture indeed. It would be hard to think of anything worse. But we do not need to, for we have Rousseau's alternative: personal independence plus state administered allocation of duties and distribution of favours; favours, and honours, not scattered about by the blind action of market forces - which recognises only successful exploitation-but distributed by the all-seeing and far-sighted state to those that dutifully serve. Not that Rousseau was a socialist., he was but confused - which is a start in the left direction. Neither did Rousseau advocate a return to man's original state of innocence and simplicity. Such a thing, because of the nature of man as he

now is, with his passions and knowledge of the truths of revealed religion, is quite impossible. No, Rousseau's ideal society was one in which almost all men were economically independent, with income derived from their own 'sacred' plot of land, and, withal, an elected authority that showered favours and honours - pensions and perquisites - upon those most serviceable to the state. Such as those, presumably, that got the authority elected.

So concludes Rousseau, so counters Voltaire "ape of Diogenes. how you condemn yourself". 'Well said Voltaire', a certain F. Nietzsche might add, for it is all too humanly possible that Rousseau's entire motive in inventing a state that never was and desiring a state that -as he wanted it - never could be, was to denigrate, slander and vilify the society that surrounded him. He may indeed have wanted the raising of the poor and weak but only if this required what he longed for; the humiliation of the high, mighty and so-called successful.

The immediately above being so much speculative biography, and therefore worthless in theoretical argument, we need an analysis of market-based society that is almost contrary to that of Rousseau but somewhat closer to reality.

Competition and Progress

Voltaire - "*What, can you not see that mutual needs have done it all.*" (Marginal note of Voltaire's on the Second Discourse.)

All modern advanced societies are founded on the basis of a worldwide system of market relationships and simply could not survive upon any other. All state 'provision', intervention and let's-pretend Socialism is parasitic and likewise depends on functioning markets: external and internal, 'shadow' and real, legal and illegal. And so far from it being the case that competition leads to the

triumph of private over public interest, it is precisely the state-backed banishment of competition that marks the victory of sectional producers' interest. Nor can one say that, illegal damage to person and property aside, one man's gained advance is equalled by another man's - or other men's - loss of income: profit comes from giving the public what it wants cheaper than anyone hitherto knew how to give it thereby releasing scarce human resources for other forms of output. It is no less wrong to suppose that individualistic competition puts a premium on fraud and deceit. How can it when people would pay competitive rates to have such things hunted down and exposed? Honesty is not only a fine policy, it is good for profits; it is an economic good, short in supply and much in demand.

Rousseau was wrong to imagine that the discipline of a free market is an encouragement to antisocial activity. It is, in fact, the market - with its promise of reward and threat of loss - that determines the citizen to actually do what otherwise he might only acknowledge ought to be done: it drives a man to sobriety, punctuality, diligence and, I fear not to say it, thrift. Some, of course, will attempt to get through theft and fraud what they cannot be bothered to win through honest toil, but that is just old Adam and he will be found in every conceivable society. Even under socialism some variety of 'reeducation' - voluntary, involuntary, and by the neck - would inevitably be required. Markets are not perfect; they are made up, after all of agents who do not know everything - including themselves. Yet it would be foolish to suppose that State displacement of the market either does or is even intended to improve the work that markets 'imperfectly' perform.

(For Rousseau's works see, *A Discourse of Inequality*, edited by Cranston; *Political Writings*, edited by Watkins.)

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