

The Social Contract and The Discourse
on The origin Inequality
of Jean-Jacques Rousseau
Raphael Descartes M. Roldan

The Social Contract

Imagine yourself driving your car in a road without traffic rules; there is a high probability that you will commit an accident. It would be highly probably that someone might hit you or you hitting someone without traffic rules. These traffic rules govern the road and guide those vehicle drivers for a safety sojourn. Without these traffic rules, you would see vehicles crashing into one another. Casualties could shoot up and more lives would be taken away.

There are certain rules that govern a system. A system might be political, industrial or relational. Political systems are systems that define a particular type of government. Democracy for example is a type of government; it is a political system that believes that the majority rules a certain country. A country has a system as a form of government that defines how a certain societies should function or react on national issues and agendas.

A country without a political system cannot be considered a country since it is one of the elements that defines what a country is. A country is defined as having the following elements: People, government, territory and sovereignty. A country has people that reside in a territory, guided by a government and in which sovereignty resides in the people. If one of these elements went missing, a country cannot be considered to be so. These elements are essential for a country to be a country.

"My design in this treatise is to enquire whether, taking men such as they are, and laws such as they may be made, it is not possible to establish some just and certain rule for the administration of the civil order. In the course of my research I shall endeavour to unite what right permits with what interest prescribes, that justice and utility may not be separated."¹

The above-mentioned paragraph is taken from a book titled "The Social Contract" written by the eighteenth century philosopher named Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The first book in his work is an inquiry whether there are laws that govern social order given the nature of human beings. Human beings are naturally seeking for things that are beneficial, Rousseau wants to investigate whether there are laws that are just at the same time does not divorce itself from man's own interests.

Freedom is one of the most coveted existential state of man. Man does not want to be put in a rectangular cage; he doesn't want to be detained. Man does not want to be chained; he doesn't want to feel the

¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, Edited by Charles Frankel, (New York: Hafner Press 1947), 5.

rusty metal clinging to his ankles or neck. History can always point out that man always struggles to be free from anything that suppresses them. In Marxist terms, "The history of hitherto existing societies is a history of class struggles."² Being caged or chained is a state of being oppressed; man always abhorred oppression if it is not in his favor.

"Man was born free, and yet we see him everywhere in chains. Those who believe themselves masters of others cease not to be even greater slaves than the people they govern."³ Rousseau presents in book one of his work that each one of us were born without chains on our neck or ankles. We were born free yet we exist in this world in such a way that somehow we are constrained. The very feeling of being constrained by some force is being in the state of being deprived of one's own liberty.

What does Rousseau mean of freedom? We define freedom as a state of being free from constraint, oppression or suppression. It is a state where an individual can do things he wants without consequences. It is solely different from being determined where one is programmed to do things without his true consciousness being aware of it. But Rousseau does not about metaphysical freedom but political freedom.

Rousseau, furthermore elaborates his claim of other people being superior than others. People who plant in their consciousness that they are greater than others does not stop being slaves than those they control. The capacity to control people marks that an individual has the ability to manipulate an individual. The individual who has the capacity to manipulate is considered to be superior. Rousseau says that if an individual thinks that he is superior to others, he does not cease to be an equal to those he manipulates.

Force is defined as a "coercion or compulsion, especially with the use or threat of violence."⁴ Rousseau says that if force makes people automatically obey, then it serves its purpose but if makes people divorce themselves from their yokes then it has served beyond its purpose. It is justified when people use force to break away from their yoke and it is unjustifiable when people use force to restrain others.

Nevertheless Rousseau says, "But the social order is a sacred right which serves as a basis for all other rights. Yet this right comes not from nature; it is therefore founded on conventions."⁵ Rousseau says that social order is a sacred right because everyone benefits from it. Social order is the state of a peaceful society wherein everyone contributes for its perpetuation and in where all citizens benefit from

²Karl Marx and Fredrich Engles, *The Communist Manifesto*, (New York: Washington Square Press 1964) 57.

³ Ibid, *The Social Contract*, 5.

⁴Oxford Dictionary of the English Language, "Force," (New York: Oxford University Press 2005, 67.

⁵ Ibid, *The Social Contract*, 6.

it. Rousseau says that social order does not come from human nature. If then it is not founded on human nature it is founded on societal standards. Rousseau further on exposes the products of force in a political society.

"The earliest and the only natural societies are families: yet the children remain attached to the father no longer than they have need for his protection. As soon as that need ceases, the bond of nature is dissolved."⁶ Rousseau says that the families are the earliest societies contrary to what Aristotle said that,

"It is evident, then, that a city is not a community of place; nor established for the sake of mutual safety or traffic with each other; but that these things are the necessary consequences of a city, although they may all exist where there is no city: but a city is a society of people joining together with their families and their children to live agreeably for the sake of having their lives as happy and as independent as possible:"⁷

Aristotle says that a family composes a society but is not a society itself. Rousseau says that when the dependence of the children and the father disintegrates, both parties are freed from each other but when both parties are independent from each other but still choose to live together, Rousseau says that it is a choice that manifests freedom.

Furthermore, Rousseau talks about the right of the strongest. "The strongest are still never sufficiently strong to ensure them continual mastership, unless they find means of transforming force into right, and obedience into duty."⁸ An individual who has the capacity to manipulate others is not adequately strong all the time, unless he shifts the force into right and makes obedience as duty. In Plato's dialogues, Thrasymachus defines justice as, "nothing other than the advantage of the stronger."⁹ When a strong individual imposes that authority is his right, it becomes just for his subject to be him. Obedience then is imposed as a duty towards those who are inferior.

To continue, Rousseau then talks about slavery. "Since no man has any natural authority over his fellows, and since force produces no right to any, all justifiable authority among men must be established on the basis of conventions."¹⁰ Individuals in the society are principally equal. Since equality is a principle among all men, no individual has

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Aristotle, *Politics: A Treatise on Government*, Trans. from Greek by Willam Ellis, (London: J M Dent and Sons 1912), 220.

⁸ Ibid, *The Social Contract*, 8.

⁹ Plato, *Plato: Complete Works, "The Republic,"* Edited by John M. Cooper, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company 1997) 983.

¹⁰ Ibid, *The Social Contract*, 9.

any right to subjugate or force another individual. Authority towards others is justifiable in conventions, which means that those who are under an authority benefit and the authority is given to the individual through a democratic vote.

Rousseau further on explains on the following book the principles of convention. These principles laid out by Rousseau presents the social pact's consequences towards the population. The individuals in a society agree upon certain rules that would be followed by all. One has to submit himself to the laws that were agreed among the individuals. These individuals compose laws that would fit into their interests.

In the case in our country, the lawmakers formulate laws that would be scrutinized thoroughly in order to avoid flaws. The laws should be processed thoroughly in order to avoid the favor of the few versus the majority. Citizens should abide by the law that was formulated by elected leaders since these elected leaders stand as representatives of those who voted for them. Voting individuals to hold authority on others requires a contract that has to be kept.

Rousseau in his second book says that individuals conglomerate to form a society. This society is bound by contracts, these contracts are what we call laws that govern the society. Aristotle once said, "and that man is naturally a political animal, and that whosoever is naturally and not accidentally unfit for society, must be either inferior or superior to man: thus the man in Homer, who is reviled for being "without society, without law, without family."¹¹ Individuals conglomerate together to form a society because they are dependent on each other.

Human nature as what was stated above seeks for his comfort and benefit. Individuals conglomerate to form a society for their own benefit and protection. Nevertheless, by submitting oneself to a society means to surrender ones personal liberty. One cannot behave in a manner that is not suited in civil society since there are moral standards that the society needs to follow; there is a point of reference of morality in the society to avoid chaos which is threatening and which human nature avoid. Individuals in a society trade their liberty to protect their liberty as what Rousseau say, "Every man has a right to risk his own life for the preservation of it."¹²

Thus Rousseau explores the social pact. The social contract is an agreement of individuals in the society. Individuals conglomerate to form a society to protect their interests. Individuals are stripped off of their liberty to protect their own liberty. By submitting oneself to the social pact, the individual loses a liberty but his liberty is being protected by the social pact.

¹¹ Ibid, Aristotle, *Politics: A Treatise on Government*, 49.

¹² Ibid, *The Social Contract*, 31.

Discourse on the Origin of Inequality

Karl Marx in his "Communist Manifesto" exposed his idea of socio-economical inequality between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. The first paragraph, he said, "A specter is haunting Europe, the specter of Communism. All the powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this specter; Pope and Czar, Metternich and Guizot, French radicals and German police spies."¹³ Karl Marx in his writings exposed the capitalist as an oppressive system.

In Karl Marx's work "Capital" he talks about the labor value as the true value of the commodity. The commodity is the atom of the capitalist system. Capitalist system as we have stated above is an oppressive system that only the bourgeoisie benefit from the labor of the proletariat. "Capital is dead labor which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks."¹⁴ Capitalism creates inequality because it creates a class among individuals in the society.

Our society today suffers inequality among individuals. The world today does not offer equal opportunities to people. We can see people on the streets famished; on the other hand we can see people in restaurants eating more than they can swallow. Even Aristotle agrees that men were not born equal, Rousseau cited his work saying, "Aristotle had said, before any of them, that men are not naturally equal, but that some are born for slavery and other for dominion."¹⁵ One may ask where does this inequality come from?

In the first part of Rousseau's work, he mentions that there are two kinds of inequality. "I conceive two species of inequality among men; one which I call natural, or physical inequality, because it is established by nature, and consists in the difference of age, health, bodily strength, and the qualities of the mind, or of the soul; the other which may be termed moral, or political inequality, because it depends on a kind of convention, and is established, or at least authorized, by the common consent of mankind."¹⁶

Natural inequality as what is stated above is established by nature. When it is established by nature, it is principally natural. A natural species of inequality covers the physiology of a human being. When we talk about the physiology of the human being we talk about his body, health and capacities. Nature endowed human beings with natural corpus that is tangible and subject to change yet nature did not distribute

¹³ Ibid, *The Communist Manifesto*, 5.

¹⁴ Karl Marx, *The Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume I, Translated by Ben Fowkes, (England: Penguin Books 1976) 781.

¹⁵ Ibid, *The Social Contract*, 7.

¹⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Major Political Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Two Discourses and The Social Contract*, Translated and Edited by John t. Scott, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2012) 220.

abilities equally.

Nature bestowed on human beings unequal bodily capacities. Some human beings have high resistance to cold or warm temperatures. Some human beings are more cerebral than performing activities that require strength. Each human being is endowed with different capacities that differentiate one from the other. The very fact that all of us human beings have different capacities and abilities show that we can be differentiated from one another. The very act of differentiation and abstraction, is an evidence that all of us are unequal.

On the other hand, there is another species of inequality Rousseau identified. He says that the population is unequal in terms of political or moral state. When we talk about the political state authority comes into our mind. In the political sphere people are unequal because each individual has a role in the society. Roles are hierarchized. If roles are hierarchized it means that it is unequal.

Political inequality is caused by convention. Convention is a repeated pattern of the society; it is a standard that should be followed. These standards are manifested through the law. The law as what we have said earlier comes from authorities that were elected by the people to represent them. In the political sphere, those in authority are unequal to those who are subject to their authority that shows inequality in the political sphere.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in his second book, talks about the origin of inequality among men. He begins saying, "The first person who, having enclosed a plot of ground, thought of saying this is mine and found people simple enough to believe him was the true founder of civil society."¹⁷ The very first individual, he says, that made a claim was honored to be a founder of civil society. Civil Society has very much loved the concept of property. But what is a property?

We define property as, "an object owned by an individual who has authority over it." Property caused inequality to societies. It has made individuals unequal because of the socio-economic conditions. Going back to Marx, socio-economic conditions makes people unequal, the more property one possesses the richer the individual is, the more superior he is to other. Property forms a class in the society that brings oppression to those who do not possess any property. But where does this thirst for the accumulation of property stem?

The thirst for this endless accumulation of wealth comes from the human nature. Human nature is insatiable; it does not have any concept of contentment. Humans are naturally seeking for endless pleasure. This endless seeking for pleasure jeopardizes others by way of man seeking only what is good for oneself and not of others.

Thus, the origin of inequality stem from the nature man. Man is naturally insatiable. His insatiability jeopardizes others; thinking only of his own benefit. Man wants to accumulate property in order to perpetuate his needs. His needs that are insatiable create inequality

¹⁷ Ibid, *The Major Political Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Two Discourses and The Social Contract*, 295.

among men.