

POLI 342: MODERN WESTERN POLITICAL THOUGHT

Session 9– . JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU'S
SOCIAL CONTRACT (PART 2)
(1712-1778)

Lecturers: Dr. E. Aggrey-Darkoh,
Department of Political Science

Contact Information: eaggrey-darkoh@ug.edu.gh



UNIVERSITY OF GHANA

College of Education

School of Continuing and Distance Education

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Session Overview

Welcome to session 9: Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Social Contract Part 2. Session 8 provided the necessary foundation for this session. I know you paid particular attention to that session. In this session, our focus is on the origin and causes of Inequalities among men. Specifically the session deals with the motives for the discourses on inequality, the examination of inequality, the origin of the state and the conditions of man in civil society. Please pay attention as we take you through the concluding thought of Rousseau.

Session outline

This session covers the following topics:

- The motives for the discourses on inequality,
- The examination of inequality,
- The origin of the state and
- Man in civil society.

TOPIC ONE

The Motives for the Discourse on Inequality

The Objectives of the Discourse on Inequalities among Men

- The objectives of the *Discourse* are to:
 - examine the foundations of inequality among men,
 - determine whether this inequality is authorized by natural law.
- Rousseau attempts to demonstrate that modern moral inequality, is unnatural and unrelated to the true nature of man.
- To examine natural law, it is necessary to consider human nature and explain how this nature has evolved produce modern man and modern society.

The Objectives of the Discourse on Inequalities among Men (cont'd)

- The *Discourse* attempts to trace the psychological and political effects of modern society on human nature
- It also shows how these effects were produced.
- Rousseau demonstrates that human evolution and the development of inequality between men are closely related.
- Rousseau diagnoses the problem with modern political institutions.
- He later attempted to resolve this problem in the *Social Contract*.

The Objectives of the Discourse on Inequalities among Men (cont'd)

- The *Discourse* was originally written as an entry for an essay competition run by the Dijon academy of Arts and Sciences in 1754.
- The essay question was "***What is the origin of inequality among men, and is it authorized by the natural law?***"
- Rousseau had won the competition in 1750 with his *First Discourse* (on the Arts and Sciences).
- He failed to win a prize with this second discourse
- However, its publication won him an important place in history of philosophy.

The Objectives of the Discourse on Inequalities among Men (cont'd)

- Rousseau attempts to trace man back to his natural state.
- At heart, the *Discourse* is a guess, an exercise in conjecture and reconstruction.
- Rousseau's central idea that people exist within an ever-increasing system of needs and that the opinion of others is vitally important is true even today.
- It is evident in our lives.
- When you look in the mirror to check your appearance, or wonder about how popular you are, or what your friends think of you, you are taking part in a process described perfectly by Rousseau.
- The idea that modern life is imperfect and unequal was not an idea invented by Rousseau.
- Rousseau presents a fascinating argument for how inequality came to manifest itself.



TOIC TWO

Inequality Examined

The Conception of Inequality Among Men

- Rousseau begins by twisting the prize question towards his own particular agenda.
- Rousseau asks another, related question: “***how can one know inequality without knowing man***”?
- To answer this question we must not consider man as he is now, deformed by society, but as he was in nature.
- Progress drives man as a species further from its original condition in the state of nature.
- As knowledge increases, so our ignorance of the true nature of man increases.

The Conception of Inequality Among Men (cont'd)

- At the moment, ignorance of the nature of man casts uncertainty over the nature of natural right.
- Rousseau provides a brief account of natural rights and natural law.
- A second problem arises; if we are uncertain about what the terms *nature* and *law* mean, how can we define the natural law that is supposed to authorize inequality?
- We must return to the problem of the real nature of man.
- If we are ignorant of man's nature, it is impossible to tell whether the definition of natural law we decide on fits with that of nature at all.
- To be a law, it has to be agreed to "knowingly" (rationally), and to be natural it must "speak with the voice of nature."

Types of Inequality

- According to Rousseau, there are two types of inequality:
 - *natural (or physical)* and
 - *moral*.
- Natural inequality stems from differences in age, health, intelligence and the capacity for reason.
- Moral inequality is established by convention or the consent of men.
- Rousseau asks how inequality in society: that is, how power and hierarchy began to operate amongst men?



TOPIC THREE

The Origin of the State

Foundation of the State

- Rousseau claims that he perceives two basic principles that exist "prior to reason"—(before man is deformed by society and rationality).
 - *self-preservation and*
 - *pity.*
- From these principles, natural right flows.
- Man's duties are not dictated to him by reason alone, but by self-preservation and pity.
- Therefore a man will not harm another sentient (pain-feeling) being unless his own self-preservation is at stake.
- The duty not to harm others is based not on rationality but on sentience, the state of being able to feel.
- According to Rousseau, this solves the age-old question of whether animals participate in natural law.
- Animals are not rational and cannot have any part in a natural law.
- As sentient beings they take part in natural right, that is, they feel and are the subjects of pity.
- This gives animals, at least, the right not to be mistreated by man.

The Foundations of the State (cont'd)

- The study of natural man, is the only way to clear up important issues such as the origin of moral inequality and the foundations of the "body politic" (the state).
- Without such a study, the foundations of modern society seem shaky and insecure.
- Rousseau argues that we can better appreciate "him whose beneficent hand" steered us away from the worst disorders.

The Foundations of the State (cont'd)

- Natural rights are not granted or instituted by society, but are created by God or Nature.
- Similarly, natural laws are rational regulations that compel all people to act in a certain way, and are generally seen as commands from God or Nature to be obeyed by man.
- Hence the prize question Rousseau is answering is about whether God or Nature commands that people should be unequal.
- An example of a natural law is the command to seek peace with other people at every opportunity.
- An example of a natural right is the right to self-preservation.
- Natural right and natural law are not interchangeable, but together were often seen as providing a basic framework of rights and duties of a political society.

The Foundations of the State (cont'd)

- The point is to avoid conflict by establishing an uncontroversial basis for people to join together.
- No one can agree on what rights and duties were natural or basic.
- Modern thinkers believe that only a rational creature can have natural rights.
- This represents a raw deal for the animals.
- Rousseau argues that natural man and animals are, in fact, alike.

Power and Hierarchy Among Men

- Equally important is Rousseau's rejection of "facts," by which he principally means the Biblical account of Creation.
- In the eighteenth-century the major problem faced by any thinker trying to write a history of human nature and humanity was the authority of Scripture.
- This approach allowed him to discard the Biblical account and work with other materials, such as anthropological studies.

Power and Hierarchy Among Men (cont'd)

- Rousseau says that he has dwelt on man's beginnings because he feels he needs to "dig at the root"
- He shows that in the genuine state of nature inequality has less influence than writers claim.
- It is easy to see that many differences between people result only from habit and the different lifestyles men adopt in society.
- Natural inequality increases as a result of instituted inequality.
- It would be hard to make savage man understand what domination is, or to make him obey you.
- Ties and servitude are formed solely by men's mutual dependence and the reciprocal needs that unite them.
- It is impossible to subjugate a man without placing him in a position where he needs another.

Power and Hierarchy Among Men (cont'd)

- Inequality is scarcely perceptible in the state of nature.
- These were contingencies that made man wicked whilst making him sociable.
- The first man who enclosed a piece of ground, and then said, "this is mine," and then found enough gullible people to believe him, was the true founder of civil society.
- People would have stopped many crimes and miseries if they had prevented him from taking that land.
- Things back then had reached the point of no return.
- Much progress had been made before this last stage of the state of nature.

Power and Hierarchy Among Men (cont'd)

- The condition of nascent man was simple:
 - His first care was for **self- preservation**.
 - He had few needs apart from **food, rest and sex**.
- Man scarcely dreamt of exploiting or profiting from Nature. However, difficulties soon arose.
- Man had to become agile, run, fight and overcome the obstacles of Nature.
- Difficulties multiplied as man spread.
- Different climates produced different lifestyles.
- As man learnt to hunt animals, he began to consider himself preeminent among species.
- This was the beginning of pride in himself as an individual.
- Savage man was solitary, but gradually began to see similarities between himself and others.
- Man was in a position to judge when he should cooperate with others

Power and Hierarchy Among Men (cont'd)

- Initial progress became more rapid.
- Men discovered tools, and how to build huts.
- This was the first "revolution," which led to the establishment of families and a sort of property.
- Conjugal love resulted from families living together.
- Each family was like a small society.
- Women became sedentary and stayed at home while men foraged.
- The sedentary individuals became less able to resist wild beasts, but better at co-operating to fight them.



TOPIC FOUR

Man and Civil Society

Conditions in Civil Society

- Men enjoyed a great deal of leisure in this new state.
- They acquired new conveniences that weakened their bodies and minds, and which turned into needs.
- Men were unhappy to possess these needs, but equally unhappy to lose them.
- Various natural catastrophes made language increasingly necessary.

Conditions in Civil Society (cont'd)

- Mankind became more settled.
- Nations eventually formed.
- Conjugal love increased, as did ideas of merit and preference.
- Jealousy eventually developed together with love, and discord triumphs.
- Songs and dances in villages led to comparison amongst people.
- This was the beginning of inequality and vice.
- As soon as men began to appreciate each other, civility and consideration became important.
- Contempt for another became a serious offense.
- This is the state of contemporary savage peoples, which makes people think that man is naturally cruel and needs political order to survive.
- In reality, nothing is as gentle as a natural man.

Conditions in Civil Society (cont'd)

- Early society was different from the state of nature.
- However, it was the happiest epoch:
 - representing a middle way between the indolence of the state of nature and
 - the activity of *amour propre* (an acute awareness of, and regard for, oneself in relation to others).
- It was the state with least revolutions, and the best time for man.
- Subsequent progress was a step towards the perfection of the individual, and the decrepitude of the species.

Conditions in Civil Society (cont'd)

- As long as men applied themselves only to one-man tasks, they were free and healthy.
- The moment when one man needed the help of another and one man wanted what was enough for two, equality disappeared.
- Work became necessary and oppression developed.
- This second "revolution" was caused by metallurgy and agriculture.
- The division of land followed its cultivation; from property came the first rules of justice.
- It is impossible to conceive of early property other than in terms of man's labor.
- Labor gives a right to land, which is transformed into property.
- Things could have remained equal in this state if talents and the use of resources had been equal.
- Natural inequality imperceptibly unfolds together with unequal associations
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Conditions in Civil Society (cont'd)

- Human faculties were now fully developed. *Amour pro per* (an acute awareness of, and regard for, oneself in relation to others) and reason were active, and the mind was almost at the limit of its perfection.
- From this arose cunning and all the vices.
- Man was now subjugated by a multitude of new needs, but especially by his need for other men.
- In fact, man became a slave to men when he tried to be their master.
- Domination became the only pleasure of the rich.
- The breakdown of equality led to a state of war.

Conditions in Civil Society (cont'd)

- In response, the rich developed the best trick ever invented:
 - to persuade the weak to unite with them into a supreme power to institute rules of justice and peace.
- Little was needed to convince such crude and easily seduced men.
- All ran towards their chains in the belief that they were securing their freedom.
- Those who did realize the nature of the trick thought that they could trade part of their freedom for security.

Conditions in Civil Society (cont'd)

- This was the origin of society.
 - It irreversibly destroyed natural freedom,
 - fixed the laws of inequality and property, and
 - turned usurpation into right.
- All men were subjugated to servitude and labor for the profit of a few.
- Multiplying societies soon covered the globe; the law of nature was left only in the relationship between nations.
- Great national wars occurred.

Conditions in Civil Society (cont'd)

- The political state remained imperfect because it was the product of chance.
- It is obvious that people gave themselves to their leaders to defend their freedom.
- It is wrong to argue that people have a disposition for servitude because they may have forgotten what freedom is like.
- One should not look to slave societies to prove this, but free ones.
- The idea that civil society is derived from paternal authority is wrong; rather, paternal authority derives from civil society.
- The voluntary establishment of tyranny is also impossible.
- It is impossible to have a contract that gives one of the parties nothing, and which involves giving away your freedom.

Conditions in Civil Society (cont'd)

- The establishment of the body politic is a contract between the people and the leaders it chooses.
- The people unite their wills into one; the collective will develops laws, and one of these laws regulates the selection and power of the leaders.
- If these laws were destroyed, the magistrates would lose their power, and the people would have no obligation to obey them.
- The state would dissolve, and people would revert to their natural freedom.
- This is possible because, in the absence of a higher power to enforce the contract, the people remain the sole judge in their own case.

Forms of Government

- Different forms of government derive from the original differences between individuals.
- If one man was preeminent, then a monarchy was formed;
- If several predominated, then an aristocracy was formed;
- The states that stayed close to the state of nature formed democracies.
- All magistracies were at first elective.
- Then the selection process led to strife and civil war, so hereditary government was instituted.
- This is how leaders came to see the people as their property.
- If you follow the progress of inequality, you find that
- (1) the establishment of law and property was the first stage
- , (2) the institution of monarchy the second, and
- (3) the conversion of legitimate to arbitrary power the last.

Forms of Government

- The first stage authorizes the state of rich and poor;
 - the second, the state of powerful and weak; and
 - the relationship of master and slave.
- The same vices that make institutions necessary make their abuse inevitable.
- Laws contain men without changing them; a country where no men broke the law would not need laws

Conclusion

- Rousseau concludes that:
 - inequality has its origins in the rise of reason and enlightenment;
 - That it is legitimated by laws and property;
 - It is against natural law unless it is related to physical inequality.
- All the threads of Rousseau's argument—critique of man, human development, and modern society—are drawn together at this point.