

The Sovereignty of the People

Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) was one of the most perceptive, influential, and controversial figures of his age. He was born in Geneva, Switzerland, and led a poor, unhappy, and unsettled existence. He was erratic, socially awkward, and suspicious. Sooner or later he quarreled with everybody, including the philosophes.

Rousseau believed that man's natural virtues had been corrupted by society and civilization. Realizing that a return to primitive existence was impossible, he yearned to establish a form of society in which natural freedom could be most nearly approximated. He put great emphasis on the authority of a community of equals willed into existence by all its members, and he believed that only such a community could provide liberty, good laws, and the happiness that come from the respect of citizens for each other.

As the eloquent spokesman of the sovereignty of the people, he was revered more than any other writer by the revolutionaries in France. The *Social Contract*, his most famous work, was written in 1762.

Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains. One thinks himself the master of others, and still remains a greater slave than they. How did this change come about? I do not know. What can make it legitimate? That question I think I can answer.

If I took into account only force and the effects derived from it, I should say: "As long as a people is compelled to obey, and obeys, it does well; as soon as it can shake off the yoke, and shakes it off, it does still better; for, regaining its liberty by the same right as took it away, either it is justified in resuming it, or there was no justification for those who took it away." But the social order is a sacred right which is the basis of all other rights. Nevertheless, this right does not come from nature, and must therefore be founded on conventions. Before coming to that, I have to prove what I have just asserted.

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The most ancient of all societies, and the only one that is natural, is the family: and even so the children remain attached to the father only so long as they need him for their preservation. As soon as this need ceases, the natural bond is dissolved. The children, released from the obedience they owed to the father, and the father, released from the care he owed his children, return equally to independence. If they remain united, they continue so no longer naturally, but voluntarily; and the family itself is then maintained only by convention.

This common liberty results from the nature of man. His first law is to provide for his own preservation, his first cares are those which he owes to himself; and as soon as he reaches years of discretion, he is the sole judge of the proper means of preserving himself, and consequently becomes his own master.

The family then may be called the first model of political societies: the ruler corresponds to the father, and the people to the children; and all, being born free and equal, [give up] their liberty only for their own advantage. The whole difference is that in the family, the love of the father for his children repays him for the care he takes of them, while in the State, the pleasure of commanding takes the place of the love which the chief cannot have for the peoples under him. . . .

The problem is to find a form of association which will defend and protect with the whole common force the person and goods of each [member] and in which each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone, and remain as free as before. This is the fundamental problem of which the *Social Contract* provides the solution. . . .

Each man, in giving himself to all, gives himself to nobody; and as there is no associate over [whom] he does not acquire the same right as he yields others over himself, he gains an equivalent for everything he loses and an increase of force for the preservation of what he has. . . .

Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will, and in our corporate capacity, we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole.

At once, in place of the individual personality of each contracting party, this act of association creates a moral and collective body, composed of as many members as the assembly contains voters and receiving from this act its unity, its common identity, its life, and its will. This public person, so formed by the union of all other persons, formerly took the name of *city*, and now takes that of *republic* or *body politic*; it is called by its members *State* when passive, *Sovereign* when

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active, and *Power* when compared with others like itself. Those who are associated in it take collectively the name of *people*, and severally are called *citizens*, as sharing in the sovereign power, and *subjects*, as being under the laws of the State.