

Rousseau's Social Contract

By Sanderson Beck

"Conscience is the voice of the soul."

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

"Firmly convinced as I am that nothing on this earth is worth purchase at the price of human blood, and that there is no more liberty anywhere than in the heart of the just man, I feel, however, that it is natural for people of courage, who were born free, to prefer an honorable death to dull servitude."

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was a fascinating individual whose unorthodox ideas and passionate prose caused a flurry of interest in 18th century France, and his republican sentiments for liberty, equality, and brotherhood led eventually to the French Revolution. He was born on June 28, 1712, but his mother died in giving birth to him. His father had him reading romances and classical histories such as Plutarch before apprenticing him to an engraver. Rousseau loved to walk in nature; frustrated at being locked outside the city gates of Geneva at nightfall, at the age of sixteen he left his home to wander on his own. He was guided by a Catholic priest to Madame de Warens who took him in for about ten years and eventually became his mistress. Rousseau studied music and devised a new system of musical notation which was rejected by the Academy of Sciences. Throughout his life Rousseau often earned his living by copying music. In Paris in the 1740's he entered literary society and wrote both the words and music for an opera *Les Muses galantes*. Rousseau lived for thirty years with an uneducated servant girl who bore him five children, according to his *Confessions*; all of them were given to an orphanage in infancy.

In 1749 Rousseau burst into prominence by winning an essay contest on the theme: "Has the progress of the arts and sciences contributed more to the corruption or purification of morals?" Rousseau criticized social institutions for having corrupted the essential goodness of nature and the human heart. In his "Discourse on the Origin of Inequality" he elaborated on the process of how social institutions must have developed into the extreme inequities of aristocratic France where the nobility and the church lived in luxury while the poor peasants had to pay most of the taxes, and in his "Discourse on

Political Economy" he suggested remedies for these injustices. In 1756 he retreated to a simple country life and wrote a romantic novel *La Nouvelle Héloïse* which won the hearts of many. Some historians consider Rousseau the initiator of the romantic rebellion in art and literature

Rousseau's two greatest works were published in 1762 -*The Social Contract* and *Emile or On Education*. For Rousseau society itself is an implicit agreement to live together for the good of everyone with individual equality and freedom. However, people have enslaved themselves by giving over their power to governments which are not truly sovereign because they do not promote the general will. Rousseau believed that only the will of all the people together granted sovereignty. Various forms of government are instituted to legislate and enforce the laws. He wrote, "The first duty of the legislator is to make the laws conformable to the general will, the first rule of public economy is that the administration of justice should be conformable to the laws." His natural political philosophy echoes the way of Lao Tzu: "The greatest talent a ruler can possess is to disguise his power, in order to render it less odious, and to conduct the State so peaceably as to make it seem to have no need of conductors." Rousseau valued his citizenship in Geneva where he was born, and he was one of the first strong voices for democratic principles. "There can be no patriotism without liberty, no liberty without virtue, no virtue without citizens; create citizens, and you have everything you need; without them, you will have nothing but debased slaves, from the rulers of the State downwards." Rousseau goes on to explain that citizens depend upon education. *Emile* was a revolutionary book in regard to educational theory. Rousseau described how a boy can learn most naturally by direct experience. Rousseau recommended awakening the inner goodness that comes from the heart and warned against the evil contrivances of "civilized" society.

Where are there laws, and where are they respected? Everywhere you have seen only individual interest and men's passions reigning under this name. But the eternal laws of nature and order do exist. For the wise man, they take the place of positive law. They are written in the depth of his heart conscience and reason. It is to these that he ought to enslave himself in order to be free. The only slave is the man who does evil, for he always does it in spite of himself. It is found in no form of government; it is in the heart of the free man. He takes it with him everywhere. The vile man takes his servitude everywhere.

Yet Rousseau was not against positive law. On the contrary, laws protect those who are free from the vile enslaved man who violates them. We are free within the law, but again the laws must be in harmony with reason and the general good.

Rousseau's political writings stirred up controversy, and threatened by the established powers he fled into exile to Prussia and also visited David Hume in England. Later he was able to return to France. In 1768 a populist revolt protested for more rights against an oligarchy of twenty-five councilors

in Geneva. Rousseau counseled against violence but encouraged them in their struggle and predicted, "I foresee that in ten or twenty years the times will be far more favorable to the cause of the Representative party." In fact the American Revolution was about ten years away and the French Revolution about twenty. Rousseau discussed many different forms of government and indicated that there are various factors to consider in deciding on the best form of government for any given State. Generally he favored "elective aristocracy"- not hereditary but republican. In his *Constitutional Project for Corsica* he advised them to adopt democratic government and to abolish hereditary nobility. Consulted on Poland's government he recommended the gradual enfranchisement of the serfs and a multi-level civil service system whereby one could advance by merit.

In pain often from a prostate disorder Rousseau's moodiness and paranoia of other influential people increased in his later years. Fearing distortions of his life by others which actually were written later, Rousseau tried to tell all honestly in his *Confessions* and other autobiographical works. He died on July 2, 1778.