

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Discourse on Inequality and its Impact on Modern Western Society

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Abstract

The famous French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau has undoubtedly left his mark on history and heavily influenced numerous governments over the last two hundred years. Rousseau's "Discourse on Inequality", in particular, changed the way in which individuals view society, religion, and morality in a significant manner. The worldview which is presented in this writing is the product of years of abandonment, sexual promiscuity, and a lack of personal responsibility. The real-world implications of which have led to the deaths of millions upon millions in one of the bloodiest centuries in all of human history and inspired some of modern history's most evil figures such as Karl Marx and Joseph Stalin. As the United States is seeing rising popularity in recent years of the ideas of Rousseau, it is no wonder why there has been great concern over the future that this may spell for the nation. The success of America's founding and the failures of those who adhered to Rousseau's theories should serve as a warning sign for those considering going down the same disastrous path we've seen play over time and time again.

Research Question

What effect have the ideas of Rousseau in his *Discourse on Inequality* had on western society and how should we respond to his theories in modern times?

Hypothesis

The implications of Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality* have been extremely damaging to the western world and are contributing to the degradation of American society and culture.

Introduction

There are few modern figures in the field of political philosophy who have had the impact that Jean-Jacques Rousseau has had on western society. Rousseau may be most notably known for his most famous work, “A Discourse on the Sciences and Arts”, which was one of the leading philosophical texts of the 18th century. His writings on the social contract theory also gave him immense notoriety and helped to lay the groundwork for the French revolutionaries at the tail end of the 1700s. It would be a disservice, however, to merely paint Rousseau as a philosopher whose main influence barely extended his own lifetime. The impact that Rousseau had on the enlightenment not only inspired his fellow countrymen but it gave birth to new forms of government, political theories, and societal norms. For better or worse, Rousseau’s writings changed the trajectory of political philosophy and drastically impacted the western world.

With this in mind, this paper seeks to answer the following question: What effect have the ideas of Rousseau in his Discourse on Inequality had on western society, and how should we respond to his theories in modern times? In order to come to an accurate conclusion, the author has conducted a thorough literature review surveying the available research on the subject. The author will examine not only the ideas of Rousseau but also the context of his worldview and the implications his theories have brought about. This paper will provide an in-depth explanation of Rousseau’s impact on the western world and how American society should respond to his philosophy.

Literature Review

In order to truly understand the impact of Jean-Jacques Rousseau on the west, it is important to understand him in his own context. When you look at the upbringing and early life of Rousseau, it becomes easier to understand why he believed what he believed and how the people around him shaped his view of the world. Authors such as Mary Ann Glendon and Maurice Cranston both emphasize the French Philosopher’s formative years as an explanation for his future works. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was born in 1712 and was raised in a single household by his father as his mother had died in childbirth. During his childhood, Rousseau’s father fled their hometown of Geneva, Switzerland due to some legal issues that he had run into. This forced Rousseau to move in with his late mother’s family. During this time, he was not treated as an equal by his mother’s side of the family and chose to flee Geneva as his father had previously done and convert to Catholicism¹.

Upon leaving Geneva, Rousseau begins to live with a benefactor, Madame de Warens, who served as the mother figure that he never had in his formative years. Warens was the estranged wife of a wealthy landowner and heavily influenced Rousseau on issues of religion, philosophy, and human nature. Glendon, in particular, cites Warens as one of the most central figures in directing Rousseau in his younger years². While both Rousseau and Warens shared a commonality in their adherence to the Catholic tradition, Warens deterred from orthodoxy and rejected many of the key tenants of Christianity. Her views on human nature and its relation to the theology of sin fascinated the young Rousseau. While still claiming the title of Catholic, she

¹ Duignan, Brian, and Maurice Cranston. 2018. “Jean-Jacques Rousseau | Biography, Philosophy, Books, & Facts.” In *Encyclopædia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jean-Jacques-Rousseau>.

² Mary Ann Glendon. 2011. *The Forum and the Tower : How Scholars and Politicians Have Imagined the World, from Plato to Eleanor Roosevelt*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press.

did not believe in original sin, the existence of Hell, or that it was against God's law to follow one's own desires and impulses, regardless of morality.

Madame de Warens warped theology began to influence the way in which Rousseau viewed societal structures and their relation to the church. Rousseau grew in his knowledge as Warens put him through schooling and encouraged him to embrace the arts. While the budding philosopher grew up as an awkward and socially unaware child, he began to develop an affection toward Warens, leading to a sexual relationship between the two³. Rousseau's intimate yet casual relationship with his benefactor would carry implications not just for his personal future but also for his view of the state and how it should handle the process of child-rearing.

Rousseau soon sought to be independent of Madame de Warens and went off to Paris, France, to make a life for himself. There he met Thérèse Levasseur, who would become his partner and eventually his wife⁴. This is where the true colors of Rousseau's morality were shown. Near the end of his life, Rousseau wrote an autobiography called "Confessions" which detailed his life through the years. He specifically talks about how he abandoned each of his five children that he had with Thérèse Levasseur at an orphanage soon after they had been born. This was all done in spite of the passionate and tearful objections of his wife. While Rousseau claimed that he was doing this due to financial troubles, his real motivations lay in the fact that he believed that providing for his children would be too much of an interference with his personal study and writings⁵.

It is clear through a contextual view of Rousseau's upbringing that his views on religion, sex, and family dynamics were largely influenced by a desire to follow his passions and impulses, regardless of the collateral damage it caused. Rousseau's broken family life as a child led him to reject the responsibilities of becoming a father and instead led him down a path of secularism where personal pleasure and selfish desires trumped morality and the interest of others. These personal decisions made by Rousseau are reflected in one of his most influential works, "A Discourse Upon the Origin and Foundation of the Inequality Among Mankind." In this book, he not only discusses the natural state of man but also looks at its implications on modern society. These implications that are laid out by Rousseau are still influencing western culture and society to this day.

In many ways, Rousseau's view of the nature of man was opposed to both his Protestant upbringing in Switzerland and his later conversion to Catholicism. Like Madame de Warens, Rousseau rejected the idea of original sin and the belief that man is naturally inclined to evil. He instead believed that human beings in their most primitive state were focused on one thing, self-preservation. In his view, aspects of what Christians would consider a part of man's sinful nature, such as pride, greed, and jealousy, did not come into the human experience until our species began to adapt. As humans began to learn how to live in different climates, defend themselves from predators, and innovate in areas of hunting and agriculture, people only then began to feel pride in themselves and their accomplishments. This is a consistent theme

³ Mary Ann Glendon. 2011. *The Forum and the Tower : How Scholars and Politicians Have Imagined the World, from Plato to Eleanor Roosevelt*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press.

⁴ Mary Ann Glendon. 2011. *The Forum and the Tower : How Scholars and Politicians Have Imagined the World, from Plato to Eleanor Roosevelt*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press.

⁵ Mary Ann Glendon. 2011. *The Forum and the Tower : How Scholars and Politicians Have Imagined the World, from Plato to Eleanor Roosevelt*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press.

throughout Rousseau's writings as he sees these self-centered emotions as a product of society rather than something that predates modern civilization.

Rousseau's "Discourse on the Inequality Among Mankind" points to our two central "evils," which he believes to be foreign concepts to the natural state of man. This includes private property and the division of labor⁶. Rousseau seems to see the idea of private property as completely foreign to the primitive man. He believed that the only thing that separated a personal possession from a shared commodity was the gullibility of those who accepted that someone could own something. Rousseau also had a similar view regarding the idea of shared labor. He believed that in a natural state, men would only participate in tasks that did not require the help of others. Once man began to need the help of others, the two would have to split the product of their combined labor. Rousseau believed that this is where oppression first appeared in human history. He asserted that when man was only concerned about staying alive and providing for themselves individually, they had no need to act in an unethical manner toward their neighbor⁷.

The reason Rousseau believed that these two "evils" of property and labor were so significant was that they both played into the hand of the other. The division of labor and the dependency on other humans that he believed to have developed in primitive times would inherently create a need for private property. As humans began to innovate and begin to mine for minerals and precious metals, and expand their knowledge on how to grow their own food, people began to divide up land in order to advance these practices. He believed that this is how property originated from the division of labor. People now felt that because they were producing some from the land and taking the natural resources they were now entitled to own it⁸.

Rousseau felt that society may have been able to function in a more naturalistic state had the natural ability of each man been equal and if the resources that were produced from that land had also been equal. This is what Rousseau called "natural inequality." When differences in production appeared between men, Rousseau's idea of absolute equality in man's natural state fell apart. This is a key point in Rousseau's worldview as throughout the rest of this discourse, he sees this foundational point of inequality between men and between nature as one of the central building blocks that modern society has been founded on.

These ideals espoused by Rousseau have inspired the likes of many famous and infamous philosophers both during and after his time. While the American founding father Thomas Jefferson had clear differences from the French philosopher, he took inspiration from Rousseau when it came to his strong beliefs about the prominent role of democracy in a functioning society⁹. This type of inspiration, however, is a far cry from the kind of endearment for the writings of Rousseau which have contributed to the deterioration of societies and, in some cases, led to the murder of millions in the name of so-called "equality".

Scholars frequently cite the notorious German philosopher Karl Marx as possibly the most egregious example of Rousseau's influence on modern political thought. Marx latched on to this idea that the natural man was oblivious to oppression and the evils of this world and that it was society and the structures and institutions that came with it which polluted the hearts and minds of primitive humans. Instead of seeing humanity as a naturally flawed and imperfect

⁶ Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 2013. *Discourse on Inequality*. Aziloth Books. (Orig. pub. 1755.).

⁷ Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 2013. *Discourse on Inequality*. Aziloth Books. (Orig. pub. 1755.).

⁸ Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 2013. *Discourse on Inequality*. Aziloth Books. (Orig. pub. 1755.).

⁹ "Jefferson and Rousseau – on Democracy." 2010. *Almost Chosen People*. January 7, 2010. <https://almostchosenpeople.wordpress.com/2010/01/07/jefferson-and-rousseau-on-democracy/>.

species, all of human history from the conception of civilization onward could be summed up as an everlasting struggle between those who are oppressed (the proletariat) and those who are the oppressors (the bourgeoisie).

We have seen this philosophy leak its way through history through the policies of dictators such as Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin, and Mao Zedong. The vast majority of scholars on this issue are in agreement that the amount of damage done by these leaders is almost impossible to fully comprehend. Throughout various communist regimes, their central goal was to eliminate the bourgeoisie and replace it with a government ruled by “the people”. These regimes, however, were not merely content with simply taking power away from their former rulers, they needed to end the historical cycle of oppression once and for all. This required the mass killing of various communities and people groups. From the year 1900 to 1987, communism accounted for nearly two-thirds of all government, quasi-government, and guerrilla killings in the world¹⁰. When all was said and done, the final death toll for this Rousseauian ideology came out to over 110 million people, making the 20th century possibly one of the bloodiest centuries in all of human history¹¹.

At the tail end of the 20th century, it seemed as if communism, as it had been seen up to that point, had failed and the western liberal democracies had come out on top. As the years have progressed, however, there appear to be those who are so ignorant of the past that they see the ideas in Rousseau’s discourse on inequality as viable in our modern day. Throughout the United States, there are college professors, academics, philosophers, and even some politicians who spread the same message that inspired so much violence and evil just under forty years ago. In these circles, heterosexual, white, European males are seen as the dominant oppressor in American society. Minority populations within the United States along with those who are homosexual or identify with another gender and are now under the title of “oppressed” and must be protected at all costs. While the subjects of this ideology may have changed over the years, the base framework of their argument is still the same one that Rousseau penned all back in the 18th century.

The question that America is now faced with is how we handle this new onslaught of Rousseauian political theory. It certainly must go without question that oppression does and will continue to exist even within the western world. The institutions of slavery and later Jim Crow were all terrible atrocities that brought about countless human rights violations. Even today in the 21st century we can see the cultural and societal effects that these traumatic events in our history had on our nation. When it comes to addressing Rousseauian principles in our society today, we should not ask the question of *if* oppression is a real factor within our nation, but instead *why*. The entire crux of Rousseau’s discourse on inequality is based on the idea that the very creation of human society brought oppression into our world. It is clear to see, however, that when one steps outside of the idealistic lens of political philosophy and looks at the natural world in a practical manner that this hypothesis does not hold any weight.

One of the most well-known (and perhaps notorious due to his opinions on this subject) political and cultural thinkers of our day, Jordan Peterson, has given pushback against Rousseau and his ideas on human nature and the origins of oppression. While there no longer exists large societies of human beings in their most primitive forms, Peterson argues that we can look at

¹⁰ “MURDER by COMMUNISM.” n.d. Hawaii.edu. <https://hawaii.edu/powerkills/COM.ART.HTM>.

¹¹ “MURDER by COMMUNISM.” n.d. Hawaii.edu. <https://hawaii.edu/powerkills/COM.ART.HTM>.

other species within our world which display similar natural traits. In his book, “12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos”, he examines the social behavior of lobsters and how it relates to the chemical makeup of their brains.

Peterson compares human beings to lobsters in this example because our brain activity is almost identical when it comes to how we reinforce good behavior in our minds. He found in his studies that groups of lobsters will naturally organize themselves into hierarchical structures. When a lobster then moves up the ladder of this newly-created hierarchical system, its brain releases chemicals that give the lobster a sense of purpose and safety. Based on this, Peterson believes that the creation of a society in just about any primitive species is inevitable due to the brain's need for social reinforcement¹². Peterson also combines the idea of a society and hierarchies together. Since societies are biologically natural and no society in either a primitive or modern context has existed without one, hierarchies must also come naturally. The question then becomes less about the basic building blocks of society, and rather the qualities that society represents¹³.

This question of the qualities of government is one that set the United States apart from the ideas of Rousseau in its founding. The aspect of American governance that astounds scholars to this day is the fact that the founders did not spend much time disputing the need for government or the justification for a hierarchical society. The founder believed, in the same way, that Peterson pointed out, that these building blocks of society went far deeper than some man-made institution. They instead put their energy into discussing the role of government and how it related to its citizens. After looking at the aftermath of previous revolutions during that time, particularly the French Revolution, this divergence from Rousseauian ideology may have been the missing puzzle piece that ended up saving America from the same mistakes made by their fellow revolutionary counterparts.

¹² Tyronis. 2018. “Jordan Peterson’s Refutation of Rousseau’s Noble Savage.” Ty Taylor. February 4, 2018. <https://tyntaylor.wordpress.com/2018/02/04/jordan-petersons-refutation-of-rousseau-noble-savage/>.

¹³ Tyronis. 2018. “Jordan Peterson’s Refutation of Rousseau’s Noble Savage.” Ty Taylor. February 4, 2018. <https://tyntaylor.wordpress.com/2018/02/04/jordan-petersons-refutation-of-rousseau-noble-savage/>.

Conclusion

Even with the nature of America's founding and its rejection of Rousseau's theories on society, the western world as a whole still to this day finds itself plagued with the same secular and naturalistic worldview that is evident in Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*. The question now is, how do we engage with these theories in modern times? While looking through the relevant literature there doesn't seem to be a clear-cut solution to eliminating this false philosophy, the western world, and specifically, Americans, have the unique opportunity to educate themselves through the freedoms they enjoy on a daily basis. Since many of the ideologies espoused by Rousseau and those he influenced are generally received by a younger audience, it is imperative that local communities get involved with their school boards and other local organizations that hold influence over the younger generation. While ideologies of any kind can be hard to combat, consistently pointing back to the past successes of the American experiment and the failures of those who implemented Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality* into their governments can serve as an indicator of how this nation should move forward in the future.

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