Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Contribution to International Relations Theory

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To renounce one's freedom is to renounce one's condition as a man.[1]

The above statement by Rousseau expresses the ideological foundation upon which the Enlightenment was built. Undoubtedly a product of his time, Rousseau was a key contributor to the development of liberalism in the 18th century. His works, which mainly focus on political philosophy, have shaped the concept and practice of democracy as it exists today. Most importantly, Rousseau helped to open new doors to the study of political science by influencing the international aspect of this discipline. In today's global village, knowledge and understanding of society's political roots is critical, as it helps one to comprehend current trends in international relations. Furthermore, a thorough study and comprehension of mankind's political past may help to anticipate its future. Democracy is becoming increasingly prevalent worldwide; therefore, a clear understanding of its foundations is imperative in order for contemporary states to function effectively as international actors. This research essay seeks to outline Rousseau's contribution to international relations theory and to analyze its relevance to contemporary society.

Rousseau's Background and Influences

Born in Geneva, Switzerland in 1712, Jean-Jacques Rousseau was both a product of the century of the Enlightenment and one of its major exponents.[2] He established his reputation as a passionate, eloquent writer in 1749, after writing a prize-winning essay on the argument that the revival of the arts and sciences had done more to corrupt morals than to purify them.[3] Throughout the course of his writing career he created many works, including *Discourse on the Origins of Equality*, a novel entitled *Julie ou la Nouvelle Heloise*, a treatise on education entitled *Emilie*, and his most famous political science oeuvre, *The Social Contract*. The aforementioned works were written between 1754 and 1761.[4] Rousseau died an isolated and eccentric man in 1778, on the eve of the French Revolution.[5]

Rousseau was strongly influenced by prominent ancient and Renaissance writers such as Plutarch, Plato, Machiavelli and Montaigne. He also carefully read and analyzed the works of Hobbes and Locke, whose ideas he develop in his own theory of the Social Contract.[6] However, he drew most of his inspiration from his close circle of friends, now known as the *philosophes*. He shared the Enlightenment thinkers' liberal aims to promote reason, equality, freedom from authoritarianism and above all, the importance of questioning everything. He worked alongside French philosopher Diderot and readily used the *Encyclopedie* as a means of propaganda in order to communicate his ideas.[7] Although Rousseau had no formal education and maintained strong religious principles throughout his life,[8] he still considered himself a voice of the Enlightenment and a man who "sometimes had common sense and loved the truth."[9]

Rousseau's Conception of Human Nature

Rousseau's views on the nature of man are a crucial element of his contributions to international relations theory. In order to understand how states interact at the international level, it is necessary to examine what lies at the center of every state, which is the individual. His conception of man's state of nature is that of freedom and natural goodness, however, man has the capacity to be both good and evil.[10] Society corrupts man, and the source of this corruption rests in bad institutions that can be replaced with better ones.[11] To precisely define man's state of nature, Rousseau established three basic principles, introduced in his *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*. The first principle argues that natural man was solitary, and had no permanent ties with others. Secondly, natural man had only two practical principles, self-love, demonstrated by greed, selfishness, and the pursuit of self-interest, and pity, demonstrated through compassion, admiration and love for others. Lastly, natural man was distinguished from animals chiefly because he possessed free will, and also because he had the capacity for self-improvement or perfectibility.[12] From these three central assumptions, Rousseau is then able to explain how society has corrupted natural man. He gathers his explanations under his 'Social Division of Labor Theory'. Rousseau begins by saying that through historical progress, natural man witnessed the establishment and distinction of families, as well as the introduction of the idea of owning property. It was at this point that natural man began to compare himself to other.[13] Then the invention of new technology, such as agriculture and metallurgy, led men to become dependant on each other for resources and responsibilities; thus the division of labor was introduced. As a direct result of the division of labor and property, inequality between men was entrenched, and freedom became slavery. Man was divided into social classes determined by wealth and power, and therefore became compelled to achieve personal profit at the expense of others. Man's state of nature became a state of war due to this competition. Men could only regain their freedom by establishing a supreme power that would govern them, according to laws they had consented to. [14] At the core of Rousseau's political philosophy is how this government is created. This requires an analysis of his conception of the nature of the state.

Rousseau's Conception of the Nature of the State

Rousseau was concerned with explaining the relationship between human nature and the nature of the state, which is at the root of his political philosophy. He states,

> The passing from the state of nature to civil society produces a remarkable change in man; it puts justice as a rule of conduct in the place of instinct, and gives his actions the moral quality they previously lacked...We might also add that man acquires with civil society, moral freedom, which alone makes man the master of himself; for to be governed by appetite alone is slavery, while obedience to a law one prescribes to oneself is freedom.[15]

The latter part of this statement suggests the possibility of self-legislation; indeed, Rousseau was a firm believer in the democratic form of government. Rousseau's theory of the nature of the state is based on these two central ideas of self-legislation and democracy. The nature of the state, according to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, is a Social Contract, which is the only legitimate means of political authority.[16] The Social Contract concerns itself primarily with the idea that in order to remain free in a political society, individuals must, above all, be at liberty to create their

own laws. These individuals formed the 'body politic' and their collective voice became the 'General Will,'[17] thus they become the 'Sovereign.'[18] Obviously, the 'body politic' had an obligation to obey their own laws in order to remain free.[19] The 'general will' became a governing motive; this was the function of the political machine, which was designed to convert the 'General Will' into morally obligatory law.[20] The Social Contract, then, is a mutual agreement between the Sovereign and its government under which democracy can flourish.

To understand Rousseau's Social Contract, it is absolutely necessary to consider the respective natures of the general will and of the government. Simply defined, the general will is the agreement of interests between every member of a community.[21] Paradoxically, it recognizes freedom as the supreme moral value.[22] According to Rousseau, the general will "attempts to solve the problem of social organization, or how to get autonomous, self-enclosed individuals to cooperate in a society while still being free to pursue personal aims."[23] Thus, the general will is defined as the harmonization of individual and collective interests, [24] and to obey the general will is not a loss of freedom because individuals are ultimately obeying themselves.[25] When individuals obey the general will, they remain free and collectively fulfill their part of the Social contract.

The other component of the Social Contract is the political institution. Rousseau defines the state as "essentially the institutional expression of man's moral purpose," and not "a device by which men are enabled to control one another."[26] Most importantly, the members of the government implement the power delegated to them in the name of the Sovereign, so as to guarantee the freedom of the people governed.[27] Rousseau was also concerned with the preservation of equality within government, and firmly supported a balance of power between its branches, stating, "it is not good for the power that makes the laws to execute them."[28] In addition, it is crucial to understand that Rousseau fully endorsed direct democracy, with elections based on the principle that there should be as many votes in the Assembly as there are in the body politic.[29] He recognized that direct democracy could only function properly in small states, where people could easily assemble together on a periodical basis.[30] He was opposed to representative democracy on the assumption that it deprived the people of freedom of choice,

> The idea of representation is modern, and derives its origin from the feudal government, a system absurd and iniquitous, that degrades human nature and dishonors the name of man.[31]

In relation to the role and functions of the government, Rousseau outlines many ideas similar to those of other political philosophers of his time, such as Montesquieu. As previously mentioned, the primary function of the state is to preserve man's state of nature, which is free and good, by respecting the Social Contract, thereby giving the state legitimate authority as well as securing man's freedom. There are three other main functions of the state, beginning with legislation. The state, through reception and interpretation of the General Will, is responsible for establishing laws, which are separated into four main categories: political (fundamental), civil, criminal and moral, the last being unofficial, but strictly upheld.[32] The second function of the state is execution, that is, implementing laws in order to maintain civil and political liberty.[33] Lastly, the third function of the state is that of the tribunal, which can be compared to the judiciary. This last function exists largely to balance the two other branches and to provide security to the people by preserving laws.[34]

When linking the role of the General Will to the role of the state, it is easy to understand the Social contract and accept it as a valid description of the nature of the state. Furthermore, a thorough comprehension of the nature of the state is of crucial importance when explaining the relationship between states. This leads us to an analysis of Rousseau's theory of international relations.

Rousseau's Contribution to International Relations Theory

Although the works of Rousseau did not focus explicitly on the study of international relations, it is evident from his writings that he recognized the importance of this subject.[35] Generally speaking, Rousseau had a pessimistic conception of international relations, because he viewed international society as being in a permanent state of insecurity and mutual antagonism, or more explicitly, a constant state of war.[36] This state of war, originated from the mutual dependence of naturally unequal states.[37] Interdependence breeds trade and competition, which subsequently causes inevitable discord. Rousseau clearly states this point in his work, *State of War:*

> Political bodies have enough for their own preservation...but they have no fixed measure; their proper size is undefined, it can always grow bigger, it feels weak so long as there are others stronger than it. Its safety and preservation demand that it makes itself stronger than its neighbors.[38]

Rousseau believed that war arose from the relationship between states, not between individuals.[39] Man is naturally peaceful and timid, and becomes a soldier only through the influence of his society.[40] Therefore, war is a product of society; armies did not exist until societies existed, with states organizing these armies and sending them to fight for the interests of the rulers.[41] Furthermore, Rousseau maintains that international society in the state of war obeys only the law of the strongest.[42] For this reason, he expresses his great distrust in foreign powers, and believes that relations with these powers only engender more dependence and division. He confirms this thought in his writings:

> No one who depends on others, and lacks resources of his own, can ever be free.
> Alliances, treaties, gentlemen's agreements, such things may bind the weak to the strong, but never the strong to the weak.[43]

He also claims that society in the state of war can never become good and legitimate, unless war is eliminated everywhere in the world. He articulates this pessimistic view in his work, *State of War:*

> Permeated with [the] persuasive talk [of the philosophers], I lament the miseries of nature, admire the peace and justice established by the civil order, bless the wisdom of public institutions and console myself for being a man by looking upon myself as a citizen. Well-versed in my duties and happiness, I shut my book, leave the classroom, and I look around me. I see unfortunate nations groaning under yokes of iron, the human race crushed by a handful of oppressors, a starving crown overwhelmed by pain and hunger, whose blood and tears the rich drink in peace, and everywhere the strong armed against the weak with the formidable power of law.[44]

Finally, Rousseau believes that perpetual peace can only be achieved at the price of revolution.[45]

To understand Rousseau's solution for the establishment of perpetual peace, it is crucial to mention the contributions of Abbé de Saint-Pierre to the development of Rousseau's ideas. Abbé de Saint-Pierre was a writer who had studied international relations theory, and had come to the conclusion that peace could only be achieved through the integration of the European states into a confederation. After de Saint-Pierre's death, his friends and family searched for an eloquent scholar to edit his principal work, entitled *Project for Perpetual Peace*. Rousseau was chosen for this undertaking; however, the finished product became more his personal critique of de Saint-Pierre's ideas than an edited version of the original work.[46] Initially, Rousseau's analysis seems to recognize the potential effectiveness of a European Commonwealth. This federation would have to be established through revolution, specifically one state conquering the entire continent militarily.[47] The formation of a federal government that united these states would also be advantageous in some ways. Such a union would combine the advantages of large and small states, and would hold subjects, rulers and foreigners equally in check. Also, this Commonwealth would be powerful enough to hold supremacy of law, and could also intimidate neighboring non-member states from attacking.[48] It would have enough defensive force to protect itself if attacked, yet not enough offensive force to conquer.[49] This solution for perpetual peace seemed favorable, but Rousseau was hardly convinced. He claimed that this theory had an easy yet undeniably impossible conclusion because it did not take into account the diversity and inequality of the citizens involved.[50] Surely not everyone would be willing to give up both identity and property for the sake of the Commonwealth. Therefore, Rousseau set about developing his own vision of international society.

He proposed the establishment of a variety of federations, as a means of creating "islands of peace" within the state of war.[51] Rousseau argues that the stability of such a system hinges on historically formed preconditions, and operates on balance of power dynamics. In Europe for example, the presence of the German body could make this system possible. Germany, because of its geographic position at the center of the European continent, its vast size, and its stable, internal balance of power politics, would be able to balance the rest of Europe. [52] Here it is important to note that Rousseau was basing his assumptions on the European geopolitical situation of the late 1700s. He credited the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648 as the foundation of an international system based on the balance of power, and acknowledged that the principle of the sovereignty of states is extremely important. [53] He further declared:

> The powers of Europe constitute a kind of system, united by the same religion, international law and moral standards, by letters, by commerce and by a kind of equilibrium which is the inevitable outcome of all these ties. And although the rulers of individual states always act to extend their dominions, the balance still remains.[54]

Although the balance of power system was effective in maintaining order, Rousseau still maintained that it did not abolish the state of war because peace could only be achieved if the European states relinquished their sovereignty and invested in a higher federal body.[55] Also, separated federations would make war less likely and fewer in between.[56] Realizing that war was inevitable in this alternate international system, he devised partial measures to limit the violence of war, and created an 'international law of war'. This law proposed two principles, the first of which was non-combatant immunity. Under this principle, professional armies would be abolished in favor of 'popular defense,' which advocates the use of guerrilla tactics and the avoidance of technological weapons. The second principle he recommends is the duty to spare

prisoners of war.[57] Clearly, Rousseau realizes that this alternate system has many flaws, but it is ultimately the one that best preserves the interests of the General Will of the international community. Rousseau's contributions to international relations theory seem very relevant, when analyzed in the context of the time period during which he lived. But are they still significant in today's global society?

Modern Applications of Rousseau's Contributions to International Relations Theory

Due to the historical evolution of international relations, one must wonder whether Rousseau's main ideas can explain the prevailing trends in contemporary international society. In his work, *A History of International Relations Theory,* Tobjorn Knutsen draws parallels between Rousseau's thoughts and the practice of international relations today. First, he argues that Rousseau would be considered a contemporary neo-isolationist. He would have preferred modern states to remain independent of each other as much as possible, because he believed that dependence was the source of all conflict. In situations of war, he would have probably opposed intervention to punish aggression or the formation of alliances to protect victims, even though he despised conquest. Furthermore, his distrust of the motives of rulers would have made him a critic of great-power interventionist policy, especially regarding the use of military force.[58] In relation to economic interdependence, he would have probably been opposed to free trade, again because of his neo-isolationist views and his social division of labor theory. For example, Rousseau would have probably supported unions against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), as well as other unions fighting against economic imperialism.[59]

Tobjorn Knutsen also points out that contemporary political societies correspond less and less to Rousseau's vision of international relations. His ideals of internal unity and independence of states are hardly applicable to today's global village. States are slowly losing control over their citizens because they are forced to simultaneously compete for their attention with smaller sub-national communities and larger multinational influences. As well, the mass media brings the global community closer together, by keeping individuals informed about the internal affairs of virtually every country in the world. Factors such as mass migration, religious movements, and even the activity of criminal organizations affect all parts of international society, bringing people together regardless of territorial borders. Contentious issues regarding visible minorities and refugees are also on the rise, which requires cross-border communication between states. Now more than ever, the international community cannot remain oblivious to the need for collaborative international relations. There is a growing awareness that the interdependence of states is becoming increasingly necessary for stability.

According to Tobjorn Knutsen, another contemporary force that Rousseau did not anticipate was the rise of humanitarian intervention. Obviously, this activism creates dependence and requires constant dialogue between states. The presence of humanitarian organizations such as Amnesty International and Doctors without Borders, to name a few, substantiates Rousseau's belief about the compassionate nature of man and his willingness to help alleviate the suffering of others. However, this new awareness of the plight of suffering peoples around the world, brought to attention by such organizations may also have an opposite effect on man's compassionate nature. People may become increasingly desensitized or too overwhelmed to feel that their activism would make any small difference at all, causing them to

turn their eyes away from problems presented before them (on CNN or BBC, for example), or refrain from actively questioning the policies of governments.[60]

From a more long term and comprehensive perspective, one may even wonder whether observations, like those made by Knutsen, do not totally miss Rousseau's fundamental message: the centrality of the quest for equality and democracy in human relations. The national and social revolutions of the past two centuries attest to the accuracy of Rousseau's vision. So do the tragedies of uneven "interdependence" or the North-South gap as well as the persistent abuses of hegemonic power, including in the field of "humanitarian internvention". And could not the current trends towards collaborative federalism, administrative and fiscal decentralization, and new communication technologies also promote the resurgence of forms of more direct or "local" democracy?

Conclusion

The context of current international society is so different from the time of Rousseau's writings that one may be tempted to consider that his theories are no longer pertinent. However, by studying historical events and the ideas of authors writing in the past, mankind is perhaps better able to understand the present context they find themselves in, and also anticipate their future. Rousseau's theories have permitted man to learn much about his own nature, his political surroundings and his role within international society. For these reasons, Rousseau remains a chief contributor to the study of international relations theory. Indeed, his contribution to the subject of democracy is still relevant, since democracy still endures as a legitimate form of government. Further, the existing international system must be submitted to closer srutiny. Is a balance of power international system, as established by the Treaty of Westphalia and supported by Rousseau, favorable to today's global village? Certainly, such a system is more legitimate than a polarized system, which encourages the dominance of hegemonic powers. Rousseau would have undoubtedly rejected a system based on hegemony, as such a system adversely affects man's freedom and equality in so many ways. When considering the hegemonic dominance of one power in the current international system, perhaps it is a good time to seriously re-evaluate Rousseau's passionate plea for the safe-guarding of the freedom and equality of individuals and nations.

Notes

[1] Hall, John C. Rousseau – Totalitarian or Liberal? New York: Columbia University Press, 1956. 99.
[2] Ibid, 11.
[3] Ibid, 13.
[4] Ibid, 14-15.
[5] Ibid, 16.
[6] Ibid, 18.
[7] Ibid, 19.
[8] Grimsley, Ronald. Jean-Jacques Rousseau. New Jersey: Barnes and Noble Books, 1983. 14.
[9] Ibid, 1.
[10] Hall, John C. Rousseau – Totalitarian or Liberal? New York: Columbia University Press, 1956. 22.
[11] Ibid, 28.
[12] Ibid, 34.

[13] Grimsley, Ronald. Jean-Jacques Rousseau. New Jersey: Barnes and Noble Books, 1983. 30.
[14] Ibid, 31.
[15] Rapaczynski, Andrzej. The Nature and Politics: Liberalism in the Philosophies of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau. London: Cornell University Press, 1987. 241.
[16] Hall, John C. Rousseau – Totalitarian or Liberal? New York: Columbia University Press, 1956. 90.
[17] Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. The Social Contract. Charles Frankel, ed. New York: Hafner Publishing Co., 1947. 17.
[18] Melzer, Arthur M. The Natural Goodness of Man: On the System of Rousseau's Thought. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990. 150.
[19] Ibid, 18.
[20] Chapman, John W. Rousseau – Totalitarian or Liberal? New York: Columbia University Press, 1956. 43.
[21] Hall, John C. Rousseau – Totalitarian or Liberal? New York: Columbia University Press, 1956. 75.
[22] Rapaczynski, Andrzej. The Nature and Politics: Liberalism in the Philosophies of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau. London: Cornell University Press, 1987. 243.
[23] Ibid, 251-252.
[24] Hall, John C. Rousseau – Totalitarian or Liberal? New York: Columbia University Press, 1956. 73.
[25] Ibid, 76.
[26] Chapman, John W. Rousseau – Totalitarian or Liberal? New York: Columbia University Press, 1956. 141.
[27] Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. The Social Contract. Charles Frankel, ed. New York: Hafner Publishing Co., 1947. 51.
[28] Ibid, 59.
[29] Ibid, 15.
[30] Ibid, 59.
[31] Ibid, 85.
[32] Ibid, 48-49.
[33] Ibid, 51.
[34] Ibid, 108.
[35] Forsyth, M.G., H.M.A. Keens-Soper and P. Savigear, eds. The Theory of International Relations. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1970. 127.
[36] Ibid, 129.
[37] Orwin, Clifford and Nathan Tarcov. The Legacy of Rousseau. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997. 202.
[38] Forsyth, M.G., H.M.A. Keens-Soper and P. Savigear, eds. The Theory of International Relations. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1970. 170.
[39] Orwin, Clifford and Nathan Tarcov. The Legacy of Rousseau. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997. 207.
[40] Forsyth, M.G., H.M.A. Keens-Soper and P. Savigear, eds. The Theory of International Relations. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1970. 167.
[41] Knusten, Torbjorn L. A History of International Relations Theory. 2nd ed. New York: Manchester University Press, 1997. 130.
[42] Ibid, 133.
[43] Orwin, Clifford and Nathan Tarcov. The Legacy of Rousseau. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997. 200.
[44] Ibid, 203.
[45] Forsyth, M.G., H.M.A. Keens-Soper and P. Savigear, eds. The Theory of International Relations. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1970. 129.
[46] Knusten, Torbjorn L. A History of International Relations Theory. 2nd ed. New York: Manchester University Press, 1997. 129.
[47] Ibid, 137.
[48] Orwin, Clifford and Nathan Tarcov. The Legacy of Rousseau. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997. 205.
[49] Ibid, 207.
[50] Forsyth, M.G., H.M.A. Keens-Soper and P. Savigear, eds. The Theory of International Relations. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1970. 129.
[51] Orwin, Clifford and Nathan Tarcov. The Legacy of Rousseau. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997. 206.

[52] Knusten, Torbjorn L. A History of International Relations Theory. 2nd ed. New York: Manchester University Press, 1997. 135.
[53] Ibid, 135-136.
[54] Ibid, 134.
[55] Ibid, 136.
[56] Orwin, Clifford and Nathan Tarcov. The Legacy of Rousseau. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997. 207.
[57] Ibid, 207-208.
[58] Knusten, Torbjorn L. A History of International Relations Theory. 2nd ed. New York: Manchester University Press, 1997. 215.
[59] Ibid, 216.
[60] Ibid, 218.

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