

An Essay on the Contributions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau to the Modern World – the Bad and the Worser.

(excerpted from *War Comes to God's House*)

Perhaps foremost among Frederick's (i.e. Frederick the Great, King of Prussia) protégés was writer-philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Here was a marvel of guileless inconsistency, and more marvelous still was his popularity and influence. The basic premise of his philosophy was that "Man is naturally good", until corrupted by society – religion, government, Capitalism. Rousseau (portrait to lower right) lamented:

The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, bethought himself saying, 'This is mine' and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society. From how many crimes, wars, and murders, from how many horrors and misfortunes, might not anyone have saved mankind, by pulling up the stakes, or filling up the ditch and saying to his fellows: 'Beware of listening to this impostor, you are undone if you once forget that the fruits of the earth belong to us all, and the earth itself to nobody'.

(Durant 3, p-30)

One has to consider this statement only briefly to find the flaws in it. For one, nature does not give up her treasures without hard work (someone's hard work, that is, not Rousseau's obviously). Contrast that with Hobbes' view of the state of nature, and John Locke's philosophy that nature gives bounty only in opportunity, labor makes it property. The American Revolution Providentially occurred when the English mind was still enamored with Hobbes and Locke, and John Milton's ideal of a Christian moral paradise; else it probably would have gone the way of the French Revolution. Rousseau's philosophy deforms Christian humanism into a justification for theft, as we see all about us in modern socialistic societies.



Hybriasis didn't feel the need for justification to take what he wanted; modern western man, still suffering from the after-effects of Christianity, feels some slight embarrassment at the theft of others' property unless covered in such fig-leaf fancies as Rousseau's.

More than any other ideal, Rousseau's has become the basis of modern secular society. Rousseau made civil society, law in other words, the enemy of natural man. That has always been the Christian conception of the nature of man – natural man at war against God and God ordained civil law. But Rousseau put natural man in the right, it was civil society that was in the wrong.

There have been countless permutations of this idea since, including Marx's ideal of overthrowing private ownership, Freud's ideal of overthrowing the sexual mores that oppress the natural man, and Hitler's ideal of overthrowing the moral constraints that bind the natural aggressiveness of superior men.

Rousseau popularized several novel, and one might add, logically inconsistent, notions. His political treatise, *The Social Contract*, promoted the power of popular will against divine right. He created the idealized image of the "noble savage", yet admitted that modern man couldn't return to the "state of nature" and live as noble savages. He even admitted that such a state of nature probably never existed. That being the case, Rousseau, darling of revolutionaries and free thinkers, advocated a collectivist state dominated by a "civil religion", the slightest departure from which meant death or banishment.

Though his civil religion echoed basic Christian humanist doctrines, the church opposed him because his system had no room for a separate church – or for a supernatural being, for that matter. "*We recognize the authority of Jesus Christ because our intelligence agrees with his precepts and we find them sublime...*", he wrote; while original sin, hell, and miracles, matters that disagreed with his intelligence, were summarily dismissed.

Rousseau's' writings subjected him to a good deal of buffeting in both Protestant and Catholic dominated states; so he came to Frederick.

Rousseau wrote to the Prussian king *"I have said a good deal that is bad about you (i.e. such things as "tyrant posing as philosopher"); I shall probably say more such things; however, chased from France, from Geneva, from the canton of Bern, I have come to seek an asylum in your states..."*. From the battlefield Frederick responded in a letter to a subordinate, *"We must succor this poor unfortunate. His only offense is to have strange opinions which he thinks are good ones. I will send him a hundred crowns, from which you will be kind enough to give him what he needs...I conclude that the morals of your savage (Rousseau) are as pure as his mind is illogical."*

One might accuse Frederick of the cardinal sin of illogic for indulging his dilettante collecting of philosophers to help place such a dangerous weapon as Rousseau in the hands of an unstable mankind. Here was the inflexible champion of reason aiding the enemy of reason and the champion of the "Romantic" reaction, accused of destroying the Enlightenment and fathering both the anarchic French revolution and Marxist totalitarianism; not to mention "Progressive Education" which has done so much damage to education in the western world (i.e. education must help children "discover" good for themselves; as they are not yet corrupted by society they are innately "good").

Voltaire, whose pen had drawn so much blood from the Catholic Church, made a very prophetic jab at his ardent admirer Rousseau:

I have received, Monsieur, your new book against the human race. I thank you for it. You will please men, to whom you tell truths that concern them, but you will not correct them.

You paint in very true colors the horrors of human society; ...no one has ever employed so much intellect to persuade men to be beasts. In reading your work one is seized with a desire to walk on four paws. However, as it is more than sixty years since I lost that habit, I feel, unfortunately, it is impossible for me to resume it...". (Durant 2, p-31)

The desire to walk on all fours, to be an animal, ruled by animal instincts not bound by the moral strictures of Christianity tugs powerfully at us all. Voltaire should have realized that, but he was blinded by an animus to the Church, and by extension, to Christianity. If someone of traditional Christian values was searching for some point in history where the upward curve of western civilization began to flatten out, he might locate it in Rousseau, when the goal became no longer a Christian man, a chivalrous man, or even a rational man, but a “natural man”.

With astonishing arrogance Rousseau saw himself as something of a noble savage and wasn't adverse to describing himself as a “good man”, though an objective judgment might find him a bit shy of that mark. He hypocritically sponged off the autocrats he despised, he fathered one child after another with his mistress and discarded them immediately to live or die in public charities run by better men, and he fomented trouble that still plagues the world.

Of course, so much of the population has adopted Rousseau's attitude that one does not do good, rather what one does is good that it would be difficult to get the average crowd today to condemn him.

An after-thought occurred to me on considering Rousseau's contribution to the world. He did make one contribution to democratic thought. He brought down the worst of the ideology of the hereditary nobility – the arrogance and self-centeredness, the belief that other men owed you the fruit of their labor because “you deserve it” – and distributed it broadly to all men who would have it.