

Discourse on the Origins and Inequality Among Men

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

'Oppression' Among Natural Men

- I hear it always repeatedly said that the stronger will oppress the weak, but let someone explain to me what is meant by this word 'oppression'. Some will dominate by violence, and the others will groan, subject to all their whims. This is precisely what I observe among us, but I do not see how this could be said of savage men, to whom it would even be very difficult to explain what servitude and domination are. A man may well seize the fruits another has picked, the game he has killed, the cave he used as shelter, but how will he ever succeed in making himself obeyed and what chains of dependence can there be among men who possess nothing? If someone chases me from one tree, I leave it to go to another...I take twenty steps into forest, my chains are broken, and he never sees me again in his life.

The Prerequisite for Oppression Among Men

- Without needlessly drawing out these details, since the bonds of servitude are formed only by the mutual dependence of men and by the reciprocal needs that unite them, it is impossible to enslave a man without first having put him in the position of being unable to do without another—a situation which, since it does not exist in the state of nature, leaves everyone in it free from the yoke and renders vain the law of the stronger.

Private Property and Inequality Among Men

- The first person who, having enclosed a plot of ground, thought of saying *this is mine* and found people simple enough to believe him was the true founder of civil society. What crimes, wars, murders, what miseries and horrors, would the human race have been spared by someone who, pulling up the stakes or filling the ditch, had cried out to his fellow humans: “Beware of listening to this imposter. You are lost if you forget that the fruits are everyone’s and the earth is no one’s!”.

Interpersonal Comparisons as Catastrophe

- In proportion as ideas and feelings succeed one another, as mind and heart are trained, the human race continues to be tamed, contacts spread and bonds draw tighter. They grew accustomed to assemble in front of their huts or around a large tree. Song and dance, true children of love and leisure, became the amusement or rather the occupation of idle men and women gathered together. Each began to look at the others and to want to be looked at himself, and public esteem had a value. The one who sang or danced the best, the most beautiful, the strongest, the most clever, or the most eloquent became the most highly considered – and this, then was the first step toward inequality and at the same time toward vice. From these first preferences arose vanity and contempt, on the one hand, and shame and envy, on the other.

Needs of Men and Inequality

- As long as they applied themselves only to tasks a single person could do and only to arts that did not require the cooperation of several hands, they lived free, healthy, good, and happy insofar as they could be by their nature, and continued to enjoy the sweet pleasures of independent interactions with one another. But from the moment that one man needed the help of another, as soon as they perceived it was useful for a single person to have provisions for two, equality disappeared, property was introduced, labor became necessary, and vast forests were changed into smiling fields which had to be watered by the sweat of men and in which slavery and misery were seen to sprout and grow together with the harvest.

Iron, Wheat and Inequality

- Things in this state might have remained equal if talents had been equal, and if, for example, the use of iron and the consumption of foodstuffs had always been exactly balanced. But the proportion, which nothing maintained, was soon upset. The stronger did more work, the more clever turned his work to better advantage, the more ingenious found ways to reduce his labor; the farmer needed more iron or blacksmith more wheat; and, even though they worked equally, one person earned a great deal while another had difficulty staying alive. This is how natural inequality imperceptibly unfolds together with contrived inequality and how differences among men, developed by their different circumstances, make themselves more perceptible, more permanent in their effects, and begin to have a proportionate influence on the fate of individuals.

The Origins of State (1)

- It is not possible that men would not have eventually reflected on such a miserable situation and on the calamities with which they were overwhelmed. The rich above all must have soon sensed how disadvantageous to them was a perpetual war in which they alone paid all the costs and in which the risk to life was common to all, while the risk to goods was theirs alone...Devoid of valid reasons to justify himself and sufficient force to defend himself...the rich man, pressed by necessity, finally conceived the most carefully considered project that ever entered the human mind. It was to use the very strength of those who attacked him in his favor, to make his defenders out of his adversaries, to instill different maxims in them, and to give them different institutions that were as favorable to him as natural right was adverse to him.

The Origins of State (2)

- With this in mind, after having shown his neighbours the horror of a situation that made them all take up arms against one another, that made their possessions as burdensome as their needs, and in which no one found safety in either poverty or wealth, he easily invented specious reasons to lead them to his goal. "Let us unite," he tells them, "to protect the weak from oppression, restrain the ambitious, and secure for each the possession of what belongs to him. Let us institute rules of justice and peace to which all are obliged to conform, which make no exception for anyone, and which compensate, as it were, for the whims of fortune by subjecting the powerful and the weak alike to mutual duties. In a word, instead of turning our forces against ourselves, let us gather them together into a supreme power that governs us according to wise laws, that protects and defends all the members of the association, repulses common enemies, and maintains everlasting concord among us.

The Origins of State (3)

- Much less that the equivalent of this discourse was needed to sway crude, easily seduced men, who, moreover, had too many disputes to straighten out amongst themselves to be able to do without arbiters, and too much greed and ambition to be able to do without masters for too long. All ran toward their chains, believing they were securing their freedom, for while they had enough reason to sense the advantages of a political establishment, they did not have enough experience to foresee its dangers.

The Origins of State (4)

- Such was, or must have been, the origin of society and of laws, which gave new fetters to the weak man and new forces to the rich man irreversibly destroyed natural freedom, forever established the law of property and of inequality, made an irrevocable right out of a clever usurpation, and henceforth subjected the entire human race to labor, servitude, and misery for the profit of a few ambitious people.

Why Different Regimes?

- The different forms of government derive their origin from the greater or lesser differences found among individuals at the time of institution. Was one man preeminent in power, virtue, wealth, or prestige? He alone was elected magistrate, and the state became monarchical. If several who were more or less equal to one another surpassed all the others, they were jointly elected, and there was an aristocracy. Those whose fortune or talents were less disproportionate, and who were at least distant from the state of nature, retained the supreme administration in common, and they formed a democracy.

Wretched Men when Society is Formed

- Political distinctions necessarily bring about civil distinctions. Growing inequality between the people and its leaders soon makes itself felt among private individuals and is modified among them in a thousand ways according to passions, talents, and circumstances. The magistrate could not usurp power illegitimately without creating some minions to whom he is forced to cede some share of it. Furthermore, citizens let themselves be oppressed only insofar as, being carried away by blind ambition, and looking more beneath than above themselves, domination becomes more precious to them than independence, and they consent to bear chains so that they in their turn can give them to others.

Interpersonal Comparison and Destruction in Society

- Wealth, nobility or rank, power, and personal merit are generally the principal distinctions by which one is measured in society, the surest indication of a well or badly constituted state...I would note how much this universal desire for reputation, honors, and preferences, which consumes us all, exercises and compares talents and strengths, how much it excites and multiplies the passions, and – by making all men competitors, rivals, or, rather, enemies – how many reverses, successes, and catastrophes of every type it daily causes by making so many contenders run in the same lists...If one sees a handful of powerful or rich men at the height of glory and fortune while the crowd grovels in obscurity and misery, it is because the former value the things they enjoy only to the extent that the latter are deprived of them, and that, without any change in their status, they would cease to be happy if the people ceased to be miserable.