



## Rousseau, democracy, and nationalism

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### Abstract

In the modern context, there seems to be little correlation between democracy and nationalism. It is generally believed that the former points to modern mainstream values such as equality and freedom, emphasizing individual rights; while the latter is more closely related to values such as patriotism and unity, placing collective interests above individuals'. However, under ancient democracy, the values implied by nationalism and democracy are quite consistent. In *"The Social Contract"*, Rousseau keenly observes the dilemma of modern democracy and the degeneration of civic morality. He attempts to return to the ancient democratic system and closely link individual freedom with collective emotions through the teachings of "general will". However, as Rousseau continues the modern liberal thinkers' presupposition of human nature, as well as his admiration for modern values of "equality" and "democracy", Rousseau ultimately deviates from the classical political philosophy. The attempt to preserve the classical concepts on the basis of modernity has also led to inherent contradictions in Rousseau's thoughts.

**Keywords:** Rousseau, "The Social Contract", democracy, nationalism, equality

### Introduction

#### 1. The relationship between democracy and nationalism: Starting from the concepts

As a kind of political regime, democracy has a history of more than 2500 years. Both our understanding and evaluation of democracy today is largely different from the ancient time. The word "democracy" (Greek: *dēmokratia*) we use today actually originates from the Greek character, which combines the elements *dēmos* ("people") and *krátos* ("force" or "power"), and thus means literally "people have power" or "rule of the people".

There is actually not much to be surprised about the definition of democracy. At first glance, it seems to have nothing to do with nationalism. In the modern context, nationalism is somewhat tainted with derogatory connotations, while democracy is gradually becoming a universal value and is seen with the virtues of liberty and equality (Sen, 1999, pp. 3-17) <sup>[11]</sup>. Nevertheless, an unexpected discovery can be found if we go back to the historical development of the meaning of the concept "nationalism".

Nationalism as a political ideology only emerged when the idea of national community encountered the doctrine of popular sovereignty. This occurred during the French Revolution and was influenced by the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, sometimes seen as the "father" of modern nationalism. Previously, the inhabitants of a country were "subjects" (as opposed to citizens), their political identity being formed by an allegiance to a ruler or ruling dynasty, rather than any sense of national identity or patriotism. However, the revolutionaries in France who rose up against Louis XVI in 1789 did so in the name of the people, and understood the "people" to be the "French nation". Nationalism thus signifies a transformation of political identification from a feudal lord to people sovereignty, which overlaps perfectly with "rule of the people" defining democracy.

#### 2. Why do we no longer associate democracy with nationalism?

From the analysis of the two concepts themselves, an unconventional conclusion may be drawn that the spirit of democracy is similar to that of nationalism. However, it is a little counter-intuitive as there still seems to be tension between the two. When we talk about democracy, what first pops into mind may be values like "liberty", "individuality", and "equality". Whereas, "nationalism" seems to more or less point to values like "collective" and "solidarity", which is quite different from the former. If we want to figure out why, we have to first go back to the ancient form of democracy in order to better understand the modern type as well as the relation of the two.

##### 2.1. Ancient democracy: Combination of public and private spheres

During the Athenian period, the scope of democracy application was infinite. In addition to public areas like politics and judiciary, democracy even extended to the private sector. To be more precise, there was even no such thing as "private" in Athenians' eyes, as "when the total sum of public happiness contributes a larger portion to the happiness of each individual, there remains less for him to gain from his own efforts" (Rousseau, 1999, p. 126). Due to the overlap between the public and private spheres, citizens in ancient times born great enthusiasm in discussion of general affairs, which they took seriously as their own business. Rousseau highly reveres this positive democratic spirit in ancient Greece, "Among the Greeks the people did for itself all that it needed to do: it was constantly in assembly in the town square" (Rousseau, 1999, p. 128).

In the circumstance of such a close integration between the public and private spheres, we may take it for granted that there is no personal freedom to speak of at all. However, in ancient Greece, one of the greatest concern for people is exactly liberty. According to Rousseau, true sense of liberty can only be gained when people concern about the public affairs instead of letting the government to do so. When a

citizen participate in discussion for public affairs and vote for the common good, he actually owns more freedom than one who does nothing, for the later easily transfers the decision-making right of policies that can determine his own destiny to others who he does not even know. As the public and private spheres are combined in ancient times, as long as citizens care about the common good, it is equivalent to them also considering for their own interests. In this sense, liberty and solidarity, two seemingly unrelated words, are perfectly combined together. Though the modern idea of "nationalism" did not occur in the ancient Greece, the spirit of ancient democracy surprisingly meets what we talk about nationalism today.

## 2.2. Modern democracy: Competition of individual interests

This kind of liberty referred to above seems quite unfamiliar to modern people. In the modern context, liberty is closer to the "negative" form, which means freedom free from public domain intervention. This major shift in the meaning of liberty can be traced back to Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, both of whose views on liberty aim to protect individuals from control and restraint, serving as a negative precaution against government power and infringement by others, which is totally different from the classical one requiring positive aims.

In fact, it is not until the modern time that the individual begins to emerge from the collective, and clear boundaries are drawn between the public and private domains. "He cares only for his own preservation, and all of his faculties are directed to that end" (Bloom, 1991, p. 180) [2]. It is widely recognized that the less public things we need to care, and the larger the scope of private area is, the more freedom we will get. Thus, in contrast to ancient democracy, modern democracy has no voice except in the political sphere. But even in this limited field, modern democracy system is not the same with the direct form in ancient Greek, where there is no intermediary to represent the people. Under the modern democratic system, the parliament composed of "representatives of public opinions" has become the cornerstone, and the only thing people can do is to vote for the representatives during the short election period. At first glance, people are freer than ever before, as they not only no longer need to bother with public affairs, but their private domain has become unprecedentedly large. Nevertheless, Rousseau precisely regards this so-called liberty as the root of slavery:

The people of England believes itself to be free; it is quite wrong: it is free only during the elections of Members of Parliament. Once they are elected, the people is enslaved, it is nothing. Seeing the use it makes of liberty during its brief moments of possession, it deserves to lose it. The idea of representation is modern: it came from feudalism, that unjust and absurd form of government which degrades the human race, and under which the name of man was dishonourable (Rousseau, 1999, p. 127).

What's more, the inability of people to hold real power in modern democracy, coupled with the rising of individualism, makes people inclined to vote only for personal interests (or what they think are their interests) without any consideration for common good. "No one is willing to stir a step in order to be there, because no one is interested in what goes on there, nor believes that the

general will will dominate, and finally because domestic affairs monopolize everything" (Rousseau, 1999, p. 126). In short, modern democracy not only deviates from its original meaning "rule of the people", but also loses touch with the public spirit of nationalism, depriving people of their liberty in the real sense.

## 3. Rousseau and ancient democracy

### 3.1. Citizenship and "General Will": Returning to ancient democracy

In Rousseau's view, "the weakening love of country, the energy spent on private interests" are typical characteristics of people under modern democracy. "He will be one of these men of our days: a Frenchman, an Englishman, a bourgeois. He will be nothing" (Rousseau, 1979, p. 40) [7]. Unlike other "progressive" thinkers, Rousseau attributes the corruption of civic morality and political system to the prevailing Enlightenment movement at his time. The scientific enlightenment uncovers the sacred veil of religious beliefs and overturns the dominant religious authority. And at the same time, it also includes the moral emotions of patriotism and customs to dispel the charm. "With Enlightenment the illusions are dispelled, and men learn that they care about their own lives more than about country, family, friendship, or honor" (Bloom, 1991, p. 180) [2]. In the void of spiritual ruins, the intimidation of people by the pope is replaced by a new secular "religion": "Fear of God can be replaced by the fear of an able prince" (Strauss, 1947, p. 457) [13]. The Enlightenment movement, which aims at bringing liberty to people, actually becomes the tomb of freedom, providing an opportunity for tyrant. Rousseau recognises the correlation between the level of freedom in a nation and the necessity for a strong moral foundation and a genuinely virtuous religious system. The disillusionment caused by scientific knowledge may appear to free individuals' intellects, but it fails to bring about genuine liberty and democracy, nor does it foster civic engagement and social cohesion. In fact, the pursuit of "absolute liberty" inevitably results in an irreversible trajectory towards complete slavery.

In light of the circumstances mentioned, Rousseau endeavours to reconcile personal freedom with community unity, allowing for the coexistence of democracy and the concept of nationalism. Thus, Rousseau returns to the classical political philosophy abandoned by modern thinkers, attempting to find intellectual resources from ancient forms of democracy. In order to overcome the moral dilemma of modern selfishness and to reunite the divided public and private spheres, Rousseau puts forward his famous teaching of the "general will", which means the genuine interests of a collective body. When all citizens prioritise the common good, personal interests and collective will can achieve the highest degree of unity.

To make it more clear, Rousseau uses example of a Spartan mother to illustrate what it means to be a true citizen:

A Spartan woman had five sons in the army and was awaiting news of the battle. A Helot arrives; trembling, she asks him for news. "Your five sons were killed." "Base slave, did I ask you that?" "We won the victory." The mother runs to the temple and gives thanks to the gods. This is the female citizen (Rousseau, 1979, p. 40) [7].

Modern individuals may perceive this mother as lacking freedom and view her as a victim of complete indoctrination by the group. According to Rousseau, liberty is not simply

the absence of restrictions or the ability to do as one pleases. Instead, it involves self-legislation and strict adherence to the laws one has established: "For the wise man, they take the place of positive law. They are written in the depth of his heart by 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" (Rousseau, 1979, p. 403) <sup>[7]</sup>. In the ideal direct democracy, citizens legislate by general will as their fundamental principle and strictly obey the laws they have established with the patriotic fervour and self-discipline spirit promoted by civil religion. In an ideal society, citizens prioritise public matters over their own private issues, as evidenced by the quote "everyone hurries to the assemblies" (Rousseau, 1999, p. 126). At this point, the seemingly conflicting values of democracy, nationalism, freedom, and solidarity are all perfectly linked together under the adhesive effect of the "general will".

### 3.2. Rousseau's deviation from ancient democracy

Rousseau endeavours to address the modern issues of societal moral deterioration and political malfeasance by advocating for a revival of ancient democracy. However, as a modern man, Rousseau continues to incorporate values unique to the modern era into his thinking, as "he tries to preserve the classical idea of philosophy on the basis of modern" (Strauss, 1947, p. 487) <sup>[13]</sup>. This leads to a non-negligible tension between him and classical thought.

From a modern perspective, the concept of "equality" is often regarded as an unquestionable principle that humanity relentlessly strives for. Modern political thinkers have seen equality among individuals as an essential requirement or objective in their philosophical deliberations, and Rousseau is no exception. Although different from the Enlightenment as Rousseau emphasizes the importance of the natural inequality among humans, he rejects the notion of using this natural inequality as a basis for introducing governmental inequality. As a result, Rousseau makes the system of government based on equality as its principle - i.e. democracy - the best political system in his mind. It is in this sense that Rousseau attempts to return to the democracy of ancient Athens, trying to provide a model for modern people to follow.

However, the reality of Athenian democracy is not as "equal" as we think of it today. In Athens, political involvement is exclusively reserved for individuals classified as "citizens", who are specifically restricted to adult males. Under such a strict definition, adult women, foreigners and slaves are all excluded, and the real Athenian "citizens" account for only about one-tenth of the total number of people in the city-state (Wang, 2014, p. 4) <sup>[16]</sup>. Therefore, Athenian democracy is in fact a democracy enjoyed by a very small number of citizens, a democracy that excludes the vast majority of the people. The purported "rule of the people" is actually the rule of a select few, predicated on the inequitable institution of slavery. This kind of political system is not so much democracy as a certain degree of aristocratic system.

In fact, classical political philosophy has always been based on the concept of "inequality". As endorsed by Rousseau, classical philosophers clearly recognize that there is inequality in intelligence or physical strength among individuals in the state of nature. The truly ideal political system and society are not arrangements that go against

nature, lowering everyone's talents to the same level. If equality is forced, the result is often an equalized mediocrity or what Nietzsche calls "last man". Instead, classical thinkers conform to "natural right" (Strauss, 1999), assigning different responsibilities and positions to individuals based on their different talents. They believe that "the natural inequality of intellectual powers is, or ought to be, of decisive political importance" (Strauss, 1947, p. 485) <sup>[13]</sup>.

While Rousseau is a strong advocate of the value of equality, he still more or less recognizes that freedom is even conditional on some form of slavery:

So can liberty be preserved only with the help of slaves? Maybe. The one extreme meets the other. Everything that is not natural has its disadvantages, and civil society more than anything else. There are some unhappy situations in which one's liberty can be kept only at the expense of another's, and the citizen can be perfectly free only if the slave is in complete servitude (Rousseau, 1999, p. 128).

Indeed, there are instances when we unquestioningly prioritise both equality and liberty as the utmost ideals, without critically considering their true worthiness of pursuit. However, there is an inherent tension between the values of the two. In order to achieve equality, it is necessary to establish artificial institutional structures, which in turn requires sacrificing a portion of our own freedom. Conversely, if individuals prioritise increasing their freedom, it would inevitably lead to the progressive widening of natural inequality. Furthermore, the concept of equality is inherently unnatural. According to Rousseau, in the state of nature, though there exists considerable inequality, people do not have the luxury of leveling the naturally endowed positions, nor do they covet positions that are not in accordance with their own natural endowments. Just like plants in nature, they are different in size and height, receiving different sunlight and water, but no one is dissatisfied with the natural arrangement. In this sense, "equality" is a purely artificial construct. It is precisely because the idea of "equality" is so deeply rooted in people's heart that it leads to jealousy and hatred among people, and it is also because the concept of "equality" is created in the first place that the corresponding feeling of "unfair" appears, not the other way round.

Anyway, though Rousseau fully recognizes inequality in the natural sense, he consistently regards political equality as one of his supreme aims. Rousseau attempts to seek the salvation of modernity from classical thought, but in his highest goal he departs radically from classical political philosophy and joins the mainstream of modern thought.

### 4. Intrinsic contradictions of Rousseau's theory

Rousseau's primary motivation for reflecting on modernity and advocating for a return to ancient democracy is to expose and confront the moral and political quandary inherent in the modern democratic system. He aims to find a legal framework that effectively balances individual freedom with the communal spirit. Nevertheless, Rousseau's adherence to the foundational principles of modern political thought while revisiting classical political philosophy necessarily gives rise to intrinsic conflicts and deficiencies in his teachings.

Rousseau's idea suggests that if every member of the community legislates in alignment with the singular general will, it is possible to attain a state of flawless democracy and

liberty, where the individual and communal wills can harmoniously unite. This seems to be a very ideal prospect, provided that two fundamental conditions of this hypothesis are met: the majority of citizens must attain a state of altruism and possess the capacity to discern the genuine collective desire. Regrettably, attaining the two premises becomes arduous in actuality. First and foremost, Rousseau asserts that citizens in a democratic society must prioritise the collective welfare over their individual self-interests. This was feasible during ancient times when the distinction between private and public spheres had not yet been established. In the realm of modern philosophy, Rousseau, while differing to some degree from Hobbes and Locke's beliefs about human nature, identifies compassion as the fundamental emotion. However, he aligns with modern thinkers in his understanding of the formation of society: individuals enter into social contracts and establish communities as a means of self-preservation. Under such assumption, humans are not, as classical philosophers believe, inherently political animals and have an inseparable connection with the collective. On the contrary, Rousseau already presupposes the absolute superiority of the individual over the collective, and the natural division between the two. Rousseau seeks to establish a civic religion to cultivate patriotic feelings among citizens, aiming to overcome the inherent divide between individuals and collectives through artificial methods. He expects self-centered individuals to make complete sacrifices in order to prioritise the common good. However, Rousseau acknowledges that a social order built upon the manipulation of natural arrangements is challenging to sustain, and would inevitably expose its unsolvable flaws and contradictions.

Furthermore, Rousseau's theory of democracy sets forth a demanding criterion for citizens, specifically that all citizens, or at the very least the majority of them, must possess the necessary competence to discern the genuine popular will. In fact, Rousseau has already disproven this premise in "The Social Contract" in a straightforward manner:

How can the blind multitude, often ignorant of what it wants, because it seldom knows what is good for it, accomplish by itself so large and difficult an enterprise as a system of legislation? The people, of itself, always wants the good, but does not, of itself, always see it (Rousseau, 1999, p. 75).

In Rousseau's view, the majority of commoners could not even truly distinguish their own interests, let alone have the ability to clearly grasp and uphold the common good. Rousseau argues that in order to establish genuine popular sovereignty, it is essential to direct citizens towards making correct decisions through the guidance of a "legislator". The one side must be obliged to shape their wills to their reason, the other must be taught the knowledge of what it wants...This is why it is necessary to have a legislator" (Rousseau, 1999, p. 75). This legislator, as a guide to the people, requires not only deep insight and long-term vision, but also a calm and selfless attitude that is not affected by emotions, deeply caring for the well-being of all. According to Rousseau, "It is gods that are needed to give laws to men" (Rousseau, 1999, p. 75). It is evident that Rousseau's concept of the "legislator" bears striking resemblances to Plato's idea of the "philosopher king", and Rousseau's view

of the ignorant masses is no much different from Plato's. Like philosophers who detach themselves from secular society, Rousseau's legislator also "does not form part of its constitution, but is specific and superior, having nothing in common with human authority" (Rousseau, 1999, p. 77). So far, it is clear that Rousseau has departed from his original demand for the norm of "equality", as the legislator is no longer equal to the people in need of guidance, either in natural endowments or in social duties. Moreover, if Rousseau's democracy has to be guided by a towering legislator in order to function adequately, this is in fact a departure from the definition of democracy as "rule of the people". Rousseau's appearance of democracy is in essence a return to the monarchy or aristocracy recognized by classical philosophers.

### Conclusion

Rousseau endeavours to revive the ancient democratic system and establish a strong connection between individual freedom and communal sentiments by promoting the concept of the "general will" in his teachings. However, the aforementioned study reveals that Rousseau's worldview exhibits an inherent conflict when he attempts to uphold classical notions within the framework of modernity. In modern society, democracy and equality have transformed into symbolic designations that are advocated without thoughtful consideration of their original meaning and potential outcomes. According to Tocqueville's findings, the popularity of democracy has consistently increased since the 19th century, and it has now become an inexorable phenomenon. Conversely, nationalism and patriotism are sometimes discredited and stigmatised as indications of intolerance or a deficiency in freedom. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that certain activities and beliefs that we consider unquestionable and universally accepted may not be appropriate to all time periods. The concept of democracy, which is currently seen as a universally accepted principle, has only gained significant traction in the past two centuries, despite its existence throughout history. Prior to the 19th century, democracy was often regarded as a morally corrupt regime.

This article is by no means intended to justify slavery, nor is it intended to undermine the fundamental principles of democracy and equality. However, if there is no room for questioning and rethinking a certain value, even if it is correct, it will eventually fall into a lifeless empty slogan or a rigid ideology. In this sense, a profound understanding of Rousseau's views on ancient and modern democracy, as well as the contradictions inherent in his theories, is also an important source of inspiration and reference for us to rationally view the strengths and weaknesses of our current polity.

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