

# ROUSSEAU'S CRITIQUE OF INEQUALITY: RECONSTRUCTING THE SECOND DISCOURSE

by Frederick Neuhouser

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, xi +236 pp. ISBN Paperback 978-1-107-64466-3

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men* (hereafter, *Second Discourse*) has exerted a magnetic attraction on its readers since its publication in 1755, despite (or perhaps because of) the fundamentally mysterious nature of its essential teaching. Rousseau traces the emergence of inequality in its broadest forms: from social status and hierarchy to relations of romantic love and sexual preference and, most notably, economic disparity between rich and poor. That much is clear. What is far from clear, however, are Rousseau's precise views about these issues. For example, given that Rousseau appears to think that inequality arises with society, does he conclude from this that it would be better to return to the primitive simplicity of nomadic life? Does he find all forms of economic inequality in modern societies illegitimate, and, if so, what exactly is his standard of normative assessment? Does Rousseau hold out any hope for the eradication of pernicious forms of inequality, or were we doomed from the onset of private property? Ultimately, is Rousseau optimistic about the possibility of justice? Generations of philosophical interpreters, from Leo Strauss to Louis Althusser to John Rawls, have disagreed about Rousseau's answers to these basic questions.

Matters are made further complex by the *Second Discourse's* mode of argumentation. Rousseau purports to provide a historical narrative, yet his account begins by assuming fictional people, lacking many essential human traits such as language and sociality, who exist in a hypothetical state of nature—a state that, as he puts it, “no longer exists, which perhaps never did exist, which probably never will exist,” and yet of which it is “nevertheless necessary to have exact Notions in order to judge of our present state.”<sup>1</sup> He even exhorts the reader to “set aside all the facts, for they do not affect the question” (SD, p. 132).

Frederick Neuhouser's *Rousseau's Critique of Inequality* provides a magisterial point of entry into this dense thicket of issues. To my mind, the work is undoubtedly the finest Anglophone interpretation of Rousseau's *Second Discourse*. Rarely, if ever, has Rousseau's text been treated with such hermeneutical care. For Neuhouser, the *Second Discourse* is a work of systematic philosophy. As such, it contains a central argument that is to be understood and reconstructed. It is not merely a set of provocative claims to be diagnosed as a product of Rousseau's dazzling literary style or penchant for apparent contradiction. In this respect, *Rousseau's Critique of Inequality* sets the standard for analytical engagement with Rousseau's social and political thought.

Neuhouser avoids excessive sparring with scholarship on the text. Instead, he organizes his reconstruction around an elegant and yet surprisingly under-used methodological principle: When a text asks a question, one ought to figure out its answer to that question. The question, proposed by the Academy of Dijon, to which Rousseau's *Second Discourse* is a response, asks, “What is the origin of inequality among men, and [is it] authorized by the natural law” (SD, p. 130)? According to Neuhouser, Rousseau's answer to the first part of the question (on origins) does not in fact seek the precise moment in human history when inequality first appeared. Rather, Rousseau transforms the search for origins into a search for the *sources* of inequality, that is, the factors that make inequality such a ubiquitous

feature of the human condition. (This is of a piece with Neuhouse's larger methodological orientation towards Rousseau's genealogical argument. For Neuhouse, what Rousseau puts in terms of temporal priority is really an account of conceptual dependence. Rousseau discusses something as historically *first* as a way of indicating that it is explanatorily *basic*). Rousseau's response to the second question, on the normative foundations (i.e., the legitimacy) of inequality, is to propose a rational standard by which inequality might be assessed.

Having clarified Rousseau's reinterpretation of the tasks set by the Academy's question, Neuhouse organizes his reconstruction of Rousseau's answers into four complex chapters. In brief, Neuhouse's reconstruction is as follows: Inequalities do not have their origin in man's *original nature*, which Neuhouse understands as those aspects of human existence that underlie and are unformed by more complex aspects of our nature such as reason and free action, what he calls "human nature in an expanded sense" (p. 33). Human nature understood as original nature—as, roughly, what we share with other complex forms of animal life (e.g., the drive to self-preservation and the capacity for limited pity at the sight of suffering)—does not explain why humans are motivated to seek out the inequalities they create. There is no need for human beings to create significant inequalities simply to satisfy the needs they share with non-rational animals (Chapter 1).

Rather, social inequalities stem from those aspects of our nature that Rousseau calls "artificial," which, when applied to the social realm, refers to practices whose existence and legitimacy depends on the beliefs held by agents governed by those practices—for example, property, love, the state, fashion, or artistic styles: what contemporary philosophers would classify as the domain of practical normativity. Specifically, the central explanatory factor in the prevalence and persistence of inequalities in all advanced societies is the aspect of human nature in the expanded sense that Rousseau calls *amour propre*—roughly, the desire to have one's worth recognized by others, to count as something for other people (Chapter 2).

Inequalities are illegitimate when they impede the pursuit of the human good, understood as (a) freedom as the absence of domination; (b) well-being as the absence of pain, frustrated desires, and unmet needs; and (3) self-preservation (Chapter 3). The appropriate principles for judging when practices of inequality fail to realize the human good derive from a contractualist standard of political legitimacy. According to this standard, the central evaluative question is, could institutions legitimizing such inequalities be willed by all agents aiming to satisfy only their fundamental, shared interests? Inequalities should be a legitimate object of social critique when they produce domination, loss of well-being, and threats to basic self-preservation, but they are legitimate when restrained so as not to produce these consequences (Chapter 4).

Finally, Neuhouse argues that although there are many similarities between Rousseau's treatment of inequality and Rawls's—no surprise given Rawls's deep and lifelong engagement with Rousseau—Rousseau places much greater emphasis on the way in which economic inequality can impede human freedom (as opposed to Rawls's emphasis on distributive unfairness) and on the extent to which forces of domination proliferate throughout society (as opposed to Rawls's overly restrictive emphasis on domination in the political sphere; Chapter 5).

Just as in his earlier work, *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love: Evil, Rationality, and the Drive for Recognition* (Oxford, 2010), *amour propre* is the red thread of Neuhouse's reconstruction. The desire to be esteemed by others, and the consciousness of oneself as a self in and through those recognitive dynamics, is the central cause of our desires to have more than others and to accumulate goods beyond what we need to satisfy our essential needs. But, on Neuhouse's reconstruction, *amour propre*, suitably transformed, can also explain human beings' sense of justice and attachment to equality. The essential insight of Neuhouse's Rousseau is that there is an intrinsic connection between self-consciousness, recognition, reason, justice, and freedom. And so, his Rousseau is "very much a member of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German tradition in social and political philosophy – the founder of it in fact!" (p. 14).

So much for an overview of Neuhouse's complex and nuanced argument. Although as I have already indicated, I have deep admiration for the book's achievements; I want to pose two critical questions.

The first has to do with Rousseau's views on the relation between psychological and material factors in the explanation of inequality. For Neuhouse's Rousseau, "the passion to be esteemed by others is what fuels the spread of inequality, since it alone among the elements of human psychology provides humans with a motive to create

inequalities beyond those that nature itself provides" (p. 80). But what then to make of the complex array of nonpsychological, material factors that Rousseau also thinks play a role in explaining the sources of inequality—for example, leisure, the division of labor, class stratification, and private property? Neuhouser treats these factors as "auxiliary conditions" which explain how *amour propre* produces social inequality. These factors "serve to ... give permanence to the various inequalities that beings with the desire for superior standing are driven to create" (p. 82); they explain how the desire for superior standing can be "translate[d] into enduring systems of advantage" (p. 80). Is this Rousseau's view, and, if so, should we agree with it?

Let me first treat the philosophical plausibility of this position. Does it make sense to think of historical, material, and institutional conditions as simply channeling or giving force to an independently intelligible drive? Neuhouser writes that for Rousseau, "private property ... follows more or less necessarily ... once *amour propre* is sufficiently active to recommend the acquisition of property to individuals as a partial means to achieving a recognized standing for others" (p. 102). But one might instead hold that private property arises for other reasons, having to do with changes, say, in modes of production, and that the desire to express one's worth in terms of greater property is produced in and through that material change. As deeply historically situated beings, it might be misleading to discuss private property as a *means* for achieving psychological standing. Rather, one might say that the very substance of such standing is nothing other than these material relations. In other words, one might resist the idea that there is something called a desire for recognition that is conceptually intelligible independently of the material and cultural forms it takes.

Now, Neuhouser might well be correct as an interpretation of Rousseau. After all, Rousseau, unlike many later historicist thinkers, wants to retain a conception of human nature. Rousseau often seems committed to the notion of basic drives whose mode of expression is historically contingent, but which are not themselves historically constituted. Perhaps his form of genealogy is undergirded by timeless psychological principles. But a more complex intertwining of the psychological and the material-historical is suggested by the fact that the *Second Discourse* treats the following two issues in tandem: (a) the formation of a sense of self as located in intersubjective relations, that is, the constitution of being with entitlements who can thus be wronged by others, and (2) the formation of practices and ideas about property in land and goods. When Rousseau writes, "Where there is no property, there can be no injury" (p. 166), this at least suggests the possibility of a deeper interrelation of material and psychological factors than Neuhouser's account admits.

Finally, although as I have indicated I appreciate Neuhouser's economical approach to the secondary literature and nondefensive writing style, it would have been helpful to have more sense of Rousseau's position in a historical dialectic. At one point, Neuhouser mentions Hobbes's rival explanation of economic inequality, which he says is "surely the main interlocutor Rousseau has in mind" (p. 56). As Neuhouser explains it, Hobbes's view was that humans might create inequalities because, under conditions of perceived scarcity and threat, they think that doing well for themselves involves hoarding potentially scarce resources.<sup>2</sup> For our purposes here, the important point is that people might conceptualize these resources not in terms of what they need to have in order to be *better* than others but simply in terms of what they need to live a decent life. If the Hobbesian account were true, then inequality would stem not from *amour propre* but from the psychological force Rousseau calls *amour de soi-meme* (roughly, our interest in our own preservation).

Neuhouser's response to this objection on behalf of Rousseau is that conditions of perceived scarcity are not natural but in fact often stem from artificial social conditions that, as his account posits, are principally explained by *amour propre*. But one wonders whether, whatever the origin of scarcity (whether natural or historical), it isn't more plausible to think that dominant classes in the modern world do not in the first instance seek to maintain inequality in order to be recognized as superior, but simply out of a perceived sense that what they have is under threat (in this respect, they would be like real-life versions of the agents in Hobbes's state of nature, acting from perception of the essential hostility of others under conditions of imagined scarcity).

In *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self Love*, Neuhouser suggests that Rousseau offers too coarse an explanation of the "full range of ills in actual societies." He claims that not all forms of violations of the fundamental equality of all

can be understood in terms of the desire to have one's superiority recognized. As he puts it, it is difficult to accept Rousseau's "conclusion that what motivates aggression and cruelty of all kinds—genocide, imperial wars, the rationalized slaughter that characterized the twentieth century—is but a version, however perverted, of the desire to count for something in the eyes of others."<sup>3</sup> Neuhouser is concerned to show that there might be an independent desire simply to seek power for its own sake, a view he attributes to Nietzsche and Freud. But one might reject that idea—thus retaining Rousseau's optimism about human nature—and still wonder about how best to understand the relation between two distinct forms of domination in the modern world: domination aimed at asserting hierarchy and domination aimed at maintaining material benefits.

Ultimately, however, these are but small questions about what is overall an extraordinary reconstruction of a classic of European social theory.<sup>4</sup>

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men* in *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 125. Hereafter cited in text as *SD*.

<sup>2</sup> Neuhouser now thinks that this reconstruction is insufficiently attentive to Hobbes's discussion of glory (personal communication).

<sup>3</sup> *Rousseau's Theodicy*, p. 268.

<sup>4</sup> I thank Neuhouser for extended conversation and comments on an earlier draft of this review. In this case more than others, it worth emphasizing that any felicities in expression or argument are entirely my own.