

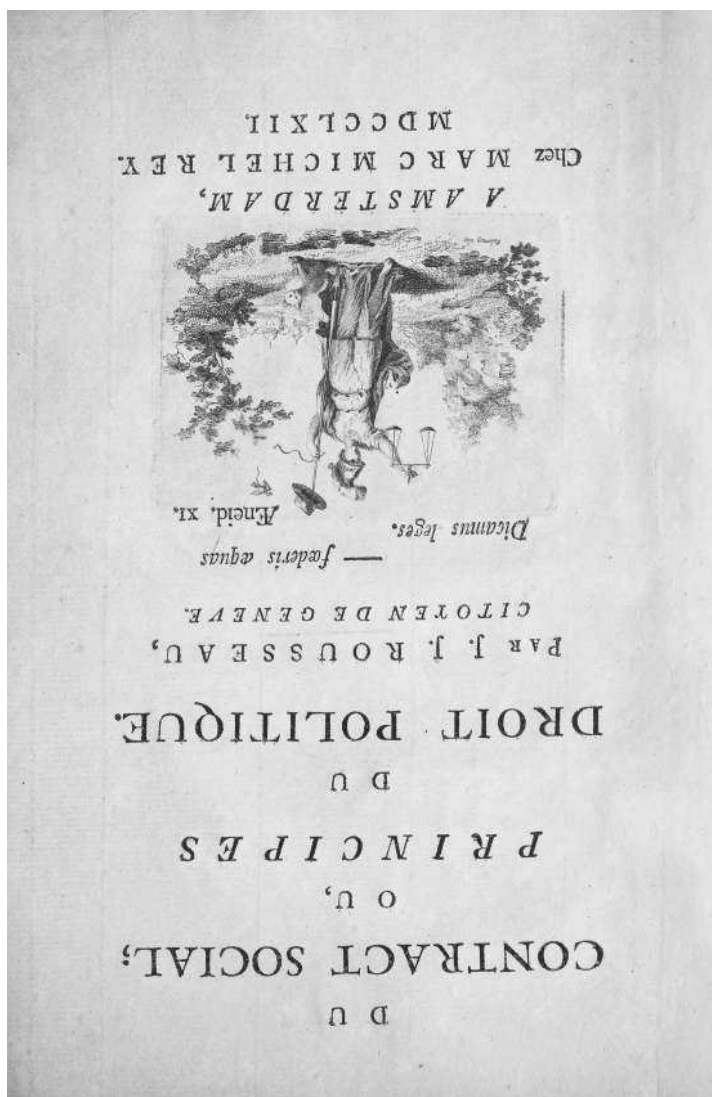
Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-15081-2 — Rousseau: The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings

Edited and translated by Victor Gourevitch, Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Excerpt

[More Information](#)



Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-15081-2 — Rousseau: The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings

Edited and translated by Victor Gourevitch , Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Excerpt

[More Information](#)

[OC III, 241]

DISCOURSE ON POLITICAL ECONOMY

[1] Economy (*Ethics and Politics*), the word is derived from ὄικος, *house*, and νόμος, *law*, and originally merely means the wise and legitimate government of the household for the common good of the entire family. The meaning of the term was subsequently extended to the government of the large family, which is the state. In order to distinguish the two usages, it is called *general* or *political* economy in the latter case, and in the former, *domestic* or *particular* economy. This article deals only with the first. Regarding domestic economy, see FATHER OF THE FAMILY.

[2] Even if the similarity between the family and the state were as close as a number of authors claim, it would not follow that the rules of conduct appropriate to one of these two societies suited the other: they differ too much in size to admit of being administered in the same way, and there will always be a very great difference between domestic government, where the father can see everything for himself, and civil government, where the chief sees almost nothing but through someone else's eyes. For things to become equal in this respect, the father's talents, force, and all of his faculties would have to increase in proportion to the size of the family, and the soul of a powerful monarch would have to be to an ordinary man's as the extent of his empire is to a private person's inheritance.

[3] But how could the government of the state be like that of the family, when its foundation is so different? Since the father is physically stronger than his children, so long as they require his assistance, paternal power is rightly taken to be established by nature. In the large family all of whose members are naturally equal, political authority, which is purely arbitrary in its institution, can only be founded on conventions, and the magistrat[e] can command others only by virtue of the laws. The father's duties are dictated to him by natural sentiments, and in a tone that rarely allows him to disobey. Chiefs have no comparable rule, and are really accountable to the people only for what they have promised it they would do, and which it has a right to demand they perform. Another even more important difference, is that

Discourse on Political Economy

since children have nothing but what they receive from the father, it is obvious that all the rights of property belong to him, or emanate from him; the very opposite is the case in the large family, where the general administration is established solely to insure private property, which is prior to it. The primary aim of the entire household's labors is to preserve and to increase the father's patrimony, so that he might someday divide it among his children without impoverishing them; whereas the treasury's wealth is but a means, often poorly understood, to maintain private persons in peace and plenty. In a word, the small family is destined to die out, and to break up someday into a number of other similar families; but since the large family is made to last forever in the same state, the first has to increase in order to multiply [into a number of other similar families]: whereas not only does it suffice for the other to preserve itself, but it can easily be proved that any increase is more prejudicial than useful to it.

[4] For various reasons derived from the nature of the thing, the father ought to command in the family. In the first place, the authority of the father and of the mother ought not to be equal; rather, the government has to be one, and when opinions are divided there has to be one predominant voice that decides. In the second place, regardless of how slight the incapacities specific to women may be thought to be; since they invariably impose intervals of inaction on her, this is a sufficient reason to exclude her from this primacy: for when the balance is perfectly equal, a straw is enough to tip it. Moreover, the husband has to be able to review his wife's conduct: for it matters to him that the children he is forced to recognize and to raise belong to none other than himself. The wife who has nothing comparable to fear, has not the same right over the husband. In the third place, the children ought to obey the father, initially out of necessity, then out of gratit[243]tude; after having their needs attended to by him for the first half of their life, they should devote the second half to providing for his needs. In the fourth place, as regards servants, they also owe him their services in exchange for his providing their subsistence; unless they break the bargain when it no longer suits them. I say nothing about slavery; because it is contrary to nature, and no right can authorize it.

Discourse on Political Economy

[5] None of this obtains in political society. Far from the chief's having a natural interest in the happiness of private individuals, it is not uncommon for him to seek his own happiness in their misery. When magistracy is hereditary, a child often commands men: when it is elective, a thousand inconveniences attend elections, and in either case all the advantages of paternity are lost. If you have but a single chief, you are at the discretion of a master who has no reason to love you; if you have several, you have to bear both their tyranny and their dissensions. In a word, abuses are inevitable and their consequences fatal in any society, where the public interest and the laws have no natural force whatsoever, and are constantly under attack from the personal interest and the passions of the chief as well as of the members.

[6] Although the functions of the father of a family and of the foremost magistrate should aim at the same goal, they do so in such different ways; their duty and rights are so distinct, that it is impossible to confuse them without forming false ideas about the fundamental laws of society and falling into errors fatal to humankind. Indeed, while the voice of nature is the best counsel a good father should heed in order to fulfill his duties well, for the magistrate it is nothing but a false guide constantly tending to separate him from his duties, and which sooner or later drags him to his own and to the state's ruin, unless he is restrained by the most sublime virtue. The only precaution the father of the family needs, is to guard against depravity and to keep his natural inclinations from growing corrupt; but it is these very inclinations that corrupt the magistrate. To do well, the first need only consult his heart; the other becomes a traitor the moment he heeds his: he should be wary even of his reason, and follow no other rule than the public reason, which is the law. Indeed, nature has made many [244] good fathers of families; but it is doubtful that since the world has been in existence human wisdom made even ten men capable of governing their like.

[7] From everything I have just set forth, it follows that *public economy* has rightly been distinguished from *private economy*, and that since the family and the state have nothing in common but the chiefs' obligation to make each happy, the same rules of conduct could not apply to both. It seemed to me that these few lines would

Discourse on Political Economy

suffice to overthrow the odious system which Sir [Robert] Filmer tried to establish in a work entitled *Patriarcha*, and to which two illustrious men did too much honor by writing books to refute it: besides, this error is very old, since even Aristotle saw fit to combat it with arguments that can be found in the first book of his *Politics*.

[8] I invite my readers also clearly to distinguish *public economy*, which is my topic, and which I call *government*, from the supreme authority, which I call *sovereignty*; a distinction which consists in this, that the one has the legislative right and in some cases obligates the very body of the nation, whereas the other has only the executive power, and can only obligate individuals. See POLITICS and SOVEREIGNTY.

[9] Allow me briefly to draw a common and in many respects imprecise comparison, but one suited to making myself better understood.

[10] The body politic, taken by itself, can be looked upon as an organized body, alive, and similar to a man's. The sovereign power represents the head; the laws and customs are the brain, the principle of the nerves and the seat of the understanding, of the will, and of the senses, of which the judges and magistrates are the organs; commerce, industry, and agriculture are the mouth and stomach which prepare the common subsistence; public finances are the blood which a wise *economy*, performing the functions of the heart, sends out to distribute nourishment and life throughout the entire body; the citizens are the body and the members that make the machine move, live and work, and no part of which can be hurt without the painful impression of it being straightaway conveyed to the brain if the animal is in a state of health.

[245] [11] The life of the one as well of the other is the *self* common to the whole, the reciprocal sensitivity and the internal correspondence of all the parts. What if this communication should cease, the formal unity vanish, and the contiguous parts no longer belong together except by being next to one another? the man is dead, or the state is dissolved.

[12] The body politic is, then, also a moral being that has a will; and this general will, which always tends to the preservation and the well-being of the whole and of each part, and which is

Discourse on Political Economy

the source of the laws, is, for all the members of the state, in relation to one another and to it, the rule of what is just and what unjust; a truth which, incidentally, shows how thoughtlessly so many writers have treated as theft the cunning prescribed to Lacedaemonian children to earn their frugal meal, as if everything the laws commands could fail to be legitimate. *See under* RIGHT the source of this great and luminous principle, which that article develops.

[13] It is important to note that this rule of justice, dependable with respect to all citizens, can be defective with respect to strangers; and the reason for this is clear: that in this case the will of the state, although general with respect to its members, is no longer so with respect to the other states and their members, but becomes for them a particular and individual will that has its rule of justice in the law of nature, which is equally consistent with the established principle: for in that case the great city of the world becomes the body politic of which the law of nature is always the general will, and of which the various states and peoples are merely individual members.

[14] From these same distinctions applied to every political society and its members, flow the most universal and dependable rules by which to judge a good or a bad government, and in general, the morality of all human actions.

[15] Every political society is made up of other, smaller societies of different kinds, each one of which has its interests and maxims; but these societies which everyone perceives because they have an external and authorized form, are not the only ones that really exist in the state; all private individuals who are united by a common interest, make up as many other, permanent or transient [societies] whose force is no less real for being [246] less manifest, and the close study of their workings makes for genuine knowledge of morals [*moeurs*]. It is all these tacit or formal associations which in so many ways modify the appearance of the public will by the influence of their own. The will of these particular societies always has two relations; for the member of the association, it is a general will; for the large society, it is a particular will, which very often proves to be upright in the first respect, and nefarious in the second. A given person may be a devout priest, or a courageous soldier, or a zealous lawyer, and a bad citizen.

Discourse on Political Economy

A given deliberation may be advantageous to the small community, and most pernicious to the large one. It is true that since particular societies are always subordinate to those that contain them, one ought to obey the latter in preference to the former, that the duties of the citizen take precedence over those of the senator, and those of man over those of the citizen: but unfortunately personal interest is always inversely proportional to duty, and grows in direct proportion as the association grows narrower and the commitment less sacred; invincible proof that the most general will is also the most just, and that the voice of the people is indeed the voice of God.

[16] However it does not follow that public deliberations are always equitable; they may not be so regarding foreign affairs; I have stated the reason why this is so. Thus it is not impossible that a well-governed republic wage an unjust war. Nor is it impossible that the council of a democracy pass bad decrees or condemn the innocent: but none of this will ever happen unless the people is seduced by private interests which some few skillful men succeed by their reputation and eloquence to substitute for the people's own interest. Then the public deliberation will be one thing, and the general will another thing entirely. Do not, therefore, raise the democracy of Athens as an objection to me, because Athens was in fact not a democracy, but a most tyrannical aristocracy governed by learned men and orators. Attend carefully to what happens in any deliberation, and you will see that the general will is always for the common good; but very often some secret division develops, some tacit alliance which causes the assembly's natural disposition to be eluded in favor of private views. [247] Then the social body really divides into other bodies whose members adopt a general will, good and just with regard to these new bodies, unjust and bad with regard to the whole from which each of them dismembers itself.

[17] It is evident how easy it is, by means of these principles, to explain the manifest contradictions found in the conduct of so many men who are full of scruples and honor in some respects, deceitful and knavish in others, who trample underfoot the most sacred duties, yet are faithful to the death to commitments that are often illegitimate. This is how the most corrupt men invariably pay some sort of homage to the public faith; this (as was pointed

Discourse on Political Economy

out in the *article* RIGHT) is how even brigands, the enemies of virtue in the large society, worship its semblance in their dens.

[18] In establishing the general will as the first principle of public *economy* and the fundamental rule of government, I did not believe it necessary to inquire seriously whether the magistrates belong to the people or the people to the magistrates, and whether in public affairs it is the good of the state or the good of the chiefs that should be consulted. The question has long since been settled one way by practice, and another by reason; and in general it would be a great folly to hope that those who are masters in deed, would prefer some other interest to their own. It would therefore be indicated to divide public *economy* further into popular and tyrannical. The first is that of any state where there is unity of interest and will between the people and the chiefs; the other will necessarily exist wherever the government and the people have different interests, and hence opposing wills. Its maxims are recorded throughout the annals of history and the satires of Machiavelli. The others are found only in the writings of the philosophers who dare to proclaim the rights of mankind.

[19] I. The first and the most important maxim of legitimate or popular government, that is to say of government that has the good of the people as its object, is, then, as I have said, to follow the general will in all things; but in order to follow it, one has to know it, and above all clearly to distinguish it from the particular will, beginning with one's own; a distinction it is always very difficult to draw and on which only the most sublime virtue can shed enough light. Since one has to be free in order to will, another, no lesser difficulty is to secure both public freedom and governmental authority. Inquire into the motives that have led men united by their mutual needs in the great society to unite more closely by means of civil societies; you will find none other than that of securing the goods, the life, and the freedom of each member through the protection of all: but how can men be forced to defend the freedom of one of them without infringing on the freedom of the others? and how can the public needs be met without infringing on the private property of those who are forced to contribute to them? Regardless of the sophisms by which all this may get colored, certain it is that if my will can be compelled, I am no longer free, and that I am no longer master of my goods if

Discourse on Political Economy

someone else can interfere with them. This difficulty, which must have seemed insurmountable, was resolved together with the first difficulty by the most sublime of all human institutions, or rather by a heavenly inspiration that taught man to imitate here below the immutable decrees of the divinity. By what inconceivable art were the means found to subjugate men in order to make them free? to use the goods, the labor and even the life of all of its members in the service of the state, without compelling and consulting them? to shackle their will by their own consent? to have their consent prevail over their refusal, and to force them to punish themselves when they do what they did not want? How can it be that they obey and no one commands, that they serve yet have no master; all the more free in fact the more subjugated they appear to be, because no one loses any more of his own freedom than might harm someone else's freedom? These marvels are the work of law. It is to law alone that men owe justice and freedom. It is this salutary organ of the will of all that restores in [the realm of] right the natural equality among men. It is this heavenly voice that dictates the precepts of public reason to every citizen, and teaches him to act in conformity with the maxims of his own judgment, and not to be in contradiction with himself. [249] It alone is also what the chiefs should cause to speak when they command; for as soon as one man lays claim to subjecting another to his private will independently of the laws, he right away leaves the civil state and places himself in relation to him in the pure state of nature where obedience is prescribed solely by necessity.

[20] The chief's most pressing interest as well as his most indispensable duty, is therefore to see to it that the laws of which he is the minister and on which his entire authority is founded, are observed. His having to make others observe them is all the more reason for himself, who enjoys all of their benefits, to observe them. For his example carries such force that even if the people were willing for him to cast off the yoke of the law, he should refrain from taking advantage of such a dangerous prerogative, which others would soon seek to usurp in turn, often to his prejudice. In the final analysis, since all of society's commitments are by their [very] nature reciprocal, it is not possible to place oneself above the law without renouncing its advantages, and no one owes anything to anyone who claims not to owe anyone