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978-0-521-44322-7 - The General Will: Rousseau, Marx, Communism

Andrew Levine

Excerpt

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## Introduction

For nearly four centuries, a principal concern of political philosophers has been to justify the coordination of the activities of radically independent *individuals* by the state, a complex of institutions that monopolize the right to compel compliance by the use of threat of force. In what follows, I will challenge aspects of this project – the better to accommodate a way of thinking about society and politics that, following Marx’s lead, envisions a social order, communism, constituted by people who have substantially overcome a need for state-compelled coordination. My aim is to defend a nonutopian but still Marxian version of this idea.

In an intellectual culture as prone to historicism as ours now is, it should be widely acknowledged that such major historical transformations as the expansion of (individualizing) market relations and the emergence of the nation-state have profoundly affected philosophical reflections on politics and society. Nevertheless, the extent to which prevailing understandings of the individual and the state depend upon transitory real-world phenomena is commonly overlooked. For many purposes, the coexistence of a widespread awareness of the historicity of these concepts with their ahistorical treatment in contemporary political theory has been benign. But in order to defend Marxian communism, it is especially important to bear in mind how marked political philosophy today is by the historical specificity of its fundamental concepts.

The individualistic aspect of modern political philosophy is at variance with earlier understandings of politics and also, to some degree, with political currents, whether of the Left or Right, that privilege *communal* values and perspectives. A case in point is Marxism itself. Since its inception, Marxism has developed partly in opposition to, partly in isolation from mainstream, “bourgeois” social science and philosophy. According to each side’s self-representations

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and in their polemics against each other, bourgeois theorists endorse and Marxists oppose “individualism.” However, recent work in the social sciences and philosophy and new styles of Marxist theorizing have transformed this shared understanding irreversibly. Partly in consequence, many of the methodological and substantive positions that were once thought to distinguish Marxism from mainstream views have come to seem less salient and many alleged differences now appear illusory.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, so many of the old certainties have given way that it has become apt to ask what, if anything, remains that is distinctively Marxist. In the chapters that follow I investigate this question – with a focus on normative concerns. It will become evident that Marxist positions in political theory and philosophical accounts of the state are not nearly so orthogonal as they formerly appeared. But it will also emerge that there remain fundamental differences with far-reaching implications that distinguish Marxist political theory from mainstream positions.

I shall assume as a working hypothesis that an idea introduced by Rousseau, the general will, bears importantly on the possibility and desirability of Marx’s notion of statelessness. Rousseau’s idea, very generally, is that in some contexts individuals *can* and *should* coordinate their activities by seeking to advance their interests as integral members of the collective entities they freely constitute. In particular, Rousseau maintained that it is reasonable for individuals in a “state of nature” to subordinate their “private wills,” which aim at “private interests,” to the “general will,” which aims at the “general interest,” the interest of “the whole community” – in order to become the autonomous agents they potentially are.

My intent in representing this idea in Rousseauian terms is partly reflationary, partly deflationary. Rousseau is a central figure in today’s “canon” of political philosophers, yet his notion of the general will, surely his principal contribution to Western political thought, plays virtually no role in contemporary political philosophy. This situation is not nearly so odd as may at first appear. Rousseau’s account of the general will invites misunderstandings, and much of what he used the concept to express can be represented in more familiar terms. Nevertheless, it will become evident that there are good reasons for taking Rousseau’s account of

<sup>1</sup> Facets of this thesis are defended, implicitly and explicitly, in Erik Olin Wright, Andrew Levine, and Elliott Sober, *Reconstructing Marxism* (London: Verso, 1992).

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the general will seriously and for attempting to retrieve the conceptual insights and empirical speculations that constitute its “rational kernel.” It is therefore worth attempting to reflate this currently defunct idea. However, at the same time, if the general will is to be put to use in defense of statelessness, it is crucial that the misunderstandings it elicits be dissipated. Doing so will deflate the apparent novelty of Rousseau’s idea and recast its function in political arguments. But it will not render the idea otiose. What I shall say about Rousseau is relevant to the defense of communism, and what I shall say in behalf of communism bears on the case I shall make for the pertinence of Rousseau’s idea to philosophical and political concerns. Thus I shall enlist Rousseau in defense of communism and communism in defense of the cogency and timeliness of the general will. The principal justification for bringing the general will to center stage in the chapters that follow is to facilitate these mutually reinforcing objectives.

In addition to Rousseau and Marx there will be a third point of reference in several of the chapters that follow: liberalism. Not long ago, Marxists were eager to deride liberalism’s defects. However, in one of the more ironical turns of recent political and intellectual history, many progressive philosophers today find in liberalism a vehicle for waging the struggle for equality associated historically with Marxian socialism. I believe that in the present conjuncture it is important not to forsake Marxian insights but also to acknowledge Marxism’s flaws in contrast to aspects of liberal theory and practice. My contention – modest in comparison with what many on the left once believed, outrageous in light of today’s received wisdom – is just that communism, understood generally as Marx intended, implements a sounder normative vision than anything liberalism can contemplate and that general will coordination, an idea liberalism resists, has an important role to play in Marxian communism.

## THE END OF THE STATE

Rousseau’s aim in *The Social Contract* can be succinctly put: “[T]aking men as they are and laws as they might be,” he sets out to demonstrate the possibility of legitimate political authority and obligation.<sup>2</sup> In his terminology, supreme authority over a given

2 *The Social Contract*, Book I, Introductory Note. Rousseau’s *Social Contract* is divided into relatively brief chapters and is available in English in many editions,

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territory or population is “sovereignty”; what the sovereign rules is a “state.”<sup>3</sup> Rousseau then contends that “sovereignty is nothing but the exercise of the general will”<sup>4</sup> or, equivalently, that a state is established when individuals place themselves “under the supreme direction of the general will.”<sup>5</sup> Since the general will is the true will of each of the state’s members, the sovereign and its subjects are one.<sup>6</sup> Rousseau succeeds in demonstrating, at least to his own satisfaction, that the general will is real and therefore that political authority and obligation are possible – in short, that the idea of a just state is coherent and applicable under human conditions. But it is one thing for a just state to be possible and something else for it to be a feasible political objective. Rousseau was deeply pessimistic about the latter prospect. The world is divided into de facto states; authority is everywhere asserted and acknowledged. A coercive apparatus superintends and reinforces a civil society based on political and material inequalities. In consequence, human mentalities have become corrupted, perhaps irreversibly, and the de jure state, where legitimate authority and obligation exist, may never be realizable anywhere.

Thus, in Rousseau’s political thought, the exercise of the general will is more nearly a regulative idea than a plausible political aspiration. Sovereignty is possible in principle but almost certainly not in real history. Already in the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, *The First Discourse*, Rousseau faulted “progress” for corrupting human nature and burdening the human race with institutions detrimental to its well-being. *The Second Discourse* extended this diagnosis by attributing the detrimental effects of progress to the emergence of inequalities within human communities. In *The Social Contract*, the toll exacted by these developments is depicted in an even more devastating light. Identifying essential humanity with freedom of the will (autonomy) and arguing that the exercise of the general will is a necessary condition for actualizing this es-

none of which is standard. For the convenience of the reader, therefore, I shall not cite a particular edition in referring to it but will instead indicate the chapter in question. All translations from *The Social Contract* are my own and are based on the text edited by Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, published in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1964). The English translation that I have consulted most frequently is by Donald Cress. It may be found in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings* (Indianapolis and Cambridge, Mass.: Hackett, 1987).

3 Ibid., Chapter 6. 4 Ibid., Book II, Chapter 1. 5 Ibid., Book I, Chapter 6.

6 Ibid.

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sential trait, he contends that obstacles in the way of realizing a just state are mortal dangers to humanity itself.<sup>7</sup>

Several years ago, in *The End of the State*, I argued that, in conditions of material abundance and under socialist property relations, Rousseau's regulative idea or some close approximation actually is historically feasible.<sup>8</sup> I maintained that communism in Marx's sense is Rousseauian sovereignty attained or rather overcome, since what Rousseau's social contract establishes is not, in the end, a state at all but, as Kant would have it, a "republic of ends." To be sure, without considerable uncoerced compliance, no de facto state could long endure. But, ultimately, states coordinate individuals' behaviors "externally" – through force. On the other hand, in republics of ends, behaviors are "internally" coordinated by what Kant called a harmony of rational wills.<sup>9</sup> The use or threat of force may sometimes be necessary even in a republic of ends, just as uncoerced compliance is indispensable in states. "The administration of things" that, according to Engels (and, before him, Saint-Simon), replaces "the governance of men" after the demise of class society may still need to use force to overcome collective "weaknesses of will." Thus public coercive force is unlikely to disappear entirely under communism. But the use of force in genuinely communist societies would be, as it were, an administrative imperative, not an exercise of *state* power. I argued that the difference is not merely definitional. The idea that the state under communism would "wither away" is distinct from other claims that

7 Ibid., Chapters 4 and 6. See also Andrew Levine, *The Politics of Autonomy: A Kantian Reading of Rousseau's "Social Contract"* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1976), *passim*.

8 Andrew Levine, *The End of the State* (London: Verso, 1987).

9 There is reason to think that what Kant intended by a "harmony of rational wills" is, at least in part, the ideal of rational cooperation implicit in Rousseau's account of legitimate political association. A historical and conceptual connection between Rousseau and Kant has long been acknowledged. Hegel discerned it in *The Phenomenology of Mind* in the section entitled "The Moral View of the World." In this century, the idea that an important motivation for Kant's work in moral philosophy was precisely to provide foundations for Rousseauian political philosophy has been pressed most forcefully by Ernst Cassirer; see especially, *The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, trans. and ed. Peter Gay (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1954), and *Rousseau, Kant, Goethe*, trans. James Gutmann, P. O. Kristeller, and J. H. Randall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1945). I argue in support of Cassirer's thesis by exhibiting conceptual affinities joining Rousseau's political philosophy with Kantian moral philosophy in *The Politics of Autonomy*.

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can be made for Marxian communism – and less susceptible to disputation than many of them.

These claims depend on the plausibility of the core theses of Marx's theory of history, historical materialism. In the historical materialist scheme, communism is the end of a determinate process of historical change. In *The End of the State*, I argued that a defensible historical materialism implies only that the material conditions for a communist economic structure can come into being.<sup>10</sup> I also argued that there are reasons for thinking communism more than just materially possible. In addition to "discovering" the model of rational cooperation communism supposes, Rousseau, despite himself, provided support for the conclusion that communism actually is feasible. The aspects of Rousseau's political philosophy that encourage faith in the transformative effects of political institutions – above all, in the institutions that implement democratic deliberation and collective choice – support the idea that the motivations of citizens in genuinely radical democracies can change; that individuals can become less self-interested, more solidary – in short, more inclined to support general over particular interests. I maintained that a similar faith in democracy is evident in Marxist political theory or, at least, in an important strain of it, and that this conviction plays a pivotal role in Marx's case for communism. Thus the idea that the state can and should wither away is underwritten by venerable and persuasive, though hardly incontrovertible, arguments.

In an era of diminished expectations, when ideas of this sort are everywhere dismissed as utopian, this conclusion will seem anachronistic, if not quaint. Nevertheless, "the withering away of the state" merits serious consideration. In Chapters 8 and 9, in reflecting on communism and on the significance of continuing to uphold the idea at a time when leftist politics has devolved into a motley of good causes devoid of any unifying vision or aim, I will try to show why this conclusion is of more than passing theoretical interest. I concede, however, that a study in political philosophy can only issue in tentative conclusions about these matters. The prospects for organizing political communities as republics of ends depend on speculations about human nature and the likely outcomes of institutional arrangements that theoretical considerations

10 See Levine, *The End of the State*, Chapter 5. See also Wright, Levine, and Sober, *Reconstructing Marxism*, Chapters 3 and 5. The claims that follow in this paragraph are supported in *The End of the State*, Chapters 6–8.

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can never finally resolve. It remains for real-world political developments themselves to establish or refute the claim that communism, in something like the sense Rousseau anticipated and Marx intended, is a realistic and desirable political objective. However, if communism is to be brought back into political theory, as I will contend it ought to be, there is no choice but to proceed in the face of vulnerability to empirical confutation.

It is now clear that the most sustained attempt to date to move humanity toward communism, the Bolshevik Revolution, ended in failure. Partly in consequence of this historic defeat, political initiatives with similar ambitions have effectively vanished from the popular imagination. However, capitalism and the state system remain in place. Can the aspiration to replace them with a communist order remain suppressed indefinitely? If, as I shall argue, these core features of our civilization are impediments to autonomy and self-realization, and if communism is a feasible and desirable alternative to them, this question answers itself. I would therefore venture that, before long, the communist project will resume – not just in economically backward and politically underdeveloped countries but in the vastly more propitious conditions Marx himself envisioned. It will be of some help in this endeavor if, when the time again comes, philosophy is not caught unawares.

## EXCULPATIONS

I remarked at the outset that contemporary political philosophers generally fail to take due account of the historical specificity of currently dominant notions of the individual and the state. The case I will go on to construct in behalf of Marxian communism will in fact appeal to different understandings of these and other political concepts. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which what follows here is itself ahistorical in the manner of contemporary political philosophy. In this section, I shall advance a brief comment on this feature of the ensuing discussion. Then, still in an exculpatory spirit, I shall excuse my neglect of two important issues – the metaphysics of volition and the “post-Marxist” challenge to communism – that some readers might expect to see addressed in a book on the general will that defends key Marxian positions.

*Philosophy outside history*

Rousseau, Marx, Hobbes, Locke, Mill, and others figure prominently throughout the discussions that follow. However, this book

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is not a study in the history of ideas. It is intended instead as a contribution to contemporary political theory. From a historical point of view, its use of past philosophy therefore requires comment and justification.

It is commonplace for philosophers to approach the history of philosophy by focusing only on major figures, abstracted from their historical contexts and inserted into an imaginary moment in which they somehow join in dialogue with one another and with philosophers today. In this way, most of philosophy's past is excluded from the history of philosophy: Only a handful of philosophers – indeed, only a handful of these philosophers' writings – are accorded legitimacy; everything else is ignored. Curiously too, the words of these co-investigators are then in varying degrees venerated – like oracles from whose writings Truths can be teased out or, more precisely, read in. To account for this unlikely configuration of attitudes, it is well to recall the peculiar position of philosophy – as a traditional, humanistic discipline but also as a component of an emerging scientific culture. Many philosophers treat the history of philosophy – or at least the fragment of it they recognize – in much the way that Renaissance scholars and their successors treated the writings they recovered from the Greek and Latin traditions. At the same time, like scientists, most philosophers believe in the growth of understanding and knowledge. Practicing scientists characteristically have little use for the history of science. In philosophy, where progress has proven more elusive, the history of philosophy, reduced to some major works of a few master thinkers, is a more timely source of insight. From this point of view, the philosophical canon is not so much something to be studied for its own sake as it is a resource among others. With progress sufficiently slow, past philosophy remains contemporary for as long as it continues to be relevant to issues still in dispute.

Humanistic and scientific attitudes toward the history of philosophy hardly cohere and, together or separately, they offend a genuinely historical sensibility. From a historical point of view, ideas, like everything else, should be understood in context. It is this requirement that motivates some contemporary investigators to read past philosophers, "great" and minor alike, against the background of their time and place and to focus on the ways in which their positions are addressed to their own contemporaries, rather than to philosophical giants of different times and places or to issues of contemporary concern.



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As noted, my treatment of historical figures, Rousseau especially, is more in line with contemporary philosophical practice than with “contextualist” historical research. Thus I identify Rousseau’s “private will” with the wills of individuals in a Hobbesian state of nature, and I represent Rousseau as if he were engaged in a protracted dialogue with contemporary understandings of Hobbesian moral and political philosophy. This picture is plainly at odds with a contextualist account of the (major) texts I discuss. Hobbesian philosophy was not in fact a central concern of Rousseau’s, especially in the form I shall present it.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, from a more historical point of view, a discussion of the “general will” would have to engage theological disputes about sin and the nature of grace as much as Hobbes’s attempt to extricate hypothetical individuals from a devastating “war of all against all.” It would focus on theological controversies aroused by the Jansenist revival of the doctrine of predestination – in particular, on attempts to join a belief in God’s “general will” that humanity be saved with the “particular” salvation of the elect.<sup>12</sup> But French theological and political theory in the century before Rousseau will hardly intrude on the discussions that follow. Along with Rousseau, Hobbes, Locke, Mill, and, above all, Marx are the figures that matter for my purpose, not Pascal, Malebranche, Bossuet, Fénelon, Bayle, Montesquieu, or Diderot.

In short, what follows is not intended as a historical study. It is instead an investigation of the historical possibility of the general will, and of the forms and limits of its desirability. To this end, the odd and even contradictory attitude philosophers assume toward the history of their subject actually is appropriate. I would readily acknowledge that humanist postures are of dubious value in the modern world, especially when they encourage the veneration of authors and texts. However, I shall maintain that it is reasonable at the present time to continue to identify with the tradition Marx inaugurated, and especially with that strain of Marxism that bears a

- 11 The Hobbes who figures in the following pages is very much a creature of contemporary political philosophy. For a trenchant attack on what she calls “the standard philosophical interpretation” of Hobbes, see S. A. Lloyd, *Ideals as Interests in Hobbes’s “Leviathan”: The Power of Mind over Matter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
- 12 Cf. Judith N. Shklar, “General Will,” in Philip P. Wiener (ed.), *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1973), vol. 2, pp. 275 ff.; and Patrick Riley, *The General Will before Rousseau: The Transformation of the Divine into the Civic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

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conceptual affinity with Rousseauian political philosophy.<sup>13</sup> In addition and more importantly, Rousseau and Marx and the other figures I discuss still do speak to us instructively on the issues in contention here. If it is conceded that a philosophical investigation of the general will is worth undertaking, then even a committed contextualist should concede that there is no harm in using historical figures ahistorically for this purpose. This is not to say that historical sensibilities can justifiably be set aside. Misrepresentations, deliberate or not, are unlikely to be helpful or even benign. It is therefore advisable to be scrupulous in respecting the results of historical research. But within this constraint, so long as there is no pretense of advancing intellectual history, the noncontextual use of the writings of the “immortals” is surely unobjectionable and even wise.

In any case, I have tried to treat the writings I discuss as more than suggestive inkblots in a philosophical Rorschach test. What I extract from them may not be quite what their authors intended or what contemporary readers saw. But the texts still constrain what there is to see. So understood, these writings advance theses and contain arguments that cast light on the topics they address. This, I think, is what explains the exclusion of most of philosophy’s past from the history of philosophy as philosophers typically construe the subject. Some philosophical writings remain sources of insight even in circumstances remote from their conditions of origin. Others, the vast majority, are of interest today primarily as artifacts of their time and place.<sup>14</sup> Thus a properly historical history of philosophy frequently will diverge from a philosophical use of philosophy’s past. Again, it is well for the sake of good work in both domains that historical and philosophical investigations inform one another as much as possible; and it is crucial that the two not be at odds. But good intellectual history is not always good philosophy or vice versa.

It is frequently the case, for both historians and philosophers, that God, as the saying goes, is in the details. But sometimes, especially in philosophical uses of the history of philosophy, the insights that underlie particular theses and arguments are more important than the formulations through which they are ex-

<sup>13</sup> See Chapter 9 herein.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Ian Hacking, “Five Parables,” in Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (eds.), *Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).