

JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU (1712-78) – Focus on Inequality

“Is it fair that David Letterman makes 700 times more than a schoolteacher?” (from a column this week by Tom Friedman, on Michael Sandel's famous Harvard class “Justice”)

Understanding inequality (Relative vs. absolute)

- The **Gini coefficient** and the **Human Development Index** (HDI)
- Two aid paradigms: **Jeffrey Sachs** vs. **William Easterly**

Key questions on Rousseau

- To what extent can thinkers be ‘held accountable’ for the use of their ideas by subsequent leaders?
- How does Rousseau challenge some of the key themes of the **enlightenment**?

A Dissertation on the Origin and Foundation of the Inequality of Mankind

- What two ‘types’ of inequality does Rousseau distinguish?
- How is Rousseau’s ‘state of nature’ different from both Hobbes’ and Locke’s?
 - “It is [**compassion**] which will always prevent a sturdy savage from robbing a weak child or a feeble old man...it is this which, instead of inculcating that sublime maxim of rational justice, *do to others as you would have them do unto you*, inspires all men with that other maxim of natural goodness, much less perfect, but perhaps more useful; *Do good to yourself with as little evil as possible to others.*”
- Are you convinced by Rousseau’s view of the **noble savage**? Of civilized man?

The Social Contract – “man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains”

- In some respects, Rousseau’s prescription is the most demanding we have come across so far: while Hobbes defended an outmoded authoritarianism and Locke defends the status quo of (capitalist) liberal democracy, what does Rousseau’s ideal look like—and have any societies come close to realizing it?
- A question for ‘**majority rule**’ democracies: “how have a hundred men who wish for a master the right to vote on behalf of ten who do not?”
- “The problem is to find a form of association which will defend and protect with the whole common force the person and goods of each associate, and in which each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone, and remain as free as before. This is the fundamental problem of which the *Social Contract* provides the solution.” How?
- “each man, in giving himself to all, gives himself to nobody...he gains an equivalent for [all] he loses”
- What does the infamous phrase ‘**forced to be free**’ actually mean in context (IPT p. 150)?
- “What man loses by the social contract is his **natural liberty** and an unlimited right to everything...what he gains is **civil liberty** and the proprietorship of all he possesses...the mere impulse of appetite is slavery, while obedience to a law which we prescribe to ourselves is liberty.” Do you agree?
- “The **particular will** tends...to partiality, while the **general will** tends to equality...the moment a master exists, there is no longer a sovereign, and from that moment the body politic has ceased to exist.”

Jumping ahead a bit: **Peter Singer's “Famine, Affluence, and Morality”**

- **Distributive justice** and the argument that charity is not a **supererogatory** good.
- If we accept the principle of equal consideration, do his views on global obligation necessarily follow?
- The (in)famous case of the suit and the drowning child