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## Marx Implements Rousseau

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Without question, Rousseau's fiction of a general will has profoundly influenced, and continues profoundly to influence, American political thinking.

It was joined with a theory of social contract which, in one form or another, had been implicit in the organization of every American frontier community. The almost pure democracy of a New England town meeting seemed in fact to illustrate the localized operation of a general will. During and immediately after the Revolution political democracy emphasized its central characteristic of intolerance by denying the minority rights of Tories who remained loyal to the British Crown. That consummate agitator, Tom Paine, was outstanding, rather than unique, as a skillful propagandist for Rousseau's ideas. These egalitarian seeds were scattered on American soil just as the socially democratic colonists were rising in revolt against British rule, and looking for a substitute form of

government that would conform with their social customs as well as with their economic needs.

One might easily conclude, therefore, that the first of the “self-evident truths” proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence—“that all men are created equal”—was directly inspired by Rousseau. But of this there is no confirmatory evidence. Jefferson did not come under the influence of French egalitarianism until he went to Paris as Minister, after the American Revolution but prior to the much more profound upheaval there. Moreover, so far as the notes of Madison and others show, Rousseau was never once cited during the proceedings of the Constitutional Convention; nor is he ever mentioned in the *Federalist* papers.

This is not really surprising, since not even Tom Paine could speculate on the promulgation of a general will from a national capital before such a capital had been located. The entire hypothesis was academic, to say the least, when the immediate problem was the formation of a central government which could exercise some control over the independent and only loosely associated States. A Federal Republic was all that could be anticipated by the most convinced of the early American nationalists, like Alexander Hamilton and John Marshall. At the Philadelphia Convention the objective was not nationalism, but the preliminary stage of union. If anyone at that time had suggested even the possibility of a unified “general will,” to be defined and exercised throughout the States from the seat of national government, he would have

been denounced more roundly than was poor bumbling George III.

Nevertheless, it is a matter of record that the French apostles of Rousseau, if not the master himself, soon came into high favor in the fledgling United States. This was demonstrated by the adulation showered on Citizen Genêt, when he arrived here as Minister of the sanguinary French Republic, immediately after the execution of Louis XVI. It was Robespierre, the chief disciple of Rousseau, who had successfully engineered that tragic deed, approved by a bare majority of the Revolutionary Assembly in spite of all the pressures brought by "the man of virtue." But although the vote to guillotine the King was so close—387 against 334—it was nonetheless represented as "the general will" of France and as such found strong endorsement in the United States. With Genêt's arrival the underlying democratic surge burst forth, in many places and in many forms more dangerous than the poetic effusion with which cultured Boston heralded the act of regicide in Paris:

See the bright flame arise,  
In yonder Eastern skies  
Spreading in veins.  
'Tis pure Democracy  
Setting all nations free,  
Melting their chains.

More worthy of recollection, in these days of communist cells, were the Jacobin Clubs which, with the open

support of Genêt, sprang up in all our seacoast cities. They were named, of course, for the widespread organization through which Robespierre—until he himself was liquidated—directed the course of the French Revolution in line with Rousseau's concept of the general will, headquarters being the former chapel of the Jacobin monks in the rue Saint-Honoré. It was from these American Jacobin Clubs that Genêt organized what Foreign Minister Talleyrand called "the French party in America." The truly startling influence of Rousseau's adherents in the United States at this time is given careful consideration by Senator Albert J. Beveridge, in his famous biography of John Marshall, and can there be readily reviewed.<sup>1</sup>

American Jacobinism, however, ran contrary to the establishment of an American "general will." It worked against, not with, those, like John Marshall, who desired the strong central government necessary to give this faction effective expression. To their last member the Jacobin Clubs over here supported Jefferson and opposed the Federalists. These clubs, indeed, were the basis of Jefferson's Republican Party, which took that name to signify its sympathy with the revolutionary Republic of France. When Genêt was declared *persona non grata*, and the semi-

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<sup>1</sup> In his *Jefferson and Hamilton*, Claude G. Bowers finds "the shrieks of protest from the Federalists" against the Jacobin Clubs "inexplicable to the twentieth century." (p. 223.) But that was written in 1925, before the communists had shown the power of cellular organization in its modern form. Mr. Bowers agrees that the principles of the French Revolution have had far more lasting political significance for the United States than is generally realized. *Op. cit.*, pp. 208-9.

reasonable activities of his Jacobin Clubs were exposed, they logically changed their names to Democratic Clubs. From these evolved the urban Democratic organizations like Tammany Hall, and in due course the Americans for Democratic Action of our own day, revealing its ancestry by its confidence in Rousseau's concept of the general will.

There is contemporary significance in the paradoxical fact that the Jacobin Clubs, which served in France to concentrate political power, were in this country organized by the followers of Rousseau to resist a similar concentration. As already pointed out, the general will in practice must become the personal or group will of those who have been able to seize power locally. After extending this concentrated power to the national confines there will be a halt, for purposes of consolidation. But if the concept of the general will is connected with a universal assumption, such as the equality of all men, or the exploitation of labor by capital, there is no reason to stop permanently at a political frontier. On the contrary, the establishment of a general will in a single powerful country then becomes a preliminary to its attempted establishment for all mankind. And if it is to be internationalized, those who have seized power nationally cannot look passively on the rise of another, possibly contradictory, general will in another country.

Consequently, the nation that gets a running start in this direction, as did France in 1792, or Russia in 1917, must work against nationalism in other lands, although of

course it may as a tactical matter temporarily promote nationalism in colonial areas subject to its rivals. The vehicle for this subversive intrigue is the indigenous group which for various reasons is so discontented with the institutions of its own country that it will shift loyalty to the alien idea. And the fundamental task of this group, once organized, is to promote the general will for which it works, and to oppose the development of any other. Thus the Jacobin Clubs in the United States did their by no means trivial best to promote "the French interest" and to oppose the growth of American nationalism at the time of the French Revolution. And thus, the essentially similar communist clubs, or "front" organizations, are today actively opposed to an American foreign policy antagonistic to that of Soviet Russia. Thomas Jefferson suffered from this "guilt by association" with Jacobins. And for the same reason contemporary Americans who merely seek a *modus vivendi* with Soviet Russia are liable to be labelled as "pro-communist."

This repetition of history would alone justify the emphasis placed on the role of Rousseau. But he is the more to be remembered because so unquestionably the progenitor of the modern totalitarian state, to the development of which the concept of the general will readily lends itself. That conclusion does not underestimate the influence of Karl Marx, generally and properly regarded as the prophet of communism. It is no discount of Marxism to point out that its powerful contribution has been to make Rousseau's more fundamental ideas effective. Practical accomplish-

ment, as opposed to mere theorizing, was always the objective of this bitterly anti-Christian German Jew. As he himself wrote, shortly before the drafting of the famous *Communist Manifesto*: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it."<sup>2</sup>

The leverage for change which Marx provided was his theory of class war. On the one side, as minutely analyzed in that turgid classic *Das Kapital*, are all the owners of property; on the other the propertyless, the "dispossessed" or "underprivileged," the proletariat. The effectiveness of this theory lay partly in its timing, coming when the industrial revolution was grouping large masses of unorganized workers in dingy factories, and partly in providing a channel for promoting Rousseau's conception of the general will. This channel, as Marx planned it, was to be labor organization. Through universal unionism, taking the direction of each factory unit out of the hands of the owners, the capitalistic exploiters would in their turn be expropriated, labor would come into its own and the general will fulfilled. Since this end was seen by Marx as wholly desirable, violent means to attain it were to him justifiable and indeed necessary because the propertied class, controlling the machinery of government, would itself use force to oppose the social revolution. Still an-

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<sup>2</sup> From the *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845). Ludwig Feuerbach, today remembered largely for his apothegm: "Mann ist was er isst"—"Man is what he eats"—had stimulated Marx by his *Essence of Christianity* published the same year (1841) that Marx wrote his doctoral thesis at Jena.

other reason for communistic violence, Marx argued at great length, is the historic “inevitability” of the proletarian triumph. Since it *must* come, the sooner the better. “We are concerned with what the proletariat actually is; and what the proletariat will, in accordance with the nature of its own being, be historically compelled to do.”<sup>3</sup>

The evolution of this thinking from that of the French Jacobins would be evident even if the early communists among them, like Morelli, Babeuf and Buonarroti, had not already laid down the lines Marx elaborated.<sup>4</sup> The doctrine of egalitarianism is useful for starting social revolution and during the transition to the new order the “dictatorship of the proletariat”—which is reasonably called democracy because the proletarians are the great majority—will prevail. But actually the dictatorship must be exercised by a dedicated elite, supported by the one authentic party that represents the general will.

Eventually, the Marxists surmised, the totalitarian state thus created will “wither away.” When the workers of the world have united to cast off the chains of capitalism everywhere, there will no longer be any reason for national governments. The general will of mankind, not merely

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted by George Catlin in his *Story of the Political Philosophers*, Whittlesey House (New York 1939) p. 589. Professor Catlin comments: “The thesis, then, of Marx is precisely the old one of the revolutionary French Jacobins.”

<sup>4</sup> This sequence is carefully traced by J. L. Talmon in *The Rise of Totalitarian Democracy*, The Beacon Press (Boston 1952). Professor Talmon concludes: “Nothing would be easier than to translate the original Jacobin conception of a conflict endemic in society, between those of virtue and those of selfishness, into the Marxist idea of class warfare.” (p. 252.)



that of a particular locality, will have been fulfilled. It is difficult to conclude that Marx himself, who relied on passion and hatred to gain his ends, ever believed in this vision of a nationless world, held together by benevolent ties of human brotherhood. The idealistic picture, however, has been of great propaganda value to communism and has also served to distinguish it from the nationalist totalitarian systems of fascism, nazism and falangism.

Parliamentary socialism, strong in Western Europe and growing stronger in the United States under the deceptive alias of "liberalism," likewise is a direct offshoot from the theories of Rousseau and Marx, differing from communism not in basic theory but in application. The parliamentary socialist believes with Marx that capitalists should be dispossessed, and he believes with Rousseau that there should be no constitutional impediments to the attainment of the general will to this effect. In Great Britain the Labor Party, under predominantly socialist leadership, has now successfully eliminated most of these impediments to political democracy and—to Britain's cost—they are unlikely to be restored.<sup>5</sup> In the United States, as in Switzerland and the West German Federal Republic, the principle of federalism blocks all-out political democracy. This obstacle is particularly powerful in the United States because here federalism is supplemented

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<sup>5</sup> British disillusionment, resulting from hodgepodge nationalization of industry, hurried into effect by democratic procedures, is minutely and objectively described by R. Kelf-Cohen in his *Nationalisation in Britain: The End of a Dogma*, Macmillan & Co. (London 1958).

by the careful separation of executive, judicial and legislative powers. Because the American system is so clearly and positively anti-socialist few Americans are willing to admit to that political affiliation, but prefer to seek the same end of centralized and unified governmental power under more euphonious labels.

The parliamentary socialist, whether or not masquerading as a "liberal," is less fanatical, more internationally minded, and therefore more humane, than the fascist or nazi, who puts the myths of national or racial grandeur above all else. Nevertheless, any type of socialism must tend towards national socialism, because of its complete reliance on an enlarged and empowered national government to attain its ends. Hitler, who was a thoroughgoing if highly disagreeable socialist, was at least constructive in shattering the fantastic belief that socialism is helpful and capitalism hostile to international amity—the exact opposite of which is more nearly the truth. The socialists, or "liberals," are also less logical than their more offensive communist cousins in thinking that socialism can eventually triumph peacefully everywhere, by using fabian, parliamentary tactics. If the concept of the general will is granted any validity it will follow that it cannot be localized by arbitrary frontiers. It must be promulgated from the directive center over as wide an area as fanaticism permits, whether that center be Paris, as it was after 1792, Moscow, as it has been since 1917, or Peiping, as it could be tomorrow.

Socialism in the United States, under whatever name,

has been enormously helped by the Jeffersonian half-truth that “all men are created equal,” which when quoted usually omits the immediately following and qualifying phrase “that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.” It *is* self-evident that men are created equal in the sense that all have much the same basic needs and in the sense that all who are sound in body and mind are to be regarded as parties to whatever social contracts their communities may see fit to adopt. But at that point the line is, or should be, drawn, as it so clearly was in Jefferson’s thinking.

To assert that men should have equal opportunity is to imply that with this opportunity they will become unequal. Some will push ahead and others will fall behind. “From the hour of their birth,” to return to Aristotle, “some are marked out for subjection, others for rule.”<sup>6</sup> That biological fact can be concealed by sophistries, but cannot be successfully denied. Moreover, as Calhoun so cogently pointed out, no system of government devised by man can prevent those who collect the taxes from dominating those who pay the taxes. What the “more perfect” system can do is to insure that those who have the taxing power possess it only provisionally, and within clear-cut limits. Under such a system human happiness can be pursued, if not effectively caught, in literally countless lines of competing endeavor.

Where political power is concentrated and unlimited,

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<sup>6</sup> *Politics*, Bk. I, Ch. 5.

as it must be under the theory of the general will, the unscrupulous are always likely to rise to the top. The true liberal, who recognizes and cherishes the infinite variety of human nature, is by that fact alone estopped from issuing glib commands in the name of "the people." Here and there, for a brief period, a philosopher-king, a Marcus Aurelius, may fill the dictatorial role. But the odds are enormously in favor of the Neroes. It is of course bitterly ironical that, starting from the assumption of human equality, fake liberalism moves so easily to the conclusion of the one indispensable man. But that is merely another way of saying with Plato that the constant tendency of democracy is to slide into dictatorship.

For Americans the problem is especially poignant, since in their country and there alone was it carefully planned to keep political power diffused, in order to promote the individual as well as the general welfare. The validity of the social contract in Rousseau's political philosophy was admitted and indeed affirmed—by writing a Constitution in the name of the people which was eventually ratified, on the fulfilled understanding of a specific Bill of Rights, by all the States. His concept of the general will, however, was completely rejected, not only by establishing a central government of balanced powers, but also by withholding all but enumerated powers from the central government as such.

This system, though now more honored in the breach than the observance, would seem to mean that the fiction of the general will, and its Marxist realization in the form

of totalitarian democracy, will never take root in the United States. The majority will is severely circumscribed, is binding only in the field of delegated powers, and even there is subject to many specific restrictions: "No bill of attainder or ex post facto law shall be passed." "No money shall be drawn from the Treasury, but in consequence of appropriations made by law." "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." "No person . . . shall be compelled in any criminal case to be a witness against himself . . . nor shall private property be taken for public use, without just compensation."

A political system in which the majority will is so carefully restricted cannot with any pretence of accuracy be called a "democracy." Those who wish to destroy the Federal Republic, and build a unified totalitarian dictatorship on the ruins, will understandably seek to spread confusion as to what the nature of our government is. Intentional subversion, however does not fully explain why so many of unquestionable patriotism so frequently assert that our political system is the socialistic democracy which it originally sought to avert. Nor is political ignorance so complete as to explain the mystery. For the full explanation, we must recall some American history.