

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT 8

Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Social Contract, 1762



JEAN-Jacques Rousseau's famous line, "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains," sets the tone of his major political work, *The Social Contract*. Rousseau (1712–1778) strongly influenced the radical leaders of the French Revolution. He idealized the "state of nature,"—a state of peace and equality. Rousseau's contract was social, rather than political, in that a whole society agreed to be ruled by its general will.

On the Social Compact

SINCE men cannot engender new forces, but merely unite and direct existing ones, they have no other means of self-preservation except to form, by aggregation, a sum of forces that can prevail over the resistance; set them to work by a single motivation; and make them act in concert.

This sum of forces can arise only from the cooperation of many. But since each man's force and freedom are the primary instruments of his self-preservation, how is he to engage them without harming himself and without neglecting the cares he owes to himself? In the context of my subject, this difficulty can be stated in these terms;

"Find a form of association that defends and protects the person and goods of each associate with all the common force, and by means of which each one, uniting with all, nevertheless obeys only himself and remains as free as before." This is the fundamental problem which is solved by the social contract. . . .

[F]irst of all, since each one gives his entire self, the condition is equal for everyone, and since the condition is equal for everyone, no one has an interest in making it burdensome for the others.

Furthermore . . . the union is as perfect as it can be, and no associate has anything further to claim. For if some rights were left to private individuals, there would be no common superior who could judge between them and the public. Each man being his own judge on some point would soon claim to be so on all; the state of nature would subsist and the association would necessarily become tyrannical or ineffectual. . . .

[A]s each gives himself to all, he gives himself to no one; and since there is no associate over whom one does not acquire the same right one grants him over oneself, one gains the equivalent of everything one loses, and more force to preserve what one has.

If, then, everything that is not the essence of the social compact is set aside, one will find that it can be reduced to the following terms: *Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme di-*

rection of the general will; and in a body we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole.

Instantly, in place of the private person of each contracting party, this act of association produces a moral and collective body, composed of as many members as there are voices in the assembly, which receives from this same act its unity, its common self, its life, and its will. This public person, formed thus by the union of all the others, formerly took the name *City*, and now takes that of *Republic* or *body politic*, which its members call *State* when it is passive, *Sovereign* when active, *Power* when comparing it to similar bodies. As for the associates, they collectively take the name *People*; and individually are called *Citizens* as participants in the sovereign authority, and *Subjects* as subject to the laws of the State. . . .

On the Sovereign . . . [I]n order for the social compact not to be an ineffectual formula, it tacitly includes the following engagement, which alone can give force to the others: that whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be constrained to do so by the entire body; which means only that he will be forced to be free. For this is the condition that, by giving each citizen to the homeland, guarantees him against all personal dependence; a condition that creates the ingenuity and functioning of the political machine, and alone gives legitimacy to civil engagements without which it would be absurd, tyrannical, and subject to the most enormous abuses.

On the Civil State . . . What man loses by the social contract is his natural freedom and an unlimited right to everything that tempts him and that he can get; what he gains is civil freedom and the proprietorship of everything he possesses. In order not to be mistaken about these compensations, one must distinguish carefully between natural freedom, which is limited only by the force of the individual and civil freedom, which is limited by the general will; and between possession, which is only the effect of force or the right of the first occupant, and property, which can only be based on a positive title. . . .

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What, according to Rousseau, do humans lose, and gain, by the social contract?
2. To whom are citizens accountable: the sovereign, the state, or the general will of the people?