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## **REMEMBERING ROUSSEAU'S DISCOURSE ON POLITICAL ECONOMY AS A COUNTER-ENLIGHTENMENT MANIFESTATION**

### **Abstract:**

The French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) has expressed strident criticism of what he perceived to be the Enlightenment contractualism in Lockean sense and offered his own alternative of republican political theory against it. Moreover, he has very plainly rejected the enlightened confidence in technological progress as a necessary condition in the formation of modern civilization. These two aspects of his political theory have been rightly considered as the preliminary examples of Europe-wide Counter-Enlightenment thought.

However, Rousseau's views on political economy have not much been evaluated for a clear understanding of his Counter-Enlightenment position. This paper will first concentrate on possible reasons for why Rousseau's work has not become a source of discussion within the nexus of Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment. At the second level, the paper will discuss that the lack of references to the mechanisms of commercial society and Enlightenment notions of political economy in his work actually makes it a Counter-Enlightenment tract. In this sense, this paper optimistically suggests that the anatomizing of Rousseau's views on political economy will be an attempt not only to fill an important gap in Rousseau's Counter-Enlightenment thought but also it will offer a new insight for the general framework of Counter-Enlightenment political economy.

### **Keywords:**

Rousseau, political economy, enlightenment, counter-enlightenment, General Will, republican political theory.

**JEL Classification:** B12, Y70, A14

## Introduction

The scholarly controversies have not merely destroyed reductive interpretations of the French Enlightenment, and its particular formulation as a radical tradition. They have done more than this. A Europe-wide Enlightenment's homogeneous agenda is an excessive generalization, a futile endeavor to explain the intentions of eighteenth-century *literati*. However, it is so difficult to change the entrenched presuppositions about the intellectual figures of the French Enlightenment like Rousseau. Although the debates about Rousseau's place within Enlightenment/Counter-Enlightenment nexus have acquired a currency among the scholars in the last few decades, Rousseau is still *enfant terrible* of the French Enlightenment within the leading works of intellectual history (Israel, 2011: 93-109). Some minimal revisions of his portrayal as an Enlightenment thinker have not deeply changed the prevalence of this image. Such negligence has led to some cursory and naive interpretations of his corpus.

Rousseau was a polymath and prolific author, deliberate or undeliberate follower of Renaissance humanist tradition of writing on a wide range of subjects from political theory to the pedagogy and music. His radical republicanism and alternative contractualism, certainly distinct from Hobbesian contractualist theory and in a sense different from that of Locke in spite of some similarities (Riley, 2006: 362-369) became the fulcrum of anti-absolutist French political radicalism in the late eighteenth century. When his corpse was carried to Pantheon in 1794 by the radical Jacobins, Rousseau's distorted image as an inspirer was complete (O'Hagan, 2003: 89).

An enlightened Rousseau can be perceptible to some degree due to the fact that he offered a poignant critique of socio-cultural (O'Neal, 2002: 138) and political order (O'Hagan, 2003: 110) of the *ancien régime*. But, his imagination for the future was not that of the vision of the radical Enlightenment thinkers such as Diderot, d'Alembert and Condorcet. The difference between the radical Enlightenment of those and of Rousseau was irresolvable. His friends in Parisian circles were fascinated by technological progress and began to imagine an optimistic future free from the bondage of the political and religious tyranny. Cosmopolitanism was the ground for expressing a universal enlightened culture against the religious fanaticism and political regionalism. But, Rousseau criticized the major principles of his companions. In fact, Rousseau was neither a relentless enemy of the modern civilization nor did he call for a return to mythical golden age of humanity. But, he never believed in the benefits of progress and scientific development as the basis of happiness in life; rather he saw them as direct causes of decline in social unity. Rousseau was always dubious about the fruits of modern civilization in which he lived and looked for a way out of cosmopolitan urban splendour and luxury.

These points in his works have drawn the attention of some historians of the history of ideas in the recent period as emphasized before. But, it was a hard question for many willing to revise and redefine Rousseau's work. Now, Rousseau's position on several critical issues has quite rightly been thought as preliminary examples of Counter-Enlightenment. This was not an easy-going process. On the one hand, there was an established tradition of considering Rousseau as an enlightened figure as mentioned before. On the other hand, Isaiah Berlin, the precursor of Counter-Enlightenment studies did not regard Rousseau as a Counter-Enlightenment figure. For Berlin, Rousseau was, despite his partial dissociation with Enlightenment tradition, shared "more presuppositions with the Encyclopaedists than he denies" (Berlin, 2000: 272). This was not much different from, Rousseau's place in late Enlightenment historian, Peter Gay's liberal and anti-

totalitarian Enlightenment account. For Gay, “in some sense Rousseau always remained a member of the family” of the Enlightenment thinkers that “he would not have and that he would not have him” (Quoted from Garrard, 2003: 123).

However, Rousseau’s Counter-Enlightenment stance is currently more or less agreed, though some refusals, within Anglophone academic circles like the acceptable place of the concept of Counter-Enlightenment. Of Rousseau’s arguments, his rejection of enlightened confidence in the progress of the sciences and the arts as well as his radical republican political theory existing respectively in his *Discours sur les Sciences et les Arts (Discourse on the Arts and Sciences, 1750)*, and *Le Contrat (Social Contract, 1762)* have been most frequently used evidence for these dimensions of Rousseau’s views from his works to display his Counter-Enlightenment opinions. However, Rousseau’s views on political economy have not much been evaluated for a clear understanding of his Counter-Enlightenment position. This seems somewhat strange because the Enlightenment thinkers, both in France and Scotland - the leading countries in the Age of Enlightenment - put a great emphasis on the necessity of economic and social transformation of the Enlightenment societies along with the great progress in daily material life and they paid attention to the indispensability of innovative political economy forming the principles of commercial society. This paper will first concentrate on possible reasons for why Rousseau’s work has not become a source of discussion within the nexus of Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment. This point needs consideration because Rousseau sketched the general outline of his theory of political economy in his *Discourse on Political Economy*, which was first published in 1755 as part of Diderot’s *Encyclopedia* when the public discussions about economic principles and improvement were at its zenith in Europe. For a reply to the first question, it will be argued that Rousseau’s work has not attracted much attention due to its very slight references to the practical terms of Enlightenment political economy such as the optimum productivity, progressive economy and commercial organization, which were not the part of a Counter-Enlightenment political economy.

At the second level, the paper will discuss that the lack of references to the mechanisms of commercial society and Enlightenment notions of political economy in his work actually makes it a Counter-Enlightenment tract. Rousseau drew a clear line between private and public economy and wanted to show the collective happiness as a guarantee of individuality. Since he considered the division of labor and the private property as threats to collective morality of a given society, he tried to develop a political economy independent of Enlightenment notions. Therefore, he built his ideas about political economy on his political and theoretical views related to the social theory. Rousseau first offered his famous concept of “General Will” in this work and attacked on radical individualistic political economy. In this sense, this paper optimistically suggests that the anatomizing of Rousseau’s views on political economy will be an attempt not only to fill an important gap in Rousseau’s Counter-Enlightenment thought but also it will offer a new insight for the general framework of Counter-Enlightenment political economy.

### **Rousseau and Enlightenment Political Economy**

Rousseau, although he was very close friend of French encyclopedists like Diderot and d’Alembert, did not actually intend to write on political and social issues for the *Encyclopedia* project. He was, from the very beginning of his authorship adventure, did display his differentiation from French Enlightenment radicalism about epistemology. The origin of epistemology of human-beings was one of the most significant issues of French Enlightenment

*philosophes*. This was directly related to the progress of human consciousness and knowledge toward constant perfection (Garrard, 2003: 9). When a group of French *philosophes* decided to start an enterprise of publishing an encyclopedia in 1751, they moved on this epistemological postulation. Rousseau's all contributions to the *Encyclopedia* were about music. The only political tract he published for the project was his *Discourse on Political Economy* in 1755 (Garrard, 2003: 123). This brief tract was designed for the publication in the *Encyclopedia* and most probably written earlier by the request of his Parisian friends, especially of Diderot (Hobson, 2010: 68- 69). Even though his friends such as Diderot and d'Alembert knew the fact that Rousseau was the harsh critic of Enlightenment belief in technological and material progress, it is really obscure why they asked for his contribution. Some scholars such as Bertil Fridén and Robert Derathé have claimed that the request of the *philosophes* derived from the fact that "the Encyclopédie chose a distinctly pluralistic approach towards economic theory" and included several articles on it from Quesnay to Diderot (Fridén, 1998: 96). Another explanation might be the close friendship of Rousseau and Diderot. At least, we know that Rousseau and Diderot were very close friends from 1740s to 1757 but several quarrels took place between them because of their intellectual divergences. At last, their friendship ended because of a quarrel about Diderot's play titled *Natural Son (Fils Naturel)* since in the play Diderot used the line "only the wicked are alone". Rousseau considered this as an allusion to his wish for "a solitary life" (Rousseau, 1996: 443).

It is important to note that most of the scholars working on the eighteenth century did not pay much attention to Rousseau's work despite the fact that he was a man of the Age of Enlightenment. Then, why did not the work of Rousseau entitled "Discourse on Political Economy" attract the attention of the scholars from the humanities and social sciences? This point is worth attention because even if the connection between politics and economy had occupied the minds of the thinkers since the antiquity, political economy, as an exclusive field of inquiry, was an Enlightenment concept like sociology because Enlightenment political economy has focused on the operation of socio-political order in its conjunction with economy. In this respect, it has developed an innovative methodological study of social progress on the basis of "a model of subdivided labour, production and consumption" (Sutherland, 2004: 476). Then, the economic terminology has become the necessary instrument of describing the social and political structures of the societies. With regard to these themes, political economy was essentially about the organization of commercial society because commerce was quite significant for the wealth of nations. However, it should be precisely kept in mind that the connection between economy and politics was indispensable for Enlightenment political economists because the economic order could not be merely explained in pure economic terms.

In this sense, political economy was not a precisely distinct and technical term of academic discipline of economics. These issues would be the subject matter of the professional scholars of the discipline of economics by the late nineteenth century. Essentially, the political economy was also associated with the political forms of government and this was an accepted phenomenon for contemporary writers. Adam Smith's monumental work, the *Wealth of Nations* was not purely the technical work of economics but it was an attempt to explain the nature and characteristic of large commercial societies in historic and evolutionary way. For instance, he says, as a criticism of feudal institutions, in *the Wealth of Nations*: "What all the feudal institutions could never have effected, the silent and insensible operation of foreign commerce and manufactures gradually brought about." (Smith, 1868: 169)

After all, the Enlightenment writers from Smith to the physiocrats like Turgot believed that they were living in a new condition and stage of the history of humanity; progressive and materially wealthy. So, political economy was important for the Enlightenment thinkers to legitimize their commercial political societies. Political economy had to be related to socio-economic and political reality in order to be beneficial to the well-being and wealth of the nations. Like ethics and politics, economic terms in their connection to the political formulations had to be rescued from the confinements of philosophical speculations.

Commerce, particularly for the British Enlightenment thinkers such as Smith and Hume, was the fundamental aspect of national power. For example, David Hume indicated in his essay titled "Of Commerce" that "the greatness of a state, and the happiness of its subjects,... are commonly allowed to be inseparable with regard to commerce" (Hume, 1758: 150). The British writers' approach to the issue of interrelation of economy and politics can be comprehensible to a certain extent that the British state after the Union with Scotland in 1707 came to appear a rival to the supremacy of the French state, indisputably the most powerful state throughout the seventeenth and much of the eighteenth century despite its internal weakness coming from the fragile structure of the state system of France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The French Enlightenment writers like Diderot shared the same vision. In the volume of *Encyclopedia*, to which Rousseau was at the same time contributed, Diderot pointed that "the political world just like the physical world can be regulated in many ways by weight, measure and numbers" in other words, by the employment of demographical and statistical information (Hobson, 2011: 40).

Rousseau's political economy vision was neither the political arithmetic in the sense of what Diderot understood from the relationship between the politics and economy nor was it an attempt to explain the development of commercial societies in the Smithian sense. It was a rejection of Enlightenment political economy. Rousseau always hated the luxury and the modern man's desire for wealth. He wrote in 1750 in his *Discourse on the Arts and the Sciences* that "luxury is diametrically opposed to good mores" and further asked a critical question that "what will become of virtue when one must become wealthy at any cost?" (Rousseau, 1987:12). In this sense, the strident criticism of modern life style and commercialism were his aim in communicating his views about all issues related to the political economy. Not surprisingly, the modern scholars of Enlightenment period have seen the content of Rousseau's *Discourse on Political Economy* as a failure because of their conception through modern Enlightenment mind. But, Rousseau's deliberative strategy of narrative in his work does not mean that he was ignorant of the concepts of Enlightenment political economy. The lack of references to the modern commercialism was deriving from his Counter-Enlightenment position.

### **Comments on the *Discourse on Political Economy*:**

Rousseau's *Discourse on Political Economy*, as one scholar has recently indicated, has attracted less attention as compared to his other works ( Hanley, 2013: 34) The possible reasons for this have been discussed above. Now, it is necessary to have a closer look at the content of the work to determine the Counter-Enlightenment aspects of Rousseau's work. As its title indicates, the treatise begins with a definition of the word, economy and how the meaning of it changed from small household economy to the administration of the affairs of the state. In this sense, Rousseau reflected traditionalism in the sense of how he conceived the economy and its relation to the state affairs because his description depended on a distinction of political or general economy and family economy in Aristotelian sense. He pointed that "Even if there were as close an analogy as

many authors maintain between the State and the family, it would not follow that the rules of conduct proper for one of these societies would be also proper for the other” (Rousseau, 1755: 1) Rousseau’s definition may be regarded as conscious. It seems that Rousseau wanted to reformulate the already known and traditional distinction for theoretical purposes of his own to oppose the paternalist political theories, which were common in France as well as the other countries of Europe especially like England. This distinction is not only Aristotelian in essence but it approximates his political philosophy to that of Locke. It is known that Locke, in similar vein, opposes the paternalistic vision of property rights and wanted to make separation between public and domestic domains. If the political body could be founded by the consent of the subjects, the private domain and property would be under the guarantee of the state. Rousseau, in the same line, went on defending his separation between the state and family economy.

Rousseau’s reconstruction of political economy was based on his own conception of the state of nature and he believed that the family was constructed on a natural basis because of the fact that the children needed the paternal protection of their father against the dangers of social life while the state, as an arbitrary institution took its basis from the customary habits of a communal life. Therefore, for Rousseau, these two distinct bodies of social organization could not be governed in the same way. The reason for such a rigid categorization of the formation of the state and family can be, at first glance, seen as an Enlightenment attack of traditional paternalistic thought of Filmer. Robert Filmer, who lived in the tumults of the seventeenth-century England, has written his famous work *Patriarcha* to oppose anti-paternalist conceptions of monarchy. He has indicated that “As the Father over one family, so the king, as Father over many families, extends his care to preserve, feed, clothe, instruct and defend the whole commonwealth” ( Filmer, 1685: 24). The evidence from Rousseau’s own text gives such an impression that Rousseau’s purpose was an Enlightenment criticism in essence. Rousseau carefully gave importance to the distinction between public and private economy and thought the political theory of Filmer as “detestable” (Rousseau, 1755: 2). Such an attack may be misleading in a way and needs some revision. Anti-paternalistic vision of Rousseau in the *Discourse on Political Economy* does not necessarily make his approach an Enlightenment attack on paternalism. What Rousseau wanted to do is to protect the paternal body of the family against the infringement of the state. This intention of Rousseau is also evident in his work *Social Contract*: “The family is... the prototype of all political societies;... since all are born equal and free, none give up their liberty except for the utility” ( Rousseau, 1987: 142) According to Rousseau, the contemporary forms of government functioned a tool of pressure of the governors on the individuals. So, the state, in its anti-modern and republican way had to be established to protect the rights of the individuals. The family was a natural body, the foundation of the all communal structures and the private autonomy of this natural organization had to be secure against the over-expansion of the state. This does not mean that Rousseau saw the state as an evil to the private or public life. He just believed in the differences in their essence. In fact, “if the voice of nature is the best counsellor to which a father can listen in the discharge of his duty, for the Magistrate it is a false guide, which continually prevents him from performing his, and leads him on sooner or later to the ruin of himself and of the State, if he is not restrained by the most sublime virtue” (Rousseau, 1755: 2).

As the distinction between public and private/family economy becomes a part of Rousseau’s description of the liberty of the individual and the state against each other, Rousseau’s political economy in this respect becomes a tract of political theory. It includes the implications of his political theory articulated very firmly in his famous *Social Contract*. The essential purpose of the *Discourse* was to describe the most efficient form of government to keep the rights of the

individual, especially property rights. In the first lines of his treatise, Rousseau drew attention to the individual rights like property: "I am no longer free, and that I am no longer master of my property, if any one else can lay a hand on it" (Rousseau, 1755: 1) It should be indicated that the need for preserving the rights of the individuals in Rousseau's text is not attempt of Enlightenment radical individualism. The distinction between the natures of the state and the family aims to reorganize the peace and security of the collective unification of the society. For Rousseau, when the conflicts emerged among people, the law would be the base of justice and liberty and this law would be "the salutary organ of the will of all (Rousseau, 1755: 1).

This first part of the *Discourse* can be evaluated as a preparation for Rousseau's identification of political economy with political theory. The second part of the work mainly deals with the political body. In this portion, Rousseau, for the first time, propounded his famous concept of "General Will", which is generally associated with his later work, *Social Contract*. Rousseau offered the general will of the people "as the first principle of the public economy" The public economy is explicitly the public administration in Rousseau's understanding and the administration of the justice, inseparable part of the laws of the nation.

The virtue was the second essential aspect of the public economy for Rousseau (Rousseau, 1755: 7-8). The rule of virtue meant for Rousseau that all particular wills of the individuals had to be consistent with the general will. The virtuous character of the citizens and governors could be improved and perhaps could be elaborated by public education for patriotism. When all these were fulfilled and the citizens had the consciousness of submitting to the general will by putting aside their particular wills, then the most efficient social body could be built. This, for Rousseau, was a Republic and not a monarchy or commercial states like France or Britain. As is known, Rousseau was the citizen of Geneva, the Swiss Canton, and he was always proud of being a Geneva citizen. Therefore, his political dream was the foundation of small patriotic political entities in opposition to the larger commercial states.

Free people could only be the active participants of the politics in small city-states and the state governors could establish justice only in such kind of places. Then, in Rousseau's political vision, the state was equal to the republican political body and all the theoretical framework was designed according to the structure of it. In the third part of the *Discourse*, which is mainly concerned with the taxation, the public economy is envisaged in a very simplistic way. Rousseau did not offer a financial system by which the state could increase its revenues. What is important for Rousseau was proper distribution of the sources available to the society. He wrote that "the distribution of provisions, money, and merchandise in just proportions, according to times and places, is the true secret of finance and the source of wealth, provided those who administer it have foresight enough to suffer a present apparent loss, in order really to obtain immense profits in the future" (Rousseau, 1755: 16) For a proper economic and social system, Rousseau gave his Geneva Republic as an example and indicated that "I have often turned my eyes to that of this Republic, rejoicing to find in my own country an example of that wisdom and happiness which I should be glad to see prevail in every other" (Rousseau, 1755: 16) The most important aspect of Rousseau's economic view is that he proposed a taxation on the surplus of the wealth. For him, this was the best way of establishing a balance between the poor and rich because "as long as there are rich people, they will be desirous of distinguishing themselves from the poor" (Rousseau, 1755: 22). Given this, it is very explicit that Rousseau did offer neither a new political economic model for commercial society nor did he say much about economic terms such as production or division of labor, inherent elements of Enlightenment conceptualization of political economy.

## Conclusion

Considering the discussion of Rousseau's views in *Discourse on Political Economy*, can we revise already-established negative approach to Rousseau as a political economist? As I have discussed in the first part of the paper, Rousseau's position on the issue should not be investigated through the lens of modern Enlightenment scholarship. It should be kept in mind that Rousseau developed a Counter-Enlightenment stance against the French Enlightenment progressivism. The republican, historicist Rousseau always looked back history and tradition against innovative models of change. This does not mean that he was a primitive anarchist. Rousseau was well-aware that the modern age was open to drastic transformations but it seems that he had a firm belief in the possibility of founding an alternative community independent of the constraints of modern civilization. With regard to this, he was the precursor of the early-nineteenth-century Counter-Enlightenment Romanticism.

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