



To what extent can Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 'The Social Contract' and John Berger's 'G.' be said to show democracy as the best political model for a society.

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Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract* and John Berger's 'G.' provide complementing as well as diverging attitudes towards democracy. For Rousseau, there arises a disparity between democracy as a theoretical model and democracy as a practical application. 'G.' also highlights this issue but there is less affinity for democratic principles as there is a criticism of the ease of corruption of democracy through external factors. I will therefore suggest that Rousseau's concepts of 'general will' and the 'Sovereign' fit in well to a democratic model and would suggest he does see democratic theory as the best theoretical model for society. Yet *The Social Contract* highlights the problem of democracy working practically. 'G.' will be shown to highlight the same problem of democracy being unworkable, even if the ideology behind it is admirable.

Within *The Social Contract* and much of Rousseau's other work, scholars, philosophers and political activists alike have debated to what extent he found democracy to be unequivocally the best political model or indeed the worst political model available for a society to function well. Rousseau's attitude is hard to pin down and he never sets out a strict political model which he sees as perfect, rather, he sets out some fundamental tenets to which a society must adhere. It is here that subjective and contextual readings of his work inevitably lead to differing interpretations of it. Rousseau finds a dichotomy between an ideal theoretical model of democracy and the democracy usually found when practically applied to the real world. The town of Geneva, Rousseau's hometown, represented the democratic ideal he felt could not be applied on a large scale to the rest of the world. Geneva illustrated a physical manifestation of the "discrepancy between his imagined ideal and a contradictory reality"¹.

The Social Contract provides some fundamental concepts which Rousseau places at the heart of his political philosophy. Indeed the first sentence of chapter one highlights one of Rousseau's most central themes, "Man is born free"². It is this notion of freedom that is pervasive throughout the work. This is irrevocably a central tenet of democratic theory as well, illustrating one of the strongest and simplest arguments to suggest Rousseau believed democracy was one of the best political models. Rousseau's thinking was, however, of a time when the work of Thomas Hobbes was venerated. This school of thought suggests that if a person is to take any benefit from society, they must endure some limits on natural freedom. A fundamental paradox therefore arises in which each person in a given community must have individual freedom, while keeping the entire community, with all of its differing opinions and desires, united. Rousseau sees his 'social contract' as the solution to this problem, whereby everyone in the community agrees to place limits on their natural freedom

¹ James Miller, 'Rousseau: Dreamer of Democracy', (Yale University Press, 1984), p.60

² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'The Social Contract', (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1913 (First published 1762)), p.5

in order to gain the benefits and security of living within said community. It is therefore this discrepancy between natural freedom and societal security which has meant there is such scope for interpretation of Rousseau's thinking and which still means it can be suggested he is both in favour of democracy as a political model and against it.

Rousseau's notion of 'general will' is important in conveying his attitude towards democracy as a political model for society. The general will represents the desire and opinion of the Sovereign body. *The Social Contract* states that the general will "is always right and tends towards the public advantage"³. Through this, Rousseau is stating that, just as an individual would not make decisions that would end up causing self-harm, nor would the Sovereign body make decisions that would harm itself, and therefore the general will is always correct. This is an opinion that counters Aristotelian thought which contends there is "evil which is inherent in every man"⁴ because it suggests that the Sovereign will decide on things that are beneficial for the collective and not just for the individual. In accepting to live within such a society, Rousseau implies that everyone submits to the general will and therefore, if the general will goes against what the individual thinks, they must still accept it. This notion of general will is easily incorporated into the democratic model. If an issue is decided upon democratically, for example, through a vote, those who did not vote with the majority must still accept the outcome of the vote as legitimate. To disregard this would cause a break down in the democratic system. True democracy will, by definition, provide a strong basis on which one can contend decisions through assemblies or voting. Other forms of government, specifically the other two that Rousseau mentions; Monarchy and Aristocracy, do not provide this opportunity in the same way. The ability to contend decisions becomes difficult in other forms of governance, usually unless one has an elite position within some sort of hierarchy. It would seem in this sense therefore, that democracy provides the best political model to adhere to Rousseau's fundamental principle of the 'general will' in a society.

Coupled with the idea of the general will is Rousseau's interpretation of the 'Sovereign' which is central in his attitude towards democracy. The Sovereign constitutes the body of people within a State who are actively engaging in decisions which will affect the society, and is therefore "the exercise of the general will"⁵. One of the most important ideas developing from this concept is that the Sovereign, in terms of a community that is genuinely free, is always right. This conclusion is similar to democratic theory in which decisions are made by the all the people and are therefore always right for the community. Rousseau does identify a problem with the Sovereign however, in that, although the intentions of the Sovereign are always for the benefit of society, they can be influenced by externalities, which "makes a legislator necessary"⁶. This need for a legislator, a man or small group of men, who have to be outside the Sovereign to make laws, is not a democratic idea. In disregarding the ability of the Sovereign to make its own laws impartially, Rousseau has highlighted the disparity between democratic theory and real life application. On the one hand Rousseau has created a concept that sits well within democratic ideology as "anything less than a democratic sovereignty means that a society lacks a proper foundation"⁷. At the same time, however, he has also identified a belief that in a democracy, Sovereignty can be outweighed by exploitation from individuals or small groups of people, which leads to the system breaking down. Rousseau has therefore provided an ambivalent response to the question of whether democracy is the best political model, allowing personal interpretation to gauge

³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'The Social Contract', p.25

⁴ Aristotle, 'The Politics and The Constitution of Athens', edited Stephen Everson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.157

⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'The Social Contract', p.22

⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'The Social Contract', p.34

⁷ James Miller, 'Rousseau: Dreamer of Democracy', p.109

which form of governance would uphold the fundamental concepts behind the 'general will' and the 'Sovereign'.

One of the major factors dictating whether Rousseau sees democracy as a good political model for society relates to the size of the society, "Monarchy therefore suits only wealthy nations; aristocracy, States of middling size and wealth; and democracy, States that are small and poor"⁸. One of the most important reasons for Rousseau's opinion that the society must be small for democracy to work is that it rests upon the timeless axiom 'by the people, for the people'. Within a small State it is possible to hold legitimate assemblies where all the people are able to be present and make their opinions heard and Rousseau inexorably saw reflections of his hometown of Geneva in this perspective. As soon as a State becomes too large, however, the ability to govern in such a way becomes impossible and elective representatives must be employed to speak for others. The limits on people's democratic rights increase as the size of the state increases. This means larger States will always limit the freedoms democracy aims to uphold beyond a reasonable point. Decisions on correct political models therefore become a case of empirical estimation. If a State fits into a certain criteria of size or affluence, democracy may or may not be the correct political system for it, regardless of any other factors. From this suggestion, it would seem that Rousseau sees democracy as the best political model for society only in certain specific situations.

In '*The Social Contract*' Rousseau states that an elected aristocracy, which administers to the Sovereign, is the best form of governance. The root of this arises from Rousseau's admiration of the oldest form of governance which was that of the family, in which the "heads of families took counsel together on public affairs"⁹. From this natural hierarchy, the concept of the elected aristocracy evolved, taking inspiration from the idea of accepting the decisions of the supposedly wiser citizens. Rousseau's advocating of aristocracy does not diverge as far from the democratic model as it may at first seem. The aristocracy he endorses can only hold political power if they are voted in and they must only govern for the 'profit' of the Sovereign. In this way the elected aristocracy becomes a 'wise government' that, theoretically, aims to administer only to the general will. This particular model for society does mirror democracy in certain ways (for example through election and administering solely to the general will) but at the same time it is not asserting a belief that democracy is the best political model for a society.

Following from this notion of elected aristocracy it could be suggested that Rousseau is condemning a fundamental notion of democracy in that he is proposing a system in which there is a clear divide between the Sovereign and the government. Thomas Paine clearly evinces his distain for this type of governance in '*Rights of Man*', "The French constitution says, *There shall be no titles*; and of consequence, all that class of equivocal generation, which in some countries is called '*aristocracy*', and in others '*nobility*', is done away, and the *peer* is exalted into MAN"¹⁰. Paine's inherent distaste for aristocratic systems was a distaste shared among many involved in the French revolution. Yet, many of the ideals of democracy that were fought for during the French revolution, which was a landmark time for the progress of democracy during history, were ideals honed from what Rousseau propounded in '*The Social Contract*'. Although Rousseau openly approves of aristocracy as the most practical political model for most societies, this does not necessarily mean it can be disregarded that he felt democracy was as good or even better political model, at least on a theoretical level.

Rousseau's attitude towards democracy seems to be binary. At times it appears that the political model that best suits his ideas is democracy, yet at other times he seems to

⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'The Social Contract', p.69

⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'The Social Contract', p.62

¹⁰ Thomas Paine, 'The Rights of Man', (Penguin Group, 1984 (First published 1792)), p.80, (emphasis in original)

condemn it as an impractical and unworkable model. Beyond adhering to one political model over another, Rousseau helped redefine the ideals behind democracy and so helped change the perception of it from an archaic system which was often overlooked as implausible, to something much more tangible. Just thirty years after the publication of *'The Social Contract'* the events of the French revolution pointed to a future in which democracy would hold centre stage. *'The Social Contract'* looks for "someone willing to summon his own imagination, feelings and intuitive understanding, exercising his own freedom to think through for himself the ideas Rousseau reasons about"¹¹. It is therefore the ability of the reader to become the judge of whether or not democracy is the best political model which is what Rousseau achieved. What this does is shift the perspective of the title question from Rousseau to the reader. This then allows us to see what Rousseau was truly concerned with ideologically. This ideology is summed up in Rousseau's statement, "No one, under any pretext whatsoever, can make any man subject without his consent". It is perhaps this phrase that conveys his attitude towards democratic theory. Democracy as a form of governance, however, Rousseau sees as something which is always unachievable, stating, "there never has been a real democracy, and there never will be"¹².

The novel *'G.'* does not provide the same sort of overt analysis of democracy that is present within *'The Social Contract'*, but instead evokes a more subtle analysis of democracy as a political model. Within the opening chapter there is metaphorical imagery which illustrates a democratic model of modern times. *G.'*'s parents, Umberto and Esther, provide this metaphor. The democracy that is shown is inextricably linked with capitalism. It is through this link that John Berger shows what he sees as a fundamental flaw of democracy in that it can always be corrupted by external factors. Esther is 'spiritual' yet 'fragile' and it is through this that she can be seen to represent democracy, while Umberto is depicted as capitalism. Their relationship is symbiotic, "the fact that Esther was Umberto's wife saved him from appearing too extreme. Without her, he might have been reckoned a profligate. With her, it was possible to believe that he had been tamed"¹³. The imagery here conveys a relationship between democracy and capitalism in which the harsh realities of capitalism seem lessened or 'tamed' through the virtuous morality of democracy. By inextricably linking these images of democracy and capitalism Berger has illustrated a modern model of democracy that has changed from the democracy Rousseau pictured two hundred years earlier. The issue Berger deliberates upon is that often, in modern times, democracy is bound to capitalism which undermines the democratic system before it can ever be properly implemented. Modern democracy is highlighted as being wrought with hypocrisy, and ultimately, undemocratic. This is something Berger has noted in other writing, for example, when commenting on election in a two party system such as that of America, Berger stated, "Democracy should not be confused with the freedom of binary choices"¹⁴. This illustrates that it is not necessarily the theoretical model of democracy that he contends, but the fact that in a modern world it is inevitably not democracy people are partaking in, but a corruption of democracy. This notion, highlighted in the opening pages, would suggest, like Rousseau, that Berger has a duality of opinion with regard to democracy as the best political model for society.

Linking to the corruption of democracy through capitalism Berger illustrates an issue of a relationship between colonialism and democracy. In relating 'The Great Amaxosa Delusion' in *'G.'*, Berger identifies what he perceives as a great hypocrisy that has pervaded British democracy for centuries. The ability for a society to claim to uphold a political system

¹¹ James Miller, 'Rousseau: Dreamer of Democracy', p.74

¹² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'The Social Contract', p.58

¹³ John Berger, *'G.'*, (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1972), p.5

¹⁴ John Berger, 'Written in the Night: The Pain of Living in the Present World' in 'Le Monde Diplomatique', February 2003, archived online at www.hartford-hiwp.com/archives/27a/113.html

of equality whilst systematically devastating other societies undermines the authority of democracy. Over the centuries democracy has been practiced alongside monarchical systems and aristocratic systems (and still is today). These systems often openly practice inequality, and Berger is therefore illustrating that modern democracy is deeply rooted in political models of the past which were overtly undemocratic. In most cases there is not a moment of definable paradigm shift from a non-democratic model to a democratic one, it is a long process. In the novel the narrator conveys the Amaxosa delusion with a factual coldness that strikes the reader, "An estimated fifty thousand died of starvation... Those who remained did so as a propertyless labour force"¹⁵. In this way 'G.' provides a scathing analysis of the ability for democracy to be distorted and usurped. This sort of corruption destroys democracy and puts the individual above the collective, as Berger himself put it, "The first democratic principle is that the elected remain accountable to those who elected them"¹⁶. It is evident that for Berger a tenet such as this is not adhered to in modern capitalist democracy and it is for this reason that one could infer that he does not see modern democracy as the best political model for society.

In understanding whether 'G.' presents democracy as a good political model or not, it is interesting to note the way Berger perceives language. Through analysing the meaning of words, Berger finds another problem with democracy. This is not so much to do with theoretical principles, but rather is concerned with a meta-language, a meaning behind the words. This is exemplified when G. comes across the demonstrating crowds for the first time and he cannot understand the language being used. One character he interacts with realises this means G. is "immune to the hypocrisy of deception of words and thus can be the pure witness of their actions"¹⁷. What Berger means by this is that words have in themselves a plethora of meaning which is subjective to each person. This raises an issue in that no one can truly comprehend the countless connotations and values carried in the words they hear or read, which is certainly true for the word 'democracy'. The effect of this is that it becomes impossible to speak the word 'democracy' and convey its true meaning. It is not something that can be described in a single word, because it would need thousands of words to accurately explain all that 'democracy' stands for and means. When the narrator attempts to describe Leonie's feelings when making love to G., this point is clearly evinced, "To express her experience it would be necessary for us to reconstruct around ourselves her unique language. And this is impossible. Armed with the entire language of literature we are still denied access to her experience"¹⁸. By viewing the text in this way it is possible to suggest that it is not possible to name and define any political model, such as 'democracy', because each supposed manifestation of democracy is bound to be different in countless ways. The novel therefore illustrates a relativist stance in which one cannot claim any political model to be the best, but must judge each society's political model individually.

Both of the works discussed above have illustrated that democracy is based upon strong ideals. The central notions behind democracy, such as 'freedom', 'free will' and 'governance by the people' are ideals I think Rousseau and Berger would aspire to in a society. At the same time, however, both of the works find issue with the ability for these ideals to be upheld without being corrupted or negatively influenced by external factors, therefore limiting democracy. It is to this end that I think Rousseau and Berger might uphold democracy as an ideal, but would not advocate it unequivocally as the best political model for society.

¹⁵ John Berger, 'G.', p.100

¹⁶ John Berger, 'Describe the Truth Until It Sticks' in 'The Drawbridge: Rumour (Issue 6), Autumn 2007, archived online at www.thedrawbridge.co.uk/issue_6/describe_the_truth_until_it_is_st/

¹⁷ John Berger, 'G.', p.67

¹⁸ John Berger, 'G.', p.135

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