

**Rousseau and Marx on Equality:
Paradise Lost, Paradise Restored**

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*Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.*¹

-- Jean-Jacques Rousseau

*Workers of the world unite; you have nothing to lose but your chains.*²

-- Karl Marx

Both Marx and Rousseau write extensively on the origins and nature of inequality in their work. In this paper, I will show that these two political theorists' work can be shown to be complementary, and furthermore, that together they define a trajectory, operational through history as follows.

Paradise Lost

1. **The State of Nature:** a state of fundamental and general equality
2. **The Nature of the State:** a loss of equality effected by a transformation from *communal* to *private* property institutions

Paradise Restored

3. **The Nature of Equality:** the realization that political equality requires property equality
4. **The Equality of Nature:** the restoration of equality effected by a transformation from *private* to *communal* property institutions

Paradise Lost: From Equality to Inequality...

¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "On the Social Contract," in *Modern Political Thought : Readings from Machiavelli to Nietzsche*, ed. David Wootton (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Pub., 1996), 465.

² Karl Marx, "The Communist Manifesto," in *Modern Political Thought : Readings from Machiavelli to Nietzsche*, ed. David Wootton (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Pub., 1996).

In order to understand what was lost, we must investigate two phenomena: 1) the general equality existing between men in the *state of nature*, and 2) the transformation from this state of general equality to a state of general inequality inculcated in the *nature of the state*.

The State of Nature

What is the state of nature? Rousseau emphasizes the role of compassion, or pity. He tells us that men have “a natural repugnance to seeing any sentient being, especially our fellow man, perish or suffer.”³ This repugnance is so strong, that even when injured, humans in the state of nature avoid inflicting suffering on others. In fact, “as long as he does not resist the inner impulse of compassion, he will never harm another man....”⁴ This behavior is, claims Rousseau, natural and spontaneous. Compassion is “a virtue all the more universal and all the more useful to man in that it precedes in him any kind of reflection....”⁵ Contrasted with Man’s only other attribute, self-preservation, which even the animals exhibit, compassion thus emerges as *the only uniquely human characteristic*. Moreover, its expression underscores a basic, albeit subconscious “community” which eventually culminates in Man’s first Golden Age.

In this Golden Age, the earth belongs to all and all to the earth. Without property, each man’s “equality” is a given. As Rousseau asks, “what can be the chains of dependence among men who possess nothing?”⁶ Suffering there may be, but not conflict.

³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality among Men," in *Modern Political Thought : Readings from Machiavelli to Nietzsche*, ed. David Wootton (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Pub., 1996), 412.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 426.

⁶ Ibid., 430.

Quoting Locke, Rousseau reaffirms, “*where there is no property, there is no injury.*”⁷

Alas, this Golden Age carries within itself the seeds of its own demise. Association begets comparison, and comparison makes natural inequalities more apparent. These natural inequalities – differences in strength, intellect, talents, etc. – which previously had served unite the community in cooperation, come to divide it, as we shall see.

The Nature of the State

What then is the nature of the state? To answer, we turn our attention to “how much natural inequality must increase in the human species through inequality occasioned by social institutions.”⁸ The transformation begins with an act that Rousseau not only laments, but also sees as possibly having been avoidable:

“The first person who, having enclosed a plot of land, took it into his head to say this is mine and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society. What crimes, wars, murders, what miseries and horrors would the human race have been spared, had someone pulled up the stakes or filled in the ditch and cried out to his fellow men: ‘Do not listen to this impostor. You are lost if you forget that the fruits of the earth belong to all and the earth to no one!’”⁹

“In Rousseau’s view, the successful enclosure of plots of land – or, more generally, the private appropriation of alienable means of production – might not have occurred.”¹⁰

This act constituted an act of appropriation precisely because it removed the land from the common property of all, to which all had equal access, and placed it in the hands of a

⁷ Ibid., 435.

⁸ Ibid., 430.

⁹ Ibid., 431.

¹⁰ Andrew Levine, *The General Will : Rousseau, Marx, Communism* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 44.

single owner, creating an inequality of access, and thus *relative scarcity*. “Once relative scarcity was *socially* introduced, history became invested with a determinate structure and directionality. The subsequent course of human affairs then became inevitable.”¹¹

Rousseau explains, “thus it is that natural inequality imperceptibly manifests itself together with inequality occasioned by the socialization process. Thus it is that the differences among men developed by those of circumstances, make themselves more noticeable, more permanent in their effects, and begin to influence the fate of private individuals....”¹² Those excluded from access outnumber those who accumulate property, and invariably come to resent and prey upon them. Rousseau’s masterful description of the inevitable next stage of this process is worth quoting at length:

“Bereft of valid reasons to justify himself and sufficient forces to defend himself; easily crushing a private individual, but himself crushed by troops of bandits; alone against all and unable on account of mutual jealousies to unite with his equals against enemies united by the common hope of plunder, the rich pressed by necessity, finally conceived the most thought-out project that ever entered the human mind. It was to use in his favor the very strength of those who attacked him, to turn his adversaries into his defenders, to instill in them other maxims, and to give them other institutions which where as favorable to him [the rich] as natural right was unfavorable to him.”¹³

“‘Let us unite,’ he says to them, ‘in order to protect the weak from oppression, restrain the ambitious, and assure everyone of possessing what belongs to him. Let us institute rules of justice and peace to which all will be obliged to conform, which will make special exceptions for no one, and which will in some way compensate for

¹¹ Ibid., 46.

¹² Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality among Men," 437.

¹³ Ibid.

the caprices of fortune by subjecting the strong and the weak to mutual obligations.”¹⁴

According to Rousseau, this clever ruse “gave new fetters to the weak and new forces to the rich, irretrievably destroyed natural liberty, established forever the law of property and of inequality, changed adroit usurpation in to an irrevocable right, and for the profit of a few ambitious men henceforth subjected the entire human race to labor, servitude and misery.”¹⁵

The implications of this division are profound. “If some of us are very wealthy, while others are very poor, if some have servants and others are forced to serve, then the sense of community may easily dissolve, and divisive interests may seem more important than common ones.”¹⁶ Since, for Rousseau, divining the common interest, or “general will,” is crucial to a well-governed society, inequalities threaten the very existence of the community. Inequality gives rise to factions, and “for the general will to be well articulated, it is therefore important that there should be no partial society in the state and that each citizen make up his own mind.... If there are partial societies, their number must be multiplied and inequality among them prevented....”¹⁷ As one scholar has commented, “general will coordination or at least the form of it that Rousseau expressly described cannot obtain in conditions that are detrimental to the development of rational and independent judgments by all the members of the whole community. Whatever detracts from real equality of citizenship is therefore inimical to general will

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ David Wootton, *Modern Political Thought : Readings from Machiavelli to Nietzsche* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Pub., 1996), 400.

¹⁷ Rousseau, "On the Social Contract," 477.

coordination.”¹⁸ Also, “private property and markets generate resource inequalities, and these inequalities, if they grow too large, put liberty and therefore general will coordination itself in jeopardy.”¹⁹ On this subject, Marx concurs. Living in an industrial era Rousseau never dreamed of, Marx insists that the Bourgeois has “centralized means of production, and has concentrated property in a few hands. The necessary consequence of this was political centralization.”²⁰ Although he does not analyze it in detail – that would have to wait for Marx – Rousseau, too, recognizes the inherent connection between economic inequality and political inequality when he states:

“Do you therefore want to give constancy to the State? Bring the extremes as close together as possible. Tolerate neither rich men nor beggars. These two estates, which are naturally inseparable, are equally fatal to the common good. From the one come the fomenters of tyranny, and from the other the tyrants. It is always between them that public liberty becomes a matter of commerce. The one buys it and the other sells it.”²¹

The liberty that is being bought and sold is congealed in property and labor. The men who have none are forced by circumstance to work for the men who have all. Society becomes industrious and competitive. Marx tells us that in “industry and competition all the conditions of existence, the determining factors, and the biases of individuals are fused together into the two simplest forms: private property and labor.”²² Since an individual’s labor is no longer manifested through his conviviality, his life’s work, man

¹⁸ Levine, *The General Will : Rousseau, Marx, Communism*, 176.

¹⁹ Ibid., 179.

²⁰ Marx, “*The Communist Manifesto*,” 834.

²¹ Rousseau, “On the Social Contract,” 488.

²² Karl Marx, “The German Ideology,” in *Modern Political Thought : Readings from Machiavelli to Nietzsche*, ed. David Wootton (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Pub., 1996), 823.

becomes *alienated* from the product of his labor. He works not for love, but for money, for a *wage*. “Wages are a direct result of alienated labor, and alienated labor is the direct cause of private property.”²³ Furthermore, Marx clarifies that “*wages and private property* are identical: for when the product, the object of labor, pays for the labor itself, wages are only a necessary consequence of the alienation of labor.”²⁴ Marx was not unaware of his debt to Rousseau on this point, and regarding it he states, only in society can useless and even socially harmful labour become a gainful occupation, that only in society can one live by being idle, etc., etc. – in short, one could just as well have copied the whole of Rousseau.”²⁵

More disastrously for society, “a direct consequence of man’s alienation from the product of his work, from his life activity... is the *alienation of man* from *man*.”²⁶ Men are alienated from each other by being forced to compete in a socially constructed arena of *relative scarcity*, and can no longer realize their true connectedness. In addition, they must also become alienated from those who are appropriating the products of their labor. “If man is related to the product of his labor, to his objectified labor, as to an *alien*, hostile, powerful object independent of him, he is so relate that another alien, hostile, powerful man independent of him is the lord of this object. If he is unfree in relation to his own activity, he is related to it as bonded activity, activity under the domination, coercion, and yoke of another man.”²⁷ This relation between the freedom of the rich and the freedom of the poor is not lost on Rousseau, who points out “you, modern peoples,

²³ Karl Marx, "Alienated Labor from *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*," in *Modern Political Thought : Readings from Machiavelli to Nietzsche*, ed. David Wootton (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Pub., 1996), 796.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Karl Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Programme," in *Modern Political Thought : Readings from Machiavelli to Nietzsche*, ed. David Wootton (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Pub., 1996), 884.

²⁶ Marx, "Alienated Labor from *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*," 794.

²⁷ Ibid., 795.

you do not have slaves, but you yourselves are slaves. You pay for their liberty with your own.”²⁸

Thus men that were once equal in freedom become equal in slavery, forming “a class that is the dissolution of all classes, a sphere of society having a universal character because of its universal suffering and claiming no particular right because no particular wrong but unqualified wrong is perpetrated on it.”²⁹ In “free” states “everything is used for the common utility.”³⁰ Furthermore, it is always “the surplus of private individuals that produces what is needed by the public.”³¹ However, in the new state the surplus created by the worker is appropriated by the owner, and this appropriation is nothing less than stealing from public coffers. This state of affairs results in a condition observed by Marx as “the condition of the rule of a definite class of society whose social power, deriving from its property, has its *practical*-idealistic expression in the form of the state.”³²

Paradise Restored: From Inequality to Equality

Having followed the emergence and institutionalization of social inequality, in order to understand what equality we might restore, we must investigate two phenomena: 1) what is meant by inequality, i.e. the *nature of equality*, and 2) the transformation from a state of general inequality back to the *equality of nature*.

²⁸ Rousseau, "On the Social Contract," 511.

²⁹ Karl Marx, "Toward a Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction," in *Modern Political Thought : Readings from Machiavelli to Nietzsche*, ed. David Wootton (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Pub., 1996), 789.

³⁰ Rousseau, "On the Social Contract," 502.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Marx, "The German Ideology," 812.

The Nature of Equality

What is the nature of equality? Where Rousseau intuited the link between economic equality and political equality, Marx formalized it. Where for Rousseau it was implicit, for Marx it was to be made explicit. This does not mean that Rousseau was timid about his convictions regarding the link between economic inequality and political inequality. Political equality requires “a high degree of equality in ranks and fortunes, without which equality in rights and authority cannot subsist for long.... [This requires] little or no luxury, for luxury either is the effect of wealth or it makes wealth necessary. It simultaneously corrupts both the rich and the poor, the one by possession, the other by covetousness.”³³ Rousseau continues, “luxury is a remedy far worse than the evil it means to cure; or rather it is itself the worst of all evils in any state, however large or small it may be, and which, in order to feed the hordes of lackeys, and wretches it has produced, crushes and ruins the laborer and the citizen....”³⁴ Despite his recognition of “four types of inequality,” Rousseau admits that “wealth is the last to which they are ultimately reduced, because it readily serves to buy all the rest...”³⁵ As a result, the “words *strong* and *weak* are equivocal... because in the interval between the establishment of the right of property or of the first occupant and that of political governments, the meaning of these terms is better rendered by the words *poor* and *rich*....”³⁶ The state’s claim of political equality, Rousseau observes, is “only apparent and illusory. It serves merely to maintain the poor man in his misery and the rich man in his usurpation. In actuality, laws are always useful to those who have possessions and harmful to those who have nothing. Whence it follows that the social state is

³³ Rousseau, "On the Social Contract," 496.

³⁴ Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality among Men," 454.

³⁵ Ibid., 445-46.

³⁶ Ibid., 440.

advantageous to men only insofar as they all have something and none of them has too much.”³⁷ In this “Rousseau suggests, as Marx would half a century later, that the citizenship the rich offer the poor masks and reinforces the underlying inequalities of civil society, and that the institutions that transform possessions (*biens*) into property (*propriété*) institutionalize the poverty of the asset-poor.”³⁸

Marx’s critique of a merely “political” emancipation, echoes and extends Rousseau’s intuitions. “One must not be deceived about the scope of political emancipation,” says Marx, “the splitting of man into *public* and *private*....”³⁹ Marx astutely recognizes that “the political annulment of private property” – which seemingly abolishes inequality – “not only does not abolish it but even presupposes it. The state abolishes distinctions... when it declares them to be *non-political* distinctions.... Nevertheless the state permits private property, education, and occupation to *act* and manifest their *particular* nature... in their *own* ways. Far from overcoming the *factual* distinctions, the state exists only by presupposing them....”⁴⁰ Therefore, it is possible for the state to simply declare away *public* inequality, while preserving *private* inequality, by virtue of the fact that it had, moments earlier, defined and separated the two domains. For Marx, this is a false dichotomy, and “the limits of political emancipation are seen at once in the fact that the *state* can free itself from a limitation without man *actually* being free from it....”⁴¹

Because this is a false distinction, political emancipation is hollow without real human emancipation. Lambasting political reformers of his time who boldly announced

³⁷ Rousseau, "On the Social Contract," 474.

³⁸ Levine, *The General Will : Rousseau, Marx, Communism*, 53.

³⁹ Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," in *Modern Political Thought : Readings from Machiavelli to Nietzsche*, ed. David Wootton (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Pub., 1996), 770.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 768.

⁴¹ Ibid.

the new “rights of men,” Marx chides “none of the so-called rights of men goes beyond the *egoistic* man, the man withdrawn into himself, his private interest and his private choice, and separated from the community as a member of civil society”⁴² Participating in this illusion, “in the political community he [man] regards himself as a communal being; but in civil society he is active as private individual, treats other men as means, reduces himself to a means, and becomes the plaything of alien powers.”⁴³ The yoke revealed earlier may be concealed within the *private* sphere by virtue of its absence in the *public* sphere, but it is no less oppressive. As Rousseau has noted, along with private property came private wills.⁴⁴ This is why, for Marx, *real* equality can only be *human* equality, *including* political equality but not *limited* to it. Real *public*, political, equality can only stem from *private* equality. “Political emancipation is a reduction of man to a member of civil society, to an *egoistic independent* individual on the one hand and to a *citizen*, a moral person, on the other. Only when the actual individual man has taken back into himself the abstract citizen and in his everyday life, his individual work, and his individual relationships has become a *species-being*, only when he has recognized and organized his own powers as *social* powers, so that social force is no longer separated from him as *political* power, only then is human emancipation complete.”⁴⁵

The Equality of Nature

How then are we to restore the equality of nature, Rousseau’s Golden Age? The challenge, Rousseau asserts, is to ““find a form of association which defends and protects with all common forces the person and goods of each associate, and by means of which

⁴² Ibid., 775.

⁴³ Ibid., 769.

⁴⁴ Levine, *The General Will : Rousseau, Marx, Communism*, 58-59.

⁴⁵ Marx, "On the Jewish Question," 777-78.

each one, while united with all, nevertheless obeys only himself and remains as free as before.”⁴⁶ Marx, too, is clear: “In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.”⁴⁷ If the government of this association is, as Rousseau claims, “nothing but a commission, an employment in which the leaders, as simple officials of the sovereign, exercise in its own name the power with which it has entrusted them,”⁴⁸ then it becomes unclear in what historical sense such an association is properly called a “state.” Marx notes this ambiguity, and deftly refrains from resolving it, when he says “freedom consists in converting the state from an organ superimposed upon society into one completely subordinate to it, and even today forms of state are more free or less free to the extent that they restrict the ‘freedom of the state.’”⁴⁹

Drawing on Hegel, Marx has suggested, “Mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation.”⁵⁰ The crux of this is that any historical mode carries within it a germ that not only defines and propels its fundamental trajectory, but also *requires* and *provides the means for* its final resolution. According to the logic of historical materialism, inequality is created, defines the conflicts, and ultimately forces their resolution by negating itself. “The distinguishing feature of Communism is not the abolition of property generally, but the abolition of *bourgeois* property. But modern bourgeois private property is the final and most complete expression of the system of

⁴⁶ Rousseau "On the Social Contract" in David Wootton, *Modern Political Thought : Readings from Machiavelli to Nietzsche* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Pub., 1996), p. 470.

⁴⁷ Marx, "The Communist Manifesto," 829.

⁴⁸ Rousseau, "On the Social Contract," 490-91.

⁴⁹ Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Programme," 892.

⁵⁰ Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy: Preface," in *Modern Political Thought : Readings from Machiavelli to Nietzsche*, ed. David Wootton (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Pub., 1996), 863.

producing and appropriating products, that is based on class antagonism, on the exploitation of the many by the few.”⁵¹ Marx does not think we should replace the “exploitation of the many by the few” with the exploitation of the *few* by the *many*, and it is this distinction that marks the new transformation as *revolutionary* and not as merely the trading of one oppressor for another. The final solution, for Marx and Rousseau both, is predicated on an *act* of human virtue that subsequently *transforms* human virtue.

Marx quotes Book II of Rousseau’s “Social Contract” regarding the nature of such a transformation:

“Whoever dares to undertake the founding of a nation must feel himself capable of changing, so to speak, human nature and transforming each individual who is in himself a complete but isolated whole, into a part of something greater than himself from which he somehow derives his life and existence, substituting a limited and moral existence for physical and independent existence.”⁵²

Rousseau insists that a virtuous “more,” or “custom,” that is the foundation of good governance, “most important of all.... [is] in the hearts of citizens. It is the true constitution of the states....”⁵³ The conditions of good governance “could not subsist without virtue.”⁵⁴ Amidst economic inequality, “individuals must therefore be made virtuous in order to counter the mentality markets encourage; otherwise, there is no hope of mitigating their effects.”⁵⁵ Marx admits that “the alteration of men on a mass scale is required.”⁵⁶ But, in the end, if virtue wins the day “a people that would always govern

⁵¹ Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, 834.

⁵² Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” 777.

⁵³ Rousseau, “On the Social Contract,” 490.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 496.

⁵⁵ Levine, *The General Will : Rousseau, Marx, Communism*, 179.

⁵⁶ Marx, “The German Ideology,” 813.

well would not need to be governed.”⁵⁷ Rousseau, then, foreshadows Marx’s “withering away” of the state. Interestingly, Rousseau mentions only briefly how such a social transformation might happen. “The better a state is constituted, the more public business takes precedence over private business in the minds of the citizens. There even is far less private business, since, with the sum of common happiness providing a more considerable portion of each individual’s happiness, less remains for him to look for through private efforts.”⁵⁸ Still though, whereas Rousseau’s cry for equality is practical, Marx’s is moral, and so for Marx, to acquire virtue is to set aside virtue; to acquire power is to set aside power, to acquire rule is to set aside rule.

Ultimately, for Marx, the overthrow of the oppressive class makes class distinctions impossible, thereby abolishing all classes in a single annihilation. Because “the communist revolution is directed against the preceding *mode* of activity, [it] does away with *labor*, and abolishes the rule of all classes along with the classes themselves....”⁵⁹ By this act, “emancipation is *restoration* of the human world and the relationships of *men themselves*.”⁶⁰ Just as the knight Parsifal’s *spontaneous act of compassion* in the Castle Grail *heals* the wounded Fisher King, and in so doing *restores* the land’s health as well, so too we see, from the “origins of inequality” to the final revolution, that the wound *inflicted* in the first transformation is *healed* in the last. No other outcome is conscionable.

⁵⁷ Rousseau, "On the Social Contract," 496.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 510.

⁵⁹ Marx, "The German Ideology," 812-13.

⁶⁰ Marx, "On the Jewish Question," 777.

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