

Rousseau on Leadership: Guiding the Wills of Men

*"Oh ye people who are free, remember this maxim: Liberty may be acquired, but
never recovered."*

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Cries for liberty began to swell during the last half of the eighteenth century in Western society. And, the sparks of revolution were not limited to England and the colonies of the New World. In France, Voltaire's literary attack against the ecclesiastical authority of the church had set the stage for political discontent. Inspired by these writings, Jean-Jacques Rousseau had lashed out against the French aristocracy, those who "gorge themselves with superfluities while the starving multitude are in want of the bare necessities of life." Thus, as we move across the channel toward the Continent in our attempt to gain a more complete understanding of the leadership dyad, we discover a landscape filled with turmoil. We find ideas that would provide new meaning to the terms *Liberté*, *Egalité*, and *Fraternité*. In brief, we enter the world of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and whether it be in his *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, *Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality among Men*, *Discourse on Political Economy*, *Emile*, or *The Social Contract*, we find a mind filled with the relentless passion of revolt against privilege.

Moreover, we find writings renouncing philosophies that give primacy to reason, for unlike Locke or Hobbes and the rationalists who emerged from the Age of Enlightenment, Rousseau scoffed at those who taught that reason could bring understanding regarding the nature of man. Instead, he searched within man's soul, within his feelings, his desires, his instincts. Reason, he believed, had stifled humankind. It had reduced men to mere mechanistic organisms con-

trolled by the forces of natural law. It had legitimized one man's dominance over another. It had justified inequality, providing abundance for the elite and famine for the poor. For Rousseau, not only had reason placed man in bondage, it had transformed him into a *depraved animal*.

Thus, imbedded within Rousseau's teachings are the seeds of Romanticism. As a Platonist, he argued against the rationalists. One's mind *is not* a blank slate at birth, a *tabula rasa*, to be informed by experiences acquired through the senses. Rejecting the primacy of reason, he focused on the supremacy of man's instincts and passions. If we wish to discover truth, Rousseau taught, we should not look outward with syllogistic analysis. Instead, we must look inward to the nature of our souls, for it is there that we find truth. Within our souls resides the will of God.

It is within this context, then, that Rousseau explored concepts related to the leadership dyad. Book I, Chapter I, of *The Social Contract* begins as follows:

Man is born free, and yet we see him everywhere in chains. Those who believe themselves the masters of others cease not to be even greater slaves than the people they govern. How this happens I am ignorant; but, if I am asked what renders it justifiable, I believe it may be in my power to resolve the question.

If I were only to consider force, and the effects of it, I should say, 'When a people is constrained to obey, and does obey, it does well; but as soon as it can throw off its yoke, and does throw it off, it does better: for a people may certainly use, for the recovery of their liberty, the same right that was employed to deprive them of it: it was either justifiably recovered, or unjustifiably torn from them.' But the social order is a sacred right which serves for the basis of all others. Yet this right comes not from nature; it is therefore founded on conventions.¹

In summary, Rousseau maintained that although man is born free, he finds himself subject to the will of others. And whereas Hobbes and Locke and many of their Greek predecessors had proposed a proper social order rooted in reason and the laws of nature, Rousseau held that social order is not *natural* at all. It is a mere convention of society. It is simply an agreement among men. Thus, if we want to understand humankind, he argued, we must understand its history. It is convention, not nature, that gives rise to the leadership dyad.

First, he explained, the *natural* family cannot be the basis of civil society, for once a child reaches maturity, he is exempt from obedience to the will of his parents:

The earliest and the only natural societies are families: yet the children remain attached to the father no longer than they have need for his protection. As soon as that need ceases, the bond of nature is dissolved. The child, exempt from the obedience he owed the father, and the father, from the duties owed the child, return equally to independence. If they continue to remain together, it is not in consequence of a natural, but a voluntary union; and the family itself is maintained only by a convention.²

Second, he argued, force cannot be the natural foundation of society, for obedience is due only to legitimate powers. *Might making right* can never be considered a legitimate basis for authority:

If it is necessary to obey by force, there can be no occasion to obey from duty; and when force is no more, all obligation ceases with it. We see, therefore, that this word 'right' adds nothing to force, but is indeed an unmeaning term.

We must grant, therefore, that force does not constitute right, and that obedience is only due to legitimate powers.³

Thus, he rejected Aristotle's notion that some men are born to rule while others are born to be slaves, teaching that at birth all men are free. Aristotle, Rousseau believed, had mistakenly identified the effect of slavery as its cause. "If there are some who are slaves by nature, the reason is that men were made slaves against nature," he writes. "Force made the first slaves, and slavery, by degrading and corrupting its victims, perpetuated their bondage."⁴

One can, of course, sell oneself for subsistence. We cannot, however, legitimately renounce our liberty:

To say that a man gives himself gratuitously is absurd and incomprehensible; such an act is unjustifiable and void, because the person who performed it is not in his proper senses. To say the same of a whole people is to suppose the people are all mad; and folly does not make it right.

To renounce our liberty is to renounce our quality of man, and with it all the rights and duties of humanity. No adequate compensation can possibly be made for a sacrifice so complete. Such a renunciation is incompatible with the nature of man; whose actions, when once he is deprived of his free will, must be destitute of all morality. Finally, a convention which stipulates absolute authority on one side, and unlimited obedience on the other, must be considered as vain and contradictory.⁵

In our primitive state of nature, Rousseau explains, there was no leadership dyad. No person had the right to exact obedience from another. All lived in a state of goodness as they followed their pas-

sions and instincts, and what few needs they had were quickly and fully satisfied. Nevertheless, since not all were born with equal capacities, some were at a disadvantage regarding the acquisition of the necessities of life. Consequently, humans formed social contracts to protect their lives as well as their possessions, and it is these contracts that placed them in bondage. Rather than assure people of their freedoms, however, they bound them in chains. Carefully concocted by those claiming supernatural authority based on natural law, these social contracts allowed some to gain advantage over others. Thus, it is not nature that causes injustices among men. Rather it is society. It is convention that limits our liberties.

Certainly, Rousseau agreed that humans could not have survived in their primitive state, for the strength of individuals would not have been sufficient to overcome the obstacles of self-preservation. "This primitive state can therefore subsist no longer"; he states, "and the human race would perish unless it changed its manner of life."⁶ Yet, the contract Rousseau proposed was quite different from that of Hobbes or Locke. It was not based on fear or fraud or deficiencies within nature. Rather, his social contract was based upon the sanctity of the *general will* of the community. It was based on the forfeiture of *individual* liberties in exchange for *civil* liberties. He explains,

The articles of the social contract will, when clearly understood, be found reducible to this single point: the total alienation of each associate, and all his rights, to the whole community; for, in the first place, as every individual gives himself up entirely, the condition of every person is alike; and being so, it would not be to the interest of any one to render that condition offensive to others.

Nay, more than this, the alienation being made without any reserve, the union is as complete as it can be, and no associate has any further claim to anything: for if any individual retained rights not enjoyed in general by all, as there would be no common superior to decide between him and the public, each person being in some points his own judge, would soon pretend to be so in everything; and thus would the state of nature be continued and the association necessarily become tyrannical or be annihilated.

If, therefore, we exclude from the social compact all that is not essential, we shall find it reduced to the following terms:

*Each of us places in common his person and all his power under the supreme direction of the general will; and as one body we all receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole.*⁷

Indeed, Rousseau recognized the many implications of such a trade-off. Certainly, we lose our *natural* liberties. We are no longer free to do as we please as we follow the instincts of our nature. Nevertheless, in exchange for our *individual* liberties, we gain our *civil* liberties as we become an indivisible part of the entire community. Moreover, by accepting the justice of the *general will*, we gain a *moral* liberty that we lacked in the primitive state of nature. By *choosing* to submit our private wills to the *general will*, we are no longer subject to the primitive passions of our instincts. In brief, by relinquishing our freedom, we force ourselves to become free.

Under Rousseau's social contract, not only does one relinquish his private will to the *general will* of the community, he also foregoes his individual rights to property. Ownership, he taught, should be allocated by the *general will* of the people, for no person, he believed, should ever be wealthy enough to buy another, nor should one be so poor that he would be forced to sell himself. Thus, within his community "the right which each individual has over his own property is always subordinate to the right which the community has over all; without which there would be no solidity in the social bond, nor any real force in the exercise of sovereignty."⁸

In this manner, Rousseau believed that all citizens would be assured both liberty and equality. At the conclusion of Book I of *The Social Contract*, he explains as follows:

I shall conclude this chapter and book with a remark which must serve for the basis of the whole social system: it is that, instead of destroying the natural equality of mankind, the fundamental compact substitutes, on the contrary, a moral and legal equality for that physical inequality which nature placed among men, and that, let men be ever so unequal in strength or in genius, they are all equalized by convention and legal right.⁹

According to Rousseau, the underlying foundation of this *legal right* resides in the *general will*. It cannot err, for it has no self-interest against any individual citizen. It is indivisible. Since it seeks to promote the common safety and well being of all citizens, it becomes the absolute measure of justice. Thus, one could always test the validity of his often self-serving private will by comparing it to the *general will*. If a discrepancy exists, the private will is in error.

The *general will*, however, should not be confused with the *will of all*. Such is an important distinction. They are not the same, for the *will of all* is only a sum of private wills, and, as such, it often contains greed and selfishness. Thus, the *will of all* might not always

reveal the truths of the *general will*. The *general will*, however, is an abstract entity that pre-exists the *will of all*. It is concerned only with the common good; it is not influenced by individual interests. Within the *general will* lies the will of God.

Who, then, should lead? Does any person have a right to exact obedience from another? On the surface it would appear that under this social contract there would be no leaders. Following the directives of the *general will* toward the common good, the people would lead themselves. Yet, Rousseau's answers to these questions are far more complex than they might appear, for although he believed in the liberty and equality among humankind, he also held that some have more ability than others to decipher the truths of the *general will*.

First, he explains, *goodness* exists independently of human existence, i.e., all *justice* flows from God. It is universal. It applies to all. And, according to Rousseau, it is through the *general will* of the people that God's justice is revealed. Since it is determined by all people for all people, it cannot be advantageous to some and detrimental to others. Consequently, it is through this *general will* that laws are derived to direct God's justice toward its proper end. Thus, in this rather Utopian understanding of the nature of law, there are no leaders. All follow the *general will* of the people.

But Rousseau was not a Utopian. Although egalitarian in his compassion for the masses, he feared that their decisions might lack wisdom and understanding. Thus, even though he taught that the *general will* is always right, he also held that the judgment that guides it is not always enlightened. Leaders would be needed to help the masses understand God's justice. Rousseau explains,

How can an unenlightened multitude, which often does not know what it wants, since it so seldom knows what is good for it, execute, of itself, so great, so difficult an enterprise as a system of legislation? Of themselves the people always will the good, but of themselves they do not always see in what it consists. The general will is always right, but the judgment that guides it is not always enlightened. It is therefore necessary to make the people see things as they are, and sometimes as they ought to appear, to point out to them the right path which they are seeking, to guard them from the seducing voice of private wills, and, helping them to see how times and places are connected, to induce them to balance the attraction of immediate and sensible advantage against the apprehension of unknown and distant evil. Individuals see the good they reject; the public wills the good it does not see. All have equally need for guidance. Some must have their wills made conformable to their reason, and others must be taught what it is they will. . . . From thence is born the necessity of a legislator.¹⁰

Who should lead? The people? Ultimately, yes, for it is they who participate in the *general will*. Since, however, the masses are incapable of knowing the common good, they *must have their wills made conformable* to the wills of the enlightened few.

Rousseau is rather vague, however, as to who these leaders, these enlightened few, might be. First, he proposes that as servants of the people, legislators might be elected by the people. Later, he suggests that since all are equal, selection by lots might be more appropriate in a true democracy. Although he is not clear on this issue, he is quite precise as he discusses the qualities necessary to be a legislator: "if it be true that a great prince is a rare man, how much more rare must be a good legislator?" He continues,

Those who dare to undertake the institution of a people must feel themselves capable, as it were, of changing human nature, of transforming each individual, who by himself is a perfect and solitary whole, into a part of a much greater whole, from which he in some measure receives his being and his life; of altering the constitution of man for the purpose of strengthening it; of substituting a moral and partial existence instead of the physical and independent existence which we have all received from nature.¹¹

In addition, Rousseau suggested that leaders must often point to supernatural authority as the source of their inspiration and wisdom if they are to be successful in their attempt to guide the wills of the masses. In brief, those who wish to influence the wills of others must claim that God has sanctioned their judgment:

It is this that has, in all ages, obliged the founders of nations to have recourse to the intervention of Heaven and to attribute to the gods what has proceeded from their own wisdom, that the people might submit to the laws of the State as to those of nature and, recognizing that the same power which formed man created the city, obey freely, and contentedly endure that restraint so necessary to public happiness.

This sublime reason, so far above the comprehension of vulgar men, is that whose decisions legislators put in the mouth of the immortals, that those might be led along under the sanction of divine authority, whom it might be impossible for human prudence to conduct without it.¹²

In many ways Rousseau's legislators resemble Plato's philosopher-kings. Only they know the ultimate good. Their role is to guide those less capable than themselves toward justice. Yet, whereas Plato proposed that such a hierarchy existed as a part of the natural order, Rousseau maintained an insistence on equality. Even though the leader might be superior in ability and understanding, he ultimately, like his followers, remains subject to the *general will*.

Consequently, the leader's task is to convince the follower that his ideas are their ideas, that his will is their will. In his book, *Rousseau's Social Contract*, Lester Crocker explains as follows,

One function of the guide, or Legislator, is, then, to tell the people what they ought to think and what they want. It is he who makes the people 'sufficiently informed.' The 'educational' role of the State begins with the Legislator, and the purpose of 'education' is to prepare consent ('docility') and 'liberty' by changing wills. That the people should will consent ('of their own desire') is necessary; . . . The role of the guide is to see to it that the citizens make their own decisions as they should; that while they do as they wish, they wish what they *should* wish. . . . Rousseau is the inventor of what is now euphemistically called 'guided democracy'¹³

The successful leader, then, is one who can persuade others to align their wills to his. In this manner, the unity of the organization remains intact.

This is especially true as the *general will* relates to law and public opinion. In his discussion regarding legal relationships within the community, Rousseau explains as follows:

To these three sorts of laws there must be united a fourth, which is the most important of all, and is not inscribed on brass or marble, but in the hearts of the citizens. This makes the true constitution of the State; its powers increase by time; and when all other laws become feeble or even extinct, this reanimates them or supplies their place. This preserves among a people the true spirit of their institution, and substitutes insensibly the force of habit for that of authority. I speak of manners and morals, customs, and more than all, of opinions; these are means unknown to our political thinkers, but on which the success of everything else depends. To them the great legislator directs his *secret* (italics added) care, though he appears to confine his attention to particular laws, which are only the curve of the arch, while manners and morals, slower to form, will become at last the immovable key-stone.¹⁴

Consequently, not only must the leader influence the opinions of the followers, he must do so surreptitiously. They must not know that he is *guiding* them. The illusion of the *private will* must be maintained, for without it, the follower's belief in his individual freedom would be destroyed.

Returning to Rousseau's answers to our questions regarding the leadership dyad, while on the surface it appears that leaders and followers are somewhat equal, in actuality they are not. Certainly, his thought demonstrates an intense passion for the rights of all people. He abhorred privilege. He sought freedom for all. Yet, in his attempt to provide liberty, he subjugates individual wills to the surreptitious control of the leader. As a result, the *general will* often becomes little more than the will of the most persuasive, the most

cunning, and the most devious. Thus, in his attempt to elevate man from *natural liberty* to *civil liberty* to *moral liberty*, Rousseau managed to relegate him to the manipulation of a privileged few. Lester Crocker describes this relationship as follows:

Men, unless they are remade and under continuous control, cannot be trusted to distinguish between good and evil, or not to prefer the personally useful to the socially harmful. Judgment and decision therefore belong to an elite of leaders. The people, unable to think or will correctly, are called on to obey and to believe. Because Rousseau has no confidence either in their reason or in their impulses, his whole thinking points to a system of hidden control by a few Wolmarian leaders under the guise of self-government and liberty.¹⁵

From this perspective, then, leaders are those who can persuade others to share with them their understanding of the common good, and while Rousseau taught that leaders serve only at the pleasure of the followers, their right to lead is ultimately based on their ability to maintain a hidden control. It is based on their ability to perpetuate an illusion of liberty and equality among men.

Although Rousseau's teachings are vague as to who among the people should lead, women would not be included among his legislators. Instead, as he delineates his education programs, he proposes that women should be treated differently than men: they should be taught to serve men and make them happy. As Professor S. E. Frost, Jr. explains, "While the boy should be free to develop according to his own inner nature, the girl should be molded to fit the pattern demanded by the man."¹⁶ For Rousseau, however, such a pattern is not a matter of innate inferiority. Instead, it is because obedience is what society has taught her. It is convention, not *nature*, that has defined her proper role.

Such are a few of Rousseau's contributions toward our understanding of leadership. Indeed, they are complex. As a result, one might find his ideas as supportive for a number of seemingly contradictory leadership theories in Western culture. If, for example, we focus on his supposition that man, by nature, is basically good and that it is society that brings evil into his life, we can conclude that many of the behavioral scientists of the twentieth century would take solace in the teachings of Rousseau. Leaders who pay heed to motivational theories that confirm the importance of the human dimension within organizations are philosophically in harmony with his teachings.

Similarly, leaders who advocate egalitarianism within the social order share the philosophical beliefs of Rousseau, for in many ways, he laid the political foundation for the socialist democracies of Western Europe. In fact, many argue that his teachings were the seeds that would germinate into communism nearly 100 years later. In any event, leaders who share his belief that privilege and inequality must be eradicated within our societies and organizations will recognize their philosophical underpinnings in the works of Rousseau.

On the contrary, one might reasonably argue that the political philosophy of Rousseau has served to buttress totalitarian leadership in Western society, for such an autocratic leadership style is based on control. It is nurtured by surreptitious double-talk. It flourishes when leaders believe that only they have the ability to discern what is good, what is true. It thrives when the elite, whether liberal or conservative in their ideologies, are convinced that it is their task to mold the wills of the less informed masses to conform with their own. Obey and believe. Mind control. Human engineering. Conformity. Behavior modification. Whether found in the political arena, religious sanctuaries, or the corporate board room, all are concepts embedded in the philosophy of Rousseau.

Moreover, to a great extent environmentalists and communitarians, those who seek to distinguish between what is *rightly mine* and what is *rightly ours*, often share Rousseau's belief that the private wills of individuals lead to the disruption of the social order. They share his proposition that if greed and self-serving interest were allowed to rule, then the concept of *rightly ours* would hold little sway within our communities.

More important to our understanding of leadership, however, is Rousseau's proposition that human nature is transformed by history. Prior to the eighteenth century, man had viewed his nature as being constant and consistent. It would never change. Rousseau was among the first to argue that history influences the nature of humankind. It is continuously changing. Although we maintain certain primeval characteristics, he taught, it is the conventions of society that influence most heavily what we are and what we will become. And it is this proposition that is most important, for as Jean-Jacque Rousseau altered our understanding of the nature of humankind, so, too, did he alter our perspective regarding of the leadership dyad in Western culture.

Notes

1. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1947), 5.
2. Ibid., 6.
3. Ibid., 8-9.
4. Ibid., 7.
5. Ibid., 10.
6. Ibid., 14.
7. Ibid., 15.
8. Ibid., 21-22.
9. Ibid., 22.
10. Ibid., 35.
11. Ibid., 36.
12. Ibid., 38.
13. Lester G. Crocker, *Rousseau's Social Contract* (Cleveland, OH: Case Western University Press, 1968), 74.
14. Rousseau, 49.
15. Crocker, 87.
16. S. E. Frost, Jr., *Basic Teachings of the Great Philosophers* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1962), 221.