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Jean-Jacques Rousseau II

Lead: Accepted as a part of the brilliant literary and cultural society of Paris in the mid-1700s, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, however, never felt quite at home.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: His early youth, spent in one of Geneva's upper class families, was disrupted by his mother's death and father's exile. The resulting social come down gave Rousseau a life-long sense of insecurity and hunger for approval from the wealthy and well-connected. After his 1742 arrival in

Paris Rousseau gravitated to the leading intellectual figures of the city cultivating a friendship with many such as the Encyclopedist, Denis Diderot. He soon, however, broke with them over the question of progress. In *A Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, begun in late 1753, Rousseau describes primitive man in his idyllic state, basically good in the moral sense, free of the cumbersome burdens of modern society - culture, government, education, even family - here truly was uncorrupted man, the noble savage.

Later, in 1762, in an elegant and reasoned explanation of political theory, *The Social Contract*, Rousseau

describes the means of returning to the uncorrupt state of freedom. John Locke and following him Thomas Jefferson believed that all men have certain natural rights that are independent from society This is the heart of liberal democracy. Rousseau rejected this. His ideal society was one in which people gave up their individual rights to the group which then governs according to the general will. Policy is reached by consensus. If anyone resists this general will, he or she must be compelled to yield, he said. “This means nothing less than that he will be forced to be free.” It is not surprising that some contemporary followers of Rousseau found in his writings justification for the brutal excesses of the French

Revolution. In fact, some critics have found in Rousseau, perhaps unfairly, the philosophy underlying the single-party predator states of the twentieth century, especially the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. After all, several years in Siberia usually lessens a person's resistance to the general will. Intended or not, ideas have consequences.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

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