

The Marxist Critique of Rousseau

In *State and Revolution*, Lenin quotes and then comments on a passage in Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Programme* as follows: "“Equal right” [of everyone to an equal product of labour] we certainly do have here [i.e. in the first phase of communism]; but it is still a “bourgeois right”, which, like every right, presupposes inequality. Every right is an application of an *equal* measure to *different* people who in fact are not alike, are not equal to one another;¹ that is why “equal right” is really a violation of equality and an injustice. In fact, every man, having performed as much social labour as another, receives an equal share of the social product . . . But people are not alike: one is strong, another is weak; one is married, another is not; one has more children, another has less, and so on. And the conclusion Marx draws is: “with an equal performance of labour, and hence an equal share in the social consumption fund, one will in fact receive more than another, one will be richer than another, and so on. To avoid all these defects, right instead of being equal would have to be unequal”.’

Lenin comments: 'The first phase of communism, therefore, cannot yet produce justice and equality: but the exploitation of man by man will have become impossible, because it will be impossible to seize the means of production . . . as private property. . . . The vulgar economists . . . constantly reproach the socialists with forgetting the inequality of people and with "dreaming" of eliminating this equality. Such a reproach, as we see, only proves the extreme ignorance of the bourgeois ideologists. Marx not only most scrupulously takes account of the inevitable inequality of men, but he also takes into account the fact that the mere conversion of the means of production into the common property of the whole of society (commonly called "socialism") does not remove the defects of distribution and the inequality of "*bourgeois right*".'²

But Rousseau had already posed the problem of the inequality of men in these terms in his *Discours sur l'origine et les fondemets de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1755): 'I conceive that there are two kinds of inequality in the human species; one, which I shall call *natural* or physical, because it is established by nature, and consists in a difference of age, health, bodily strength, and the qualities of the mind or of the soul [this is the inequality *of* men]: and another, which may be called moral or political inequality [or also the inequality *among* men], because it depends on a kind of convention, and is established, or at least authorized, by the consent of men. This latter consists of the different privileges which some men enjoy to the prejudice of others; such as that of being more rich, more honoured, more powerful, or even in a position to exact obedience . . . It follows from this survey [concludes Rousseau, at the end of the *Discourse*] that, as there is hardly any [moral or political] inequality in the state of nature ['a state which . . . perhaps never existed'], all the inequality which now prevails owes its strength and growth to the development of our faculties and the advance of the human mind, and becomes at last permanent and legitimate by the establishment of property and laws. Secondly, it follows that *moral inequality*, authorized by positive right alone, *clashes with natural right* [i.e. with reason], *whenever it is not proportionate to physical inequality* [i.e. *natural* inequality of abilities and merits: or inequalities of men]—a distinction which sufficiently determines what we ought to think of that species of inequality which prevails in all civilized countries; since it is plainly contrary to the law of nature [i.e. contrary to reason], . . . that children should command old men, fools wise men, and that the privileged few should gorge themselves with superfluities, while the starving multitude are in want of the basic necessities of life.'³

¹ Cf. also the following very interesting passage from the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*: 'Right by its very nature can consist only in the application of an equal standard; but unequal individuals (and they would not be different individuals if they were not unequal) are measurable only by an equal standard in so far as they are brought under an equal point of view, are taken from one *definite* side only, for instance, in the present case, are regarded *only as workers* and nothing more is seen in them, everything else being ignored' Marx-Engels: (*Selected Works*, Moscow 1962, Vol. II, p. 24).

² Lenin: *Selected Works*, Moscow, Vol. II, pp. 376–377.

³ J. J. Rousseau: *The Social Contract and Discourses*, Everyman edition, London 1955, p. 221.

Before we examine the ultimate implications of this famous conclusion of the *Discourse*, let us look at the Marxist solution to this difficulty, as expounded in the Marx-Lenin text (given the inequality of men, right must not be equal but unequal), a difficulty we can already define as one of an egalitarian-Rousseauist type. Lenin's text goes on: 'And so, in the first phase of communist society (usually called socialism) "bourgeois right" is not abolished in its entirety, but only in part, only in proportion to the economic revolution so far attained, i.e. only in respect of the means of production . . . However, it continues to exist as far as its other part is concerned; it continues to exist in the capacity of regulator (determining factor) in the distribution of products and the allotment of labour among the members of society. The socialist principle: "*He who does not work, neither shall he eat*" is already realized; the other socialist principle: "*An equal amount of [social] products for an equal amount of [social] labour*" is also already realized. But this is not yet communism, and it does not yet abolish "bourgeois right", which gives to *unequal individuals*, in return for unequal (really unequal) amounts of labour, *equal* amounts of products. This is a "*defect*", says Marx, but it is unavoidable in the first phase of communism; for . . . the abolition of capitalism does not immediately create the economic premises for such a change . . . Marx continues [and concludes]: "In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and therewith also the anti-thesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished; after labour has become not only a means of life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly—only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: *From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!*"'⁴ Engels' earlier conclusions in *Anti-Dühring* (Part III, II) are completely consistent with this: 'The possibility of securing for every member of society, by means of socialized production, an existence not only fully sufficient materially, and becoming day by day more full, but an existence guaranteeing to all the free development and exercise of their physical and mental faculties—this possibility is now for the first time here, but it *is* here'.⁵

Let us return to Rousseau to find out what was the original solution he gave to the difficulty of establishing a 'proportion' between the inequality *of* men and the inequality *among* men (i.e. the civil differences constituted and governed by society); a difficulty later reformulated, as we have seen, by Marx and Lenin as the necessity for an 'unequal right' precisely because of the unavoidable 'inequality of men', and resolved in a different way according to their scientific criterion of a communist society. Rousseau explains to us that 'riches, nobility or rank, power and personal merit [*the origin*], he says, [*of all the others*]' being the principal distinctions [or '*sorts of inequality*'] by which men form an estimate of each other in society . . . the harmony or conflict of these different forces [personal merit and '*other*' qualities] is the surest indica-

⁴ Lenin, op. cit., p. 378.

⁵ F. Engels: *Anti-Dühring*, Moscow 1959, pp. 389–390.

tion of the good or bad constitution of a State'.⁶ For in a State with a good constitution, 'the rank of citizens ought, therefore, to be regulated . . . according to the actual services ['in proportion to their *talents* and *abilities*'] done to the State'.⁷ This means that for Rousseau the solution to the problem of an effective universal equality requires the unlimited, universal application of the criterion of personal *merit* and circumstances, given that personal qualities are, as we have seen, the origin of all the others. In other words, it requires that equality be conditioned by the (social) recognition of the unequal or different capacities and possibilities of all men without exception. So this solution implies the creation of a new and democratic society (the antithesis of the Absolutist society of privileges), for it is quite clear that the recognition of every person on which the installation of an effective equality depends must be of a social nature. Not only because, as we have seen, it presupposes *in fact* the settlement of a question of 'rank' or civil status, but also and above all (*quaestio jurist!*) because '*distributive justice* would oppose this rigorous equality of the state of nature, even were it practicable in civil society'⁸. (Note, still in the *Discourse*, the strong protest against those who deform the real thought of Rousseau, the antinomastic* 'critic' of society: 'What, then, is to be done? Must societies be totally abolished? . . . This is a deduction in the manner of my adversaries, which I would as soon anticipate as let them have the shame of drawing').⁹ This produces Rousseau's final appeal to 'distributive justice'—a brilliant and modern appeal to this crucial Aristotelean ethico-political category, in order to oppose the superiority of *social equality*—based on the 'actual services' rendered society by its members, i.e. 'in proportion to' their different, 'unequal' 'talents and abilities'—to *natural equality*, the rigid equality of the mythical state of nature which, if we accept that it is 'practicable' in 'civil society', would, suggests Rousseau, be unjust and hence contradictory, given its anarchic indifference to persons, to their diversity and originality.

This series of texts by Mars, Lenin and Rousseau enables us to deduce the fact that the extreme attention Marxism-Leninism pays to the problem of society's proportionate economic recognition of the inequalities or differences between individuals and their abilities and necessities, expresses—on a new historical level—a continuity with and development of Rousseau's highly original anti-levelling egalitarian spirit. In other words, it would seem difficult to dispute the fact that—across the abyss dividing Rousseau's spiritualism and humanitarian natural-law moralism from the class-struggle criterion of historical materialism—it is Rousseau's crucial problem—that 'everything depends on not spoiling the natural man [i.e. the free *individual*] while appropriating him to society'¹⁰—which is formulated anew and resolved by the supreme scientific hypothesis of the definitive phase of communism, or

⁶ Rousseau: *The Social Contract*, op. cit., p. 216.

⁷ Ibid., p. 216, n. 1.

⁸ Ibid.

* Antonomasia: rhetorical figure which designates something indirectly by a characteristic aspect or function of it. Hence it has here the sense of 'paradigmatic critic of society'. (Trs. note).

⁹ Ibid., p. 228.

¹⁰ J. J. Rousseau: *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse*, Editions Garnier, Paris 1960, p. 599.

communist society strictly speaking (leaving aside for the moment the historical awareness Marxism-Leninism has had of its relations with Rousseau's egalitarianism).

Hence we can already conclude:

1. That scientific socialism with its materialist method of class struggle, solves this problem, which we can call the problem of an equality which is *universal* and yet *mediates persons*. This problem was discovered and posed by Rousseau, with his moralistic (humanitarian) method, in the egalitarian and anti-levelling democratic conception of the person: i.e. of the social recognition of the *merits* and abilities of all men without distinction;

2. That this final focus of interest on to the human person reveals the Christian heritage Rousseau transmitted to scientific socialism; the difference between the heir and the testator consisting, on the other hand, in the fact that the former entrusts the value of the person and his fate to history, to an institution such as a society sufficiently unified to prevent any centrifugal movement of parasitic individuals or classes exploiting men, whereas the latter, Rousseau, entrusted the person's value and fate to an extra-historic, theological investiture. He writes 'I tell you, on God's behalf, that it is the part [i.e. the human *individual*] which is greater than the whole [i.e. the human *race*]', Yet Rousseau could only give a partial, bourgeois solution to this problem of the universal and truly democratic recognition of the merits of the person; given precisely the fact that the *a priori sacrum* of the human person only justified an exacerbated, abstract individualism, and thus in consequence the impotent, semi-anarchistic society that is liberal bourgeois society.

Later Attitudes

Once this is established, it remains to examine the conscious attitude of the founders of scientific socialism to Rousseau and his doctrine.

I shall stress the following characteristic and significant moments of Marx's attitude:

1. To Hegel's conservative opinion that 'the sovereignty of the people is one of the confused notions based on the wild idea of the "people"', Marx retorted that the 'confused notions' and 'wild idea' were only to be found 'on Hegel's side' (*Zur Kritik, der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie*, 1843);¹¹ and in the same work, which is steeped in the typically Rousseau-like idea of the sovereignty of the people, those who are represented in the bourgeois State are defined by Marx as a 'people in miniature' (in so far as they are a 'class edition' of civil society).

2. However, in his *Jewish Question* 1844, Marx presents the famous passage from the *Social Contract* (II, 7), in which can be clearly seen Rousseau's attempt to integrate the natural, or abstractly independent man

¹¹ Marx-Engels: *Werke* Vol. I, p. 229.

into the social body, to transmute the whole-individual, or solitary natural individual into the part-individual who is the citizen or man in the civil state, in short the social man. 'He who dares to undertake the making of a people's institutions', says Rousseau, 'ought to feel himself capable, so to speak, of changing human nature, of transforming each individual, who is by himself a complete and solitary whole, into part of a greater whole from which he in a manner receives his life and being'¹². For Marx, this is only a 'correct' picture of the bourgeois 'abstraction, of the political man'.¹³ This explains the fact that, on discussing the political Rousseau at the beginning of the *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy* (1857), he only sees in Rousseau the adept of natural right, who 'brings subjects who are by nature independent into relation and liaison with a contract', which is quite simply an 'anticipation of bourgeois society'. Thus the *Social Contract* becomes one of the 18th century's *Robinsonades*, a critique of which is precisely the starting-point of the *Introduction*.¹⁴

3. In *Capital* (Vol. I, Part VIII, Ch. XXX), on the other hand, during his analysis of the expropriation of the 'many small independent producers' by the 'large manufactories', Marx openly uses the moralizing critique to be found in a passage from Rousseau's *Discours sur l'Economie politique*. As reproduced in Marx's quotation, this passage runs as follows: "I will permit you," says the capitalist, "to have the honour of serving me, on condition that you bestow on me the little you have left, in return for the pains I shall take to command you".¹⁵ However, it still remains true that this quotation from and homage to Rousseau on Marx's part are far from doing justice to the profound democratic (egalitarian) inspiration that, as we know, Marx received from Rousseau. Thanks to the correction Marx makes when he substitutes for 'the rich', a generic sociological term, the specifically materialist term 'the capitalist', the quotation is transformed in its substance into a new, socialist formulation. Nevertheless it still leaves unexplained the unmistakable touch of Rousseau's anti-levelling egalitarianism which was to be revealed in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, i.e. in the ultimate work of scientific socialism, whose masterpiece is *Capital*. Compare the critical substitution, in Marx and Engels' *German Ideology*, of 'a necessary combination', i.e. one within certain material 'conditions', for the 'arbitrary one, such as is expounded for example in the *Contrat Social*'.¹⁶ Yet even when its natural-right contractualism and abstract and anti-historical character have been liquidated, this still leaves unexplained the enormous influence the *Contract*, with its extremely original criteria of the 'sovereign will of the people', of the 'Sovereign', who 'can only be represented by himself', had had on Marx himself, as we have seen, and on the whole historical development of scientific socialism, from the Paris Commune of 1870 to the Soviet State (with its 'democratic centralism').

¹² Rousseau: *The Social Contract*, op. cit., p. 32.

¹³ Karl Marx: *Early Writings* trans. T. B. Bottomore, London 1963, p. 30.

¹⁴ Marx-Engels: *Werke* Vol. XIII, p. 615.

¹⁵ *Capital* Vol. I, Moscow 1961, p. 746, n. 1.

¹⁶ Marx-Engels: *The German Ideology*, London 1965, p. 92.

4. Finally, in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, near the beginning, Rousseau is cited as a typical example of the semi-utopian, semi-rhetorical social theorist. Intending to mock the inconsistency and superficiality of the Lassallean authors of the *Gotha Programme*, Marx writes, textually: 'According to the first proposition [of the *Programme*], labour was the source of all wealth and all culture; therefore no society is possible without labour. Now we learn, conversely, that no "useful" labour is possible without society. One could just as well have said that only in society can useless and even socially harmful labour become a branch of 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 (*Kurz den ganzen Rousseau abschreiben können*)',¹⁷ It is obvious here that the Rousseau of the *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* (see for example: 'Thus it is that luxury, profligacy and slavery have been, in all ages, the scourge of the efforts of our pride to emerge from that happy state of ignorance . . .',¹⁸ etc) and of other similar texts, the *minor* rhetorical critic of society, has become for Marx, in the literary passion of his political polemic, no more nor less than *the whole of* Rousseau. Of course, Marx's contempt is all the more remarkable, and shall we say piquant, in that it appears in one of those of his works which, as we know, is most marked by the philosophical spirit of Rousseau, the *major* critic of political societies and their social inequalities and injustices. A curious contradiction, intimate and unconscious at the same time.

Engels' attitude to Rousseau is no less contradictory and puzzling than Marx's, even if it is more interesting and significant, given Engels' historical sensitivity to the complex problem of egalitarianism.

Engels' documents on this subject can be subdivided as follows, for reasons of convenience:

i) Judgements on the *Social Contract*, some of which occasionally hardly do justice to it, as for example, when Engels says that 'the Social Contract of Rousseau, came into being, and only could come into being, as a democratic bourgeois republic'¹⁹ or that Rousseau with his '*Social Contract* indirectly overcomes the constitutional Montesquieu' (Letter to Mehring, July 14th 1893)²⁰. Others occasionally lag well behind both truth and justice, as for example, when Engels indiscriminately includes the *Social Contract* in his condemnation of the abstract 'State based upon reason', and concludes, like Hegel, that the *Contract* 'found its realization in the Reign of Terror'.²¹

ii) A general judgement on the egalitarian notion, which is formally and theoretically correct. After having first posed that 'since the French bourgeoisie, from the great revolution on, brought civil equality to the forefront, the French proletariat has answered blow for

¹⁷ Marx-Engels: *Selected Works*, Vol. II, p. 19.

¹⁸ Rousseau: *The Social Contract*, op. cit., p. 129.

¹⁹ Marx-Engels: *Selected Works*, Vol. II, p. 117; Engels: *Anti-Dühring*, p. 29.

²⁰ Marx-Engels: *Selected Works*, Vol. II, p. 498.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

blow [*proletarische Konsequenzzieherei*] with the demand for social, economic equality', he concludes that 'the real content [*der wirkliche Inhalt*] of the proletarian demand for equality is the demand for the *abolition of classes*', and that 'any demand for equality which goes beyond that, of necessity passes into absurdity'²². Compare the *Preparatory Writings* to *Anti-Dühring*: 'The equality of the bourgeoisie (abolition of class *privileges*) is very different from that of the proletariat (abolition of the *classes themselves*)'.²³ But it is still a judgement which, if we integrate it with the role Engels himself attributes to the general scope of Rousseau's thought in the egalitarian movement, appears as one-sided and defective on the historical level. Despite the touches of pure Rousseau, of the *major*, egalitarian anti-levelling Rousseau in Engels' critique of Dühring's abstract egalitarianism—for example, 'what interests us is [Dühring's] admission that, as a result of the moral *inequality* between men, *equality* has vanished one more',²⁴ etc—all that Engels can find to say about the egalitarian Rousseau is one general sentence of recognition: that the idea of equality 'thanks to Rousseau played [an important] theoretical . . . role' (Ibid.)²⁵ If it is true that in the *Preparatory Writings*, but only in them, he adds that the 'bourgeois side' of egalitarianism was formulated 'in trenchant terms' and 'on behalf of all humanity' by Rousseau, it is no less true that he immediately goes on to say that 'as was the case with all demands of the bourgeoisie, so here too the proletariat cast a fateful shadow beside it and drew *its own conclusions* (Babeuf)'.²⁶ This amounts to saying that the only conclusions the proletarian revolutionary movement in fact drew from Rousseau's egalitarianism were the utopian-levelling egalitarian corollaries of Babeuf, of whom we only need remember, for example, the 'even and honest mediocrity': corollaries that can, of course, be compared, as derivatives, with certain passages from the *minor* Rousseau ('in respect of riches, no citizen shall ever be wealthy enough to buy another, and none poor enough to be forced to sell himself')²⁷. This may explain the limited, inaccurate and generalized opinion Engels later expressed in the *Preparatory Writings* (and which he prudently did not allow to survive anywhere else): that is, that the principle of equality (which Engels formulates as follows: 'that there must be no privileges',)²⁸ is 'essentially *negative*', and that 'because of *its lack of positive content*. . . it is just as suitable for proclamation by a great revolution, '89-'96, as for the later blockheads [*Flackköpfe*] engaged in manufacturing systems'.²⁹

iii) A specific judgement on the *Discours sur l'inégalité*—an apparently very generous judgement based on an attempt at a *logical* analysis of Rousseau's theory, i.e. on a few of the basic elements of the *Discours* (elements such as: 'For the poet it is gold and silver, but for the philosopher iron and corn, which have civilized *men* [human *individuals*] and

²² *Anti-Dühring*, pp. 147–148.

²³ Ibid., p. 474.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 140.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 142.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 472–473.

²⁷ Rousseau: *The Social Contract*, op. cit., p. 42.

²⁸ *Anti-Dühring*, p. 473.

²⁹ Ibid.

ruined the human *race*')³⁰ which concludes with dialectical considerations such as the following: 'Each new advance of civilization is at the same time a new advance of inequality . . . And so inequality once more changes into equality; not, however, into the former natural equality of speechless primitive men, but into the higher equality of social contract. The oppressors are opposed. It is the negation of the negation [*vide* Hegel]. Already in Rousseau, therefore, we find not only a line of thought which corresponds exactly to the one developed in Marx's *Capital* [sic!], but also, in details, a whole series of the same dialectical turns of speech [*dialektischen Wendungen*] as Marx used: processes which in their nature are antagonistic, contain a contradiction; transformation of one extreme into its opposite; and finally, as the kernel of the whole thing, the negation of the negation'. Here, thanks to Engels' dubious propensity to search everywhere for precedents for the historical-materialist dialectic, these considerations concede too much to Rousseau, ranging him alongside Marx in the method he followed. But, at the same time, they concede him *too little*, drowning Rousseau's specific anti-levelling egalitarianism in a sea of generalized and schematic antitheses and syntheses of inequality and equality (revealing the Hegelian residue present in Engels' own conception of the historical-materialist dialectic), thereby resembling Engels' previous, historically deficient judgement.

This is enough, I think, to prove what a confused and defective awareness the founders of scientific socialism had of their *historical debt* to Rousseau.

This debt can finally be summarized as follows. The egalitarian *proletarian consistency* Engels discusses was, contrary to what he believed, expressed in a *positive* theoretical content, by the concept or model of the abolition of classes in a society of free and equal (free because equal) men, comparable to the communist society advanced hypothetically in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, in *Anti-Dühring* and in *State and Revolution*. The premises of this concept are to be found in the propositions of the personally mediated and anti-levelling egalitarianism *par excellence* of the *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 199.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 192–193.