

Part 11: Book 3, Chapters 3-6

Book 3, Ch. 3: The Division of Governments

Definitions: Rousseau says the “kinds or forms of government” differ primarily by the number of supreme magistrates the Sovereign chooses to employ. Democracy means any system with more magistrates than non-magistrate citizens. Aristocracy any system with fewer magistrates than non-magistrate citizens. Monarchy, Rousseau claims may have one or up to a handful of supreme magistrates. He gives examples of the two kings of Sparta and a point in the Roman Empire when there were eight emperors at the same time, yet the Empire had not broken apart.

Definitions. Mostly harmless. But to have the most fundamental descriptor of government be based on something this wiggly seems like a bad idea.

Rousseau notes that various subdivisions within these three main types are also possible, with government dividing itself up in one of any variety of ways.

Almost as if those other divisions might have a fairly large effect...

Rousseau repeats that the best government has a “number of supreme magistrates” “in inverse ratio to the number of citizens.” Democracies for small states, aristocracies for mid-sized ones, and monarchies for big states. He points to his earlier deduction as evidence.

He’s said he’s immune to criticism for his stupid fuzzy math metaphors, but just remember that “in inverse ratio” implies that a State with 100k citizens needs 1/100kth of a single magistrate. Obviously his calculation contains a rather significant fudge factor, and as we all know, calculations with fudge factors are to be used tentatively and trusted not at all.

Book 3, Ch. 4: Democracy

Rousseau says it might seem that lawmakers are best positioned to understand how to execute laws, and therefore unity of the legislative and executive powers might also seem like a good idea. However, Rousseau contends, combining these two things “renders the government in certain respects inadequate, because things which should be distinguished are confounded.”

The attention of the body of the people should stay general and not get bogged down in particulars. “Nothing is more dangerous than the influence of private interests in public affairs.”

I would say that a greater danger would be the assumption by the government of unlimited power over the people, but what do I know?

“[T]he abuse of the laws by the government is a less evil than the corruption of the legislator, which is the inevitable sequel to a particular standpoint.”

By Rousseau’s framework, since the government is the total and unlimited creator of laws, it really can’t abuse them, can it? It’s free to change them at any time. Obviously in any real system the legislator will be a part of the government.

Democracy is a government for gods or angels, not men.

Rousseau is suggesting that gods and angels don't need to be dominated by a government in order to be good, and fair enough, but the other thing worth noting is that supreme and unlimited power is also something only suitable for gods or angels, and not men.

Impossible to keep the people continuously assembled.

The logistical problems of pure democracy are quite well-understood.

Rousseau stumbles onto the Iron Law of Oligarchy, sort of: “the less numerous sooner or later acquire the greatest authority, if only because they are in a position to expedite affairs.”

To be fair, this book predates David Ricardo and the spread of [the concept of comparative advantage](#), and Rousseau does say “if only because,” but it's funny that he hasn't incorporated this thought into any of his other chapters, when I've been forced to harp on in his stead.

The best shot at democracy is in a very small State, so small that everybody knows each other, and one with very little luxury. (Rousseau argues that luxury and riches corrupt the rich by possession and the poor by covetousness.)

Rousseau again pushing permanent subsistence farming as the way for mankind. Obviously this is devastating for anyone hoping for people to have better lives someday.

Plato made virtue the basis for his Republic, but Plato was inexact and obscure, “and did not see that, the sovereign authority being everywhere the same, the same principle should be found in every well-constituted State, in a greater or less degree, it is true, according to the form of the government.”

Rousseau calling Plato inexact and obscure is perhaps the funniest thing we're going to get in this whole book.

The succeeding sentence appears to be word salad. If “the same principle” means virtue, he just said, virtue should be present more or less, depending on things. It would be difficult to be more inexact and obscure than this.

Democracies commonly have civil wars and intestine agitations, and have a tendency to change form. Quotes Palatine of Poland: “I prefer liberty with danger to peace with slavery.”

The better question is whether or not democracies' civil wars and agitations are more or less justified. For Rousseau to quote Palatine of Poland is laughable, since Rousseau's framework has brought us nowhere so much as “peace with slavery:” a wretched populace completely dominated by an unlimited and all-powerful State, with not an iota of hope for wealth or comfort.

Book 3, Ch. 5: Aristocracy

Rousseau starts by noting the “two general wills” of an aristocracy: one “in relation to all the citizens, the other only for the members of the administration.” Government can have internal policies as it pleases, but must only speak to public in the name of the Sovereign.

Rousseau is failing his own terminology here. It would be a corporate versus a general will. Yet again he ignores the power of the corporate will and the inability to measure the general will. If the aristocracy was *not* speaking to the public in the name of the Sovereign, how would anyone know?

Aristocracy is the method of the first societies. Starting with rule by submission to age/wisdom/experience.

Naturalistic fallacy, and also not all elders demanded 100% adoption of all of their positions and opinions. Locke does a better job describing the differences between paternal and political powers.

Institutions create inequalities which change aristocracy from its natural state to elective aristocracy, where riches or power essentially buy membership in the aristocracy. If transfer of power is then made from parent to child, that makes hereditary aristocracy.

Definitions, but Rousseau's blame of nebulous "institutions" is a problem here.

These are the three types of aristocracy: natural, elective, and hereditary. Natural is "for simple peoples," hereditary is "worst of all governments," elective is best, and "is aristocracy properly so called."

More definitions.

In aristocracies, it's easier to assemble, discuss, and carry out the government's wishes. Rousseau points at "order and diligence" of "venerable senators."

Rousseau points, and [Hayek laughs](#).

"[I]t is the best and most natural arrangement that the wisest should govern the many, when it is assured that they will govern for its profit, and not for their own."

If only there were some way to guarantee this...

Watch out for scattering rulers and making each the master of a limited sphere.

Actually a plausible explanation for how a type of government might collapse! Finally!

Alternative form of pre-eminence for men other than riches.

It was Franz Oppenheimer who split up means into "economic" and "political." (See his book *The State*) The economic includes voluntary transactions, and is a possible, though difficult source to become wealthy. The political is what Rousseau is talking about, and is also a possible (and much easier) method to become wealthy, as well as to force one's beliefs onto others. Guess which one Rousseau is more in favor of.

Book 3, Ch. 6: Monarchy

Unitary government is most active, least plagued with internal conflicts. But it is also the most affected by individual wills.

Obvious.

Kings desire to be absolute, and the love of the people is too precarious a foundation. They naturally prefer a subjugated, weak people which will tolerate their wickedness.

Worth noting that Rousseau's framework *also* [aims at a completely helpless, subjugated people.](#)

Monarchy suits a large state, where class differences of a small nobility/court are not as destructive.

Ah, the “we can get away with it” principle.

Another major problem is that those who arise to positions of privilege in a monarchy are often “petty blunderers, petty swindlers, and petty intriguers.” Rousseau says such petty officials are rare in “republican government.”

Rousseau forgot to mention wheedlers.

Size of State should vary with ability of king, but this is impossible to maintain. A senate has more constant abilities and therefore suits a State of relatively consistent size well.

Rousseau is making a serious mistake here by using this metaphorical idea of “power” as some kind of fluid, like the old idea of caloric for heat flow. While there is an effect that a charismatic ruler can have in getting others to agree to obey him, this is still not a truly voluntary transaction, as the violence of the State typically lies behind it.

Working from a basis of “what the people agree upon” is a far better gauge of the workable size of a government. Then, that government needs to limit itself to those issues on which there is essentially common agreement. Anything else creates subjugated minorities that may at any time decide to fight back violently against the majority and/or the State apparatus.

The need for unbroken rule of a single person is another weakness of monarchy, and often leads to bad rulers. The ability of regents and the teaching of young princes both have horrible consistency.

Weaknesses loom over any strengths. Gotcha.

Inconsistency from generation to generation and the tendency of Regime N+1 to simply try to do the opposite of Regime N.

This isn't a fact of nature but more a scapegoat idea Rousseau is putting forth. As far as I can tell, this is actually rarely the case.

A “king by nature,” as described by Plato is so rare that it makes monarchy a bad gamble. Simply telling the people that bad kings are the wrath of God doesn't really solve the problem. Metaphor about doctor and patience.

And if it's hard to find kings by nature, how hard is it to find senators by nature? Wouldn't it make more sense to reduce the dependency of the populace upon these extremely shaky grounds?