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December, 2008

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# ROUSSEAU'S CONCEPT OF THE GENERAL WILL: MYTH OR A REALITY

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## Abstract

The major objective of this paper is to holistically examine Jean Jacques Rousseau's concept of General will. The thesis of the paper posits that the natural needs of man cannot be satisfied by society, but rather society increases misery.

## Introduction

General will, the all-powerful will of Jean Jacques Rousseau's Organic Society offered as solution to the dilemma of community found in the primitive state of nature, a time Rousseau believed that neither government nor society existed. People were rather simple, shy and innocent in this state of nature. Human's enjoyed solitude according to Rousseau because they lived apart from one another and were basically animalistic in the positive sense of the word. Thus, innocent and timid as a deer might be and such condition was not unpleasant.

Life was peaceful in the state of nature, but it was not "fulfilled". Hence Rousseau wrote "man is born free" and every where he is in chains" (Barker 1966:240). The concept of general will in the organic society was offered as a solution by Rousseau to the dilemma described above hence a new community was structured or designed so that their better unused could dominate by giving up their rights and powers to the group hence a new entity i.e the society would become an *organism* in which each individual contributed to the whole, by giving up their individual powers, people gain a new kind of equality and a new kind of power. They would achieve equality because they would all become full contributors to the group, and enhanced power would also accrue to the community, the sum greater than its individual parts. "Public person".

The public person would be directed by the general will, that the combination of the wills of each person in the society. As such, the general cord could do no wrong because it would create the right. It could not be bad because it would determine what was moral. It is against this background that this paper takes a holistic approach to the Rousseau's concept of General will and to examine whether it is myth or a reality.

The paper is in five parts, starting with introduction, second part is an overview of the general will concept. Its criticism is in part three while part four is the recommendations. Part five concludes the paper.

## An Over View of the General Will Concept

It is perhaps the most important idea in all his political writing.

The General Will is a summation of the goodwill of all the citizens of a state, when they are willing not in their own private interest but the general good. It is the voice of all for the good of all. He goes on to say that my will which wills the best interest of the state is my best will and is indeed more real than my will which wills my private interests. It is also the most just (Sidqwick, 1969).

The General Will is believed to be an attribute of the state itself. Every association, he thinks, which calls forth the public spirit of its members, also calls into being a "group mind" which is something other than and bigger than the sum of the minds of the individuals composing it. The General Will seems to be therefore, a group mind as well as being the compound of the best wills of all citizens willing the best interest of the state. It follows from this that the General Will must be

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*Multidisciplinary Journal of Empirical Research Volume 6 No 1 December, 2008.*

sovereign. Since it is my best will, my own real will. I ought always to want to obey it. Indeed it is the only authority that can legitimately coerce me to obey and it is only through obedience to the General Will can I find true freedom, following this, whoever refuses to obey the General Will shall be compelled to do so by the whole body. This means he will be forced to be free (Crocker, 1971).

The General Will though by definition can only deal with public matters, can alone be the judge of what constitutes public or private interest. Where there is conflict of loyalties, citizens must always obey the public or the state. The General Will must also be inalienable and indivisible. Hence it cannot be represented in parliamentary institutions. "As soon as a nation appoints representatives", he says, "it is no longer free, it no longer exists". The General Will cannot be delegated. Nothing less than all the people together can be trusted to will the General Will. As Rousseau expressed it, it is only "the voice of the people" that is the voice of God (Rousseau, 1974).

The General Will must be a will which is general in every sense and which is particular in none. It must take account of the will of every citizen since every citizen is an integral part of the group. That is to say, it must deal only with the generalities of legislation. It follows that the General Will as Rousseau insists cannot be an executive will. He makes a clear distinction between the government and the sovereign people. The people entrust their executive power to their agents, the government. The actual form of government is of secondary importance, and it is bound to vary according to particular circumstances and needs of particular people. So long as the General Will is sovereign, it does not matter if the government is a democracy, an aristocracy or a monarchy, whichever in the existing circumstances is most suitable will be the best (Udokang, 2004). It follows from the above reasoning that Rousseau can hardly regard democracy as the best form of government. Democracy, he says, is too perfect for men as they are: "it is contrary to the natural order that the majority should govern and the minority should be governed". Since men are too imperfect for kingship, kings have a habit of becoming tyrants. *Hereditary aristocracy* is in general, the worst and *elective aristocracy* the best. But what suits one will not suit another. Variety in the forms of government is therefore, natural so long as one thing is constant, the sovereignty of the General Will (Barry, 1982).

The General Will is infallible. This means a little more than that the General Will must always seek the General good. It is always right and tends to be of public advantage.

### **Criticism of the Concept of General Will**

It is inconsistent with Rousseau's egoism. Rousseau's doctrine is exceedingly confusing and is open to serious objection. If the nature of man is fundamentally egotistical and his classics exclusively hedonistic, it is impossible to account for the existence of man's altruistic emotion and sentiments in general and for his capacity for willing disinterestedly in particular. Yet the distinction between the General Will and the Will of all presupposes that man can, will disinterestedly, that human being can be actuated by motives other than that of personal or sectional advantage and disinterestedly desire the common good.

It is incompatible with the theory of social contract. The theory of social contract, if it means anything at all, means that men are bound to obey the government. It provides for the possibility of revolt if the limits of oppression are over-stepped by a sovereign (Barker, 1966). Now Rousseau tells us that the action of government may not reflect the General Will. The government may be dominated by a particular sectional interest, which represents an accidental harmony of selfish interest, in which case, it is not the General Will. Yet he tells us that it should always be obeyed. It seems to follow from this that a strict adherence to the doctrine of General Will move in practice entails frequent revolts against most governments.

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The General Will cannot be ascertained: here, Rousseau made a number of inconsistent statements. He says (I) that the General Will emerges as a result of the cancellation of the differences between different wills, which different sectional interests animate these different wills. That the General Will only emerges when each person votes not for what he personally wants but for what he thinks the common interest demands, i.e. for the course of action, which embodies the General Will. Now statement II is incompatible with I (Talmon, 1961). That a will must be the will of a person; if we pardon Rousseau for his inconsistencies and ask what he was about saying, the answer I think is that he means what the utilitarian meant, namely that the object of state action should be to promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people; that everybody has an equal interest in promoting this greatest happiness; that people do on occasion which to promote it; that when they do wish, their wishing and consequent willing manifest the General Will and that the General Will may therefore, be identified with the sum total of the wills of all people when they are all willing for the common good. That is for the greatest happiness of the greatest number (Baradat, 1979). This appears to be what he is advocating.

But if this is actually his doctrine, his statement of it seems exposed to two serious difficulties.

First, why will it be supposed, as he does, that it is possible to discover by voting what course of action embodies the General Will and what course of action promotes the greatest happiness of the greatest number? Secondly, It may be asked whether there is any sense at all in postulating a will, which is not the will of a person. Willing implies that there is a mind. His General Will is not the will of any single mind belonging to any single person. We can only therefore, make sense of the doctrine by supposing that society has a communal mind or that society has a personality of its own.

### Recommendation

The foregoing does not suggest that Rousseau laboured in vain. Important political truths still persist in Rousseau's doctrine of General Will.

The fact that the morally redemptive factor in society-the General Will is conceived as a will commits Rousseau to what may be called a dynamic conception of society. Prior to Rousseau, the view that society should actively improve itself by legislative activities on the part of government was virtually unknown. He is therefore, the first to explore the need for continual law making and revision in a community and he adds that the law must be such that the people want and such as will provide for the people's welfare (Gamble, 1981).

His doctrine embodied the truth that in any issue that presents itself for collective decision, there is a course of action, which is right for the community to follow if by the word, right, we mean what the utilitarian meant- the common welfare conceived in terms of the greatest happiness of the greatest number.

'Right action' so defined as in 2 above will not produce benefits for some sectional interests. It is likely that in so far as it is advocated at all it will tend to be advocated by those who have the interest of society at heart (Sabine and Thorson, 1983).

### Concluding Remarks

The picture of origin of the political state, we could see is different from that of Locke. The states so created, Rousseau asserts thus;

Bound new fetters on the poor, and gave new power to the rich, which irretrievably destroyed nature inequality, converted, cleaver usurpation into unalterable right, and, for the advantage of a few ambitious individuals subjected all mankind to perpetuator, slavery and wretchedness. (Barker, 1966:246).

He therefore, posits the concept of General Will which will restore individual freedom within the ambit of the will of all. This will enlarge the freedom of individual in the civil society that has emerged and the net result is that freedom would be an all-encompassing and overreaching social good. But;

The problem to find (a form) of association of which the whole common strength of the community will be enlisted for the protection of the person and property of each constituent member, in such a way that each, when united to his fellows, renders obedience to his own will and remain free as he was before. That is the basic problem of which the social contract provides the solution (Barker, 1966: 255).

This consist in;

*the complete alienation by each associate member of the community of all his rights. For, in the first place, since each has made surrender of himself without reservation, the resultant condition are the same for all, and, because they are the same for all, it is in the interests of none to make them onerous to his fellow (Barker, 1966; 256).*

Finally, the general will is a metaphysical entity that can not be located as the community. It is therefore, a meaningless concept. Moreover, the General Will could lead to a form of totalitarianism in the hands of a small group since it is a form of organic society which does not fellow for the flowering of individual freedom which Rousseau in actually hankering after (Berkei, 1977: 163).

The interpretation that is given to the General Will depends on how one perceives in totality the Rousseau Theory. If his theory is looked at closely there are flushes of individualism embedded in it; indeed Rousseau is a Lover of individual freedom, for he wants to preserve this even in society. He is also lover of direct democracy. But if another interpretation in given to his theory it becomes what Talmon has dubbed as "Totalitarian Democracy" (Talmon, 1961). The organic nature of his theory informs this conclusion.

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