Jean Jacques Rousseau: The Social Contract

Jean Jacques Rousseau, a French political philosopher, published *The Social Contract* in 1762, during the peak of the French Enlightenment.[1] Rousseau argued that no one person was entitled to have natural authority over others.[2] He continued his argument by suggesting that an agreement should be formed, in which all individuals give up their natural liberty in order to create a general will, which in turn would represent the sovereign state.[3] *The Social Contract* appeared several years prior to the French revolution; however it became one of the most influential texts during that period in France.¹ Rousseau’s work encouraged individual membership and participation within the state they belonged, thus supported the basic democratic ideals of the French revolution.³

Rousseau’s idea of *the Social Contract* was modeled from the political system of the ancient Greek polis. During the Enlightenment, Rousseau argued that the people controlling the state oppressed the bulk of the population, thus a reform in the political system had to occur. Within a small ancient Greek polis, individuals participated actively and directly in their state’s interactions. Based on this idea, Rousseau promoted the ancient Greek polis as he believed it was the best way to relieve tensions between individual natural rights and the desires of the general population.² In order to achieve the ancient Greek polis within a modern government, a social agreement, separate from the state, among the people themselves had to be created.³ Rousseau referred to the agreement among the people as *the Social Contract*.

Rousseau described *the Social Contract* as an understanding between all individuals. John Locke, an English political philosopher from a prior generation, agreed in the idea of a contract. However, he believed the contract should exist as an agreement between a ruler and the people. On the other hand, Rousseau argued that the contract should exist only between the people themselves. He argued that when all individuals, within one state, give up their natural liberty, their combined individual wills will form a General Will. The General Will will then act as the true absolute power, allowing the people of the state to openly participate in state affairs. Rousseau then concluded that the former government became secondary, as people in leadership roles were only considered delegates of the general population. As a result, the General Will would successfully ensure all individuals had a sense of membership within their state and participated openly within the state’s interactions.³


Palmer’s *A History of the Modern World* suggests that Rousseau became “the prophet of both democracy and nationalism” after publishing *the Social Contract*.³ His agreement among the people supported both these ideas as they influenced membership and participation from each individual in their own state’s affairs. When Rousseau wrote *the Social Contract*, Europe was in the midst of an evolution known as the Enlightenment. Several years later, his modern ideas of nationalism and democracy supported the basic ideals of which the French Revolution fought for. It was during this time period that Rousseau’s ideas were put into process.¹ Rousseau’s work was one of the many factors that led to the success of the French Revolution and arguably created the foundation of the modern democracy.
