

The Social Contract

- Date** ■ 1762
- Place** ■ Montmorency, France
- Type of Source** ■ Treatise on government (original in French)
- Author** ■ Jean-Jacques Rousseau
- Historical Context** ■ Rousseau was born in Geneva, in the Swiss Confederation. He felt that under Geneva's small city-state government freedom flourished. Rousseau is one of the later Enlightenment philosophers. His ideas on social contract were influenced by both Hobbes and Locke (read their works on the website). Rousseau's books were banned in France and Geneva. However, his ideas inspired both the American and French Revolutions.
- Internal Context** ■ *The Social Contract* is divided into four books. This excerpt is from Book III. Rousseau believed man was inherently good. Later in the book he advocates a popular collective sovereignty of all its people, under a great leader.

Chapter 4—Democracy

HE who makes the law knows better than any one else how it should be executed and interpreted. It seems then impossible to have a better constitution than that in which the executive and legislative powers are united; but this very fact renders the government in certain respects inadequate, because things which should be distinguished are confounded, and the prince and the **Sovereign**, being the same person, form, so to speak, no more than a government without government.

It is not good for him who makes the laws to execute them, or for the body of the people to turn its attention away from a general standpoint and devote it to particular objects. Nothing is more dangerous than the influence of private interests in public affairs, and the 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. In such a case, the **State** being altered in substance, all reformation becomes impossible. A people that would never misuse governmental powers would never misuse independence; a people that would always govern well would not need to be governed.

If we take the term in the strict sense, there never has been a real **democracy**, and there never will be. It is against the natural order for the many to govern and the few to be governed. It is unimaginable that the people should remain continually assembled to devote their time to public affairs, and it is clear that they cannot set up commissions for that purpose without the form of administration being changed.

In fact, I can confidently lay down as a principle that, when the functions of government are shared by several **tribunals**, the less numerous sooner or later acquire the greatest authority, if only because they are in a position to expedite affairs, and power thus naturally comes into their hands.

Sovereign

in this case, the group that makes the laws

State

government; not one of the 50 states in the United States

democracy

In this case, Rousseau is talking about a direct democracy, not a representative one.

tribunals

in this case, governing bodies or branches

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Besides, how many conditions that are difficult to unite does such a government presuppose! First, a very small state, where the people can readily be got together and where each citizen can with ease know all the rest; secondly, great **simplicity** of manners, to prevent business from multiplying and raising thorny problems; next, a large measure of equality in rank and fortune, without which equality of rights and authority cannot long subsist; lastly, little or no luxury — for luxury either comes of riches or makes them necessary; it corrupts at once rich and poor, the rich by possession and the poor by **covetousness**; it sells the country to softness and vanity, and takes away from the State all its citizens, to make them slaves one to another, and one and all to public opinion.

This is why a **famous writer** has made virtue the fundamental principle of Republics; for all these conditions could not exist without virtue. But, for want of the necessary distinctions, that great thinker was often inexact, and sometimes 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.

It may be added that there is no government so subject to civil wars and **intestine agitations** as democratic or **popular** government, because there is none which has so strong and continual a tendency to change to another form, or which demands more vigilance and courage for its maintenance as it is. Under such a constitution above all, the citizen should arm himself with strength and constancy, and say, every day of his life, what a virtuous **Count Palatine** said in the **Diet of Poland**: ***Malo periculosam libertatem quam quietum servitium.***

Were there a people of gods, their government would be democratic. So perfect a government is not for men.

simplicity
lack of pretense

covetousness
extreme desire to possess something

famous writer
Here he is referring to Montesquieu's views on republics in The Spirit of the Laws.

intestine agitations
Medical theory at that time talked about the agitation of food in the intestine. However, Rousseau may just have been referring to that anxious feeling in your stomach when you are worried about something.

popular
of the people

Count Palatine
The father of the King of Poland, Duke of Lorraine, the Palatine of Posen.

Diet of Poland
the highest legislative body in Poland, which also elected their king.

Malo periculosam libertatem quam quietum servitium
Latin for "I prefer liberty with danger to peace with slavery."

Source: Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, n.d., Translated by G.D.H.Cole, <<http://constitution.org/jjr/socon.htm>> (June 2, 2011).