

**ROUSSEAU'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO SOCIALISM**

by

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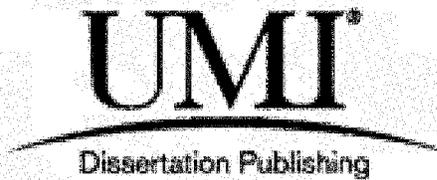
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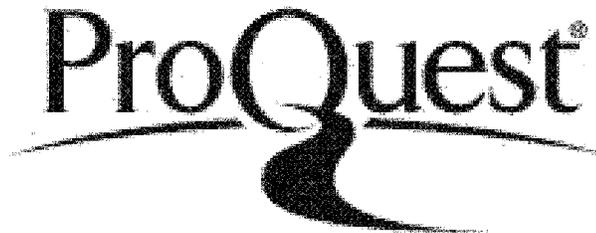


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## **Abstract**

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) is often overlooked as a founder of socialist thought. This thesis attempts to correct this oversight by defining central themes within socialism ostensibly using Robert Owen (1771-1858) and Karl Marx (1818-1883) as exemplars and then comparing their ideas to those of Rousseau. The themes that emerge from a review of Owen's and Marx's critiques are that capitalist society leads to personal and social alienation. A review of Rousseau's critiques of commercial society shows that he similarly argued that commercial society leads to personal and social alienation. In light of the similarities between Rousseau and two well known socialist thinkers, the thesis concludes that Rousseau was a proto-socialist and that his writings represent an important contribution to the development of socialist thought. However, the thesis also reviews some of the central differences among the three thinkers.

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## **Introduction**

In spite of the many improvements that have been achieved in society over the last few hundred years, many of the same problems that early socialists identified during their time persist today. Early socialist thinkers saw that commercial society could not produce happiness or lead to freedom for all members of society. They also saw that many members of society were excluded from the wealth that they had helped create and that most were excluded from political power. Lastly, they saw that many members of society were marginalized within their own communities due to their lack of economic, political and social status. These problems are still present in today's society. Homelessness and poverty, social exclusion and political apathy are evidence that members of society continue to be marginalized today. Moreover, though many improvements in the quality of life have been achieved, many people in today's society feel dissatisfied with their personal lives. Therefore, a re-examination of early socialist critiques may be useful in understanding these problems and may provide ways to help achieve personal fulfilment and social unity among today's citizens.

In this thesis I seek to understand socialism by looking into its theoretical foundations. I seek further to determine whether Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) was a proto-socialist. I refer to Rousseau as a proto-socialist because his writings pre-date the Industrial Revolution which is commonly known to be the time period wherein socialist ideas originated. Though not often recognized as a contributor to socialism, Rousseau's writings have made contributions to various other disciplines such as education, music, botany and anthropology. His writings

can add to the discussion on socialism because they offer powerful critiques of commercial society. Like many socialist thinkers, Rousseau saw the emergence of commercial society as the root cause of inequality and the ensuing loss of freedom for people throughout society.

To make a determination about Rousseau, in Chapter 1, I will first provide an overview of socialism by looking to the writings of two well-known socialist thinkers, Robert Owen (1771-1858) and Karl Marx (1818-1883). In Chapter 2, I will then examine Rousseau's political writings to understand fully his critiques of commercial society and its implications for members. Finally, in Chapter 3, I will compare and contrast the themes that emerge from the writings of Rousseau and the selected socialist thinkers to ascertain the appropriateness of applying the term proto-socialist to Rousseau to reach a greater understanding of socialism.

Throughout this thesis, I will consider two critiques that socialists have of commercial society: that it leads to personal alienation and social alienation. By personal alienation I mean individuals are disconnected from their inner sense of purpose. Their existence may be purpose driven in commercial society but that sense of purpose is externally imposed by the values and structure of society. As a result, individuals are living out their daily lives but their actions are foreign to how they think their lives should be. By social alienation I mean people are disconnected from one another and are also disconnected from their sense of collective social purpose. This sense of collective social purpose is the sense that people share about how they should live together and what they can accomplish together for the benefit of all. When members of society experience social alienation, not only are they disconnected from each other by economic, political and social divisions which

are characteristics of commercial society, but these various divisions prevent them from coming together to decide their social purpose then work towards meeting it. By considering these two critiques I aim to uncover the core problems socialists attribute to commercial society.

In Chapter 1, I will look at Owen's and Marx's arguments regarding how commercial society leads to personal alienation. Owen describes how commercial society's values interfere with the members' abilities to achieve happiness. For Marx, members of society experience personal alienation through their participation in the production process. Marx explains that as more goods are produced, workers lose their creativity and retain nothing for themselves. I will also look at Owen's and Marx's arguments concerning how economic, political and social divisions in commercial society lead to social alienation. Lastly I will explore how Owen and Marx propose to overcome both personal and social alienation.

I will use Chapter 1 to establish a framework for reviewing Rousseau's writings. By looking at the respective arguments by Owen and Marx, I will be able to look to Rousseau's writings and examine how commercial society contributes to personal alienation, how it contributes to social alienation and by what means each problem can be overcome.

In Chapter 2, I will follow the framework established in Chapter 1 and explore, in detail, Rousseau's critiques of commercial society. For Rousseau, people in commercial society experience personal alienation as a loss of their freedom. His concern is that as people become deeply involved in commercial society they become vulnerable to dependence and lose their self-reliance. I will also show how Rousseau traces social alienation to the establishment of commercial society. As

commercial society becomes established, Rousseau outlines how society first becomes divided by economic inequality, then political inequality and finally social inequality. To both problems of alienation, Rousseau offers solutions aimed at what he sees as the root causes. To overcome personal alienation and preserve freedom, Rousseau outlines the responsibilities people must be willing to embrace. To overcome social alienation, Rousseau recommends a series of political institutions aimed at fortifying members of society against forces that can arise as a result of living and working together. For the purposes of this thesis, I will rely on Rousseau's works, *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* (1750), *Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality Among Men (Discourse on Inequality)* (1755), *Discourse on Political Economy* (1755) and *On Social Contract* (1762) as principle sources of his critiques and solutions.<sup>1</sup>

In Chapter 3, I will compare Rousseau's arguments with Owen's and Marx's to make a determination about Rousseau's contributions to socialism. On their respective discussions of personal alienation, I will show emerging themes of personal happiness, sacrifice of the material self and loss of freedom that demonstrate Rousseau has similarities and differences of ideas with Owen and Marx. On their discussions of social alienation I will also show how Rousseau, Owen and Marx have similarities and differences in their views of economic, political and social inequality. I will also show how Rousseau, Owen and Marx share similarities

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Sciences and Arts," in *Rousseau The Discourses And Other Early Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men," in *Rousseau's Political Writings*, ed. Alan Ritter and Julia Conaway Bondanella, trans. Julia Conaway Bondanella (New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 1988). Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "On Social Contract," in *Rousseau's Political Writings*, ed. Alan Ritter and Julia Conaway Bondanella, trans. Julia Conaway Bondanella (New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 1988).

in their views on how to overcome alienation. In this chapter I will discuss some of the challenges presented in Rousseau's writings that may interfere with determining how his writings may contribute to an understanding of socialism. I will conclude this chapter by determining that Rousseau's writings on personal and social alienation did contribute to the development of socialism.

## **Chapter 1—Nineteenth-Century Socialist Thought**

### **1. Introduction**

What is socialism? Is it an economic system based on public ownership and equal distribution of wealth? Yes, but there is more to it than that. It prioritizes social unity over the private interests of individuals. Yet this is not to suggest that socialist thinkers are not concerned with what is best for individuals. On the contrary, socialists are concerned about the well-being of individuals but they recognize that individual well-being is linked critically to the well-being of the community. The socialist ideal is of a society unified by a communal spirit where members are pursuing the full expression of their unique talents and capabilities. It is a society characterized by fraternity and populated with members leading authentic lives.

Socialists are critical of commercial society because of its harmful effects on individuals and society. Once commercial society is established, socialists claim that people become alienated from themselves and from others as loss of freedom and inequality appear. They argue that commercial society leads to social breakdown by undermining the social bonds that exist between members of society and by preventing new ones from forming. Furthermore, they argue that commercial society does not provide the necessary conditions for members to realize their true purpose. In order to restore unity among the members of society, socialists argue that alienation must be overcome. To achieve the socialist ideal, members of society must be restored to their original wholeness and reunited with one another in community.

The purpose of this chapter is twofold. My primary goal is to develop an understanding of nineteenth-century socialism so as to determine in later chapters

the extent to which Jean-Jacques Rousseau's political writings contribute to this body of thought. As socialism is such a broad topic, a reasonable approach to gain an understanding of it is to focus the discussion to a specific timeframe in socialism's history and to discuss a central theme. Socialist thought is recognizable by its critiques of commercial society. Therefore, in order to develop a better understanding of socialism, I will examine two critiques; first that commercial society produces personal alienation, and second, that it produces social alienation. In order to examine Rousseau's contribution to the development of nineteenth-century socialist thought, in my discussion of social alienation, I will also explore divisions in commercial society by looking at economic, political and social inequality. In addition to their critiques, many socialists propose solutions to the problems they see arising out of commercial society. Thus this discussion of socialism will also include an exploration of some of the solutions prescribed by the critics of commercial society.

To develop a better understanding of socialism, I will review some works by recognized post-Rousseauian contributors to socialism and present their ideas in three sections. I have selected two socialist thinkers for this thesis well-known for their contributions to socialist thought. Robert Owen was an English industrialist who owned the mill town, New Lanark, Scotland. One of his works, *A New View of Society* (1813), describes not only the principles and actions he used to make his mill town a more humane community for the workers but also contains his critiques of commercial society and how it contributes to both personal and social alienation.<sup>2</sup> Major works by Karl Marx that contribute to this thesis include *Economic and*

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Owen, *A New View of Society or Essays on the Formation of Human Character Preparatory to the Development of a Plan for Gradually Ameliorating the Condition of Mankind*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London, Edinburgh & Glasgow, 1817).

*Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (1932) and *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848).<sup>3</sup> Marx presents in his works his developing thought including his conceptions of alienation and the relationship between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Owen's work presents views of British socialism while Marx's works present views developed in continental Europe. In addition, Owen's approach to societal change may be viewed as reformist whereas Marx's approach may be viewed as revolutionary. Taken together, Owen and Marx provide a succinct overview of nineteenth-century socialist thinking.

My secondary goal in this chapter is to develop the framework for comparing aspects of Rousseau's political writings. By outlining some of the arguments of two well-known post-Rousseauian theorists that commercial society leads to personal and social alienation, I will be able to compare Rousseau's own critiques of commercial society and demonstrate that he recognized the potential for personal and social alienation to arise out of the establishment of commercial society. Like socialist thinkers after him, Rousseau also made recommendations on how to change society so as to overcome personal and social alienation.

I will begin Section 2 by examining personal alienation and reviewing Owen's and Marx's critiques of commercial society. According to each of them, all members of commercial society experience personal alienation; it is not only the poor and wretched. For Owen, the wealthy also experience personal alienation; their drive for personal gain at all costs reflects their disconnection from their true human purpose.

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<sup>3</sup> Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1978). Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1978).

Marx's critical assessment of political economy discloses the process by which workers become alienated from their labour and themselves.

In Section 3, I will examine social alienation and I will continue to review the two theorists' critiques of commercial society. In this section I will review three forms of division identified in the works by both Owen and Marx to see how these divisions lead to social alienation in commercial society. In their critiques, both Owen and Marx perceive commercial society as divided by economic inequality. Owen describes the cleavage between the poor and the rich which is perpetuated by the promotion of individualism resulting in the loss of community, and Marx describes the burden of the proletariat as the exclusive suppliers of labour to the bourgeoisie. In addition, both writers observe the exclusion of the poor from sharing in the wealth they helped create. Marx also describes political inequality between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. He describes the proletariat's lack of political influence on the ruling bourgeois class and the bourgeoisie's lack of political, social and economic obligation to the proletarian class. Both theorists identify social inequalities amongst the members of commercial society in their works.

I will discuss some of the solutions to the problems identified by Owen and Marx in Section 4. Owen's approach is twofold. He seeks to implement a number of measures that will make working and living conditions more humane for the employees of his mill town. He also recommends a national program inspired by the progress he made at the community level. Marx identifies the solution to the problems of commercial society in the proletarian class and their self-liberation.

The use of the term "commercial society" rather than "capitalist" society requires an explanation before proceeding with this work. It is understood generally

that socialism emerged in response to the harsh social conditions evident during the nineteenth-century Industrial Revolution. Early socialists were critical of the enormous wealth created for the industrialists at the expense of the masses who endured extreme conditions of poverty while working in factories and mills.<sup>4</sup> As the economic system of the Industrial Revolution, capitalism accelerated the widespread growth of these conditions. As my goal is to examine Rousseau's contributions to socialism, it would be misleading to suggest that he was criticizing capitalist society or the conditions it engendered as were Owen or Marx; Rousseau predates the era. Instead he may be described as critiquing commercial society, the precursor to capitalist society.<sup>5</sup> Like his successors, Rousseau could see that problems would arise out of the social arrangements formed by commercial society. For the purposes of this thesis, Adam Smith's (1723-1790) definition provides a clear understanding of commercial society:

When the division of labour has been once thoroughly established, it is but a small part of man's wants which the produce of his own labour can supply. He supplies the far greater part of them by exchanging that surplus part of the produce of his own labour, which is over and above his own consumption, for such parts of the produce of other's men's labour as he has occasion for. Every man thus lives by exchanging, or becomes in some measure a merchant, and the society itself grows to be what is properly a commercial society.<sup>6</sup>

Smith's definition indicates that only through the division of labour would people be able to meet their daily needs and requirements. In other words, left to their own devices it is doubtful that individuals would be able to meet all of their material

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<sup>4</sup> For an overview of living and working conditions in Britain during the Industrial Revolution, see Norman Mackenzie, *Socialism: A Short History* (London: Hutchinson & Co. Ltd., 1966).

<sup>5</sup> Dennis C. Rasmussen, *The Problems and Promise of Commercial Society: Adam Smith's Response to Rousseau* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>6</sup> See also Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edwin Cannan (New York: The Modern Library, Random House Inc., 1937), 22. Dennis Rasmussen referred to Smith's definition in his work cited in the above footnote.

needs. Only by everyone pursuing specialized tasks would everyone's needs for survival be met. Smith's definition of commercial society is useful to this analysis because it illustrates the basic social interactions of individuals with one another through the exchange of goods and services based on the division of labour and mutual need, and it does not preclude any of the tenets fundamental to an understanding of capitalism. Smith's definition of commercial society provides a starting point for analysis of what socialists and Rousseau see as commercial society's weaknesses. Thus, commercial society as described by Smith is an adequate alternative to the term capitalist society.

## **2. Personal Alienation**

The opportunity for everyone to lead an authentic life is critical for many socialists. Too often this opportunity is not realized in commercial society because people are living lives of personal alienation. By authentic life, I mean one that includes the ability of humans to live lives that satisfy their own sense of purpose. In commercial society people may have purposes but they are imposed by the needs of society rather than generated from within individuals. As a result, these purposes do not have any meaning for individuals as they did not originate from them. One way of achieving an authentic life is through self-development. James Klugmann describing the goals of socialist society comments, "We envisage socialism as a society where ... individual men and women will find totally new possibilities to develop their capacities."<sup>7</sup> Many socialists are certain that commercial society fails to create the necessary conditions for members to achieve this goal. Rather than leading to an

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<sup>7</sup> James Klugmann, "Communists and Socialists," *The Marxist Quarterly* 3, no.3 (July 1956). <https://www.marxists.org/archive/klugmann/1956/07/x01.htm> (last viewed January 4, 2010).

authentic existence, they claim that commercial society instead destroys the possibility and leads to personal alienation. Individuals experiencing personal alienation carry out daily tasks and routines but in ways that do not fit with their own sense of purpose. In this way, individuals are disunited from their true self-creating selves and are no longer whole.

The idea of developing one's natural talents and abilities is often associated with liberal thought. John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) writes, "Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing."<sup>8</sup> For Mill, developing oneself is an exercise of choice often against the customs and traditions of society. Through this process individuals not only experience freedom but also enrich their lives and the lives of others. According to Mill, "In proportion to the development of his individuality, each person becomes more valuable to himself, and is therefore capable of being more valuable to others."<sup>9</sup> Reciprocal benefits for community members arise out of the process of self-development. For Mill, society is better when there is a range of different experiences contributing to the overall good. It is easy to see how this liberal idea is compatible with the fundamentals of commercial society. The division of labour promotes individualism and enables everyone to self-develop by pursuing their special talents and skills. In commercial society people can trade with each other to make up for areas where they lack talent. Under these circumstances people become united through exchange and everyone benefits. In

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<sup>8</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2002), 49.

<sup>9</sup> Mill, *On Liberty*, 52.

addition, individuals experience freedom through the full expression of their natural talents and gifts. Thus, it may appear that commercial society creates the conditions necessary for individuals to lead authentic lives. Are socialists wrong? Socialists contend that personal alienation, not freedom to pursue authentic lives, is the outcome of commercial society.

Robert Owen and Karl Marx believed commercial society fails to provide the necessary conditions required for individuals to lead authentic lives. Owen was concerned about the growth of commercial society but he also saw that it impeded the pursuit of a full life. Marx explained how the production process consumed human creativity, leaving people depleted of their creative reality-making power. For these socialists, commercial society failed to create the necessary conditions for members of society to lead authentic lives but rather led to their personal alienation.

Owen's general concern was that commercial society had changed the character of society for the worse.<sup>10</sup> He feared the spread of it would not enable society to fulfill its purpose towards its members. He claimed, "The general diffusion of manufactures throughout a country generates a new character in its inhabitants; and as this character is formed upon a principle quite unfavourable to individual or general happiness, it will produce the most lamentable and permanent evils."<sup>11</sup> In Owen's time, the simple, rural way of life was almost gone. It was being replaced rapidly by the factory system. Working the land was being replaced by working in factories, cooperation between neighbours by competition, and the pursuit of

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Owen, *Observations on the Effect of the Manufacturing System: With Hints for the Improvement of Those Parts of it Which are Most Injurious to Health and Morals*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London, Edinburgh & Glasgow, 1817).

<sup>11</sup> Owen, *Observations on the Effect of the Manufacturing System*, 5.

communal well being by the pursuit of individual satisfaction. As fast as commercial society was rising to prominence, so was its fundamental principle taking hold of the people. He wrote,

All are sedulously trained to buy cheap and sell dear; and to succeed in this art, the parties must be taught to acquire strong powers of deception; and thus a spirit is generated through every class of traders, destructive of that open, honest sincerity, without which man cannot make others happy, nor enjoy happiness himself ... [T]he effects of this principle of gain, unrestrained, are still more lamentable on the working classes, those who are employed in the operative parts of the manufactures; for most of these branches are more or less unfavourable to the health and morals of adults. Yet parents do not hesitate to sacrifice the well-being of their children, by putting them to occupations by which the constitution of their minds and bodies is rendered greatly inferior to what it might and ought to be under a system of common foresight and humanity.<sup>12</sup>

Owen's criticism is not meant to suggest that society was ideal before the spread of commercialism. Earlier society still had faults, but Owen did not see how the general acceptance and spread of commercial society would help improve both moral and material conditions for its members. The new purpose of society was to accumulate wealth for a few individuals rather than to promote the happiness of all its members. For Owen, as long as society's goals were dominated by the values of commercial society, its character would never be improved.

For Owen, commercial society hindered members from achieving their true purpose. In his view, members of society should be pursuing happiness collectively. Instead, Owen identified two factors that impeded the pursuit of happiness in commercial society. The first impediment was the new value underpinning commercial society, the pursuit of profit as mentioned above. The second

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<sup>12</sup> Owen, *Observations on the Effect of the Manufacturing System*, 7-8.

impediment was society's mistaken principles of human nature.<sup>13</sup> Owen wrote, "From the earliest ages it has been the practice of the world to act on the supposition that each individual man forms his own character, and that therefore he is accountable for all his sentiments and habits, and consequently merits reward for some and punishment for others."<sup>14</sup> As Owen saw it, the promotion of individualism had consequences for people trying to lead full lives because in his view, society was responsible for creating individuals. He wrote, "This is not a slight mistake which involves only trivial consequences; it is a fundamental error of the highest possible magnitude; it enters into all our proceedings regarding man from his infancy, and will be found to be the true sole origin of evil."<sup>15</sup> By denying their social obligations to one another, he feared that members of society would never achieve true happiness. Society should instead promote values that were congruent with true human purposes.

In Owen's view, in order for members of society to overcome this false notion and to achieve happiness, people must accept that human character is formed by others. He explained, "[E]very day will make it more and more evident that the character of man is, without a single exception, always formed for him; that it may be, and is, chiefly created by his predecessors; that they give him, or may give him, his ideas and habits, which are the powers that govern and direct his conduct."<sup>16</sup> In other words, who people become and where they end up in life is determined by the influence that others have had on them during their formative years. Yet it was not

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<sup>13</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 90.

<sup>14</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 90.

<sup>15</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 91.

<sup>16</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 91-92.

enough for Owen that people accepted the general truth of what he said about human nature. In order for society to reach true happiness, a necessary condition for Owen was that people must also accept the principle that their individual happiness was tied to making others happy as well. He wrote,

Happily for poor traduced and degraded human nature, the principle for which we now contend will speedily divest it of all the ridiculous and absurd mystery with which it has been hitherto enveloped by the ignorance of preceding times: and all the complicated and counteracting motives for good conduct, which have been multiplied almost to infinity, will be reduced to one single principle of action, which, by its evident operation and sufficiency, shall render this intricate system unnecessary, and ultimately supersede it in all parts of the earth. That principle is the happiness of self, clearly understood and uniformly practised; which can only be attained by conduct that must promote the happiness of the community."<sup>17</sup>

Individuals working according to their own self-interest, for their own profit, will not achieve happiness for themselves or for the community. Only when members of society recognize that their individual happiness comes from making others happy will people lead full lives. Moreover, this important principle can become ingrained in the social thinking of society as people can socialize their children from early ages to understand how they can achieve happiness in their own lives. For Owen, when the two principles were combined, only then would society and its members fulfill their individual and collective purposes.

For Karl Marx, capitalism would only lead members of society to personal alienation. It could not lead to authentic living as the liberal idea promised. According to the liberal view of self-development articulated above by Mill, one could assume that the more workers produce, the more self-developed they become and the more valuable they would be to themselves and society. Marx drew the opposite

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<sup>17</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 22.

conclusion, however. He suggested, "With the increasing value of the world of things proceeds in direct proportion the devaluation of the world of men."<sup>18</sup> Though he agreed that workers were productive, their productivity did not result in increased personal value. Instead he argued that the production process led to personal alienation. Marx was certain of this because during the production process the consumer goods produced assumed the value of the workers, leaving the workers themselves valueless. Marx explained, "For on this premise it is clear that the more the worker spends himself, the more powerful the alien objective world becomes which he creates over-against himself, the poorer he becomes—his inner world—becomes, the less belongs to him as his own."<sup>19</sup> The workers' value diminishes because they transfer their creative, reality-making power, their spiritual energy, in the form of labour, into the objects they produce. Marx called this process the objectification of labour. He explained, "The product of labour is labour which has been congealed in an object, which has become material: it is the objectification of labour."<sup>20</sup> This process of objectifying labour was important to Marx because it represented the spiritual quality of humans, their labour, which was transformed into something real that could be experienced in the material world. Because the workers had transformed their creative power into an object, it was no longer something that belonged to the workers; the objects were independent of them. The workers became personally alienated from their creative, reality-making power as the goods they produced were taken away from them by the production process.

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<sup>18</sup> Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1978), 71.

<sup>19</sup> Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," 72.

<sup>20</sup> Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," 71.

To obtain a greater appreciation of Marx's concept of alienation it would be useful to consider Ludwig Feuerbach's (1804-1872) influence. Feuerbach also recognized humans as experiencing alienation and sought to reconcile their condition by focusing on the role of religion. John H. Hallowell and Jene M. Porter explain how Feuerbach understood alienation. They write, "Religion is the consequence of human self-alienation in that humans project onto this God-illusion ... a compendium of perfect qualities and then use this illusion as a judge of themselves. God is described as all-powerful, all-knowing, immortal, holy and the like; humans are described ... as weak, limited, mortal, sinful."<sup>21</sup> Thus for Feuerbach, alienation was the result of the human abnegation of their own creative, reality-making power. By relinquishing God-like qualities and bestowing them onto something other than themselves, humans left themselves vulnerable to oppression by forces such as organized religion. In Marx's description of the production process, workers pour their labour into goods thus leaving themselves self-alienated similar to the way that Feuerbach describes.

For Marx, it was not only the worker who was unable to self-develop. Owners were also misguided in their beliefs if they thought they were able to self-develop within capitalist society. Marx saw that both the proletariat and the bourgeoisie were diminished through the process of labour exchange. The proletariat obviously lost a part of itself through the production process but the bourgeoisie did not gain by this exchange either. As Marx wrote, "The possessing class and the proletarian class represent one and the same human self-alienation. But the former feels satisfied and

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<sup>21</sup> John H. Hallowell and Jene M. Porter, "Karl Marx," in *Political Philosophy the Search for Humanity and Order* (Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice Hall Canada Inc., 1997), 566.

affirmed in his self-alienation, experiences the alienation as a sign of its own power, and possesses in it the appearance of a human existence."<sup>22</sup>

Marx denied that capitalism led to more freedom. Rather, he claimed that capitalist society resulted in a loss of freedom for the workers. He explained,

The animal is immediately identical with its life-activity. It does not distinguish itself from it. It is its life-activity. Man makes his life-activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness. He has conscious life-activity. It is not a determination with which he directly merges. Conscious life-activity directly distinguishes man from animal life-activity. It is just because of this that he is a species being. Or it is only because he is a species being that he is a Conscious Being, i.e., that his own life is an object for him. Only because of that is his activity free activity.<sup>23</sup>

For Marx, the workers' labour, their creative reality-making power which is their spiritual nature, was what distinguished them as free. With every object produced in the manufacturing process, however, workers lost a little of their natural freedom. In order to survive in capitalist society workers had daily to sacrifice their freedom for a negligible wage. The true purpose of humans was not to work in the artificially created capitalist society where workers assembled bits of manmade material on manmade machines that soaked up human freedom. For Marx, the true purpose of humans was to create reality through direct interaction with nature. He explained,

It is just in the working-up of the objective world, therefore, that man first really proves himself to be a species being. This production is his active species life. Though and because of this production, nature appears as his work and his reality. The object of labour is, therefore, the objectification of man's species life: for he duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he contemplates himself in a world that he has created.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," 133.

<sup>23</sup> Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," 76.

<sup>24</sup> Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," 76.

In this way, workers created an authentic reality that was not mediated by an artificial world. Capitalist society, organized to create the world of capital, could not preserve or increase human freedom. It could only divert human creative, reality-making power away from creating a self-directed reality.

The goal of this section was to develop an understanding of the first socialist critique of commercial society which is that it creates personal alienation. By reviewing Owen's and Marx's critiques of commercial society I have demonstrated that in their views commercial society did not provide the necessary conditions for human flourishing. In each of their views, members of commercial society lived and behaved in ways that were incompatible with their true selves. For Owen, the perpetuation of the principal of individualism and the pursuit of profit deterred people from achieving their true purpose of personal and social happiness. For Marx, capitalist society expanded in proportion to the workers' loss of freedom. Workers do not experience the supposed opportunities for freedom and self-development because of their assimilation by the manufacturing process and their disconnection from nature. As a result, people continue to pursue ends that can never be achieved and they fail to live authentic lives.

### **3. Social Alienation**

Many socialists argue that commercial society is characterized by social alienation. Whereas personal alienation is the division of the people from their own senses of purpose, social alienation is both the division of people from each other as well as their division from their collective purpose. As socialists see it, commercial society is divided economically, politically and socially. For example, Owen and Marx argue that the majority of members, the workers of commercial society, are excluded

from sharing in the wealth they help create. The promotion of exclusionary practices among members of commercial society creates cleavages between groups within society: those who share in the economic benefits of commercial society and those who do not. Under these conditions, commercial society is characterized by economic division. Though commercial society has the potential to bind people together through mutual dependency, more often than not, people are driven apart in pursuit of their own interests and are excluded from participating in any of the benefits commercial society may have to offer. Social alienation occurs as a result of commercial society's inability to cultivate bonds of fraternity.

Owen's work describes both economic and social divisions present in commercial society. His writings describe how the values of commercial society undermine social unity by creating divisions of wealth. Highlighted in his writings also are the social divisions experienced by the factory workers of his time. Marx's writings describe the economic, political and social divisions that exist between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat classes. He argues that the bourgeoisie squandered opportunities to create social unity in favour of developing capital for their own purposes and advancement. In this section I will discuss economic division first, followed by political, then social division.

### **3.1 Economic Division**

Owen was certain that commercial society would not achieve unity for its members. Instead, commercial society would produce economic division. For Owen, the goal of unity is unattainable in commercial society because earlier society was

“educated upon the most mistaken principles of human nature.”<sup>25</sup> As discussed in Section 2, the mistaken principles can only make society “a scene of insincerity and counteraction” because society does not acknowledge any responsibilities that it has towards individuals.<sup>26</sup> In other words, society holds the belief that it does not have any obligations to its members because people are responsible for their own economic well-being. Therefore people in commercial society are responsible solely for their own circumstances. In Owen’s view, if commercial society is to have any success in achieving unity for its members, the previously accepted principles of human nature will have to be abrogated.

In commercial society not everyone has the same opportunities for prosperity. According to Owen, the poor were never properly socialized to be productive members of society. He says, “The characters of these persons are now permitted to be very generally formed without proper guidance or direction, and, in many cases, under circumstances which directly impel them to a course of extreme vice and misery.”<sup>27</sup> The poor are ill equipped and unprepared to pull themselves out of their poverty. As a result, there is division among members of society based on economic status. In this view, Owen argues, the poor are considered to be responsible for their own poverty. Unless commercial society changes this commonly held belief, commercial society is doomed to deliver disunity to all of society.

In commercial society wealth is often seen as the key to happiness and the underlying principle of commercial society is to acquire profit. Therefore, it is believed that individuals in pursuit of their own wealth will lead to happiness

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<sup>25</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 15-16.

<sup>26</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 16.

<sup>27</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 15.

throughout society. According to Owen commercial society is at odds with itself. Accumulation of wealth cannot deliver individual happiness nor can it strengthen social bonds through free exchange. For Owen the acquisition of wealth can only lead to misery as it produces an insatiable desire for more wealth. He writes,

The, acquisition of wealth, and the desire which it naturally creates for a continued increase, have introduced a fondness for essentially injurious luxuries among a numerous class of individuals, who formerly never thought of them, and they have also generated a disposition which strongly impels its possessors to sacrifice the best feelings of human nature to this love of accumulation.<sup>28</sup>

As people try to pursue their dreams of more wealth they become less satisfied as their desires can never be met fully. Moreover, while the pursuit of wealth produces cravings for more wealth, it also abates any sympathetic feelings people might have for each other. As a result, people make choices in their pursuit of wealth, which will be profitable personally but may have negative consequences for others. As Owen explained, people hold the belief that they are responsible only for their own happiness in life and that all actions taken in pursuit of wealth can be justified. Social bonds that once held society together are weakened by the individual pursuit of wealth and any interaction between individuals is maintained out of monetary self-interest. Without financial gain attached to social interaction there is no incentive within commercial society to pursue happiness from sources other than wealth.

In the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx and Engels describe an exploitative relationship between the proletariat and bourgeoisie classes in capitalist society. For Marx and Engels, the bourgeoisie's sole purpose in capitalist society is to maintain itself by making money. However, the bourgeoisie cannot create capital

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<sup>28</sup> Owen: *Observations on the Manufacturing System*, 5.

without labour. The proletariat supplies the labour and contributes to the creation of wealth but does not share in it or experience freedom in society. According to Marx and Engels the proletariat are “a class of labourers, who live only so long as they find work and who find work so long as their labour increases capital.”<sup>29</sup> Marx and Engels describe the role of the labourer in commercial society as “an appendage of the machine, and it is only the most simple, most monotonous, and most easily acquired knack, that is required of him.”<sup>30</sup> Special talents and skills are meaningless in commercial society as the workers are reduced to menial and routine tasks like drones in a hive. Even physical strength is no longer a requisite for working the machines in the factories. Marx and Engels comment, “Differences of age and sex have no longer any distinctive social validity for the working class.”<sup>31</sup> The production of capital does not require skill, strength or intelligence. It simply requires the bare minimum human input to keep the machines running to meet the increasing demands of the market. So long as the working class can supply this essential component it will fulfil the needs of capital and the requirements of the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie owing its allegiance to itself only needs to maintain the working class in a condition wherein it can meet the demands of capital. Marx and Engels write, “[T]he cost of the production of a workman is restricted, almost entirely, to the means of subsistence that he requires for his maintenance, and for the propagation of his race.”<sup>32</sup> The bourgeoisie maintain the working class in impoverished conditions so as to ensure a steady supply of inexpensive labour. In capitalist society it appears

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<sup>29</sup> Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” 479.

<sup>30</sup> Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” 479.

<sup>31</sup> Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” 479.

<sup>32</sup> Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” 479.

that each class is mutually dependent on the other and therefore unified by their needs, but the reality, according to Marx and Engels, is that society is divided with one class preying on the other.

The prospect for economic unity in commercial society according to Owen's and Marx's critiques appears bleak. Unity between members of society seems improbable when members of society do not have a common purpose binding them together. Owen identifies how people are kept divided by their mistaken beliefs in individualism and their desire for profit. The rich pursue their wealth with no care for the conditions of the poor; it is only human nature to look out for their own best interests. The wealthy have earned their riches just as the poor have deserved their poverty. At the same time, the poor increase in number and misery as their hopes for an improved life are thwarted by their own limitations and society's misguided principles. Marx explains that the bourgeoisie are only concerned with the production of capital. Their concern for the proletariat extends only as far as it protects their interest in the growth of capital. The proletariat has no purpose beyond securing daily survival. Under the circumstances described by Owen and Marx, any chance for economic unity in commercial society is impossible.

### **3.2 Political Division**

Marx describes capitalist society as divided politically between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Another of his critiques of capitalist society is that the bourgeoisie is no longer entitled to maintain its privileged position as the ruling class of society.<sup>33</sup> He claims it has failed to fulfil its duty towards the lower class. For Marx, at a minimum the bourgeoisie should have provided a standard of living to the

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<sup>33</sup> Marx and Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 483.

labouring class that would have enabled it to improve itself over time. Through history many other social classes were able to improve their social standings. Marx and Engels write, "The serf, in the period of serfdom, raised himself to membership in the commune, just as the petty bourgeois, under the yoke of feudal absolutism, managed to develop into a bourgeois."<sup>34</sup> The labourer, however, has not had the same experience as the serf or the petty bourgeois. Instead the labourer's social position worsened. They write, "The modern labourer, on the contrary, instead of rising with the progress of industry, sinks deeper and deeper below the conditions of existence of his own class."<sup>35</sup> In other words, while non-labourers are benefiting from the increase in production of goods and exchange, the labourers are not. Moreover, the promise of capitalist society was that as the economy grew and progressed, even the lower classes of society would reap benefits.<sup>36</sup> Instead Marx finds that expansion of commerce has not improved the living conditions of the working class. Furthermore, the bourgeoisie has failed in its obligation towards the labouring class because it does not recognize the labouring class as an obligation. The only obligation the bourgeoisie recognizes is the production of capital. Marx and Engels write, "The essential condition for the existence, and for the sway of the bourgeois class, is the formation and augmentation of capital."<sup>37</sup> As long as the production of

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<sup>34</sup> Marx and Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 483.

<sup>35</sup> Marx and Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 483.

<sup>36</sup> See for example, Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (New York: The Modern Library, Random House Inc, 1937), 81. Adam Smith's idea was that the progressing state provides the best circumstances for all members of society, particularly the poor. In the *Wealth of Nations* he writes, "It deserves to be remarked, perhaps, that it is in the progressive state, while the society is advancing to the further acquisition, rather than when it has acquired its full complement of riches, that the condition of the labouring poor, of the great body of the people, seems to be the happiest and the most comfortable. It is hard in the stationary, and miserable in the declining state. The progressive state is in reality the cheerful and the hearty state to all the different orders of the society. The stationary is dull; the declining is melancholy."

<sup>37</sup> Marx and Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 483.

capital remains the sole purpose of the bourgeoisie, it will never be able to defend its position legitimately as the ruling class.

The bourgeoisie was more than capable of extending opportunities for advancement to the working class. After all, according to Marx, on its ascension to dominance, the bourgeoisie accomplished many achievements and exerted considerable influence over society. Through a sequence of historical events fuelled by an expansion in trade, it emerged as the dominant economic, political, and cultural class made up of wealthy property owners. According to Marx and Engels, “[T]he bourgeoisie has at last, since the establishment of Modern Industry and of the world-market, conquered for itself, in the modern representative State, exclusive political sway.”<sup>38</sup> If the priority of the bourgeoisie was to extend equal opportunities for improvement towards the remaining oppressed class, it could have used its political influence to create policies that would improve working conditions or to remove laws that perpetuated hardships incurred by the working class. However, as Marx observes, the bourgeoisie used their political influence only to serve their own interests. Marx and Engels write, “The executive of the modern State is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.”<sup>39</sup> Rather than recognizing the state’s role in serving the public interest, the bourgeoisie used the state to serve its own interests. By not using their political influence to alleviate the economic and social pressures on the working class, the bourgeoisie wasted their opportunity to assist the lower class. As a result of serving their own self-interest, the bourgeoisie contribute to furthering disunity in capitalist society.

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<sup>38</sup> Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” 475.

<sup>39</sup> Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” 475.

The bourgeoisie was not only disproportionately powerful politically; it also exerted cultural and economic influence as well. In fact, Marx describes the bourgeoisie as revolutionary for all its accomplishments. Marx and Engels write, "The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society."<sup>40</sup> With the emergence of the bourgeoisie the old look of society changed. All the traditional institutions and customs of society, the social bonds, were obliterated by the rise of the bourgeoisie. Marx and Engels explain, "It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors' and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment.'"<sup>41</sup> Most importantly, the bourgeoisie transformed the old modes of production. They write,

The feudal system of industry, under which industrial production was monopolised by closed guilds, now no longer sufficed for the growing wants of the new markets. The manufacturing system took its place ... Meantime the markets kept growing, the demand ever rising. Even manufacture no longer sufficed ... The place of manufacture was taken by the giant, Modern Industry, the place of the industrial middle class, by industrial millionaires, the leaders of whole industrial armies.<sup>42</sup>

The bourgeoisie transformed any profession that was once held in esteem into petty paid positions. They write, "The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage-labourers."<sup>43</sup> Professions that were pursued through callings and ties to tradition,

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<sup>40</sup> Marx and Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 476.

<sup>41</sup> Marx and Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 476.

<sup>42</sup> Marx and Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 474.

<sup>43</sup> Marx and Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 476.

and bound people together by esteem, were stripped to nothing but their commercial value to society. The uniting role of religion in society was discredited by the bourgeoisie. Marx and Engels write, "It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation."<sup>44</sup> Even the family, during the bourgeois reign, no longer performed its function as a principle social bond within society. Marx and Engels write, "The bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation."<sup>45</sup> In other words, with the emergence of the bourgeoisie, the landscape of society underwent political, economic and social upheaval. However, the influence exerted by the bourgeoisie and the changes it created did not contribute to the greater good of society. The bourgeoisie benefited from the changes it initiated and ensured that each subsequent change continued to be to its advantage. But the proletariat, burdened with the hardship of supplying society with newly created wealth did not benefit from the rapid changes and growth of society, nor did they participate in the wealth they created. The changes thrust onto society by the bourgeoisie, though pervasive, did not benefit everyone in society equally. Though a powerful political, economic, and cultural force, the bourgeoisie was incapable of transforming society for the benefit of the proletariat.

### **3.3 Social Division**

In the discussion on economic division Marx had described how the labourers were appended to their machines performing mindless tasks. But the workers were

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<sup>44</sup> Marx and Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 475.

<sup>45</sup> Marx and Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 474.

also enslaved by the factory hierarchy. Of the workers' situation Marx and Engels explain, "Not only are they slaves of the bourgeois class, and of the bourgeois State; they are daily and hourly enslaved by the machine, by the over-looker, and above all, by the individual bourgeois manufacturer himself."<sup>46</sup> Within the factories, the formation of social bonds was discouraged by an absence of naturally occurring bonds between the workers as they entered the workforce. Often the workers had no connection to one another or to the land as they were brought in from afar to work in the factories.

Owen had similar concerns about the lack of naturally occurring social bonds among factory workers as well. On the factory town New Lanark Owen comments, "It was ... necessary to collect a new population to supply the infant establishment with labourers."<sup>47</sup> Without a connection to the land, workers could not share a bond based on identity. The sense of social isolation within the factory system was further compounded by the use of foundlings as a source of labour. As Owen notes, "Two modes then only remained of obtaining these labourers; the one, to procure children from the various public charities of the country; and the other, to induce families to settle around the works."<sup>48</sup> Owen found that factory work was, for obvious reasons, considered undesirable leaving few people to pursue it. Foundlings, being a burden on the public purse, were a suitable choice as a supply of labour. Discarded children, however, have no basis for social bonds within the factory system. They have no identity or familial bonds prior to entering into the factory system. Their unfortunate circumstances discourage their ability to form natural social bonds with other

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<sup>46</sup> Marx and Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 479.

<sup>47</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 42.

<sup>48</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 42.

workers. Furthermore, for Owen, the factory system only seemed to attract the most destitute of people to work. He writes, “[O]nly persons destitute of friends, employment, and character were found willing to try the experiment.”<sup>49</sup> In other words, individuals with no former attachments to society were the only candidates who took up employment in the distant factories. Socially alienated before entering the factory system, their condition would not improve over time. Any bonds that might form between workers would be tenuous at best based on personal self-interest, a calculated financial advantage. But natural bonds were also replaced by forced bonds of servitude. The workers were slaves to their machines and to the owners of the factories. Thus, the working conditions established in the factories promoted social alienation among the workers rather than social cohesion.

Old attitudes and new values will keep people divided from one another in commercial society. Owen and Marx offer little hope for improvement of society if certain aspects do not change. Owen identified one aspect rooted in old attitudes of human nature that will ensure division in society if it is not addressed. For Owen, the old belief that everyone is responsible only for themselves inhibits the growth of social feelings of responsibility that society might feel for its members. In the absence of these feelings, competition between members of society arises because people are only concerned with their own self-interest. Feelings of self-interest suppress any feelings of compassion the wealthy may have for the poor, further perpetuating a gap between the two classes. The new values of commercial society also aggravate competition between members. Marx’s depiction of the bourgeoisie’s goal to increase capital perpetuates the exploitation of the working class. Owen also

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<sup>49</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 43.

raised concern about the new value of acquisition of profit spreading in tandem with manufacturing. The acceptance of the need to acquire wealth intensifies the already pervasive competition between members. As it becomes more difficult to satisfy the need for wealth, competition between members of society increases. Unless it rejects these old attitudes and new values, commercial society will always fail to achieve unity. By embracing the old attitudes and new values, members of society will be alienated permanently from each other.

The relationship Marx describes between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat cannot be described as mutually dependant any more than a parasite and its host can lay claim to mutual dependence. Though it seems the proletariat is wholly dependent on the bourgeoisie, the reality is that the proletariat gains nothing from the bourgeoisie and sacrifices everything to them. The bourgeoisie siphon off wealth created by the proletariat's labour. In exchange for their labour, the proletariat does not receive political, economic or cultural status from the ruling class. They gain nothing out of the arrangement except further misery as the bourgeoisie keeps the power and wealth of society from them. There is no unity in social purpose between the bourgeoisie and the proletarian classes.

Commercial society produces asymmetrical bonds between its members. Though it seems the poor are a burden on society and wholly dependent on it for their survival, for Owen and Marx, the opposite is true: society places a burden on the poor. For Owen, the values and structure of society impact the poor more acutely than the rich. For Marx, the proletariat is burdened by the bourgeoisie's insatiable demand for labour. As Marx and Engels observed above, the bourgeoisie do not provide their own labour in the production of capital; they obtain it from the

proletariat. With no attachments to society, members of the working class have few options available to them to secure their survival but to sell their labour. Made vulnerable by their lack of means, the working class alone is continually exposed to the harms of commercial society. Marx and Engels say, "These labourers, who must sell themselves piece-meal, are a commodity, like every other article of commerce, and are consequently exposed to all the vicissitudes of competition, to all the fluctuations of the market."<sup>50</sup> The proletariat is burdened by its role as sole supplier of labour, by its lack of opportunities, and its burden is intensified by not having any protection against economic forces.

The working class's burden is further intensified by their exclusion from sharing in the wealth they have created for society. Both Owen and Marx acknowledge that the wealth of society was based on labour. Owen observes, "[M]anual labour, properly directed, is the source of all wealth, and of national prosperity."<sup>51</sup> Marx and Engels draw similar conclusions by remarking on the bourgeoisie's feat of transforming the old society into the new industrial one. They write,

The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together. Subjection of Nature's forces to man, machinery, application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam navigation, railways, electric telegraphs, clearing of whole continents for cultivation, canalisation of rivers, whole populations conjured out of the ground—what earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labour?<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Marx and Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 479.

<sup>51</sup> Robert Owen, "Report to the County of Lanark," in *Life and Ideas of Robert Owen*, ed. A.L. Morton (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1962), 113.

<sup>52</sup> Marx and Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 477.

Though they credit the bourgeoisie, the transformation could not have been realized without the social labour supplied by the working class. Given that the working class were exclusive suppliers of labour, it might seem reasonable to assume that they would be proportionately compensated. This was not the case, however. Both Owen and Marx acknowledge that the practices of commercial society sought to keep compensation to the workers for their labour disproportionately low compared to profits. Owen comments, "Every master manufacturer is most anxious to have his work cheaply performed, and as he is perpetually exerting all his faculties to attain this object, he considers low wages to be essential to his success."<sup>53</sup> On a similar note, Marx adds that wages were set inversely in proportion to the quality of work available. Marx and Engels write, "In proportion, therefore, as the repulsiveness of the work increases, the wage decreases. Nay more, in proportion as the use of machinery and division of labour increases, in the same proportion the burden of toil also increases, whether by prolongation of the working hours, by increase of the work exacted in a given time or by increased speed of the machinery, etc."<sup>54</sup> Competition among labourers also ensured that their share of the wealth was kept as low as possible. Finally, the working class's exclusion from wealth was exacerbated by their exclusion from political power as well. For Marx, the dominance of the bourgeoisie disallowed the proletariat from accessing any political resources that might improve their conditions. The bourgeoisie did not feel the burden of the proletariat as they were insulated from their needs by wealth and political power. Yet the working class certainly felt the burden imposed on them by the operations of

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<sup>53</sup> Robert Owen, "To the British Master Manufacturers," in *Life and Ideas of Robert Owen*, ed. A.L. Morton (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1962), 108.

<sup>54</sup> Marx and Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 479.

commercial society. The weight of the bourgeois dependence on the poor's only possession divided one class from the other. Thus the bourgeoisie and the proletariat are alienated from each other by labour; the proletariat supplies it while the bourgeoisie consumes it. The asymmetrical bonds of dependency produced in commercial society are not healthy social bonds capable of overcoming social alienation.

Neither Owen's nor Marx's commentary on commercial society describe society united by bonds of fraternity. Instead Owen's and Marx's depictions only conjure up visions of social alienation: members of society divided economically, politically and socially. Clearly it can be seen that there is no fraternity kindled between members of commercial society. Within the manufacturing system, the workers are isolated from each other and they are subordinate to the managers and owners. Under the factory system, workers are united in confined spaces for long hours during the work day but their social bonds are weak, at best, undermined by the factory's need of labour. In the factories the workers may be concentrated in high numbers but their bond is to their machines, not to one another; they produce goods in isolation. Moreover, the bourgeoisie do not participate in the production of wealth as suppliers of labour.

The goal of this section was to develop an understanding of the second socialist critique of commercial society, that it leads to social alienation. By reviewing the critiques of Owen and Marx and their assertions that commercial society contributes to divisions amongst its members through various inequalities, I have demonstrated how members of commercial society are socially alienated from one another. Owen describes how for members the pursuit of profit combined with an

adherence to individualism perpetuates economic division in society. Marx describes how a lack of common purpose between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat maintains economic inequality. Marx also describes how the bourgeoisie and the proletariat are divided politically by the exclusion of the proletariat. Owen and Marx also describe the social isolation that the working class experiences in commercial society. They describe how workers often do not have connections to family, land or community. They also describe how workers are burdened by their role as creators of wealth in commercial society but are not recipients in its distribution. Moreover, this burden is not shared by the wealthy in society. For both socialists, divisions present in commercial society lead to social alienation between its members.

#### **4. Overcoming Alienation: Owen's and Marx's Recommendations**

Owen's solutions to overcoming personal and social alienation caused by commercial society are based on the principle that society forms the characters of its members. He writes, "Any general character, from the best to the worst, from the most ignorant to the most enlightened, may be given to any community, even to the world at large, by the application of proper means; which means are at the command and under the control of those who have influence in the affairs of men."<sup>55</sup> Owen's solutions were to embark on community-building initiatives at the local level first and then to institute programs at the governing level that would cultivate new beliefs and values. His certainty about his strategies arose from the positive results he witnessed from changes he implemented in his manufacturing community of New Lanark.

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<sup>55</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 19.

Prior to Owen's arrival, life in the manufacturing town New Lanark was close to unbearable. He discovered how miserable the situation was for his employees and their families. He wrote, "The population lived in idleness, in poverty, in almost every kind of crime; consequently in debt, out of health, and in misery."<sup>56</sup> To alleviate the circumstances of his employees, Owen identified several factors contributing to the misery, including those rooted in society's beliefs and values, and set himself the task of addressing them.

One of the problems endemic to the community was theft. He explains, "[I] soon discovered that theft was extended through almost all the ramifications of the community, and the receipt of stolen goods through all the country around."<sup>57</sup> Owen's approach to dealing with the widespread problem was not to punish the community members for their transgressions but rather to employ prevention measures as a means of deterring the undesirable behaviour. He writes, "To remedy this evil, not one legal punishment was inflicted, not one individual imprisoned, even for an hour."<sup>58</sup> His strategy included making theft more difficult by increasing monitoring of goods and supplies while at the same time making it simpler to detect when theft had occurred. Owen also encouraged his employees to engage in lawful activities which would benefit his employees by keeping them safe while building their esteem. By employing these measures he found that "the difficulty of committing the crime was increased, the detection afterwards rendered more easy,

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<sup>56</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 44.

<sup>57</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 50.

<sup>58</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 50.

the habit of honest industry formed, and the pleasure of good conduct experienced.”<sup>59</sup>

Child labour was also a problem in New Lanark. Though the foundlings who worked in his newly acquired mills were well housed, Owen found that their condition was still poor. He writes, “[T]o defray the expense of these well devised arrangements, and support the establishment generally, it was absolutely necessary that the children should be employed within the mills from six o’clock in the morning till seven in the evening, summer and winter; and after these hours their education commenced.”<sup>60</sup> Without doubt, these conditions burdened the children mentally and physically and made them vulnerable to further hardships upon fleeing the mills.<sup>61</sup> Upon acquiring New Lanark, Owen eliminated child labour and instituted plans for their care and education. He was of the opinion that, “[f]ar better would it be for the children, their parents, and for society, that the first should not commence employment until they attain the age of twelve, when their education might be finished, and their bodies would be more competent to undergo the fatigue and exertions required of them.”<sup>62</sup> Owen’s plans for improving the quality of life for the child labourers and their families was to provide them with free, high quality education until the children reached the age of ten at which time they would commence regular employment as workers within the mill. He explains, “The children were taught reading, writing, and arithmetic, during five years, that is, from five to ten, in the village school, without expense to their parents.”<sup>63</sup> Though not able

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<sup>59</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 51.

<sup>60</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 45.

<sup>61</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 46.

<sup>62</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 55.

<sup>63</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 55-56.

to completely eliminate the problem of child labour, Owen's changes to the use of child labour in New Lanark and the introduction of formal education for children was a significant improvement to their well-being. In addition to creating a safer community and providing free education, Owen also addressed the material conditions of the family and made provisions for improved housing and other material necessities. He writes,

Their houses were rendered more comfortable, their streets were improved, the best provisions were purchased, and sold to them at low rates, yet covering the original expense; and under such regulations as taught them how to proportion their expenditure to their income. Fuel and clothes were obtained for them in the same manner; and no advantage was ever attempted to be taken of them, or means used to deceive them.<sup>64</sup>

By addressing the problems Owen saw as contributing to the low quality of life in New Lanark, he managed to create conditions that would contribute to a sense of community amongst the employees of the village.

It is clear that Owen embarked on a community-building endeavour; however, he was not of the belief that that alone would achieve social unity for society. Radical change was still required in order to achieve his vision of what society could be beyond New Lanark. As noted in my discussions of how he conceived of personal and social alienation, Owen saw the biggest barriers to unity and happiness embedded in old attitudes and the new values associated with commercial society. As a result, he proposed strategies, outlined in *A New View of Society*, to legislators aimed at forming the character of members of broader society so as to achieve collective happiness.

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<sup>64</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 56-57.

To make radical change and achieve collective happiness for society, Owen proposed a strategy with several components. The main feature of his strategy was the institution of a national, inclusive system of education for children through to adulthood. With this strategy, education would be available to all families regardless of their economic or social status. Education would also be standardized to ensure the quality of education was the same for all children as well. He writes, "It follows that every state, to be well governed, ought to direct its chief attention to the formation of character; and that the best governed state will be that which shall possess the best system of education."<sup>65</sup> To make change throughout all society, it was imperative for Owen that the school system be inclusive of all children and uniformly applied. He further writes, "[I]t is necessary to observe, that to create a well trained, united, and happy people, this national system should be uniform over the United Kingdom; it should also be founded in the spirit of peace and of rationality; and for the most obvious of reasons, the thought of exclusion to one child in the empire should not for a moment be entertained."<sup>66</sup> The principle lessons to be taught, according to Owen, were the "ideas and habits which shall contribute to the future happiness of the individual and of the state."<sup>67</sup> He also recommended the establishment of legislation as well as the establishment of a complementary institution that would train instructors tasked with character formation through the education system.<sup>68</sup> "The training of those who are to form the future man becomes a consideration of the utmost magnitude: for on due reflection, it will appear that

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<sup>65</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 149.

<sup>66</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 150.

<sup>67</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 152.

<sup>68</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 167.

instruction of the young must be, of necessity, the only foundation upon which the superstructure of society can be raised.”<sup>69</sup> Through a national, inclusive system of education supported by legislation and the necessary institutions, Owen believed that societal transformation could occur.

Owen argued that laws that impacted the poor disproportionately should be repealed. He claimed that the effect of particular laws on the poor only aided them in furthering their untrained habits rather than providing them with relief from their hardships. “They exhibit the appearance of affording aide to the distressed, while, in reality, they prepare the poor to acquire the worst habits, and to practise every kind of crime; they thus increase the number of the poor, and add to distress.”<sup>70</sup> Owen also recommended the introduction of legislation that would support the collection and analysis of information related to the national supply of labour. “This information is necessary, preparatory to the adoption of measures which will be proposed, to provide labour for those who may be occasionally unable to procure other employment.”<sup>71</sup> He believed that it was the role for government to plan accordingly for its labourers by responding to the demands for labour based on the information it collected. Lastly Owen recommended that the Church align itself with the principles that would support the pursuit of happiness of society. He says, “For the first grand step towards effecting any substantial improvement in these realms, without injury to any part of the community, is to make it the clear and decided interest of the church to cooperate cordially in all the projected ameliorations.”<sup>72</sup> Without the support of the

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<sup>69</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 168.

<sup>70</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 142.

<sup>71</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 170.

<sup>72</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 163.

Church, Owen believed that the pursuit of happiness on a national scale could be undermined.

Owen made observable changes to the quality of life for his employees living in New Lanark. Based on his experience in his mill town, he sought change at the national level. Each recommendation he made was intended to achieve happiness. Education would socialize people to work for others' happiness. Legislation could be developed to support the pursuit of happiness rather than undermine it. Traditional institutions could be reformed to play a supporting role in changing society. While underscoring his actions and recommendations to improve life with the principle that character is formed socially, he attacked the old ideas that underpinned the foundations that made commercial society such a hardship for the masses and proved that society could be unified and harmonious.

Marx suggested that through communism, people can achieve wholeness and overcome personal alienation. He also suggested that the emancipation of the proletariat will eliminate the social divisions between the classes created by commercial society. In the above discussion on personal alienation, Marx describes how the production process results in loss of freedom and value for the workers as their creativity becomes objectified in the goods they produced. They lose their freedom as the objects they produce move through the production process and turn into profit for the factory owner. The solution for Marx does not lie in increasing wages for the worker so as to lessen the burden of their labour. He writes, "A forcing up of wages ... would therefore be nothing but better payment for the slave, and

would not conquer either for the worker or for labour their human status or dignity.”<sup>73</sup> The solution also does not lie with the workers stopping their productive activity. According to Marx, humans are creative beings by nature, and through their creativity they make their reality and express their freedom. Thus, ceasing the productivity of their labour is not an option for him. Moreover, the problem is not the labourer, the problem is the owner. Marx writes, “The category of labourer is not to be done away with, but extended to all men.”<sup>74</sup> In Marx’s solution, all humans are to be labourers and within that realization, humans begin to restore themselves through communism. Marx describes communism as “the real appropriation of the human essence by and for man; communism therefore as the complete return of man to himself as a social (i.e. human) being—a return become conscious, and accomplished within the wealth of previous development.”<sup>75</sup> In the community of labourers, the products of their creativity no longer become someone else’s private property but become universally owned. Marx and Engels add, “Communism deprives no man of the power to appropriate the products of society; all that it does is deprive him of the power to subjugate the labour of others by means of such appropriation.”<sup>76</sup> In the communist community described by Marx, workers will no longer be subjected to losing their freedom through the alienation of their creativity but will restore and nurture themselves through the creative process.

For Marx, social unity will not prevail so long as the bourgeoisie exists; however, he does believe firmly that social unity is possible. Fundamental to unifying

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<sup>73</sup> Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,” 80.

<sup>74</sup> Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,” 82.

<sup>75</sup> Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,” 84.

<sup>76</sup> Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” 486.

society is the emancipation of the working class from the conditions in which it finds itself. Emancipation is not, however, a task that others can be relied upon to carry out. In Marx's view, the proletariat must free itself from its condition. He writes,

[S]ince all the living conditions of contemporary society have reached the acme of inhumanity in the living conditions of the proletariat; since in the proletariat man has lost himself, although at the same time he has both acquired a theoretical consciousness of this loss and has been directly forced into indignation against this inhumanity by virtue of an inexorable, utterly unembellishable, absolutely imperious need, that practical expression of necessity—because of all this the proletariat itself can and must liberate itself.<sup>77</sup>

For Marx, others are unable to carry out the task of emancipating the proletariat because they run the risk of not being able to complete the task without recreating the problems they sought to destroy in the first place. For example, of the petite bourgeois socialists Marx and Engels write, "[T]his form of Socialism aspires either to restoring the old means of production and of exchange, and with them the old property relations, and the old society, or to cramping the modern means of production and of exchange, within the framework of the old property relations that have been, and were bound to be exploded by those means."<sup>78</sup> For Marx only after the proletariat comes to a shared awareness of their condition will they be able to address their oppression and transform society from a divided society into a unified society.

One of the noticeable differences in approaches between Owen and Marx lies in the process of change each writer describes. Owen was able to make changes that would eventually root themselves in the daily lives of those whom he affected with his community building efforts. As the owner of the mill, Owen had the power to

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<sup>77</sup> Karl Marx, "Alienation and Social Class," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W Norton & Company Inc, 1978), 135.

<sup>78</sup> Marx and Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 493.

cause social change in the community. He further used his experience to try to influence political leaders to make national changes that would achieve happiness for all of society. In New Lanark, the mill workers were liberated by Owen and his ideas, whereas for Marx, society cannot be transformed without the process being led by the oppressed themselves. For Marx, human history has never accomplished fully the complete emancipation of the oppressed classes; however, once the oppressed class comes to its own realization about its condition it will be able to bring about change. For Marx, the class that has to come to its own realization is the proletariat and it will liberate itself.

A second noticeable difference between Owen and Marx is in their views on social unity. For Owen, as evidenced in his approaches to overcoming alienation, society can be unified even though social stratification exists. For example, his remedies for establishing happiness among employees of New Lanark were not dependent upon his giving up ownership of the mill town. New Lanark, as a model for larger society, could promote happiness even though there were labourers, managers, and an owner and various degrees of wealth and status. In his national proposals, Owen appealed to those in positions of power and influence but acknowledged that it would take all sectors of society to produce change. For Marx unity in communist society would be dependent on all becoming proletarian with no bourgeoisie left. Communist society cannot tolerate social stratification.

A discussion of fraternity may help to explain these differing views on unity. Fraternity, in the socialist sense, represents inclusion of everyone regardless of their strengths or weaknesses. Fraternal bonds form between all members of society by their working together for the common good. Moreover, by working together for

everyone's benefit, everyone has a right to share in the collective fruits of their labour. This idea of inclusion and tolerance is similar to the one presented by Mill, above, where society is enriched by the diversity of talents indicating that there is room for everyone in society. The problem with Mill's idea of acceptance is that the pursuit of individual talents in commercial society will eventually bring about competition between its members leading to division rather than deeper unity. In Owen's example of New Lanark, fraternal bonds are formed as everyone is working together for the good of the whole even though there are differences amongst the employees; some are workers while others are managers. Moreover everyone is insulated from competition as each is pursuing the happiness of others rather than focusing on their individual talents. Marx's example of communist society also expresses bonds of fraternity as the whole of society continues to be productive in their collective labour creating their collective reality.

## **5. Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter was to develop a deeper understanding of socialism by analyzing two critiques of commercial society offered by Owen and Marx. Each of the writers described how commercial society has alienating effects on individuals and society. On individuals, they observed how commercial society imposes a way of life that is incompatible with their true natures. As a result, human existence is artificial and lacks meaning. Owen and Marx also document the social alienation in commercial society and the exploitative relationship of the poor by the wealthy. Fundamentally lacking in commercial society are social bonds tying people to one another. For Owen, the manufacturing system is a considerable barrier to social unity and a sense of community. In Marx's observations, the bourgeoisie

exploit the already vulnerable proletariat for their own purposes. Though commercial society has little to offer its most vulnerable members, both Owen and Marx are able to provide some solutions that can help restore people and their communities to wholeness. For Owen, social change can be realized through leadership at the top while for Marx, social change can occur through the proletariat alone.

## **Chapter 2—Rousseau’s Critique of Commercial Society**

### **1. Introduction**

In this chapter, I will consider whether Jean-Jacques Rousseau was a precursor to nineteenth-century socialism. In the previous chapter, I defined socialism ostensibly and used Owen and Marx as representative exemplars. I reviewed Owen’s and Marx’s critiques of commercial society and how it led to personal and social alienation. In this chapter I will review Rousseau’s critiques of commercial society with the intent to explore similar themes within his writings. Rousseau was critical of commercial society. He attributed the inequalities he observed in daily life to the growth of commercial society. He recognized the potential of new economic forces to amplify characteristics in humans that condone their pursuit of self-interest. The technological advancement commercial society ushered in would not liberate humans but could only enslave them through their pursuit of material goods and comfort. Rousseau found inequality in commercial society to be objectionable because it led to personal and social alienation.

### **2. Personal Alienation**

In Chapter 1, I described personal alienation as a disconnection of individuals from their internal senses of purpose. I described how commercial society imposes purposes on individuals that support the goals of commercial society rather than support the pursuit of their own goals. In his writings, Rousseau critiques commercial society for creating personal alienation by forcing members of society to become civilized. He writes,

While the Government and the Laws see to the safety and well-being of men assembled, the Sciences, Letters, and Arts, less despotic and perhaps more powerful, spread garlands of flowers over the chains with which they are laden,

throttle in them the sentiment of that original freedom for which they seem born, make them love their slavery, and fashion them into what is called civilized Peoples.<sup>79</sup>

In commercial society civilized people are materially and spiritually dependent upon one another and are compelled to appear to be something that they are not. Through their dependence on others for their spiritual and material needs, people become personally alienated from their own purposes. By imposing its customs and traditions on members of society, commercial society complicates life for members by denying them the opportunity to experience simple living. Rousseau is critical of the process of civilizing because in his view, humans already are equipped fully to lead fulfilling lives without the need for commercial society to intervene. In his view, humans possess qualities such as free will, physical fitness and natural goodness that enable them to be materially and spiritually self-sufficient. Without the need to rely on others for their material and spiritual needs, humans are free to be who they are rather than what society dictates.

Rousseau's critiques of commercial society reveal two kinds of self-sufficiency that are central to his views of humans. People have the capacity on the one hand to be spiritually self-sufficient and on the other to be materially self-sufficient. For Rousseau, both kinds of self-sufficiency are required to live a simple life. But what is spiritual self-sufficiency? Spiritual self-sufficiency is the ability to experience happiness without the aid of any external influences. It is a requirement for a simple life because it means that happiness can be achieved in life with little effort or complication. It relates to the spiritual or immaterial nature of humans. Unlike some

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<sup>79</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau. "Discourse on the Sciences and Arts," in *Rousseau The Discourses And Other Early Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 6.

of his predecessors, such as Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), who described humans as machinelike, moved by desires or aversions, Rousseau held the view that humans are endowed with free will giving them spiritual as well as material qualities.<sup>80</sup> He writes,

Nature commands every animal and the beast obeys. Man feels the same impulsion, but he knows that he is free to acquiesce or to resist; and it is particularly in the consciousness of this liberty that the spirituality of his soul is displayed, for physics in some way explains the mechanism of the senses and the formation of ideas, but, in the power of willing, or rather of choosing, and in the consciousness of this power, there are only purely mental acts, which cannot be explained by the laws of physics.<sup>81</sup>

By describing humans in terms of both spiritual and material qualities, Rousseau proposes that humans can be viewed as having two selves; one self is grounded in the physical world with material qualities and needs, while the other self is the higher self, or the will, from which identity, creativity and the sense of existence originate. For Rousseau, connecting with the higher self can lead to the experience of happiness. He writes,

But if there is a state in which the soul finds a solid enough base to rest itself on entirely and to gather its whole being into, without needing to recall the past or encroach upon the future; in which time is nothing for it; in which the present lasts forever without, however, making its duration noticed and without any trace of time's passage; without any other sentiment of deprivation or of enjoyment, pleasure or pain, desire or fear, except that alone of our existence, and having this sentiment alone fill it completely; as long as this state lasts, he who finds himself in it can call himself happy, not with an imperfect, poor, and relative happiness such as one finds in the pleasures of life, but with a sufficient, perfect, and full happiness which leaves the soul no emptiness I might feel a need to fill.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Thomas Hobbes, "Leviathan," in *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 38.

<sup>81</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men," in *Rousseau's Political Writings*, ed. Alan Ritter and Julia Conaway Bondanella, trans. Julia Conaway Bondanella (New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 1988), 15-16.

<sup>82</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Fifth Walk," in *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, trans. Charles E. Butterworth (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1992), 68-69.

People who experience their own existence experience true happiness in their lives. They rely on nothing but their own self-awareness as confirmation or proof that they exist. When people reach this type and level of happiness, they are spiritually self-sufficient as the happiness they experience comes from within.

Rousseau is critical of commercial society because, in his view, it destroys peoples' ability to be spiritually self-sufficient by promoting spiritual dependency on one another. In commercial society, civilized people are led to believe that happiness comes not from within but from gaining public esteem. For Rousseau, the corruption of spiritual self-sufficiency begins with the social interaction initiated by living together and becomes further entrenched by the division of labour. Prior to the advent of commercial society people experienced their own sense of existence with ease. He writes, "Man's first sentiment was that of his own existence."<sup>83</sup> This first feeling Rousseau describes is the feeling of self-esteem, "a natural sentiment which inclines every animal to look after its own preservation ... [and] produces humanity and virtue."<sup>84</sup> To be in touch with this sentiment is to be spiritually self-sufficient.

Rousseau sees that increased social interaction leads people to make comparisons with each other. He writes, "Each one began to consider the others and to want to be considered in return, and public esteem came to have value."<sup>85</sup> According to Rousseau, once public esteem was aroused it became sought after by everyone. He says, "As soon as men had begun to appraise each other and the idea of esteem was formulated in their minds, each claimed a right to it, and it was no

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<sup>83</sup> Rousseau, "Discourse on Inequality," 34.

<sup>84</sup> Rousseau, "Discourse on Inequality," 27.

<sup>85</sup> Rousseau, "Discourse on Inequality," 38.

longer possible to deny it to anyone with impunity.”<sup>86</sup> Through social interaction and the competition for public esteem, a new sentiment is aroused in people that Rousseau identifies as self-love. Unlike self-esteem, self-love is “an artificial sentiment born in society [and] leads each individual to place greater value on himself than on anyone else.”<sup>87</sup> Peoples’ feeling of self-love triggers a sense of entitlement to public esteem and puts people at risk of spiritual dependency.

From Rousseau’s perspective, no one in commercial society receives public esteem for being ordinary; people are valueless and invisible unless they appear worthy of recognition. Only those people who possess qualities or characteristics worthy of public esteem receive it. “Anyone who sang or danced the best,” he writes, “who was the most handsome, the strongest, the most skilful, or the most eloquent became the most highly regarded, and this was the first step toward inequality and, at the same time, toward vice.”<sup>88</sup> Therefore, in order to acquire public esteem in commercial society people must compete with one another and seek ways to distinguish themselves from the others.<sup>89</sup> He writes,

Behold all the natural qualities put into action, the rank and fate of each man established, not only upon the amount of his property and his power to serve or to harm, but also upon mind, beauty, strength, or skill, upon merits or talents, and since these qualities were the only ones capable of attracting consideration, it soon became necessary to possess them or to affect them; it was necessary to one’s advantage to seem to be other than what one was in fact.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Rousseau, “Discourse on Inequality,” 38.

<sup>87</sup> Rousseau, “Discourse on Inequality,” 27.

<sup>88</sup> Rousseau, “Discourse on Inequality,” 38.

<sup>89</sup> Judith N. Shklar, *Men and Citizens: A Study of Rousseau’s Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 52. Shklar describes humans as “driven by a passion for inequality.” The further humans are removed from equality and sameness the more they desire distinction from one another.

<sup>90</sup> Rousseau, “Discourse on Inequality,” 42.

If people possess nothing worthy of public esteem they must then appear as though they were worthy of recognition.

Public esteem is highly sought after for two reasons. The first reason is to gain pleasure. Public esteem is scarce; like other scarce resources it is pleasurable to have not because it is worthwhile to possess but because no one else has it. Public esteem is pleasurable because not everyone is skilful at acquiring it. Rousseau explains, “[I]f we see a handful of rich and powerful men at the pinnacle of greatness and fortune, while the crowd grovels in obscurity and misery, it is because the former esteem the things they possess only insofar as others are deprived of them, and because, without any change in their condition, they would cease being happy if the people ceased being miserable.”<sup>91</sup> As the uneven distribution of wealth in commercial society produces pleasure for those who possess it, so too does the limited distribution of public esteem produce pleasure for those lucky or skillful enough to secure it.

The second reason that public esteem is sought after is that the recognition it bestows on people validates their existence and fulfils the feeling of self-love. People of acclaim do not have to wonder whether or not their existence is real because they have others who esteem them and provide them with proof of their existence. Rousseau called this living in the opinion of others. “Social man knows only how to live beyond himself in the opinion of others,” he writes, “and it is, so to speak, from their judgment alone that he derives the sentiment of his own existence.”<sup>92</sup> Thus people in commercial society become spiritually dependent on others to gain public

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<sup>91</sup> Rousseau, “Discourse on Inequality,” 54.

<sup>92</sup> Rousseau, “Discourse on Inequality,” 56.

esteem and to confirm their existence; they do not experience true happiness in commercial society because they rely on others to provide them with pleasure and proof of their existence. Commercial society is hazardous to people because it severs the connection that people have to their internal sources of creativity, self-assuredness and happiness. Moreover, people's self-esteem becomes displaced by people's self-love. Without these connections, people become alienated from their ability to live their lives simply according to their own plans.

For Rousseau, material self-sufficiency is also a requirement for living a simple life. Material self-sufficiency is the ability to provide for the basic needs in life such as clothing, food and shelter. It is a requirement for Rousseau because like spiritual self-sufficiency, material self-sufficiency contributes to happiness. He writes, "[A]s long as they applied themselves only to tasks that a single man could accomplish and only to arts that did not need the cooperation of several hands, they lived free, healthy, good and happy lives ... and continued to enjoy among themselves the pleasures of independent intercourse."<sup>93</sup> Rousseau's concern with commercial society is that the division of labour promotes mutual dependence on others for basic needs. In the eighteenth century, thinkers like Adam Smith argued that commercial society creates mutual dependence among people through the division of labour. The common belief was that people were unable to be self-supporting in meeting their basic needs. As such, they exchanged items they were able to produce for things they could not. Smith said that it was human nature to trade. He suggested that there is "a certain propensity in human nature ... to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another ... It is common to all men, and to be

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<sup>93</sup> Rousseau, "Discourse on Inequality," 40

found in no other race of animals.”<sup>94</sup> Though Smith thought that humans naturally are traders, Rousseau thought that mutual dependency jeopardizes human happiness by corrupting the human’s natural goodness, subjecting humans to power dynamics of unequal relationships and deteriorating physical fitness.

From Rousseau’s point of view, depending on others for material needs corrupts people’s natural goodness as commercial society is not characterized by good will. In order for civilized people to meet their daily needs, they must find others who are interested in helping them because it is in their best interests to do so. Rousseau writes, “[A person] must, therefore, constantly seek to interest [others] in his fate, and make them find it profitable, either actually or apparently, to work for it.”<sup>95</sup> Rousseau suggested that people must rely on cunning to meet their goals as profit, not honesty and kindness, is a character trait that will engage people’s self-interest in commercial society.<sup>96</sup> In other words civilized people must appeal to one another’s self-interest in order to secure the means of survival. He writes, “This makes him deceitful and crafty with some, imperious and harsh with others, and makes it necessary for him to abuse all those whom he needs, when he cannot make himself feared by them, and when he does not find it in his interest to serve

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<sup>94</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edwin Cannan (New York: The Modern Library, Random House Inc, 1937), 13.

<sup>95</sup> Rousseau, “Discourse on Inequality,” 42.

<sup>96</sup> Richard Fralin, “Rousseau and Community: The Role of Moeurs in Social Change,” *History of Political Thought* 7, no.1 (Spring 1986): 135. Fralin argues that the behaviour that Rousseau observes in members of commercial society – behaving in ways so as to gain the interest of others – is the expression of individuals alienated from themselves and others. “[Alienation],” he writes, “arises out of the discrepancy between being and appearing, between what we are and the way we present ourselves to others to get ahead in the world.” Individuals are self alienated as they cannot achieve their ends on their own and must be manipulative of others rather than present their true selves. As a result, human interaction is not based on an honest representation between people as their true selves.

them in a useful way.”<sup>97</sup> Thus civilized people risked harm to their natural goodness by engaging in behaviour that was manipulative for the benefit of securing their material needs.

Not only was natural goodness risked at the price of participation in commercial society, but before this economic arrangement came into effect people knew each other well enough to know what to expect from one another. “Before Art had fashioned our manners and taught our passions to speak in ready-made terms,” he writes, “our morals were rustic but natural; and differences in conduct conveyed differences of character at first glance.”<sup>98</sup> New styles of communication accompanying the economic relations of commercial society gave the appearance of pleasantness but left people vulnerable to exploitation. He writes, “Suspicious, offenses, fears, coolness, reserve, hatred, betrayal, will constantly hide beneath this even and deceitful veil of politeness, beneath this so much vaunted urbanity which we owe to the enlightenment of our century.”<sup>99</sup> According to Rousseau, participation in commercial society makes it difficult to determine what people’s true interests are, aside from making profit, because social and economic interaction is governed by politeness. Without knowing the true intentions of others, people are vulnerable to unequal power dynamics within relationships and are, therefore, subject to exploitation. The time and resources spent trying to interest a person in providing assistance not only diminishes peoples’ natural goodness but it also forces them into unequal relationships of power. By relying on others for material needs in commercial society, people view others as means to their own ends and view one

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<sup>97</sup> Rousseau, “Discourse on Inequality,” 42.

<sup>98</sup> Rousseau, “Discourse on Sciences and Arts,” 7.

<sup>99</sup> Rousseau, “Discourse on Sciences and Arts,” 8.

another not as equals. People engage with one another less out of a desire for true interaction and companionship and more out of a physical need for the basic requirements of daily living. As a result, dependency presents a risk to equality and freedom for people in commercial society. Greater dependency on others for material or spiritual satisfaction creates an even greater gap to bridge for people to reconnect with their true spiritual and material selves.

In order to lead lives of simplicity people must be able to defend their freedom. For Rousseau, defending freedom requires not only courage but also strength. He does not find that commercial society develops these qualities in people but rather makes people vulnerable to conquest by weakening their constitutions and undermining their confidence. Commercial society disfigures the human form, argues Rousseau. As he sees it, people in commercial society have exchanged their natural fitness and courage for lives of material comfort. "As he becomes sociable and a slave," Rousseau writes, "he becomes weak, timid, and servile; his soft and effeminate manner of living completely exhausts his strength and his courage."<sup>100</sup> The retrogression from strong, self-supporting humans into weakened, civilized people poses a problem for Rousseau because he doubts their ability to protect their liberty against external threats. "How, indeed, can men overwhelmed by the least need and repelled by the least pain be expected to face up to hunger, thirst, fatigues, dangers, and death,"<sup>101</sup> he asks. He claims people were stronger, healthier and had the ability to acquire skills necessary to survive in their environment before leaving

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<sup>100</sup> Rousseau, "Discourse on Inequality," 14.

<sup>101</sup> Rousseau, "Discourse on Sciences and Arts," 21.

the state of nature, the period of human existence Rousseau identifies prior to the establishment of human-made laws. Speaking of humans, he writes,

Accustomed from infancy to bad weather and the harshness of the seasons, inured to fatigue, and forced, naked and unarmed, to defend their lives and their prey from other wild beasts, or to escape from them by running, men acquire a robust and almost unalterable constitution; the children, bringing into the world with them the excellent constitutions of their parents fortifying it by the same exercises that produced it, thus acquire all the vigor of which the human species is capable.<sup>102</sup>

In the state of nature, people survived and maintained their freedom because they were strong and skillful enough to defend against an attack if necessary. Though civilized people may not be as rugged in commercial society as they once were in the state of nature, their lack of strength is compensated for by their advances in technology; arguably they could protect their liberty by relying on technological advances in tools and weaponry. Rousseau suggests that if civilized people are to protect and maintain their freedom, they must not put their faith in advances in technology because it creates a false sense of security. "Do not cite the renowned valor of all these scientifically trained modern warriors as an objection against me. I hear praised their bravery on a day of battle, but I am not told how they bear up under extreme labors, how they withstand the harshness of the seasons and the inclemency of the weather."<sup>103</sup>

Though he concedes that technology has its advantages, Rousseau maintains that it cannot replace the original strength and skill found in those who have nothing to rely on but their own strength and wit. "Give civilized man the time to assemble all these tools around him, and he will undoubtedly overcome savage man

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<sup>102</sup> Rousseau, "Discourse on Inequality," 11.

<sup>103</sup> Rousseau, "Discourse on Sciences and Arts," 21.

with ease, but if you want to see an even more unequal contest, pit them against each other naked and unarmed, and you will soon see the advantage of having all one's strength constantly at one's disposal, of always being prepared for every event, and of always carrying one's whole self, so to speak, with one."<sup>104</sup> People who are self-supporting will always be better at defending their liberty than those who rely on technology for their protection. "Two famed Republics contended for the Empire of the World; one was very rich, and the other had nothing, and it was the latter which destroyed the first," he writes.<sup>105</sup> Moreover, for Rousseau, the over-reliance on technology poses a further risk to freedom. To be on guard always means ensuring that the technology is available and working. Rather than focusing efforts on preserving the strength and skills of the people, attention is turned towards the maintenance of tools and weapons. While these conveniences may give people a sense of preparedness and confidence, any failures or malfunctions in the technology could result in their defeat. In commercial society, civilized people are coerced through habit and custom to rely on the technology of the day and abandon their confidence in their own strength and skills. Not only do people become slaves to their weapons but they become personally alienated from their confidence in their physical abilities. For Rousseau, the guarantee of freedom rests not with a reliance on the technological advancements of commercial society but instead rests on the strength, skill and confidence of self-supporting people.

Rousseau also observes that in commercial society, the inability to be materially self-sufficient is further reinforced by dependence on modern

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<sup>104</sup> Rousseau, "Discourse on Inequality," 11-12.

<sup>105</sup> Rousseau, "Discourse on Sciences and Arts," 18.

conveniences, which makes people feel as though they cannot survive without such items. As a result, people become trapped in their unhappiness, making it unlikely they will restore their connection with their true spiritual and material selves. He explains,

[T]his was the first yoke that they unwittingly imposed upon themselves and the first source of evil they prepared for their descendents, for, besides the fact that they thus continued to soften in body and mind, and that these conveniences lost almost all their pleasantness through habit and, at the same time, degenerated into real needs, being deprived of them became much more cruel than possessing them was sweet, and people were unhappy to lose them without being happy to possess them.<sup>106</sup>

People become slaves to the modern conveniences and willingly give up their ability to be self-sufficient in exchange for comfort. Commercial society creates the illusion of simplicity but in reality only delivers convenience at the expense of happiness.

Finally, Rousseau is also critical of the political system that is required by commercial society. He is sceptical that a system devised by the wealthy to secure their interests can meet everyone's need for protection of liberty. In his opinion, it is not the kind of arrangement that protects people's freedom. The political system established by members of commercial society had one purpose only, to secure property rights so as to produce order. He writes, "Nascent society made way for the most horrible state of war; the human race, wretched and debased ... brought itself to the brink of ruin."<sup>107</sup> According to Rousseau, scarcity of land resources creates intense competition among people who are already competitive in their social interactions with one another. Those who lay claim to land based on first occupancy were threatened by those who laid claim to land based on might. Rousseau explains,

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<sup>106</sup> Rousseau, "Discourse on Inequality," 37.

<sup>107</sup> Rousseau, "Discourse on Inequality," 43.

“Between the right of the strongest and the right of the first occupant arose a perpetual conflict which came to an end only in fights and murders.”<sup>108</sup> Rousseau suggests that the people who had the most to lose by the constant fighting were the rich and wealthy. “The rich, above all, must soon have felt how disadvantageous for themselves was a state of perpetual war, in which they alone bore all the costs and in which, although all risked their lives, they alone risked their property.”<sup>109</sup> Conceivably, the fighting could continue until there was a formal agreement on property but as long as property rights were based on anything other than law, there could only be constant conflict. Says Rousseau, “[T]he rich were well aware that [their claim was] established only upon a precarious and irregular right, and that having been acquired by force, they could be taken away from them by force without their having any grounds for complaint.”<sup>110</sup> Therefore, the threat to property was the impetus to establish laws and government. As the wealthy and strong were the only ones who had property, the agreement they recommended to form laws and establish government favoured their needs over the rest of the people. As Rousseau observes, “[I]t is reasonable to believe that a thing has been invented by those to whom it is useful rather than by those whom it wrongs.”<sup>111</sup> Thus the form of political system established only suited the needs of the members of society who could afford to defend their claim to property. Those without property could not claim to benefit from the arrangement.

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<sup>108</sup> Rousseau, “Discourse on Inequality,” 43.

<sup>109</sup> Rousseau, “Discourse on Inequality,” 43.

<sup>110</sup> Rousseau, “Discourse on Inequality,” 43.

<sup>111</sup> Rousseau, “Discourse on Inequality,” 46.

For Rousseau, the correct form of laws and government would be established according to the principle that all are free and all cannot relinquish their freedom without inflicting self-harm. He writes, “[S]ince the right of property is only a matter of convention and human institution, every man can dispose of what he possesses as he pleases, but it is not the same for the essential gifts of nature, such as life and liberty, which everyone is permitted to enjoy and of which, it is at least doubtful that one has the right to divest oneself.”<sup>112</sup> The laws established by commercial society are there to protect property so as to restore order and facilitate commerce. Freedom was only a facade and fiction, used by the people with the material possessions to gain the consent of others. For Rousseau, the purpose of government is to secure people’s liberty, but by failing to make liberty the principle reason for establishing laws, commercial society will never mean freedom for the people.

In Rousseau’s view, the purpose of commercial society is to civilize humans by giving customs and traditions to them that make them appear to be something they were never intended to be. Humans, for Rousseau, were intended to live simple lives – to live free. His conception of freedom encompasses both positive liberty and negative liberty. When humans are connected with their spiritual selves, they have the capacity to create their own lives and experience happiness; in this sense humans are free from forms of spiritual dependency and are free to create their own purposes in life. When humans are connected with their true material selves, they are also free from dependence on others for their material needs and free to experience happiness that comes from simplicity. People are also free, therefore, to

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<sup>112</sup> Rousseau, “Discourse on Inequality,” 49.

interact with others on the basis of equality and recognition of equals and not out of mutual need for material or spiritual satisfaction. By civilizing people and making it seem as though they can live with one another based on need, commercial society creates personal alienation within people by severing their connection with their true spiritual and material selves.

### **3. Social Alienation**

In the previous chapter, I argued that socialists are critical of commercial society because it leads to social alienation. Though people may live together, commercial society divides them along several social, economic and political lines. In commercial society, people are not only alienated from one another, they are also alienated from their collective sense of purpose much in the same way that individuals are disconnected from their personal senses of purpose. The goal of commercial society is not to promote the collective purpose of citizens who have come together to identify their social purpose; the goal of commercial society is to promote its own continuation through the promotion of individualism and competition. Rousseau's writings identify several inequalities among people within commercial society that lead to divisions. He finds that society is divided predominantly between wealthy and poor, rulers and ruled, and those who possess power and those who do not. He claims these inequalities are not natural but are a consequence of society; moreover, the laws of society legitimize these inequalities. He finds these various inequalities problematic not only because of the threat they pose to social unity but also because of the threat they pose to human freedom. With inequalities left unchecked, members of society have become slaves to despotism. This section of the chapter will explore how, in Rousseau's view, commercial society contributes to

social alienation and the extent to which commercial society is incompatible with social unity.

### 3.1 Economic Division

Rousseau's most important criticism of commercial society is that it creates an inequality of wealth. The unequal distribution of wealth is a problem for Rousseau because, in his view, it is not only responsible for the economic divisions in society but it contributes to the political and social divisions as well. According to Rousseau, people in commercial society are socially alienated from one another by the division of labour, the establishment of private property and the unequal distribution of wealth. In his view, the deceit, conflict and contempt that accompany these economic divisions present obstacles to social unity.

For Rousseau, members of commercial society are socially alienated from each other by the division of labour. In his view, the division of labour promotes self-interest among members of society. Rousseau points to the development of metallurgy and agriculture to illustrate the division of labour.<sup>113</sup> "For the philosopher," he writes, "it is iron and wheat that civilized men and ruined the human race."<sup>114</sup> Initially Rousseau describes the discovery of the two arts as complementary; metal goods enhanced agricultural practices and farmers provided surplus food to the additional workers who were tasked with occupations other than farming.<sup>115</sup> Though

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<sup>113</sup> Rousseau, "Discourse on Inequality," 40.

<sup>114</sup> Rousseau, "Discourse on Inequality," 40.

<sup>115</sup> Williamson M. Evers, "Specialization and the Division of Labor in the Social Thought of Plato and Rousseau," *The Journal of Libertarian Studies*, 4, no.1 (Winter 1980): 45-64. Evers contrasts Rousseau to Plato and finds that Plato attempts to bring about a unified city through social stratification. He writes, "Plato's plan to organize the state on the basis of specialization is intended to produce harmonious unity." Plato's *Republic* is a search for justice by an examination of order in the soul and the city. For Plato the well-ordered soul and city have a particular order. It rests on the notion that the reasonable part of the soul, which is smaller, should rule over the passionate or appetitive

seemingly compatible, Rousseau uncovers a problem corresponding with the two industries. For Rousseau, the division of labour brings to light the natural inequalities amongst humans that could be used to further individual self-interest. He writes, “[T]he strongest did more work; the most skilful turned his to better advantage; the most ingenious found ways to curtail his work; the farmer needed more iron, or the blacksmith more wheat; and, by working equally, one earned a great deal, while the other barely had enough to live on.”<sup>116</sup> The division of labour provided the opportunity for people to begin to distinguish themselves according to their professions and use their skills to serve their self-interest. Not all developed their skills equally, however, and some people were not as successful as others, thereby creating a division between those who were able to succeed versus those who were not.

For Rousseau, the division of labour also aroused in people deceitful behaviour which further contributed to social alienation. As discussed in the section on Personal Alienation above, according to Rousseau, the division of labour in commercial society caused people to rely on deceitfulness to secure their daily basic needs. As a result the bonds of society could not be founded on mutual trust. Not only does the presence of deceitfulness in society contribute to personal alienation

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parts of the soul, which are larger and unable to govern. According to Plato, the city should take on similar proportions and each part ought to do what it does best. Through social stratification, the city becomes unified. Lucio Colletti, “Rousseau as Critic of ‘Civil Society,’” in *From Rousseau to Lenin Studies in Ideology and Society*, trans. John Merrington and Judith White (London: NLB, 1972) 143-193. On the division of labour, Colletti compares Rousseau to Adam Smith and determines that Rousseau does not perceive the value of economic development and its capacity to improve the lives of members of society, on the whole, as Smith does. He writes, “[I]n Rousseau civilization goes together with the ruin of the human race ... for Smith, the opposite is true.” As a result, Colletti observes that Rousseau’s criticism of the division of labour led him away from developing an argument for an integrated commercial economy.

<sup>116</sup> Rousseau, “Discourse on Inequality,” 41. The situation that Rousseau relates does not sound like justice.

and the discontinuation of human natural goodness but it also illustrates social alienation and the economic division persistent among people.

For Rousseau, the establishment of private property socially alienates members of commercial society from each other. For Rousseau, the establishment of private property contributes to what he called the “ruin of humankind.” He writes,

The first man who, having fenced off a plot of land, thought of saying ‘This is mine’ and found people simple enough to believe him was the real founder of civil society. How many crimes, wars, murders, how many miseries and horrors might the human race have been spared by the one who, upon pulling up the stakes or filling in the ditch, had shouted to his fellow men, ‘Beware of listening to this imposter; you are lost, if you forget that the fruits of the earth belong to all and that the earth belongs to no one.’<sup>117</sup>

The establishment of private property related to the division of labour is important for Rousseau because it results in all-consuming conflict. Conflict is instigated by the establishment of property rights created for some but not for others. Those who practice agriculture can make claims to the land they use while those who do not cannot make claims with the same strength of argument. Rousseau writes, “Labour alone gives the farmer a right to the produce of the ground he has tilled and, consequently, a right to the land, at least until the harvest, and thus from year to year, that which constitutes continuous possession is easily transformed into property.”<sup>118</sup> Though the establishment of private property is beneficial to farmers by giving them security to know that they can plan their production into the future, it has unforeseen consequences for the rest of society. The establishment of private property creates insecurity between those with land and those without; those with land have greater resources and wealth than those without. Moreover, this insecurity

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<sup>117</sup> Rousseau, “Discourse on Inequality,” 34.

<sup>118</sup> Rousseau, “Discourse on Inequality,” 41.

is heightened by population growth and increasing claims on available arable land. Thus the establishment of private property creates the conditions for conflict by excluding some from laying claims to land and therefore wealth.

In commercial society, members are alienated from one another by the legitimization of the inequalities stemming from the division of labour and property rights through agreements and law. Though intended to restore peace, agreements breed contempt for those members without security by those members secure in their rights and wealth. Agreements are significant for Rousseau as creating them not only legitimizes inequality of wealth but it also leads to the eventual loss of freedom for people. As mentioned, conditions for conflict are set by the allocation of land resources to some but not to everyone. Furthermore, according to Rousseau, not only do the wealthy develop an appetite for riches; they also have a taste for power and a desire for conquest which can lead to further conflict. He writes, "The rich, for their part, had scarcely become acquainted with the pleasure of domination, before they began to disdain all others, and, using their former slaves to subdue new ones, they thought of nothing but subjugating and enslaving their neighbours."<sup>119</sup> Rousseau describes how, out of desperation and a desire not only for self-preservation but more importantly for the preservation of possessions, the land owners conspired against the others to create an arrangement that would bring an end to conflict and secure property. He writes, "[T]he rich man, pressed on by necessity, finally conceived the most carefully thought out plan that ever entered the human mind; this was to use in his favour the very forces of those who were attacking him, to make his adversaries into his defenders, to inspire them with other

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<sup>119</sup> Rousseau, "Discourse on Inequality," 43.

maxims and to give them other institutions, which were as favourable to him as natural law was opposed.”<sup>120</sup> Though the conflict arose out of the unequal distribution of property, the landowners were able to appeal to everyone’s desire for freedom as a means to gain support for their proposed contract. Rousseau writes,

All ran headlong into their chains, hoping to ensure their liberty, for, along with enough reason to be conscious of the advantages of political institutions, they did not have enough experience to foresee their dangers; those most capable of anticipating the abuses were precisely those who counted on profiting from them, and even the wise saw the necessity of resolving to sacrifice one part of their liberty to preserve the rest, just as a wounded man has his arm cut off to save the rest of his body.<sup>121</sup>

As their desire for freedom was the only thing that all held in common, the agreement became law. Security in the right to property was established for the landowners and thus the unequal distribution of wealth in society was institutionalized.

### **3.2 Political Division**

Rousseau observes that the political system that supports the emergence of commercial society in several ways creates divisions leading to social alienation. He sees how the political system is misused by members of society, including the leaders, to pursue private interests. In this pursuit, people are politically divided from one another. Rousseau also discusses the failure of the law to apply equally to all members of society creating further opportunities for exploitation of the weak by the powerful. In explaining how members of commercial society are physically separated from each other by their own pursuits, Rousseau also highlights the spiritual division that results from the pursuit of self-interest: it is the collective disconnection from the

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<sup>120</sup> Rousseau, “Discourse on Inequality,” 44.

<sup>121</sup> Rousseau, “Discourse on Inequality,” 44.

general will as all pursue their own interest. The disconnection from the general will prevents people from uniting and creating a good and just society. Political divisions in commercial society keep people socially alienated from one another.

One of the political divisions Rousseau observes in commercial society is the appearance of the divisions of political interests among the rulers and the ruled, but also between the members of the ruled. He argues that there is not a shared vision that unites the ruler and the ruled in commercial society. Rulers look not to the common good but look to satisfy only their own private interests. He writes, "Far from the leader having any natural interest in the happiness of private individuals, it is not uncommon for him to seek his own happiness in their misery."<sup>122</sup> Moreover, factions can emerge that further undermine unity amongst the members of society. Rousseau writes, "Examine carefully what happens in any decision whatever, and you will see that the general will is always for the common good, but that a secret schism often develops, a tacit confederation, which causes the natural disposition of the assembly to be circumvented for the sake of private purposes."<sup>123</sup> In other words, for Rousseau, leaders do not rule with the best interests of the citizenry in mind and this creates a divide between rulers and the ruled. Without the demonstration of leadership, factions can form to take further advantage of the vulnerable and create even greater divides between the people. Thus commercial society is divided politically by leadership and by factions serving their own self-interest.

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<sup>122</sup> Jean Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on Political Economy," in *Rousseau's Political Writings*, ed. Alan Ritter and Julia Conaway Bondanella, trans. Julia Conaway Bondanella (New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 1988) 60.

<sup>123</sup> Rousseau, "Discourse on Political Economy," 60.

A second political division Rousseau observes is further social alienation among members of society perpetuated by two related political barriers. The first barrier Rousseau observes is a lack of commitment by the government to engage in developing civil society. The second barrier to political unity is a citizen body that has a preference for comfort and ease. Rousseau suggests that government gives a limited role for itself in commercial society, the role of facilitating commerce. He writes, "But our modern governments, which believe that they have done everything there is to do when they have raised money, never even imagine that it is necessary or possible to go that far."<sup>124</sup> For Rousseau, a further contributing factor to political division is the citizen's disengagement and inexperience in political processes. The people are more interested in securing their property in the hopes of gaining prosperity than they are interested in preserving their freedom. He writes, "[T]he people, already accustomed to dependence, tranquility, and the conveniences of life, and already incapable of breaking its chains, consented to increase its servitude in order to secure its tranquility."<sup>125</sup> The stability required by commercial society in order to progress is a greater goal to work towards for the people than the robust civic engagement that democracy requires. Commercial society is divided politically by a lack of vision on the part of government to take a greater role in promoting a political society and by a citizen body disengaged from the political process.

A third political division Rousseau identifies in commercial society is the unequal application of the laws. For the good of all members of society, the laws should be applied equally to all. He writes, "It is to the law alone that men owe justice

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<sup>124</sup> Rousseau, "Discourse on Political Economy," 67.

<sup>125</sup> Rousseau, "Discourse on Inequality," 52.

and liberty.”<sup>126</sup> He suggests that leaders in particular should obey the laws as much as subjects of the law should. He writes, “The leader’s most pressing concern, as well as his essential duty, is, therefore, to oversee the observance of the laws of which he is the minister and upon which all his authority is founded. If he must make others observe the laws, he should, with even greater reason, observe them himself, as one who enjoys their protection.”<sup>127</sup> In commercial society, where law is not applied evenly, people are ruled by tyranny. As a result, members of society who have the greatest advantages use them to fulfil their own self-interest and to exploit the vulnerable with impunity. Rousseau writes, “The law that is abused at the same time serves the powerful as an offensive weapon and as a shield against the weak, and the pretext of the public good is always the most dangerous scourge of the people.”<sup>128</sup> Without equal application of the law, members of commercial society can exploit the political system to further their own self-interest. Weaknesses in the political system keep members of commercial society socially alienated from one another through the pursuit of self-interest, but weaknesses also keep members of commercial society from uniting their wills collectively to create a society that looks out for the common interest.

### **3.3 Social Division**

Rousseau is certain that commercial society will never truly unite its members. Although commercial society seemingly brings the members of society together through regular social and economic interaction driven by the division of labour, Rousseau finds that mutual dependency, created by commercial society,

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<sup>126</sup> Rousseau, “Discourse on Political Economy,” 64.

<sup>127</sup> Rousseau, “Discourse on Political Economy,” 64

<sup>128</sup> Rousseau, “Discourse on Political Economy,” 72.

actually produces the opposite effect of unity and disunites members by creating fierce competition amongst them. For Rousseau, the close proximity of people brought about by living together draws people into the habit of making comparisons with each other. He writes, “[A]s soon as united in the same society, [the people] are forced to compare themselves to each other, and to take into account the differences that they find in their habitual dealings with each other.”<sup>129</sup> These comparisons lead individuals to compete against each other for public esteem. They compete against one another because, as identified earlier in this chapter, everyone claims a right to esteem; it is something to which all individuals feel entitled. He explains,

*I would point out how this universal desire for reputation, honours, and preference, which consumes us all, exercises and holds up our talents and strengths to comparison; how it excites and multiplies our passions; and how, by making all men competitors, rivals or, rather, enemies, it daily causes defeats, successes and disasters of all kinds, by making so many aspirants take part in the same contest.*<sup>130</sup>

Out of his observations of society, Rousseau identifies not just one type of esteem but others as well. For example, political esteem is a further form of esteem for which people compete. Political esteem is the favour that political leaders bestow on the ordinary members of society who were successful in catching the leaders’ attention in some manner. He writes, “[T]here must have come a time when the eyes of the people were so bewitched that their leaders had only to say to the least of men: ‘Be great, you and all your posterity,’ and he immediately appeared great in everyone’s eyes as well as in his own.”<sup>131</sup> Arguably, political esteem is even scarcer and intensifies competition because it is concentrated in the hands of a few

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<sup>129</sup> Rousseau, “Discourse on Inequality,” 53.

<sup>130</sup> Rousseau, “Discourse on Inequality,” 54.

<sup>131</sup> Rousseau, “Discourse on Inequality,” 53.

members of society with political authority and it has long-term benefits for the lucky recipient. Thus with scarce commodities such as public and political esteem scarcely available within commercial society, members will continue to compete with each other and will never be able to truly unite.

While many types of inequality exist within society Rousseau argues that the most damaging form is the disparity of wealth. The reason for this, he claims, is that all other forms of inequality can be purchased by wealth. One may enjoy prestige associated with being a high-ranking official but Rousseau suggests that a wealthy individual can buy that prestige. He writes, "I would show that among these four kinds of inequality, the personal qualities are the origin of all the others, and that wealth is the one to which all are reduced in the end, because, being the most immediately useful to a person's well-being and the easiest to transmit it is easily used to purchase all the rest."<sup>132</sup> In other words, one may lack talent, skill or political power but may still be able to compensate for the omission based on the degree of wealth one possesses. The possession of wealth in commercial society contributes to social disunity by giving the wealthy purchasing power to acquire the means that contribute to individual distinction. As the competition for esteem is a constant factor within commercial society, the presence of wealth for a few intensifies the competition. As long as people possess the means to distinguish themselves from others, social unity will remain elusive. Finally, the inequality of wealth also creates feelings that run counter to fraternity and unity in society. Repeatedly, Rousseau described how the wealthy sought to dominate less fortunate individuals. Clearly they displayed contempt for everyone else in society. Likewise, the poor for their part

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<sup>132</sup> Rousseau, "Discourse on Inequality," 53.

could only envy that which they did not have. These feelings of distrust prevent a society from coming together in any lasting fashion and they would not be present if not for the disparity in wealth among the people. Unequal wealth in commercial society creates economic division, leads to social disruption and results in political tyranny.

#### **4. Overcoming Personal and Social Alienation: Rousseau's Recommendations**

Embedded within Rousseau's critiques are proposals on how to achieve the ideal society wherein personal and social alienation have no place. In the *Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau describes the period between leaving the state of nature and entering into an agreement with one another. This leads to institutionalized inequality which Rousseau is compelled to denounce. Rousseau closes the door on ever returning to a simpler time in human social development as a means of mending the social ills. He does however offer some hope that humans can preserve their freedom, create meaning in their lives and avoid oppression. First, though, there must be recognition that the inequality present in society is not a natural consequence of history and, second, given that modern governments are not consented to by the people, they should be remade. This last section of the chapter will focus on Rousseau's ideas for addressing the problems he has found in commercial society.

##### **4.1 Overcoming Personal Alienation**

For Rousseau, the purpose of human life is to live simply according to one's internal sense of purpose. In order to accomplish this goal, humans must be materially and spiritually self-sufficient. Commercial society causes people to experience personal alienation because the entire structure of society interferes with

their pursuit of a simple life by imposing customs and traditions that civilize people. Through the process of civilization, humans lose their connection to their true material and spiritual selves. To address the inability of commercial society to provide the conditions for people to lead simple lives, Rousseau makes several recommendations. This section will explore his ideas.

For Rousseau, to overcome personal alienation people must be able to give up spiritual dependency and reconnect with their higher selves. Reconnection with the higher self provides durable happiness which can only be had when people experience true freedom. On spending time alone, away from the bustle of society, he explains,

What do we enjoy in such a situation? Nothing external to ourselves, nothing if not ourselves and our own existence. As long as this state lasts, we are sufficient unto ourselves, like God. The sentiment of existence, stripped of any other emotion, is in itself a precious sentiment of contentment and of peace which alone would suffice to make this existence dear and sweet to anyone able to spurn all the sensual and earthly impressions which incessantly come to distract us from it and to trouble its sweetness here-below.<sup>133</sup>

In commercial society, however, Rousseau describes satisfaction as coming from possessing what others covet—public esteem. Gaining happiness at the expense of others can only be the result of competition among humans and the extreme corruption of natural human goodness. In the pursuit of happiness, in commercial society people deny their natural goodness and exchange lasting happiness and freedom for fleeting happiness. In order to lead a simple life, humans must find within themselves an ability to be self-contented and stop competing with others for esteem.

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<sup>133</sup> Rousseau, *Reveries*, 69.

For Rousseau, it is unnatural to be dependent on one another. This is not to suggest that people are naturally unsympathetic to one another. Not only are people naturally good, they are also, Rousseau claims, naturally compassionate beings. He writes, "It is, therefore, very certain that compassion is a natural sentiment, which, by moderating the activity of self-esteem in each individual, contributes to the mutual preservation of the whole species."<sup>134</sup> The human species flourished, in part, because natural compassion moved people to aid one another for the common good. Commercial society, however, incites its participants to operate on the grounds of personal self-interest, thereby quelling natural goodness and the feelings of natural compassion within individuals.

For Rousseau if humans are to live simply, they must be capable of defending their freedom. He argues that humans are endowed perfectly with the ability to defend their freedom but commercial society has undermined human fitness by promoting dependence on technology. Modern living has weakened the human constitution by changing the way people live. Moreover, whereas it might seem reasonable to assume that the wealthy fare better in commercial society, Rousseau points out that the rich and the poor alike suffer from the changes in lifestyle. He writes,

The extreme inequality in the manner of living, the excessive idleness of some, the excessive labours of others, the ease of exciting and satisfying our appetites and our sensual desires, the overly refined foods of the rich, which nourish them with constipating sauces and prostrate them with indigestion, the bad food of the poor, which they more often lack than not, so that they greedily overburden their stomachs whenever they can.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Rousseau, "Discourse on Inequality," 29.

<sup>135</sup> Rousseau, "Discourse on Inequality," 13.

In addition, moral standards have changed with the rise of commercial society. "The ancient politicians forever spoke of morals and virtue; ours speak only of commerce and money."<sup>136</sup> In commercial society the focus of society has shifted from the development of courageous people to the acquisition of wealth. When people embrace convenience they reject their true selves as courageous, free beings. Changing the moral standards of society and weakening the human species through the pursuit of modern conveniences contributes to the personal alienation that people in commercial society experience.<sup>137</sup>

Rousseau points out in *On Social Contract* how transformative it can be for people to join with one another in forming the civil state which is not to be confused with becoming "civilized." In the latter, people give in to their desires for self-love rather than preserving their self-esteem and upholding virtue. He writes,

This passage from the state of nature to the civil state produces a most remarkable change in man, by substituting justice for instinct in his conduct, and giving his actions the morality they previously lacked. Only when the voice of duty succeeds physical impulse and right succeeds appetite does man, who until then considered only himself, find himself compelled to act on different principles and to consult his reason before listening to his inclinations.<sup>138</sup>

In joining with others into a social contract people undergo a transformation where the need to serve their own personal interests becomes secondary to serving the

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<sup>136</sup> Rousseau, "Discourse on the Sciences and Arts," 18.

<sup>137</sup> Mark S. Cladis, "Rousseau and the Redemptive Mountain Village: The Way of Family, Work, Community, and Love," *Interpretation* 29, no.1 (Fall 2001): 35-54. Cladis argues that Rousseau's fictional works can also be a source of solutions that Rousseau has found for providing humans with a "full and flourishing human existence." Cladis suggests that Rousseau's *Julie* depicts a main character, Julie, who "places common sense above philosophy, candidness and sincerity above tact and tactics, the useful and agreeable above frivolity and luxury, and character and virtue above wealth and social status." Cladis notes that even the environment where Julie lives contributes to healthy sociability amongst the local mountain folk. The geography and weather perform a regulating function either encouraging sociability in the warm summer months or discouraging it in winter. Moreover, Julie's household is self-sufficient and provides for all its needs internally.

<sup>138</sup> Rousseau, "On Social Contract," 95

interest of the common good. By neutralizing the disposition to satisfy self-interest, people in the civil state can make those internal reconnections to their higher selves.

## **4.2 Overcoming Social Alienation**

For Rousseau, any attempts at creating social unity must be supported by institutional change in order to create the necessary environment that will foster and maintain the civic qualities that a harmonious community requires. He writes, "I had seen that everything is rooted in politics and that, whatever might be attempted, no people would ever be other than the nature of their government made them."<sup>139</sup> For Rousseau there is a significant correlation between the types of institutions a society has and its outcomes in terms of values, customs and culture. Thus, one of the most significant institutions that Rousseau developed as having the capacity to initiate and maintain social change in all the critical areas he identified is the general will. This section of the chapter will explore the various ways in which the general will can ameliorate the various divisions of commercial society.

### **4.2.1 Overcoming Economic Divisions**

Absolute equality of wealth is not what Rousseau proposes to achieve social unity. Nor does he want the poor to take from the rich. Instead, Rousseau identifies measures that would address each of the factors that contributed to inequality. His goal was not to eliminate wealth accumulation in society completely, but he did want to install measures to protect the vulnerable. Rousseau begins with proposing the social contract, one that does not favor one group or set of interests over another. A defining feature of the social contract is the establishment of the general will which

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<sup>139</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Confessions," in *Rousseau's Political Writings*, ed. Alan Ritter and Julia Conaway Bondanella, trans. Julia Conaway Bondanella (New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 1988), 185.

forms the political and social foundation for the community. He also recommends new ways of thinking about property including how best to distribute it. Finally, Rousseau identifies citizen roles and responsibilities and proposes a way of life that satisfies material and social needs without creating overdependence on one another. These measures taken together will promote social unity.

In Rousseau's criticism of commercial society, he found the pervasiveness of the inequality of wealth throughout society to be legitimized by the laws created by wealthy landowners to protect their property. As a result, possession of land became entrenched as a property right. For Rousseau, the first step in remedying this problem is to create a social contract that recognizes the fundamental equality of all the contractors. Fundamentally different from the previous agreements of which Rousseau is critical, the social contract contains clauses that ensure equality for all. The most important, however, is the clause which describes the absolute surrender of individual rights. Rousseau writes, "Rightly understood, these clauses can all be reduced to one alone, namely, the total alienation of each associate with all his rights to the whole community."<sup>140</sup> To be clear, here Rousseau is using the term alienation in its legal sense as it relates to property. He adds, "[S]ince each individual gives himself entirely, the condition is equal to all, and since the condition is equal to all, no one has an interest in making it burdensome for the others."<sup>141</sup> In other words, people entering into a social contract with one another give up all of their individual rights, such as the right to defend one's life. By entering the social contract, members agree to give up their previous existence for a new one; now the collective

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<sup>140</sup> Rousseau, "On Social Contract," 92

<sup>141</sup> Rousseau, "On Social Contract," 92.

defends the individual's right to life. By developing the social contract with these conditions, Rousseau tries to minimize the opportunity for some associates to have an advantage over others. The most significant element of Rousseau's solution to the problems of commercial society is his conception of the general will.<sup>142</sup> As the organizing principle of society, Rousseau's conception of the general will exemplifies fundamental equality and it always tends to the common good. The general will ensures equality because it is composed of all the contracting members of society. Rousseau writes, "Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme control of the general will."<sup>143</sup> The general will concerns everyone equally. He explains that "the general will, to be truly so, must be general in its object as well as in its essence; that it must come from all to be applied to all; and that it loses its natural rectitude when it tends toward some individual and determinate object."<sup>144</sup> Finally, Rousseau argues that the general will can only look to the common good of its members. "[T]he sovereign power has no need to give a guarantee to the subjects, because it is impossible for the body to want to harm all its members, and we shall see hereafter that it cannot harm any one of them as an individual."<sup>145</sup>

Another measure Rousseau introduces to prevent inequality of wealth from taking hold in civil society is to reform the allocation of land and the right to property. In commercial society, landowners accumulated more land than they were able to put into production by themselves, creating scarcity in the resource and contributing

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<sup>142</sup> A comprehensive discussion on the general will as one of Rousseau's major contributions to political thought cannot fit within the scope of this thesis. One may look to Judith Shklar's entry in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* as a starting point for discussion on the elements of Rousseau's general will. See Judith Shklar, "General Will," in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, ed. Philip P. Wiener (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968, 1973) 275-281.

<sup>143</sup> Rousseau, "On Social Contract," 93.

<sup>144</sup> Rousseau, "On Social Contract," 102.

<sup>145</sup> Rousseau, "On Social Contract," 94.

to conflicts between people. For Rousseau, one of the conditions of the right of occupancy and, therefore, property, is that possession of land must not exceed what one can use. He writes, "Once he has his share, he must limit himself to it, and he has no other claim against the community."<sup>146</sup> Land must be put to agricultural use. It could not lie fallow and still be claimed as someone's property. He explains, "[O]ne must occupy only the area one needs to subsist ... one must take possession of it not by a vain ceremony but by labour and cultivation, the only sign of ownership, that in the absence of titles, should be respected by others."<sup>147</sup> By allocating land according to need, Rousseau ensures that all receive some land for their basic survival. By adding conditions to what constitutes rights of property based on the ability of citizens to put land to agricultural use, Rousseau prevents the accumulation of land to the exclusion of other citizens. Each property owner is protected by the force of the community and the general will. Rousseau writes, "What man loses by the social contract is his natural liberty and an unlimited right to everything that tempts him and to everything he can take; what he gains is civil liberty and the ownership of everything he possesses."<sup>148</sup> Rousseau does not eliminate the idea of property but he does reframe the concept of property rights by denying it as a natural right and presenting it as a social right.

In his work *Discourse on Political Economy*, Rousseau outlines the role of the government as it relates to the economic well-being of the citizens; in *On Social Contract*, he counsels citizens on their duties concerning wealth. The role of the government, according to Rousseau, is to protect the citizens from the effects of

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<sup>146</sup> Rousseau, "On Social Contract," 96.

<sup>147</sup> Rousseau, "On Social Contract," 97.

<sup>148</sup> Rousseau, "On Social Contract," 96.

unequal distribution of wealth. He writes, "It is ... one of the most important concerns of the government to prevent the extreme inequality of fortunes, not by taking wealth away from those who possess it but by depriving everyone of the means of accumulating it, and not by building poorhouses but by protecting citizens from becoming impoverished."<sup>149</sup> He suggests that it is the government's responsibility to deter the rich from using their wealth to acquire more while at the same time ensuring that the vulnerable in society do not fall prey to the wealthy. The government's role is to promote economic stability.<sup>150</sup> Citizens, however, must do their part to create stability as well; economic stability is also dependent on the virtue of the citizens. "With regard to wealth," he explains, "no citizen should be rich enough to be able to buy another and none poor enough to be forced to sell himself, which presupposes moderation in wealth and influence on the part of the upper classes, and moderation in avarice and covetousness on the part of the lower classes."<sup>151</sup> His message to citizens is that with regard to wealth, citizens can contribute to social unity by not acting on the impulses that wealth, or the lack thereof, creates. The rich should not give in to ostentation and the poor should not be envious of what others possess. Rousseau's solution is for government to promote moderation while providing opportunity for the citizens to fulfill their duties.

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<sup>149</sup> Rousseau, "Discourse on Political Economy," 72.

<sup>150</sup> John C. O'Neal, "Rousseau's Theory of Wealth," *History of European Ideas* 7, no.5 (1986): 460. O'Neal identifies that Rousseau advocated the introduction of a tax regime so as to limit the extreme effects of wealth accumulation of the members of the community. According to O'Neal, Rousseau recommended the use of sumptuary taxes and a system of proportional taxation on agricultural goods.

<sup>151</sup> Rousseau, "On Social Contract," 116.

#### **4.2.2 Overcoming Political Divisions**

Rousseau observes that within commercial society, political power becomes concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. Political power can also accumulate among factions that may form within government. Those who possess political power use it to satisfy their own self-interest rather than the interests of the people. However, concentration of political power is not inevitable. To address these problems Rousseau further describes the versatility of the general will and its protective functions as a political institution. In addition, he introduces the idea of the lawgiver, a figure who possesses the experience and foresight that the people lack themselves. This section will look at Rousseau's solutions to political inequality in more detail.

For Rousseau, the general will as a political institution protects against political tyranny while promoting political community. Rousseau does not deny the need for a supreme authority in society but he does not subscribe to the belief that power and authority must be vested in one person, such as a monarch. Instead he envisions the general will of the people as the supreme authority. Out of their mutual commitment to one another, the people form the general will. Rousseau writes, "[E]ach person, in giving himself to all, gives himself to no one, and as there are no associates over whom he does not acquire the same right as he concedes to them over himself, he gains the equivalent of all that he loses and more force to preserve what he has."<sup>152</sup> The general will is dependent on the assembly of the members in order to fulfill its function as the sovereign. Rousseau writes, "I say, therefore, that sovereignty, being nothing more than the exercise of the general will, can never be

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<sup>152</sup> Rousseau, "On Social Contract," 93.

alienated, and that the sovereign, which is merely a collective being, can only be represented by itself.”<sup>153</sup> With the general will conceived in such a way, political power and legislative authority remain diffuse amongst the members of the association.

Though the general will protects against social alienation caused by political division, it could be vulnerable to the same problems of inexperience that the people were vulnerable to in commercial society. He writes, “It follows from what has gone before that the general will is always in the right and always tends towards the public utility, but it does not follow that the decisions of the people are always equally correct.”<sup>154</sup> One solution is to draw from the wisdom of the lawgiver, which will be discussed below, but Rousseau also recommends further precautions to preserve the integrity of the general will. He writes, “It is important, therefore, in order to have a clear enunciation of the general will, that there be no partial association in the state and that each citizen speak only for himself.”<sup>155</sup> Rousseau writes, “By itself, the people always wants the good, but does not always see it. The general will is always in the right, but the judgment that guides it is not always enlightened.”<sup>156</sup>

In addition to the general will, Rousseau recommends a few precautionary measures as outlined above; however, the most significant measure he recommends to make up for the people’s lack of experience is the lawgiver. For Rousseau, the lawgiver is an exceptional individual who possesses detailed knowledge of the human condition and who is able to apply his knowledge in

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<sup>153</sup> Rousseau, “On Social Contract,” 98.

<sup>154</sup> Rousseau, “On Social Contract,” 100.

<sup>155</sup> Rousseau, “On Social Contract,” 101.

<sup>156</sup> Rousseau, “On Social Contract,” 107.

founding the people of the ideal society. He writes, "To discover the rules of society most suitable for nations, it would require a superior intelligence, who saw all the passions of men without feeling any of them; who had no relation to our nature yet knew it thoroughly; who was independent of our happiness, yet truly willing to pay attention to ours."<sup>157</sup> The lawgiver's task, according to Rousseau, is to transform the people from self-interested individuals into communally minded people.

To achieve his task, the lawgiver provides the people with laws that will form the basis of their society. Rousseau explains, "This office, which sets up the republic, does not enter into its constitution; it is a particular and superior function."<sup>158</sup> The kinds of laws this individual will put forward are the kinds of laws that an enlightened people would chose for themselves. He writes, "In order for a nascent people to appreciate the sound political maxims and follow the fundamental rules of statecraft, the effect would have to become the cause; the social spirit, which should be the product of the way in which the country was founded would have to preside over the founding itself; and before the creation of the laws, men would have to be what they should become by means of those same laws."<sup>159</sup> In other words, the people are not yet capable of receiving the wisdom of the lawgiver because they have not attained the level of enlightenment that his laws are meant to impart. The lawgiver, therefore, has a further role to play in creating the people. In addition to providing the laws for the citizens, the lawgiver must also undertake the transformation of the people.

Anyone who dares to undertake the founding of a people should feel himself capable of changing human nature, so to speak, of transforming each individual, who by himself is a perfectly solitary whole, into part of a greater

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<sup>157</sup> Rousseau, "On Social Contract," 107-108.

<sup>158</sup> Rousseau, "On Social Contract," 108.

<sup>159</sup> Rousseau, "On Social Contract," 109

whole from which this individual receives, in a way, his life and his being; of altering the human constitution in order to strengthen it; and of substituting a partial and artificial existence for the physical and independent existence we have all received from nature.<sup>160</sup>

For Rousseau, the lawgiver helps the members of the community overcome social alienation by connecting individuals to one another and to their collective sense of purpose.

#### **4.2.3 Overcoming Social Divisions**

As discussed above, the best way for people to live is self-sufficiently; in this way, they are able to preserve their freedom and live their own lives according to their own senses of purpose. The likelihood of people disbanding and living more independently, however, is low in Rousseau's opinion. His recommendation for the social contract ensures a social existence for people rather than an independent one. A solution Rousseau proposes to overcoming social alienation is to grant esteem based on public service.<sup>161</sup> He explains, "The ranks of citizens should, therefore, be regulated, not according to their personal merit, for this would mean leaving the magistrates with the means of applying the law in an almost arbitrary fashion, but according to the actual services they render to the state, which are open to a more exact assessment."<sup>162</sup> Service rendered to the public has positive side

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<sup>160</sup> Rousseau, "On Social Contract," 108.

<sup>161</sup> Richard Fralin, "Rousseau and Community," 144. Granting esteem based on public service is not the only solution Rousseau proposes for overcoming social alienation and social inequality. Fralin notes that public festivals, as opposed to other forms of entertainment common in Rousseau's time, were opportunities for members of the public to renew social bonds with one another. Fralin attributes this insight to work undertaken by Jean Starobinski. Fralin writes, "[T]he public festival is a moment of perfect transparency in which no one has anything to hide, an unmediated, spontaneous experience in which the public is simultaneously actor and spectator." For Rousseau, during these moments of public gathering and festivities, people are able to desert the pretenses required in commercial society as all are participating equally. There is no need to seek more recognition from one another as all participants come together in unison.

<sup>162</sup> Rousseau, "Discourse on Inequality," 53, note 2.

effects for the members of society. First, it provides a measurable standard to which all citizens can strive. As such, all have the opportunity to acquire esteem through their public acts of service, not just a select few. Second, the power of esteem is harnessed for the common good and the collectively defined purposes of the community. A consequence of living together is that competition is more likely to occur; however, people may be less inclined to compete against one another if esteem is no longer seen as a scarce commodity. Public service transforms esteem to an unlimited resource as there is no limit to performing good deeds.

Rousseau's further recommendation for overcoming social alienation is the delivery of a civic education. To ensure both the maintenance of the general will Rousseau recommends an education for the public in their duties as citizens. Rousseau is concerned that without the effects of education, all other measures employed to ensure the endurance of the general will would come to naught. Therefore, Rousseau recommends that the government take responsibility for the education of the public in civic virtues. The efforts of the government, however, must not be directed towards adults as "[i]t is too late to change our natural inclinations, once they have taken their course."<sup>163</sup> Citizen virtues must be instilled within the youth before self-interest takes root. As such, the government must assume the parental task of educating the children so as to produce citizens that readily identify with the community over themselves. Rousseau explains,

If children are brought up in common in the bosom of equality, if they are steeped in the laws of the state and all the precepts of the general will, if they are taught to respect them above all things, if they are surrounded by examples and objects which constantly remind them of the tender mother who nourishes them, of all the love she bears for them, of the inestimable benefits they receive

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<sup>163</sup> Rousseau, "Discourse on Political Economy," 73.

from her, and of what they owe her in return, let us not doubt that they will learn to love each other as brothers, never willing anything but what society wills, substituting the actions of men and citizens for the vain and empty prattle of sophists, and one day becoming the defenders and fathers of the homeland whose children they will have been for so long.<sup>164</sup>

Without a civic education or the institution of the general will, Rousseau argues, that humans are unable to overcome social alienation.<sup>165</sup> Within commercial society, people are unable to flourish socially because they are not equipped to recognize others as anything other than obstacles to overcome. Moreover, leaders misuse the laws to their own advantage and to the disadvantage of the poor. With a civic education, children will learn to love the laws and, therefore, will not seek to corrupt them. Rousseau's education overcomes the tendency to be self-interested and instead redirects the focus towards the community and other citizens.

## 5. Conclusion

It is clear that Rousseau believes that commercial society leads not only to personal alienation but to social alienation as well. He argues that as people become "civilized" by commercial society, they lose their true human purpose which is to live a life according to their own purposes. Instead commercial society creates material and spiritual dependence and arouses characteristics in people which drive them to

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<sup>164</sup> Rousseau, "Discourse on Political Economy," 74.

<sup>165</sup> Carole Pateman, "Rousseau, John Stuart Mill and GDH Cole: A Participatory Theory of Democracy," in *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 25. It may be difficult for community members to make an effort to be informed and participate in building community if they have a preference for ease and comfort; their preference for ease may be stronger than their desire to participate as citizens. A solution to overcoming this particular stumbling block can be found, however. Pateman discusses Rousseau's theory of participation. Her discussion draws on John Plamenatz and his observations that Rousseau's works are concerned with the "psychological impact of social and political institutions." Pateman suggests that for Rousseau, active participation in political processes will train individuals to overcome their natural inclinations. She writes, "Once the participatory system is established ... it becomes self-sustaining because the very qualities that are required of individual citizens if the system is to work successfully are those that the process of participation itself develops and fosters; the more the individual citizen participates the better able he is to do so."

be self-interested and competitive with one another. He also concludes that commercial society cannot produce unity amongst its members but can only perpetuate conflict and slavery. Conflict arises out of the unequal distribution of wealth and is intensified by individual pursuits of esteem. For Rousseau, commercial society cannot offer any means of improvement for people as individuals with a shared purpose.

## **Chapter 3—Rousseau's Contributions to Socialist Thought**

### **1. Introduction**

Throughout his political writings, Jean-Jacques Rousseau offered arguments that commercial society leads not only to personal alienation but to social alienation as well. His early works were dedicated to exposing the problems with commercial society that ultimately resulted in the loss of human freedom. In the *First Discourse*, he described how the process of civilization through the development of the arts and sciences promoted dependency on technology rather than self-reliance, thus leading to an inauthentic existence for human beings. In the *Discourse on Inequality*, he articulated how the division of labour led to entrenched inequalities among humans. In *On Social Contract*, he turned his attention towards the type of society that could provide humans with their basic need for security. The purpose of this chapter is to identify Rousseau's contributions to socialism by demonstrating that his critiques of, and solutions to, commercial society are sufficiently similar to those of Robert Owen and Karl Marx such that he may be seen as a forerunner to these socialist thinkers.

As with the previous chapters, this chapter will follow the framework set out in Chapter 1. First, I will begin by identifying the similarities and differences I observed among the writings of Owen, Marx and Rousseau and their views on personal alienation. Next, I will identify the similarities and differences I observed among their views on social alienation. Finally, I will compare their solutions for addressing the problems created by commercial society.

### **2. Personal Alienation**

The first theme that emerges in the discussions of personal alienation in the previous two chapters is the idea of personal happiness. It becomes clear that Owen

and Rousseau hold diverging points of view on how to achieve personal happiness. In Chapter 1, I outlined Owen's ideas on achieving happiness. According to Owen, happiness is achieved by performing services for the good of others in the community. People will achieve a real sense of happiness for themselves by working towards others' happiness. For Owen, happiness is the result of living and working for the good of the community; it is a socially derived experience. For Rousseau, however, happiness is achieved through solitude. For him happiness is an inward experience achieved by withdrawing from social interaction.

Though they appear far apart, both Owen's and Rousseau's views on happiness lead to the rejection of commercial society. In commercial society happiness is achieved through monetary gain and the accumulation of things; however, neither Owen nor Rousseau promotes participation in commercial society as a means to achieve happiness. On the contrary, Owen's approach to happiness is practical and achievable through performing tasks for the good of others. This can be achieved through simple tasks such as holding open a door for someone to assisting a neighbor with bringing in the harvest. It does not entail buying extravagant gifts for others or watching the growth of stocks. Likewise, Rousseau's inward turn to contentment does not give way to satisfying desires through self-indulgent consumption as promoted by commercial society.

Though Rousseau argues that lasting happiness is to be found within the person, does this mean that there is no room for Owen's ideas within his theories? Rousseau may prefer to turn inward for the source of happiness but this does not preclude people from reaching out to one another to work for the common good as Owen suggests. Rousseau discusses natural compassion, which in the absence of

commercial society, flourishes and motivates people to positive action. Rousseau also recommends that people seek recognition and honours through public acts of goodness rather than by drawing attention to themselves and creating competition through the acquisition of things. Thus Owen and Rousseau may differ in their views on how to attain happiness but their theories are compatible with one another. Moreover, some of Rousseau's theories complement Owen's views on happiness and the importance of the common good.

The second theme that emerges is the idea of the physical toll that commercial society exerts on people engaged in commercial activities. Marx is not alone in his criticism of commercial society and its physically debilitating effects on the workers. In Chapter 1, I outlined Marx's explanation of personal alienation. Marx describes how the workers labour, and, in doing so, lose their creativity in the production process. He describes an inverse relationship wherein the workers transfer, through their labour, their creative essence into the goods they produce; the goods, in turn, take on value that formerly belonged to the workers. Rousseau also observes the consequences of commercial society on its members. In Chapter 2, I outlined how in Rousseau's view poverty and wealth, alike, physically change people. Poverty changes people from fit individuals into emaciated wretches starving for food. Wealth creates obese, overstuffed rich people. Rousseau also describes the loss of courage that accompanies the retrogression of humans under commercial society. Through their love of comfort, their spirits become weakened. Rousseau describes the retrogression and division of humanity as society advances in its development of commercial society.

The last theme that emerges is the observance by Marx and Rousseau of the loss of freedom that humans experience as a result of the development of commercial society. In my discussion of Marx's analysis of personal alienation, he describes human creativity as the expression of human freedom through labour. As Marx explains, humans express their freedom through their labour with the natural world and thus their creation of reality. Personal alienation is experienced in commercial society through the "objectification" of labour which is the production process wherein labour is transferred into objects. Loss of human freedom occurs when human interaction with the world is disrupted by the emergence of the social relations that sustain commercial society. Humans under these conditions are not creating a reality for themselves and therefore are not free. Similarly, for Rousseau, loss of human freedom in commercial society occurs as a result of the loss of material and spiritual self-sufficiency.

As I outlined in Chapter 2, Rousseau identifies a number of ways in which humans lose their material and spiritual self-sufficiency. Rousseau says humans lose their material self-sufficiency through the establishment of the division of labour and the creation of mutual dependency for basic material needs; however, as commercial society progresses humans also become reliant on technology, thus further eroding their self-sufficiency. It is worth noting that reliance on technology is less problematic for Marx than for Rousseau. But self-sufficiency is lost in other ways as well. In commercial society people lose their spiritual self-sufficiency. People become dependent on others to satisfy their nonmaterial needs in the same way they become dependent on others for their material needs. In commercial society, Rousseau argues that people become dependent on others' opinions for personal

validation and happiness. Personal validation through the acquisition of public esteem provides people with pleasure, although not a true form of happiness. For Rousseau, the complete loss of self-sufficiency results in the loss of freedom for humans. There is no realm for humans where freedom can be preserved in commercial society.

### **3. Social Alienation**

In Chapter 1, I outlined Owen's and Marx's critiques of commercial society and how they viewed its contribution to social alienation. Whereas Owen identified economic and social divisions within commercial society, Marx identified economic and political divisions. In Chapter 2, I outlined Rousseau's critiques of commercial society and how it contributes to social alienation. In commercial society he observed economic, political and social divisions. I will now briefly review the arguments put forward by each of the respective theorists and will discuss the commonalities and differences that exist between the critiques of Owen, Marx and Rousseau. I will demonstrate that Rousseau's observations of commercial society also included perspectives on economic, political and social divisions thus contributing to a greater understanding of social alienation as a socialist critique of commercial society.

#### **3.1 Economic Disunity**

As I discussed in Chapter 1, Owen's writings described a society divided by economic disparity. He saw that some members of society were privileged with wealth while others were not. In commercial society, this disparity of condition between its members seemed destined to remain unchanged, according to Owen, due to the values that society held. On the one hand, Owen described society as

misguided in its views. Its members held that each member of society was individually responsible for his or her own outcomes. Members of society did not have a social responsibility that extended beyond their own individual needs. For Owen, the predominance of individualism would ensure that people remained self-interested. On the other hand, Owen also described society as valuing the acquisition of profit. In other words, the purpose within commercial society was to increase wealth. Though seemingly the acquisition of wealth may not have negative consequences for members of society, Owen found that the desire for wealth could never be satisfied fully, which meant that individuals would continue to pursue wealth even though they may already have enough to satisfy their wants and desires. Moreover, Owen also found that the desire for more wealth diminished sympathetic feelings for others. Finally, Owen found that wealth was not distributed equally in society. Workers received less compensation for their labour than owners received for their contribution. These economic realities observed by Owen resulted in a society that had no collective vision for the economic well-being of its citizens.

As I described in Chapter 1, Marx found commercial society to be divided economically between the bourgeois and the proletariat classes, the owners of capital and the suppliers of labour. Marx conceived of the bourgeois class as the owners of capital whose purpose was to increase it. To achieve this task, they relied on labour supplied exclusively by the proletariat. Improving the condition of the proletariat in commercial society was not a part of the bourgeoisie's plan for society. The bourgeoisie's primary function was to maintain the conditions that supported the production of capital including ensuring that there was a steady supply of labour. The proletariat, although performing a critical function in the bourgeoisie's plan, were

unable to benefit from the economic wealth that they helped to generate. Though they supplied the labour to create profit, they did not receive their share of the wealth generated by their efforts.

Throughout his writings, Rousseau wrote about society divided between the wealthy and the poor. Moreover, he wrote about how economic divisions became legitimized among people in commercial society. As I outlined in Chapter 2, he described how the economic division was defined by ownership of land. Initially, land ownership was attributed to the division of labour between agriculture and metallurgy. He suggested those who practiced agriculture were in the best position to lay a claim to the land as property. As a result, land and wealth became unevenly distributed and scarce. Scarcity created conflict which involved the landed and landless alike until those with property devised a solution that would secure their possessions. Rousseau described how those with land reached an agreement with those who had no land based on the exchange of freedom for security. In order for the landed to protect their interests, they had to identify something other than property that would have broad appeal among all the members of society. Because everyone was affected by conflict, those with property recommended sacrificing some freedom for peace. Under the circumstances that Rousseau described, an agreement was reached and the unequal distribution of property was legitimized as well as the economic division it created.

Rousseau shares some commonalities in his views on economic division with Owen and Marx. For example, both Rousseau and Owen find that individualism sustains the division in commercial society between the wealthy and poor. In Rousseau's descriptions of society, individualism arises as a result of the division of

labour where everyone pursues his or her own means of survival. Individual pursuits lead to competition wherein resources such as land become scarce. Scarcity leads to conflict; security is regained at the price of freedom. Owen finds that members of society have a long-held belief that everyone is responsible individually for their well-being which leads members of society to be self-interested. Moreover, for both Rousseau and Owen, there is little sense of social responsibility for other members of society. Rousseau's depiction of the arrangement devised by the landowners demonstrates the lack of social responsibility they felt towards others. Their response to the conflict was not to redistribute property fairly but rather to maintain the inequalities at the expense of freedom. As for Owen, his observation of the desperate situation of young factory runaways demonstrates a lack of social responsibility within commercial society. Both Rousseau and Owen conclude that individualism contributes to the economic division found in commercial society.

Rousseau not only identifies individualism as a problem in commercial society but he also describes exploitation of one group of people by another group. In this way he shares a commonality with Marx and his identification of the exploitative relationship between the bourgeois and the proletariat classes. In Rousseau's account of the agreement discussed above, he shows how the vulnerable in society, those without land, are manipulated into giving up their freedom in exchange for an end to conflict. Likewise, Marx explains how the bourgeoisie depend on the proletariat for a constant supply of labour but do not offer fair compensation in exchange. Nor do they aid in the political or economic emancipation of the working class. Instead, the bourgeoisie maintain the conditions of the working class to ensure

that labour continues to be supplied. For both Rousseau and Marx, exploitation is a condition of commercial society for the vulnerable to endure.

### **3.2 Political Disunity**

Rousseau and Marx both comment on the political inequality evident between rulers and the ruled in commercial society. As I explained in Chapter 2, Rousseau critiques what he sees as a tyrannical system of rule associated with commercial society. Rather than ruling for the good of the whole community, Rousseau argues that rulers put their private interests ahead of the people. Factors such as political inexperience and a penchant for comfort and security scuttle any interest on the part of the members of society to engage actively in the political processes that democracy requires. As a result of political complacency on the part of citizens and self-interest on the part of the rulers, society is divided politically between rulers and ruled. Similarly, as I described in Chapter 1, Marx observes that society was divided between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Along with economic power and influence, the bourgeoisie also captured political power in society and used it to further its own interests rather than advance the interests of the working class. Marx explains that the ruling bourgeoisie did not put any resources towards improving the working or living conditions of the proletariat. By ignoring the conditions of the proletariat, the bourgeoisie ensured proletariat political subservience. Like Rousseau, Marx observes that the bourgeoisie needed the proletariat more than the proletariat needed the bourgeoisie. The dependency of the rulers on the ruled, observed by both Rousseau and Marx, could not unite commercial society meaningfully or beneficially for all members of society.

### **3.3 Social Disunity**

Rousseau and Owen attribute social divisions within commercial society to a lack of a sense of community. For Rousseau, commercial society does not encourage cooperation amongst members but rather promotes competition amongst people. As I discussed in Chapter 2, Rousseau observes social division based on intense competition that is aroused by living together and interacting socially and economically. He suggests that as people come to live together, they make comparisons with each other and then seek to distinguish themselves from one another. By achieving distinction, individuals obtain public approval and esteem, which is scarce in society. For Rousseau, the acquisition of public esteem creates competition. Owen finds that disunity in commercial society is created by the requirements of the manufacturing system. As I described in Chapter 1, Owen found that factories were not places that fostered a sense of community. Most importantly, factories could not draw a source of labour from the local community. Often, factory workers were foundling children who provided a cheap source of labour with no ties to the land, family or community. Factory workers were the poor and destitute who had no place in society. Thus with the expansion of commercial society and factories, the sense of community that united members of society was lost. Factory workers shared no communal bonds with one another based on common identity, tradition or familial ties. Nor could commercial society unite, for Owen, without replacing individualism as an underlying principle of society. For Rousseau and Owen, social disunity was a consequence of commercial society.

#### **4. Overcoming Alienation**

In Chapter 1, I provided a brief discussion of Owen's and Marx's respective solutions for overcoming personal and social alienation in an effort to provide a complete framework for discussing Rousseau's critiques of commercial society. Each of the theorists developed their own solutions that would address what they identified as root causes contributing to both personal and social alienation. For Owen, building community and accepting social responsibility for one another through a comprehensive public education system was the solution to the problems of commercial society. For Marx, the alienation, personal and social, caused by commercial society could be overcome through the unification of the working class. In Chapter 2, I explored Rousseau's recommendations for overcoming personal and social alienation. To overcome personal alienation and live an authentic life of freedom, people must be willing to be self-sufficient in their material and spiritual needs as well as be willing to defend their freedom. Moreover, overcoming social alienation, in his view, could only be achieved through institutional change through a new social contract and the establishment of the general will.

One commonality in Owen's and Rousseau's recommendations for overcoming social alienation is the recommendation for a system of public education. Both thinkers recognize that societal change can be achieved by focusing on the role that public education of the youth can play in developing socially responsible and collectively minded people. Where the two thinkers appear to differ in their views of public education is on the outcomes that each system produces. For Owen, the purpose of the education system is to produce people who work for the good of others in an effort to achieve happiness, whereas for Rousseau the purpose

of the education system is to produce citizens with a love for their homeland, whose duty to the homeland will protect against future corruption.

A key difference between Owen and Rousseau is in their views of maintaining the division of labour in society and social stratification. Though Owen recognizes that people, particularly the poor, suffer under the conditions required by commercial society, his plan does not rely on reorganizing society so as to eliminate social stratification and the division of labour. As I outlined in Chapter 1, he implements strategies to improve life in his factory town but he does not remove the social stratification in place. His town still has labourers, managers and owners all working towards the common goal of improved society through humane working conditions. Unlike Owen, Rousseau seeks to eliminate the division of labour by promoting material self-sufficiency of citizens as generalists rather than specialists. For Rousseau, with the allocation of land to each household, citizens become farmers with a variety of skills to provide for their own needs. In this sense, Rousseau is more closely aligned with Marx's thinking in which everyone becomes a labourer.

## **5. Discussion**

Rousseau and Owen appear to be at odds with each other in their ideas on character development. Owen and Rousseau both argue that character development is impacted by social interaction. As I discussed in Chapter 1, Owen is critical of commercial society because it promotes individualism, the idea that people individually in society are responsible for their own outcomes in life. Owen is critical of commercial society because in it people fail to recognize their social responsibility to the development of the character of society's members. In Chapter 2, I explained that Rousseau argues that commercial society promotes economic and social

dependence amongst its members. He finds this form of dependence hazardous to character development because persons in society must resort to scheming in order to enlist others to assist them. Moreover, the hazard is heightened because people begin to pursue public esteem which further increases people's dependency on one another while at the same time promoting competition among people. Rousseau's response to the effects of commercial society is to find ways to minimize interaction by encouraging people to live their lives in such a way as to be dependent on others for less. In other words, Rousseau promotes material and spiritual self-sufficiency and thus appears to promote a form of individualism which seems to put him at odds with what Owen claims will create a better society.

Second, and perhaps most importantly, Rousseau appears to be at odds with himself, as well as with Owen, with his advocacy of material and spiritual self-sufficiency. In his earlier work, the *Discourse on Inequality*, he recommends living with less economic and social dependency as commercial society has a corrupting influence on the development of human character. In his later work, *On Social Contract*, Rousseau outlines ways in which social alienation can be overcome. Specifically, his recommendations include a social contract wherein people agree to live with one another, thereby acquiring a social, rather than individual, existence. Moreover, Rousseau recommends the general will as the primary social and political institution for society. Thus, on the one hand, Rousseau appears to be critical of society and recommends that individuals live apart from it and each other, while, on the other hand, Rousseau proposes a model of society that looks to the interest of all rather than the interest of the individual.

Can there be reconciliation between Rousseau's and Owen's ideas and within Rousseau's own ideas as well? If one takes a narrow approach and limits themselves strictly to Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*, then perhaps there is little room for reconciliation between Rousseau's and Owen's ideas, even though Rousseau's work is highly critical of commercial society. If one takes a broader approach, however, and views Rousseau's writings as including a continuum of ideas, then there is room for reconciliation between not only his ideas and Owen's, but also within his own ideas. As argued in the above discussion on personal alienation at the beginning of this chapter, Rousseau's later ideas, as he presents them in *On Social Contract*, appear to be more compatible with Owen's. Both writers place importance on the role of society as serving the common good. For Owen this can be accomplished through a comprehensive system of public education for members of society; for Rousseau this can be accomplished through establishment of and participation in the general will. Similarly, if one were to view both *Discourse on Inequality* and *On Social Contract* as parts of a whole body of writing, then one can view the first writing as that which outlines the problems and makes some basic recommendations (such as the promotion of material and spiritual self-sufficiency to preserve freedom) in the absence of a comprehensive solution. His later work then presents the comprehensive solution required by the magnitude of the problems he identified in his earlier work. As his principle concern in both writings is to preserve human freedom, the earlier recommendations he makes to secure freedom through self-sufficiency are not jettisoned completely by Rousseau in his later writings. He still seeks to find a balance between preserving freedom while bringing people together in a community. The problem of finding a balance between the needs of the

individual and the needs of the community is an ongoing issue in socialism. Rousseau belongs to this tradition of those who sought such a solution.

## **6. Conclusion**

Socialism is one of the ongoing traditions in western political thought. Though twenty-first century socialist economic policies largely have fallen out of favour, socialist critiques are still relevant today, as many of the problems that early socialist thinkers identified in their own time remain with us. Problems such as personal and social dissatisfaction with our lives, poverty and homelessness, social exclusion and political apathy continue to persist even though many improvements in society have been achieved. Early socialist thinkers identified the roots of the problems in the economic system of commercial society and the values that sustained it. They argued that commercial society led to unhappiness and a lack of freedom for members of society. They also argued that commercial society led to economic, political and social divisions. If people were to live fulfilling lives where all members of society shared in wealth and decision-making power, commercial society would have to be remade. Clearly society has not been remade as many people today continue to experience exclusion based on their economic, political and social status. Many people continue to be dissatisfied with their personal lives. Social unity and achieving the common good are dependent on our collective ability to overcome personal and social alienation. If the problems that continue in today's society are to be addressed meaningfully then examining the economic system and its underpinning values, as early socialist thinkers did, must be a first step.

In this thesis I have sought to develop an understanding of this tradition so as to determine Rousseau's contributions by focussing the discussion on two critiques socialists have of commercial society. In Chapter 1, I provided arguments made by two well-known socialist writers that commercial society leads to personal alienation and social alienation. I also provided a brief discussion of their solutions to the problems they identified with commercial society. In Chapter 2, I presented Rousseau's critiques of commercial society and the ways in which it causes personal and social alienation. I then reviewed the recommendations made by Rousseau on how to fix the problems he identified. The contributions made by these thinkers to the tradition of socialism lies not only with their critiques but also with their solutions. Owen's contribution to socialism was to become an agent of change himself and to use his resources to build a community in the hopes that doing so would lead to a more just society. Marx's contribution was to identify the proletariat as the source of change within commercial society. I argue that Rousseau's contribution to socialism is found not only in his critiques of commercial society but also found in his ideas about the development of institutions, such as the general will, that will sustain change in society and allow people to lead authentic lives. If one views Rousseau's works as a continuum of developing ideas, his ideas can be seen to be less paradoxical. Moreover, the tensions that appear in his writings may also be viewed as representative of the tensions that exist within socialist thinking. In summary I find Rousseau's political writings were foundational to the development of modern socialism.

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