

Final Paper:

Rousseau vs. Marx views on society

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Society is often pointed to as a root cause of unhappiness in the world. It is almost as if the society we live in has been constructed in a way to make people miserable. While things like the internet, the 24/7 news cycle, or any political discourse in the past 8 years are certainly factors contributing to unhappiness, some theories point to more foundational or fundamental aspects of human interaction that are the emanating source of unhappiness. Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Karl Marx are two such theorizers who sought to expose the truth of our unhappiness. For Rousseau, unhappiness emanates from people's Amour Propre, an internal comparison to others that is exacerbated and encouraged by modern society. While, for Marx, society's fetishization of wealth and desire to accumulate more is the cause of suffering and misery. This paper will seek to conduct a comparative analysis of the arguments and theories by Rousseau and Marx and determine which presents the stronger, more persuasive argument.

Amour Propre is the foundation of Rousseau's argument for the source of misery in society. Interestingly, this source of unhappiness resides inside of a human being but is exacerbated by society. Amour Propre is a form of deriving one's self-worth based on a comparison and relation to others.¹ Essentially this boils down to basing your own happiness and your own conception of yourself based on how others view you. This led to people developing a concern with their reputation, status, and appearance. Since this concern began to develop, people came to be judged on these attributes. Rousseau writes "Each one began to look at the

¹ Delaney, James. "Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712—1778)". Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Accessed 11 April. 2024, <https://iep.utm.edu/rousseau/#SH3b>.

others and to want to be looked at himself, and public esteem had a value.”² He continues that with this revelation and newfound public esteem, vice, vanity, shame, and envy came to be born. These new emotions began to cause unhappiness for the people who experienced them. The development of amour propre and the subsequent negative emotions were caused by society and the permanent interaction among human beings.

This obsession with status would manifest into a desire to be better than others. Because with the introduction of things like vanity and jealousy, it was not enough to be content with yourself as you are, but a person needs to be better. Striving to be better is not inherently a bad thing. Many people strive to improve their skills at an activity or a hobby, some try to run faster to improve their mile time or lift heavier to set a new personal record in the gym. However, problems arise when this desire to be better is fueled by a desire to be better than someone else. Rousseau writes “The one who sang or danced the best, the handsomest, the strongest, the most adroit or the most eloquent became the most highly regarded.”²

While activities like singing and dancing used to be done for the purpose of leisure or recreation, they now became a competition. With the nature of competition, inevitably some will win, and others will lose. This competition and desire to be highly regarded became the root cause of inequality. Inequality would see its effect on happiness really take its toll with the introduction of labor. As people lived in the state of nature, they were content with a primitive level of technology such as bows and arrows and animal skin clothing.³ This primitive level of technology could be produced by a single person leading to personal satisfaction. As civilization progressed, the desire grew for the development of more and more complex products and

² Rousseau, Jean J. *Basic Political Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1987), 64. <https://grattoncourses.files.wordpress.com/2018/11/jean-jacques-rousseau-donald-cress-trans.-basic-political-writings-hackett-pub-co-1987.pdf>.

³ Rousseau, Jean J. *Basic Political Writings*, 65.

luxurious clothing and eventually became too much for one to handle and thus needed assistance. This, as Rousseau explains, introduced the concept of labor into the world.³ Labor would introduce slavery and misery and thus grow unhappiness throughout the world.

Rousseau's thoughts on the sources of misery a society faces are far-reaching. They extend from simply coveting status and material possessions, to introducing criticisms of systems of labor and property ownership. While not explicitly criticizing ownership of property, Rousseau acknowledges that property ownership can result in the same sort of comparison that amour propre induces. People who do not own property, are inherently thought of as a lower class than those who own property. This can be seen today in thoughts regarding renters versus homeowners, and how home ownership is commonly thought of as a sign of success. Rousseau's description of society is one of the haves and have-nots, with the have-nots coveting the status and possessions of the haves.

While it may be confusing that a desire for more status and material possessions would drive the creation of labor and this in turn generates more unhappiness, it is not so far-fetched after all. Since inequality can be tied to status within a society, then employer vs. employee is certainly an unequal status. When an employer hires someone, there is by nature an unequal status, the employer has the resources to pay an employee to do a certain task. If the task is done, the employee is paid, if it is not done, the employer has the right to deny further payment and leave the worker unemployed. One class, the employer, is more powerful than the employee, and will eventually think of themselves as being superior. The lowly employee, depending on their boss for survival, will usually detest this lack of agency or power and resent the employer as a result. This results in a perpetual cycle of inequality and unhappiness which permeates throughout everyday life.

Marx in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* puts the blame for human misery squarely on capitalism. More specifically the source of human suffering emanates from man's fetishization and obsession with the accumulation of money or wealth. This differs from Rousseau, who argued that status is what causes misery for humankind. For Marx, while status affects the relationship between employer versus employee, money is the root cause of suffering. However, similarly to Rousseau, Marx also argues that suffering emanates from within a person, just as Rousseau recognizes misery and jealousy as being internal emotions.

In the work of Marx, he makes a claim that the capitalist economy and society deprive people of their basic needs and degrades the human condition. Due to industrialization, the worker is subjected to an environment lacking clean air, water, and light.⁴ He continues that these necessities (water, air, light), are basic animal necessities, essentially the most basic of needs. Because of capitalism, the human worker lacks even what is considered essential for lower animals. Marx says that the coveting of money incentivizes employers to strip everything down to the most basic and lesser quality in order to accumulate more wealth. So, the obsession employers have with making ever-increasing amounts of money causes them to not care about the quality of life in the larger society. Spending money to improve the quality of life for worker would cause the employer (the capitalist) to have less money for themselves.

This obsession with money and the accumulation of wealth, Marx asserts, extends to even the type of labor a worker engages in is degrading and was previously considered torture, citing the Roman treadmill as his example.⁴ Labor as an activity has been stripped down to its barest form, one that includes physical activity but no satisfaction or enjoyment. Marx writes, "...by reducing his activity to the most abstract mechanical movement."⁵ The worker no longer

⁴ Marx, Karl. *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd edition. Edited by Robert C. Tucker. (New York: Norton), 1978, 94.

⁵ Marx, Karl. *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 95.

feels fulfilled as a result of his labor as it has been made monotonous and tedious. This type of work further makes the worker miserable and contributes to a decline in happiness.

However, this denial of a good quality of life is not solely the result of the employer. Marx asserts that the worker makes himself miserable as well. This is done by being more and more frugal and denying themselves basic comforts in order to save more money. Marx writes that society morphs into one focused on self-denial. Since the worker covets money, he will deny himself things he considers luxuries.⁵ These luxuries start off as things such as fine clothing, silverware, and jewelry, but eventually degrade to things like clean food, physical activity, or even comfort. Things about life that were once considered to be necessities, even for animals are either denied by the capitalist class or denied by the workers themselves.

This is one part of Karl Marx's theory of alienation. The system of capitalism and its obsession with accumulating money alienates people from one another and the world at large. People alienate themselves and others from basic human necessities, all in order to save or make more money. In Marx's take on society, the self-perpetuating cycle is not one of comparison and envy but one of degradation and denial. Denying oneself things like clean air and water, and a comfortable place to live eventually transforms into resenting and hating to be around others and partake in communal activities. Writing, "Such things as smoking, drinking, eating, etc., are no longer means of contact or means that bring together."⁶ People come to be alienated, first from the natural world, then their labor, then finally each other. What ties it all together is the system of capitalism and money, people are miserable because they deny themselves what used to be essentials but now are considered luxuries.

⁶ Marx, Karl. *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 99.

Marx's broader theory is one that goes beyond simple misery, but complete alienation. What Marx means by alienation is that you cease to feel like a human being, becoming essentially just a cog in a machine, the machine being capitalism. When reading his theory, a pattern begins to emerge. First people become alienated from their work, no longer deriving satisfaction from what they are laboring to produce. This is due to the fact that in a capitalist society, the worker is selling their labor as a product, not actually laboring to create a product that they then sell. This reduces a worker to a product, something consumable and less than human. This worker has such a coveting for money, that they then willingly deprive themselves of things once considered necessities in order to accumulate more wealth. The strongest part of Marx's theory is that he postulates that workers sell their humanity for money, more than they even sell their labor.

Overall, Marx and Rousseau present two similar, yet different lines of thought on how society induces misery. Rousseau alleges that it is amour propre, an internal comparison to others that causes people to lose self-esteem and become miserable. This comparison is exacerbated by the introduction of society and status within that society. Marx also pins the blame of misery on society, but only on a certain type of society: capitalism. For Marx, a capitalist society is one that obsesses over money and will induce misery in itself in order to accumulate more money. People deny themselves things that would make them happy because they are unable or unwilling to spend the money or the time to partake or purchase these things. While Rousseau's amour propre is the thief of joy, Marx's theory of alienation is the willingness to give up joy in exchange for money.

Upon examination, one could see that the argument laid out by Marx can be used to complement Rousseau's theory of Amour Propre. Rousseau's theory boils down to status and

jealousy being the root of misery. Marx's theory of alienation can be used as a case study to explain a possible avenue this could manifest itself. According to Marx, capitalist society incentivizes people to spend less money and to make more. This leads to a degradation of society, but within this society, those who have money are inevitably going to flaunt it. We know today that industrial society was quite unequal with some living in mansions while others live in squalor. Those living in squalor would certainly covet the lives that the rich live. I know personally, as someone who is attending college and with how expensive it is, I certainly wouldn't have minded being born into a wealthy family. People would strive to improve their lot in life, often by scrimping and saving in order to be able to afford rent in a nice apartment or drive a nicer car.

However, Marx does not mention status or jealousy in his argument. Marx only mentions status when used to distinguish between the capitalist and the worker. Those who own property and those who do not. While Rousseau would say that this distinction would make the lower class covet the higher class, Marx does not. For Marx, it boils down to the living conditions of the worker. He is not concerned with how the upper class is doing or how they view the worker, but more so with how the worker lives. The worker's quality of life is what is driving their misery, not how they view themselves in relation to another class or person.

In the world of Marx, the worker willingly deprives himself of things he calls luxuries. This leads to a lack of food, water, recreation, etc. and this is precisely what is causing the misery. It seems that Marx is making the argument that the lack of these physical things, makes someone feel inhuman. Marx is looking at physical factors that determine someone's source of misery, while Rousseau looks into the ideas that make someone miserable. I think this is where Marx's argument falls short. Living in a bad environment is tantamount to being miserable,

almost as if the environment dictates the inhabitant's mood. However, I think Rousseau's idea of comparison being the thief of joy is the stronger of the two arguments because I believe it has more factual appeal.

By more factual appeal, what I mean is, that Rousseau's argument centers around comparing yourself to others and being dismayed at the status you possess versus that possessed by someone else. This act, comparing oneself to others, is far more common and causes far more misery than simply living in terrible conditions or depriving oneself of luxuries. Marx is certainly correct when he deduces that living in a polluted, area of squalor would make someone unhappy, and feel inhuman. That is a given but, this pain would be compounded if you live in squalor and know that your neighbor is living in a palace.

Rousseau even touches on this very fact in his original theory. Mentioning that before civilization people lived in huts with rudimentary tools and clothing, but they were happy. They were happy because they didn't know that they shouldn't be. A "primitive" people as was commonly referred to non-Europeans during the time of the Enlightenment and subsequently thereafter, were usually content with their lives. Living in huts with a thriving community, as Rousseau portrays it, was how these people lived and how they enjoyed their lives. While to Europeans, whose world was one of roads, brick and stone buildings, they lived abhorrently to those unaccustomed to features of "civilization" they were living just fine. You can't be envious or miserable about your condition compared to someone else's if you do not have any point of comparison.

Referring to an earlier example of renting as compared to home ownership and how this reflects different statuses in society, shows the difference of both theories by Marx and Rousseau. According to Marx, if you are living in an apartment where you have to deal with a

landlord and noisy upstairs neighbors in a loud part of the city, you would be completely miserable. While some of these factors would no doubt upset you, if you were born and raised in an apartment complex these would be annoyances but would simply be part and parcel of what it's like living in an apartment. But, if you were to visit a family member who lives on an estate in the countryside, where it is dead quiet, and each bedroom is bigger than your whole apartment this would be a drastic change. Suddenly, you realize what it's like to live in a nice luxurious house and you realize all the things your small studio apartment lacks. This would make returning back to the inner-city apartment more difficult and you would constantly compare apartment life to mansion life.

Suddenly every stomp produced by an upstairs neighbor is not just an annoyance but infuriating. You would constantly think about when you could sleep peacefully through the night in a place that lacked such an annoyance. The rules in place by the landlord, suddenly become almost draconian considering your uncle who owns the mansion can decorate it and change it however he pleases. All of these factors while annoying, were what you were used to, and upon seeing life without them, they become unbearable. This is because your frame of reference has expanded and has been altered. If the trip to a luxurious countryside manor never occurred and this frame of reference had been altered these problems would not be at the same level of unbearable.

While I do believe Marx's views on money and those who own the means of production have value and offer valid criticisms of the system of capitalism, I believe Rousseau's thoughts on what makes society miserable are more complete. Marx is certainly correct that employers will consciously underpay, undervalue, and deprive their workers of things to make more profit. We see this every day since worker productivity has increased in the past century or so, yet

salaries have not increased as dramatically. I know firsthand that this fact alone is misery-inducing. However, Rousseau's argument and concept of amour propre strikes at a deeper problem and delves more into the root cause of misery than Marx's assertions do.

Marx's theory of alienation and how it contributes to misery in society is best used not as a competing theory but as a symptom of Rousseau's deeper theory. How the system of capitalism alienates one from their work and encourages the deprivation (whether by the employer or the self) of needs and wants is one way that Rousseau's theory is proven in reality. The workers deprive themselves of things, and the employers deny things to their employees on the basis of saving money and increasing their wealth. Because, in a capitalist system wealth is conflated with status, those with more wealth are highly regarded in a capitalist society. Workers only want to save money in order to accumulate more wealth. Whether this is to buy nicer clothes, a bigger house, or a faster car, they sacrifice something to trade for these goods. People would only make such sacrifices because great value is placed on having wealth or high-end products.

High-end products, while sometimes being of higher quality, are usually status symbols. A BMW car for example, famously has expensive repair costs and other mechanical issues. Compared to a far more reliable Toyota Corolla, the Toyota is the more logical vehicle to purchase. But people want the BMW because of its status as a luxury automobile. People at the end of the day make sacrifices for the chance to be thought of as higher class or more important. This is why, when peeling back the layers, Marx's theory is emblematic of the ideas presented by Rousseau. Marx, thinking of class and economics, is really pointing out that people are miserable because they are chasing status. The reason people have the "fetish for money" that Marx says they do is because money equals status in a capitalist society. Therefore, Marx's theory is essentially a case study of Rousseau's concept of amour propre.

Both men have made long-lasting contributions to political thought and human history. Marx's theory of alienation is but one of his many ideas that are still widely circulated and will forever be in political thought. Rousseau in his theory of amour propre thinks more philosophically about what the advent of society has done to human's happiness. However, when just looking at how society is impacting people's happiness and well-being, Rousseau presents the better theory. His theory cuts far deeper and addresses the root issues plaguing the human condition. Marx's theory offers a great critique of capitalism but falls short of Rousseau's in explaining misery. In fact, Marx's theory can be used to lend more credence to that of Rousseau's. Both Marx's and Rousseau's writings still have merit and grant a fascinating critique and insight into the modern society we currently live in.

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