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Unheeded Advice

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Abstract

In his book, *On the Social Contract*, Rousseau discusses some of the main pitfalls to the survival of a government. By focusing on one paragraph, it is possible to get an in-depth view of one of Rousseau's causes of the dissolution of government.

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Unheeded Advice

In Chapter 15 Book III of *On the Social Contract*, Rousseau discusses some of the main pitfalls to the survival of a government. By focusing on the following paragraph, it is possible to get an in-depth view of one of Rousseau's causes of the dissolution of government.

The hustle and bustle of commerce and the arts, the avid interest profits, softness and the love of amenities: these are what change personal services into money. A person gives up part of his profit in order to increase it at leisure. Give money and soon you will be in chains. The word finance is a slave's word In a truly free state the citizens do everything with their own hands and nothing with money. Far from paying to be exempted from their duties, they would pay to fulfill them themselves. Far be it from me to be sharing commonly held ideas. I believe that forced labor is less opposed to liberty than taxes (Wootton 510).

The problem that Rousseau is describing in this passage is one that is common to all forms of government—apathy among its citizens. In this case, apathy is caused by citizens paying their taxes and believing that to be the end of their civic duty. Rousseau lived in a society that he felt was corrupt. His answer to this problem was a renewed sense of community, which would come through greater citizen participation, and a commitment to an idea that he termed the “general will” (Wootton 511).

The general will is best described as that which is best for society. This comes from the citizens, but only when they decide the public good, rather than their private interest. In order for Rousseau's idea of a state to work, it requires that citizens make a contract with themselves in which they commit to two interests: private and public. According to Rousseau, apathy of the citizens is a direct manifestation of the private interest, while participating in public affairs is a source of the public interest, from which we get the general will. Rousseau understands that the private and public interest may conflict, but if the private interest wins out it causes problems for his idea of a government based on the general will. The public interest must be discovered for the general will to exist, and is necessary because it gives the society the guiding principle upon which it is based. Therefore, Rousseau argues that if people

feel that they have fulfilled their civic duty by simply paying their taxes, they are wrong because they are no longer transmitting the general will, and thus causing the destruction of the state. Rousseau makes this very point in Chapter 15 when he says, "Once public service ceases to be the chief business of the citizens, and they prefer to serve with their wallet rather than with their person, the state is already near its ruin."

Rousseau believes that citizen apathy and complete focus on the private interest, inevitably leads to corruption. This corruption leads to the destruction of the state. Societies that are filled with citizens who are content for their public service to end with paying their taxes are creating a breeding ground for corruption. As a result of their apathy, the citizens are tacitly accepting the corruption, which would surely arise in such a society. This is why Rousseau says "Give money and soon you will be in chains" (Wootton 511).

Unfortunately, America is not heeding the warning written by Rousseau hundreds of years ago. If there is any word that describes most American's feelings toward government, it is apathy. While many Americans may complain about the way in which the government is run, they certainly do not feel the need to do anything about it. Most Americans do not concern themselves with the public good. If they do think about such things, they do not seem to take a pro-active approach to them. In fact, statistics tell us most Americans do not even choose to participate in the easiest form of public service, voting. Voter turn-out rates in national elections are often below 50 percent, and are usually much lower for state and local elections. Not only did most US citizens not vote for comptroller or other local government positions in the most recent election, but they also cannot tell you the purpose of these positions. The feeling among these people is that by paying their taxes they have fulfilled their duties as a citizen, and if the government does not directly harm them in some way, they are content.

Rousseau says, "Once someone says what do I care about the affairs of the state, the state should be considered lost" (Wootton 512). While it is arguable whether one should take the fatalistic view that society in the United States today is lost, most would agree that it is certainly on the wrong path. Just as Rousseau would have predicted, corruption in the US government appears to be rampant. One needs only to pick up a major newspaper to read stories about government corruption on the local level, continuing all the way up to the highest levels of government in America. Beyond government corruption, many look at America today and see an entire society that is corrupt. Rousseau would look at our society and agree that it is corrupt, and almost certainly claim that this corruption results from the apathy of the people toward their job as citizens. If people never think of the public good, and only think of their personal, private interest, we should not be surprised that society is corrupt.

Not only have we not followed Rousseau's advice against being apathetic in America, as Americans we have arguably perfected the idea. Should we be surprised at the actions of many of our politicians and some of our citizens? According to Rousseau, we are simply reaping what we as a society have sown.

Bibliography

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