

Chapter Three

TOTALITARIAN DEMOCRACY (ROUSSEAU)

(a) THE PSYCHOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

ROUSSEAU often uses the words nature and the natural order in the same sense as his contemporaries to indicate the logical structure of the universe. He also uses nature, however, to describe the elemental as opposed to the effort and achievement of the spirit in overcoming and subduing the elemental. The historical state of nature before organized society was the reign of the elemental. The inauguration of the social state marked the triumph of the spirit.

It must be repeated that to the materialists the natural order is, so to speak, a ready-made machine to be discovered and set to work. To Rousseau, on the other hand, it is the State, when it has fulfilled its purpose. It is a categorical imperative. The materialists reached the problem of the individual versus the social order only late in their argument. Even then, supremely confident of the possibility of mutual adjustment, they failed to recognize the existence of the problem of coercion. To Rousseau the problem exists from the beginning. It is indeed the fundamental problem to him.

A motherless vagabond starved of warmth and affection, having his dream of intimacy constantly frustrated by human callousness, real or imaginary, Rousseau could never decide what he wanted, to release human nature or to moralize it by breaking it; to be alone or a part of human company. He could never make up his mind whether man was made better or worse, happier or more miserable, by people. Rousseau was one of the most ill-adjusted and ego-centric natures who have left a record of their predicament. He was a bundle of contradictions, a recluse and anarchist, yearning to return to nature, given to reverie, in revolt against all social conventions, sentimental and lacrimose, abjectly self-conscious and at odds with his environment, on the one hand; and the admirer of Sparta and Rome, the preacher of discipline and the submergence of the individual in the collective entity, on the other. The secret

of this dual personality was that the disciplinarian was the envious dream of the tormented paranoiac. The *Social Contract* was the sublimation of the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*. Rousseau speaks of his own predicament, when describing in *Émile* and elsewhere the unhappiness of man, who, after he left the state of nature, fell prey to the conflict between impulse and the duties of civilized society; always "wavering between his inclinations and his duties", neither quite man nor quite citizen, "no good to himself, nor to others", because never in accord with himself. The only salvation from this agony, if a return to the untroubled state of nature was impossible, was either a complete self-abandonment to the elemental impulses or to "denature (*dénaturer*) man" altogether. It was in the latter case necessary to substitute a relative for an absolute existence, social consciousness for self-consciousness. Man must be made to regard himself not as a "unité numérique, l'entier absolu, qui n'a de rapport qu'à lui-même", but as a "unité fonctionnaire qui tient au dénominateur et dont la valeur est dans son rapport avec l'entier, qui est le corps social". A fixed rigid and universal pattern of feeling and behaviour was to be imposed in order to create man of one piece, without contradictions, without centrifugal and anti-social urges. The task was to create citizens who would will only what the general will does, and thus be free, instead of every man being an entity in himself, torn by egotistic tensions and thus enslaved. Rousseau, the teacher of romantic spontaneity of feeling, was obsessed with the idea of man's cupidity as the root cause of moral degeneration and social evil. Hence his apotheosis of Spartan ascetic virtue and his condemnation of civilization in so far as civilization is the expression of the urge to conquer, the desire to shine and the release of human vitality, without reference to morality. He had that intense awareness of the reality of human rivalry peculiar to people who have experienced it in their souls. Either out of a sense of guilt or out of weariness, they long to be delivered from the need for external recognition and the challenge of rivalry.

Three other representatives of the totalitarian Messianic temperament to be analysed in these pages show a similar paranoiac streak. They are Robespierre, Saint-Just and Babeuf. In recent times we have had examples of the strange combination of psychological ill-adjustment and totalitarian ideology. In some cases, salvation from the impossibility of finding a balanced relationship with

fellow-men is sought in the lonely superiority of dictatorial leadership. The leader identifies himself with the absolute doctrine and the refusal of others to submit comes to be regarded not as a normal difference of opinion, but as a crime. It is characteristic of the paranoiac leader that when thwarted he is quickly thrown off his precarious balance and falls victim to an orgy of self-pity, persecution mania and the suicidal urge. Leadership is the salvation of the few, but to many even mere membership of a totalitarian movement and submission to the exclusive doctrine may offer a release from ill-adjusted egotism. Periods of great stress, of mass psychosis, and intense struggle call forth marginal qualities which otherwise may have remained dormant, and bring to the top men of a peculiar neurotic mentality.

(b) THE GENERAL WILL AND THE INDIVIDUAL

It was of vital importance to Rousseau to save the ideal of liberty, while insisting on discipline. He was very proud and had a keen sense of the heroic. Rousseau's thinking is thus dominated by a highly fruitful but dangerous ambiguity. On the one hand, the individual is said to obey nothing but his own will; on the other, he is urged to conform to some objective criterion. The contradiction is resolved by the claim that this external criterion is his better, higher, or real self, man's inner voice, as Rousseau calls it. Hence, even if constrained to obey the external standard, man cannot complain of being coerced, for in fact he is merely being made to obey his own true self. He is thus still free; indeed freer than before. For freedom is the triumph of the spirit over natural, elemental instinct. It is the acceptance of moral obligation and the disciplining of irrational and selfish urges by reason and duty. The acceptance of the obligations laid down in the Social Contract marks the birth of man's personality and his initiation into freedom. Every exercise of the general will constitutes a reaffirmation of man's freedom.

The problem of the general will may be considered from two points of view, that of individual ethics and that of political legitimacy. Diderot in his articles in the *Encyclopædia* on the *Législateur* and *Droit naturel* was a forerunner of Rousseau in so far as personal ethics are concerned. He conceived the problem in the same way

as Rousseau: as the dilemma of reconciling freedom with an external absolute standard. It seemed to Diderot inadmissible that the individual as he is should be the final judge of what is just and unjust, right and wrong. The particular will of the individual is always suspect. The general will is the sole judge. One must always address oneself for judgment to the general good and the general will. One who disagrees with the general will renounces his humanity and classifies himself as "dénaturé". The general will is to enlighten man "to what extent he should be man, citizen, subject, father or child", "et quand il lui convient de vivre ou de mourir". The general will shall fix the nature and limits of all our duties. Like Rousseau, Diderot is anxious to make the reservation in regard to man's natural and most sacred right to all that is not contested by the "species as a whole". He nevertheless hastens, again like Rousseau, to add that the general will shall guide us on the nature of our ideas and desires. Whatever we think and desire will be good, great and sublime, if it is in keeping with the general interest. Conformity to it alone qualifies us for membership of our species: "ne la perdez donc jamais de vue, sans quoi vous verrez les notions de la bonté, de la justice, de l'humanité, de la vertu, chanceler dans votre entendement". Diderot gives two definitions of the general will. He declares it first to be contained in the principles of the written law of all civilized nations, in the social actions of the savage peoples, in the conventions of the enemies of mankind among themselves and even in the instinctive indignation of injured animals. He then calls the general will "dans chaque individu un acte pur de l'entendement qui raisonne dans le silence des passions sur ce que l'homme peut exiger de son semblable et sur ce que son semblable est en droit d'exiger de lui". This is also Rousseau's definition of the general will in the first version of the *Social Contract*.

Ultimately the general will is to Rousseau something like a mathematical truth or a Platonic idea. It has an objective existence of its own, whether perceived or not. It has nevertheless to be discovered by the human mind. But having discovered it, the human mind simply cannot honestly refuse to accept it. In this way the general will is at the same time outside us and within us. Man is not invited to express his personal preferences. He is not asked for his approval. He is asked whether the given proposal is or is not in conformity with the general will. "If my particular

opinion had carried the day, I should have achieved the opposite of what was my will ; and it is in that case that I should not have been free." For freedom is the capacity of ridding oneself of considerations, interests, preferences and prejudices, whether personal or collective, which obscure the objectively true and good, which, if I am true to my true nature, I am bound to will. What applies to the individual applies equally to the people. Man and people have to be brought to choose freedom, and if necessary to be forced to be free.

The general will becomes ultimately a question of enlightenment and morality. Although it should be the achievement of the general will to create harmony and unanimity, the whole aim of political life is really to educate and prepare men to will the general will without any sense of constraint. Human egotism must be rooted out, and human nature changed. " Each individual, who is by himself a complete and solitary whole, would have to be transformed into part of a greater whole from which he receives his life and being." Individualism will have to give place to collectivism, egoism to virtue, which is the conformity of the personal to the general will. The Legislator " must, in a word, take away from man his resources and give him instead new ones alien to him, and incapable of being made use of without the help of other men. The more completely these natural resources are annihilated, the greater and the more lasting are those which he acquires, and the more stable and perfect the new institutions, so that if each citizen is nothing and can do nothing without the rest, and the resources acquired by the whole are equal or superior to the aggregate of the resources of all individuals, it may be said that legislation is at the highest possible point of perfection." As in the case of the materialists, it is not the self-expression of the individual, the deployment of his particular faculties and the realization of his own and unique mode of existence, that is the final aim, but the loss of the individual in the collective entity by taking on its colour and principle of existence. The aim is to train men to " bear with docility the yoke of public happiness ", in fact to create a new type of man, a purely political creature, without any particular private or social loyalties, any partial interests, as Rousseau would call them.

(c) THE GENERAL WILL, POPULAR SOVEREIGNTY,
AND DICTATORSHIP

Rousseau's sovereign is the externalized general will, and, as has been said before, stands for essentially the same as the natural harmonious order. In marrying this concept with the principle of popular sovereignty, and popular self-expression, Rousseau gave rise to totalitarian democracy. The mere introduction of this latter element, coupled with the fire of Rousseau's style, lifted the eighteenth-century postulate from the plane of intellectual speculation into that of a great collective experience. It marked the birth of the modern secular religion, not merely as a system of ideas, but as a passionate faith. Rousseau's synthesis is in itself the formulation of the paradox of freedom in totalitarian democracy in terms which reveal the dilemma in the most striking form, namely, in those of will. There is such a thing as an objective general will, whether willed or not willed by anybody. To become a reality it must be willed by the people. If the people does not will it, it must be made to will it, for the general will is latent in the people's will.

Democratic ideas and rationalist premises are Rousseau's means of resolving the dilemma. According to him the general will would be discerned only if the whole people, and not a part of it or a representative body, was to make the effort. The second condition is that individual men as purely political atoms, and not groups, parties or interests, should be called upon to will. Both conditions are based upon the premise that there is such a thing as a common substance of citizenship, of which all partake, once everyone is able to divest himself of his partial interests and group loyalties. In the same way men as rational beings may arrive at the same conclusions, once they rid themselves of their particular passions and interests and cease to depend on "imaginary" standards which obscure their judgment. Only when all are acting together as an assembled people, does man's nature as citizen come into active existence. It would not, if only a part of the nation were assembled to will the general will. They would express a partial will. Moreover, even the fact that all have willed something does not yet make it the expression of the general will, if the right disposition on the part of those who will it was not there. ▲

will does not become general because it is willed by all, only when it is willed in conformity to the objective will.

Exercise of sovereignty is not conceived here as the interplay of interests, the balancing of views, all equally deserving a hearing, the weighing of various interests. It connotes the endorsement of a truth, self-identification on the part of those who exercise sovereignty with some general interest which is presumed to be the fountain of all identical individual interests. Political parties are not considered as vehicles of the various currents of opinion, but representatives of partial interests, at variance with the general interest, which is regarded as almost tangible. It is of great importance to realize that what is to-day considered as an essential concomitant of democracy, namely, diversity of views and interests, was far from being regarded as essential by the eighteenth-century fathers of democracy. Their original postulates were unity and unanimity. The affirmation of the principle of diversity came later, when the totalitarian implications of the principle of homogeneity had been demonstrated in Jacobin dictatorship.

This expectation of unanimity was only natural in an age which, starting with the idea of the natural order, declared war on all privileges and inequalities. The very eighteenth-century concept of the nation as opposed to estates implied a homogeneous entity. Naïve and inexperienced in the working of democracy, the theorists on the eve of the Revolution were unable to regard the strains and stresses, the conflicts and struggles of a parliamentary democratic régime as ordinary things, which need not frighten anybody with the spectre of immediate ruin and confusion. Even so moderate and level-headed a thinker as Holbach was appalled by the "terrible" cleavages in English society. He considered England the most miserable country of all, ostensibly free, but in fact more unhappy than any of the Oriental despot-ridden kingdoms. Had not England been brought to the verge of ruin by the struggle of factions and contradictory interests? Was not her system a hotch-potch of irrational habits, obsolete customs, incongruous laws, with no system, and no guiding principle? The physiocrat Letronne declared that "the situation of France is infinitely better than that of England; for here reforms, changing the whole state of the country, can be accomplished in a moment, whereas in England such reforms can always be blocked by the party system".

It is worth while devoting a few words to the Physiocrats at

this juncture, for their thinking reveals a striking similarity to totalitarian democratic categories, in spite of the differences of outlook. The Physiocrats offer an astonishing synthesis of economic liberalism and political absolutism, both equally based upon the most emphatic postulate of natural harmony. Although they preached that in the economic sphere the free play of individual economic interests and pursuits would inevitably result in harmony, they were intensely aware of opposing, conflicting and unequal interests, where politics were concerned. In their view these tensions were the greatest obstacle to social harmony.

Parliamentary institutions, the separation and balance of powers, were thus impossible as roads to social harmony. The various interests would be judges in their own cause. The clashes among them would paralyse the State. The Physiocrats thus rejected the balance of powers, claiming that if one of the powers is stronger, then there is no real balance. If they were of exactly the same strength, but pulled in different directions, the result would be total inaction. The object of legislation is not to achieve a balance and a compromise, but to act on strict evidence, which according to the Physiocrats was a real thing, having as it were nothing to do with, and lifted above, all partial interests. The authority acting on this evidence must accordingly be "autorité souveraine, unique, supérieure à tous individus . . . intérêts particuliers": "le chef unique", "qui soit le centre commun dans lequel tous les intérêts des différents ordres de citoyens viennent se réunir sans se confondre". The Physiocrats had so great a faith in the power of evidence to effect rational conduct that they refused to consider the possibility that the absolute monarch might abuse his authority. They believed in the absolute monarch acting on strict evidence, and in the isolated individual. These two factors represented the general interest, while the intermediate partial interests falsified the "evidence", and led man astray on to selfish paths. "There will be no more estates (orders) armed with privileges in a nation, only individuals fully enjoying their natural rights."

Rousseau puts the people in place of the Physiocratic enlightened despot. He too considers partial interests the greatest enemy of social harmony. Just as in the case of the rationalist utilitarians the individual becomes here the vehicle of uniformity. It could be said without any exaggeration that this attitude points towards the idea of a classless society. It is conditioned by a vague expectation

that somewhere at the end of the road and after an ever more intensive elimination of differences and inequalities there will be unanimity. Not that this unanimity need be enforced of itself. The more extreme the forms of popular sovereignty, the more democratic the procedure, the surer one may be of unanimity. Thus Morelly thought that real democracy was a régime where the citizens would unanimously vote to obey nothing but nature. The leader of the British Jacobins, Horne Tooke, standing trial in 1794, defined his aim as a régime with annual parliaments, based on universal suffrage, with the exclusion of parties, and voting unanimously.

Like the Physiocrats Rousseau rejects any attempt to divide sovereignty. He brands it as the trick of a juggler playing with the severed limbs of an organism. For if there is only one will, sovereignty cannot be divided. Only that in place of the Physiocratic absolute monarch Rousseau puts the people. It is the people as a whole that should exercise the sovereign power, and not a representative body. An elected assembly is calculated to develop a vested interest like any other corporation. A people buys itself a master once it hands over sovereignty to a parliamentary representative body.

Now at the very foundation of the principle of direct and indivisible democracy, and the expectation of unanimity, there is the implication of dictatorship, as the history of many a referendum has shown. If a constant appeal to the people as a whole, not just to a small representative body, is kept up, and at the same time unanimity is postulated, there is no escape from dictatorship. This was implied in Rousseau's emphasis on the all-important point that the leaders must put only questions of a general nature to the people, and, moreover, must know how to put the right question. The question must have so obvious an answer that a different sort of answer would appear plain treason or perversion. If unanimity is what is desired, it must be engineered through intimidation, election tricks, or the organization of the spontaneous popular expression through the activists busying themselves with petitions, public demonstrations, and a violent campaign of denunciation. This was what the Jacobins and the organizers of people's petitions, revolutionary *journées*, and other forms of direct expression of the people's will read into Rousseau.

Rousseau demonstrates clearly the close relation between popular

sovereignty taken to the extreme, and totalitarianism. The paradox calls for analysis. It is commonly held that dictatorship comes into existence and is maintained by the indifference of the people and the lack of democratic vigilance. There is nothing that Rousseau insists on more than the active and ceaseless participation of the people and of every citizen in the affairs of the State.

The State is near ruin, says Rousseau, when the citizen is too indifferent to attend a public meeting. Saturated with antiquity, Rousseau intuitively experiences the thrill of the people assembled to legislate and shape the common weal. The Republic is in a continuous state of being born. In the pre-democratic age Rousseau could not realize that the originally deliberate creation of men could become transformed into a Leviathan, which might crush its own makers. He was unaware that total and highly emotional absorption in the collective political endeavour is calculated to kill all privacy, that the excitement of the assembled crowd may exercise a most tyrannical pressure, and that the extension of the scope of politics to all spheres of human interest and endeavour, without leaving any room for the process of casual and empirical activity, was the shortest way to totalitarianism. Liberty is safer in countries where politics are not considered all-important and where there are numerous levels of non-political private and collective activity, although not so much direct popular democracy, than in countries where politics take everything in their stride, and the people sit in permanent assembly.

In the latter the truth really is that, although all seem to be engaged in shaping the national will, and are doing it with a sense of elation and fulfilment, they are in fact accepting and endorsing something which is presented to them as a sole truth, while believing that it is their free choice. This is actually implied in Rousseau's image of the people willing the general will. The collective sense of elation is subject to emotional weariness. It soon gives way to apathetic and mechanical behaviour.

Rousseau is most reluctant to recognize the will of the majority, or even the will of all, as the general will. Neither does he give any indication by what signs the general will could be recognized. Its being willed by the people does not make the thing willed the expression of the general will. The blind multitude does not know what it wants, and what is its real interest. "Left to themselves, the People always desire the good, but, left to themselves, they do

not always know where that good lies. The general will is always right, but the judgment guiding it is not always well informed. It must be made to see things as they are, sometimes as they ought to appear to them."

(d) THE GENERAL WILL AS PURPOSE

The general will assumes thus the character of a purpose and as such lends itself to definition in terms of social-political ideology, a pre-ordained goal, towards which we are irresistibly driven; a solely true aim, which we will, or are bound to will, although we may not will it yet, because of our backwardness, prejudices, selfishness or ignorance.

In this case the idea of a people becomes naturally restricted to those who identify themselves with the general will and the general interest. Those outside are not really of the nation. They are aliens. This conception of the nation (or people) was soon to become a powerful political argument. Thus Sieyès claimed that the Third Estate alone constituted the nation. The Jacobins restricted the term still further, to the *sans-culottes*. To Babeuf the proletariat alone was the nation, and to Buonarroti only those who had been formally admitted to the National Community.

The very idea of an assumed preordained will, which has not yet become the actual will of the nation; the view that the nation is still therefore in its infancy, a "young nation", in the nomenclature of the *Social Contract*, gives those who claim to know and to represent the real and ultimate will of the nation—the party of the vanguard—a blank cheque to act on behalf of the people, without reference to the people's actual will. And this, as we hope later on to show it has, may express itself in two forms or rather two stages: one—the act of revolution; and the other—the effort at enthroning the general will. Those who feel themselves to be the real people rise against the system and the men in power, who are not of the people. Moreover, the very act of their insurrection, e.g. the establishment of a Revolutionary (or Insurrectionary) Committee, abolishes *ipso facto* not only the parliamentary representative body, which is in any case, according to Rousseau, a standing attempt on the sovereignty of the people, but indeed all existing laws and institutions. For "the moment the people is

legitimately assembled as a sovereign body, the jurisdiction of the government wholly lapses, the executive power is suspended, and the person of the meanest citizen is as sacred and inviolable as that of the first magistrate ; for in the presence of the person represented, representatives no longer exist". The real people, or rather their leadership, once triumphant in their insurrection, become Rousseau's Legislator, who surveys clearly the whole panorama, without being swayed by partial interests and passions, and shapes the "young nation" with the help of laws derived from his superior wisdom. He prepares it to will the general will. First comes the elimination of men and influences not of the people and not identified with the general will embodied in the newly established Social Contract of the Revolution ; then the re-education of the young nation to will the general will. The task of the Legislator is to create a new type of man, with a new mentality, new values, a new type of sensitiveness, free from old instincts, prejudices and bad habits. It is not enough to change the machinery of government, or even reshuffle the classes. You have to change human nature, or, in the terminology of the eighteenth century, to make man virtuous.

Rousseau represents the most articulate form of the *esprit révolutionnaire* in each of its facets. In the *Discourse on Inequality* he expresses the burning sense of a society that has gone astray. In the *Social Contract* he postulates an exclusively legitimate social system as a challenge to human greatness.