

Rohan (could you pls put your name in the header next time?)

Are Rousseau's 'general will' and Marx's 'dictatorship of the proletariat' compatible with democracy?

Yes, the means of government described by Rousseau's 'general will' and Marx's 'dictatorship of the proletariat' are both compatible – in theory – with a minimalist conception of democracy. However, only Rousseau's 'general will' is consistent with a more substantive, rights-respecting liberal definition of democracy. Moreover, neither would perform well if put into practice as the blueprint for a modern state. In Marx's case, the result would likely be straightforwardly undemocratic, because of the near inevitability of power struggles within the dictatorial majority. For Rousseau, the decision-making procedure would not necessarily be undemocratic, but it would not reflect his idealised general will due to the heterogeneity of contemporary society. In this essay, I first outline my preferred definition of democracy, as well as briefly explaining the concepts of the general will and dictatorship of the proletariat. I then demonstrate that the desired end point for both Rousseau's and Marx's theories is indeed a democratic one. Finally, I consider whether these states can be reached through a democratic process, drawing parallels between Rousseau's legislator and the communist vanguard. I conclude that although both are theoretically compatible with a thin view of democracy, only Rousseau's leaves space to protect liberal rights and freedoms.

Whether or not the general will and dictatorship of the proletariat are compatible with democracy depends, in large part, on what we deem democracy to be. It is therefore worth giving some careful consideration to this from the outset. Rousseau presents a tripartite classification of governments in the classical tradition, using 'democracy' to refer to systems where a majority of citizens are directly involved in the business of government by holding public office (SC III.3).^{*} This does not fit with our modern understanding of democracy, though. No Western country would meet this criterion, yet surely any meaningful definition must classify at least some such nations as democratic.[†] The minimalist view advocated for in Przeworski (1999), that a system is democratic simply so long as leaders are chosen in competitive elections, brings us closer to an ideal definition, though it makes the unnecessary assumption that elections must be the mechanism through which public opinion shapes outcomes. As Saunders (2010) notes, democracy need not entail political equality nor majority rule, but is rather its own, discrete concept. Therefore, and after Saunders, I shall adopt as my working definition of democracy as a system in which the decisions made for a group are sufficiently responsive to the wishes of the members of that group. Although I will later come on to consider liberal conceptions of democracy, these more substantive views present a higher bar to clear than compatibility with democracy simpliciter. What are your grounds for sufficiency?

In a standard democratic system, each citizen might cast a vote in favour of whichever policy they prefer, and the government then implements the most popular choice. Rousseau's general will differs from this, which he would call the 'will of all', in two important ways. First, it must not concern itself with specific matters of fact or policy, but instead focus only on abstract, general matters. Second, the general will is arrived at by each citizen voting with regard for the common social interest, rather than their narrow, private desires (SC II.4). For Rousseau, a state guided by the general will has a legitimate basis for its power, since (as they are in the common interest) every citizen wills the laws in effect. Where Rousseau's general will is an ideal to be aspired to, Marx's dictatorship of the proletariat is a transitory form of government on the path to communism. Dictatorship of the proletariat cannot possibly be the ultimate goal, given that Marx explicitly states that he wants an end to class distinctions, and with it, class conflict (CM 34). Seen in this light, it is evident that 'dictatorship' is meant to capture

^{*} All references to Rousseau (1762), *The Social Contract* (abbreviated to SC) are given by book and chapter number. Marx and Engels (1888), *The Communist Manifesto* is abbreviated to CM with references by page number.

[†] There are, incidentally, only two countries in the world where public sector employment (which I think is the broadest possible view of 'holding public office') accounts for more than half the workforce: Oman and Cuba (International Labour Organization).

and why is this the measure of the com.

why is this ideal? on what grounds?

speculation (but on what grounds?)

ok interesting and a good clear opening

?

the traditional sense of a revolutionary government, as opposed to a totalitarian autocracy (Wolff and Leopold 2021). According to Marx's depiction (CM 22, 33), the working classes will seize control from the bourgeois, overturning the established authority and legal system, and then work towards the establishment of a classless communist society.

With a clearer understanding of the social orders described by Rousseau and Marx, we can now examine their compatibility with democracy. Taken at face value, both seem to be eminently compatible with the minimalist definition fleshed out above. Rousseau desires a form of direct democracy where the general will (that is, common interests) sets the laws of a nation, with day-to-day administration carried out by a government accountable to the sovereign.* Compare this with our definition of democracy from earlier - it is certainly true that in such a system, the decisions arrived at are responsive to people's wishes. The Marxist idea of the state withering away as its functions merge into civic society has a similar flavour: choices about society are made communally, by all the people they will affect. Even the temporary proletarian dictatorship can be wholly compatible with democracy. If, as an empirical matter, the proletariat make up a suitably large fraction of a nation's citizens, then given that they collectively determine the direction of the revolution, we can say that the decisions being made are sufficiently responsive to the wishes of the people in general. Therefore, at least on a thin conception, the general will and dictatorship of the proletariat are not in conflict with democracy.

What of individual rights and freedoms, though? Rousseau and Marx are both wary of factions or classes in society, because of the discord they believe these will bring (SC II.3; CM 19). It might seem as though their anti-pluralism leaves no space for the protection of individual rights that liberals prize. In this regard, Rousseau's general will does better than Marx's dictatorship of the proletariat. Although one might make the case that in a communist society rights are protected (at least in the sense that every individual's best interest lines up with the common interest which is pursued), the forcible appropriation of capitalists' property under a proletarian dictatorship obviously does not respect their rights.† The general will, on the other hand, can be interpreted in a rights-compatible way. Every individual is a part of the sovereign, so whenever the people deliberate on the common interest, regard for their own interests must figure. Rousseau's demand is simply that citizens must not give overriding weight to the private interest (Waldron 1990). Put another way, making decisions in the common interest of all citizens entails showing respect for each citizen's interests in the preservation of their life, liberty and property (Cohen 1986). So, the general will can be compatible with individual rights, whilst the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot.

We can now see why the general will may not exist in many nations: conflict between the fundamental interests of citizens rules out the possibility of a solution in line with Rousseau's idea of the common interest. The probability of such a situation arising increases with a state's size and heterogeneity. When describing his procedure for the elicitation of the general will, Rousseau had in mind city-states such as his home of Geneva, where the entire population could feasibly be gathered in one place, and where citizens' lives and values were sufficiently similar that fundamental conflicts could be avoided (Jones 1987). He did, however, set out a means by which a suitably young nation (perhaps in the calm after a revolution) could be fashioned into a virtuous society with the help of a benign, intelligent 'lawgiver' (SC II.7-8). This blueprint is an interesting final point of comparison between Rousseau's theory and Marx's, where the dictatorship of the proletariat and subsequent transition to communism is expedited by the Communist Party (CM 21-22). Just as Marx presents the small, elite communist vanguard as essential for developing the movement's ideology and helping the working classes realise it is in their

* For all the criticism of representatives in III.15, the model proposed by Rousseau in practice seems very similar to modern constitutional republics: the people select who is to be in government, allow the government to implement rules in accordance with laws, and then hold those leaders accountable for outcomes at a later date. His enthusiasm for aristocratic government of the wise, for the multitude (SC III.5) fits with this.

† Perhaps a Marxist would respond that the capitalists had no legitimate claim to that property and thus no rights existed that could possibly be violated, but this is not a line of argument likely to convince any liberal.

but are they "sufficiently" so that our views are so sufficiently in your view & obtained by a "suitably large" faction? What does "majority" mean? Plurality?

Is this Cohen or Rousseau or Marx?

2 is Marx trying to convince liberals? (cm)

Yes, and that paternalism is also present in Marx's dictatorship of the proletariat (although it takes a different form)

interests to join. Rousseau endorses paternalistic manipulation on the part of the lawgiver as a way of guiding an unenlightened nation towards a new system of wise self-rule (SC II.7). Rousseau stresses that his lawgiver would not use force to shape people's moral character, but a position of such power is vulnerable to abuse. As Feigan (2015) notes, factual evidence from Russia suggests that coordination problems and insufficient selflessness cause the dictatorship of the proletariat to collapse into minority rule by the vanguard for its own benefit. The same forces would act on any mortal put forward as lawgiver. Therefore, whilst the exercising of a general will might be compatible with liberal democracy, reaching a situation in which the general will prevails is, like Marx's communism, unattainable without some measure of illiberalism.

To conclude, both the general will and the dictatorship of the proletariat are compatible with a minimalist conception of democracy, although only the general will is compatible with individual rights. There are striking similarities between the Rousseauian ideal and the Marxist one, including the emphasis placed on direct democracy and homogeneity. As I have demonstrated, this leads to impracticalities in implementation which mean that their theoretical compatibility with democracy is, in reality, unattainable. So, is the test of a theory its implementation? And if so, how can we determine whether a particular historicist rendering is the "correct" one?

this is a good point

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← which paper not Feigan's...

* It was two decades after that paper was written when Mao Zedong coined the phrase "people's democratic dictatorship", which remains in China's constitution today.

So, on your discussion w/ Michael in tutorial (or, our collective discussion) about whether the general will can ever be wrong - Rousseau does state that "the general will is always right and ever tends toward the public advantage" - chiefly because it is sovereign + indivisible. So, in the case that was mentioned about the majority deciding to eliminate the minority in a genocidal manner, this would not by definition be the general will because the general will must take into account the betterment of all. So, if that then is put forth as a proposition, that society is by definition still transferring to the security of the social contract, and on those grounds, the figures your translation renders as "lawmakers" (mine renders them "legislators") step in to return to the organic constitutional principles of the public advantage and the interest (sovereign and indivisible) of all.

I hope that's a bit clearer.

Looking forward to your next essay
(Sunday 10 am)