

Rejection of Rousseau's Enlightened Collectivism in Favour of Locke's Individualism

By Arnold August, October 2011

One can appreciate the Thirteen Colonies' penchant for Locke's private-property individualism more fully and bring out all the contours based on private-property values, liberty and freedom by examining briefly other thinkers from the Enlightenment, aside from John Locke. These other philosophers were a potential source from whom the authors of the U.S. Declaration of Independence may have chosen to seek inspiration. However, the Thirteen Colonies did not do so.

Rousseau emerged as the thinker par excellence of his time in favour of the collective and fraternal relationships over the individual possessive characteristic of capitalism. He pointed out the source of so many misfortunes and horrors, which society has faced since "The first man, who after enclosing a piece of ground, took it into his head to say, 'This is mine,' and found people simple enough to believe him."¹ Based on the theme to which he gave the title of his important classic (*Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*), he developed his thesis on the impossibility of democracy to exist based on a society nurtured on individualism and inequality (an important lesson for contemporary democracy in the U.S.). "The various forms of government owe their origin to the various degrees of inequality between members, at the time they first coalesced into a political body."² He constantly championed the need for common interests and well-being over and above particular or individual interests, concluding with this warning: "If there were not some point on which all interests agree, no society could exist.... Now it is solely in terms of this common interest that society ought to be governed."³ At the same time, Rousseau placed the flourishing of the individual on par with the collective well-being. He wrote that a legitimate civil order is "an association that will defend and protect the person and goods of each associate [and each person] uniting with all, nevertheless obey[s] only himself and remain[s] as free as before."⁴ Rousseau stood out for constantly striving to unite the collective and the individual. It was for all these reasons that the two tendencies of the Enlightenment split. One inclination headed in the direction of the Anglo-American world as embodied most obviously in the extreme individualism of the U.S., sticking to Locke and rejecting Rousseau's common good in a dialectic relationship with individual desires. The penchant led by Rousseau and others inspired all progressive thinking in Europe and in the South,

whereby he placed the common good over and above private property and interests, while simultaneously taking the latter into account. It would thus be a mistake, blinded by U.S.-centric prejudices, to attach any advanced Enlightenment thinking and values to the experience of democracy in the U.S.

¹ Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 2004. *Discourses on the Origin of Inequality*. Mineola, NY: Dover, p. 27.

² Ibid., p. 46.

³ Rousseau. 2007. In Victor Gourevitch (ed.), *Rousseau: The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 57.

⁴ Ibid., p. XIII.