A Rousseauian Look at European Integration

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HARRY BOOTY, MAR 13 2012

The modern study of international order would be difficult to conduct without reference to Jean Jacques Rousseau, the political philosopher of the 18th century who, alongside Kant, Hobbes, Locke and others, form the core of theory on the nature of man, society and the international system. One of the many issues he covered was the idea of international cooperation or even integration, and its suitability to at least some of the states of Europe. Times have of course changed since Rousseau's era, and the issue has been given considerably higher importance in contemporary international relations theory, with institutions such as the European Union (EU), the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and many more besides highlighting the possibility and potential of inter-state organisations engaging in political activity and strengthening supra-state links. What a Rousseauian theorist would have to say on this phenomenon is to a point limited to conjectural interpretations and debate; however there are several areas that can be studied to give us a better idea of what a Rousseauian stance on the issue might be.

Initially it is prudent to examine the main principles of Rousseau's philosophical theories at the societal and international level that are relevant to this area of interest. He begins, like many of his intellectual contemporaries, with the State of Nature, a largely imagined and hypothetical point in man's development that many philosophers used to examine the 'way people behave in the absence of artificial factors'[1], thus better understanding the nature of man. Rousseau differs from his major intellectual rival Thomas Hobbes by suggesting that the formation of the 'timid' man of the state of nature[2] into societies was a natural progression of man's 'need to find a common basis for a peaceful and happy life together'[3] (rather than the Hobbesian view that the State of Nature was a state of 'every man against every man'[4], necessitating the development of societies for protection). This group of associated people would come together and form a 'general will' that was sovereign over the society as a whole. An important consequence of this is that Rousseau argued that a 'nation is a nation before it gives itself to a king'[5] which can be taken to mean that according to his theory, the sole legitimate sovereign of a society is the people who compose it.

Interestingly, if Rousseau's theory of the international system is considered, it can be seen that, for two philosophers who disagreed on their basic societal philosophy, there was a surprising collusion of ideas between Hobbes and Rousseau at the international level. However, it is not much of a compromise for Hobbes as both, to a certain extent, saw the international system as an exaggerated form of the Hobbesian State of Nature, with each state being the sole guarantor of 'their interests for themselves'[6]. This necessitated that they maintain a 'posture of gladiators'[7] to protect these interests – which inevitably leads to what is known today as the 'security dilemma' and an atmosphere of mutual threat and mistrust. Therefore it is clear that Rousseau, whilst not being an explicit international relations theorist, could and did extrapolate his theories on society and the nature of man to the international level, and had strong, articulated views on the indivisibility of the sovereign power of all states which, almost paradoxically went hand in hand with his view of them as naturally selfish and concerned solely with their own prosperity and security.

Closely following on from this is the other major aspect of the topic in question, namely the integration of Europe in some shape or form into a single political entity. European integration theory was not as unheard of by many of Rousseau's contemporaries (as well as the man himself) as one might think. The idea that Europe should unite was, in many ways, prevalent – as the European inter-state wars of the 18th century were frequent and ruinous, and led to regularly discussion about what, if anything, could be done to stop them. A major formative theorist was the Abbe St Pierre, a French Abbot who was also a radical political theorist of the first half of the 18th century. St Pierre

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suggested that since war was 'inseparable from the nature of sovereignties'[8] that the major states of Europe should 'make a treaty of union and perpetual congress…and form a European Union'[9]. The idea, startlingly forward-thinking in hindsight, was laughably ridiculed by the majority of academics and politicians as naive and overly idealistic. Rousseau himself wrote a response to the Abbe which, whilst initially praising the spirit of his work – saying that 'never did the mind of man conceive a scheme nobler'[10] goes on to state that 'beyond doubt a lasting peace is at the present moment ridiculous'[11] as since states are fundamentally selfish beings they will not wish to lose some of their sovereignty and independence. He goes on to argue that without a common army to enforce the union the plan is essentially incompatible with the nature of the international system. From this evidence then it be can be argued that while Rousseau may have been at heart a supporter of European integration he was first and foremost a realist, and saw the problems of his era as insurmountable in the circumstances as they were.

European Integration Theory in its modern format has been around since the 1960's, and advanced massively in the half-century since then (often in tandem with the political and economic developments in Europe). Simply put, there are three basic forms of integration that are put forward as possible avenues for European amalgamation:

1. Federalism – under this system states retain significant autonomy (for example in law and education) but are united under one nation. This is a concept which is already used by many countries, most obviously the United States of America. In the European case countries would retain their ethno-cultural identity but subsume their sovereignty in certain areas (e.g. foreign relations, macro-economics and defence)
2. Neo-functionalism – here integration is seen as a continual process rather than an objective. States gradually cede parts of their responsibilities to transnational institutions (e.g. many states did away with their right to set currency exchange rates and print their own money autonomously when they joined the Euro). These institutions are not national, and can take on more responsibility as the perceptions of the involved nation-states change.
3. Liberal inter-governmentalism – this is the least formal of the three as it merely propagates the idea that as governments' interests become more and more aligned they will work together to an increasing degree. Post Cold War idealism could mean that states are more inclined to treat and cooperate.[12]

Elements of all three do of course exist in the current European situation – for example all member states of the European Union (EU) do cede part of their sovereignty to that body by allowing the European Court of Justice (ECJ) to arbitrate as the Supreme Court of the region. Indeed, it can be said that the major states of Europe exist in 'a union that currently includes intergovernmental, supranational, federal, con-federal and functional elements'[13].

Another area of modern theory that should be examined is that of the problems and hindrances that current and future European integration may face. There are three main arguments here against the theory and its application. Initially, it is often suggested that the almost forced artificiality of the union of countries, seemingly based on a 'cartographic mystic belief that certain areas on the map are crying out to become single geopolitical units'[14] is doomed to failure, as for example the fate of the USSR has shown that the 'time of the artificial mega state…had come and gone'[15]. Since it is not a natural construct sought by the people of the Union, but rather an economic pact sought by individual leaders seeking financial gain the people do not identify with it and it does not have their support.

Another problem often raised against European integration leads directly on from this, which is that of the national interest. As is said above, states and their citizens will for the majority see themselves as of their nation rather than European and would rather act in their own national interest rather than that of Europe as a whole. Current news in October 2011 has shown that this could well be the case, as the faltering single currency precipitated by the financial meltdown in Greece and weak economies in Ireland and Spain also has led to substantial friction between members of the Euro-zone and others, with citizens of the richer countries (e.g. Germany) unwilling to bail out the struggling countries (e.g. Greece) as it is not directly in the German national interest.

The third argument can also be seen as a derivative of the other two, which is that of domestic opposition based on cultural or ethnic difference. For example, in Britain the British National Party (BNP) oppose the union primarily on the grounds that they do not wish to be 'forced into a straightjacket of political and economic unification'[16] by what

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they perceive to be a 'bureaucratic elite'[17] that is, simply put, not British. The same can be said of other groups across Europe, such as Marine Penn's Front National in France. The sum of these problems shows that there are significant threats to the EU as national self interest and concerns about ceding sovereignty to foreign arbiters will often hinder the current unity that is in place as well as threatening to derail any future plans.

Now that the essential groundwork of the relevant theories of Rousseau and European Integration have been established, these can be applied together and analysed to discern the implications of this for our question. As was stated above, Rousseau was an idealist at heart but a realist in practice in relation to European integration in his own time. However, obviously times have changed massively since then, arguably so much that Rousseau's stance can be hypothetically shifted with it. Europe has in reality assumed many aspects of a single state – a Parliament, a shared Supreme Court, for many a single currency etc. It can be legitimately assumed that Rousseau would be in favour of this, as his objections to the Abbe St Pierre's proposal were purely pragmatic, based upon the feasibility of this happening. That it has happened would most likely have delighted Rousseau due to its ability to minimise war and enhance prosperity, and it is difficult if not impossible to argue that Rousseau would have been anything but in favour of it.

Whether he would be supportive of further integration is more difficult so say, since here his evident pragmatism would come into play again. European integration is stalling, with divisions rife among the factions of the EU – e.g. Euro-zone versus non Euro-zone, wealthy versus less wealthy etc. – calling into question any further integration in the near future as well as retrospectively examining past progress such as the Euro, which was after all a 'political currency'[18]. Furthermore when dealing with nations Rousseau himself said that they are primarily concerned with 'their interests for themselves'[19], which still holds true today and is another major factor casting doubt on the future of the EU. Therefore whilst it is probable that Rousseau may have been in favour idealistically of further European integration he would probably have been against it due to its realistic impossibility, as he was first and foremost a pragmatist who believed in what was doable first, and desirable second.

In conclusion, when studying what the most appropriate Rousseauian stance would be towards the modern integration of Europe there are several major areas to consider. If the judgements he made about the Abbe St Pierre in his own time are accepted, it is possible to theoretically extrapolate them to the situation today. Here it could be argued that whilst he would most likely be a serious supporter of the trend and ideals of European integration he would be limited by his pragmatic assessment of reality, judging the differences between countries as difficult to overcome, meaning he would perhaps rather judge how to deal with the world as it is rather than what it aspires to be. This argument is of course primarily hypothetical, however it is nevertheless important as it can serve to shift and update the ideas of a major political philosopher to the modern situation, and apply classic principles of political thought to one of the major practical questions of international politics today.

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