

## Private Property and its Discontents

Both Thomas More's *Utopia* and Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* serve as critiques of the society in which they lived in. Both authors describe flaws in the excess that people lived in and point to societies practice of private property as a potential reason for this excess. Unlike Rousseau, More steers away from looking at the past and instead creates a perfect society that seems to only be attainable in the very distant future. Rousseau however, believes that we have already experienced a time of fulfillment where inequality ceased to exist that cannot be once again reached unless society strips itself of all its excess commodities. Therefore, because More and Rousseau look at their ideal societies through different lenses, they both have very different solutions to the problem of private property in society. Both More and Rousseau agree that while private property can produce happiness for the individual, it diminishes the happiness of society as a whole.

good with very clear argument

More uses Plato's view on the use of communal property as his justification to why private property leads to inequality. More doubts that goods can be equitably shared if every individual has his own property; "however abundant things are, a few men will nonetheless divide everything amongst themselves, leaving everyone else in poverty" (47). The poverty that More describes stems directly from a few powerful people having large amounts of wealth and influence over others, which allows them to distribute things amongst the few instead of the many. This is an issue that still arises today, showing that we still have not been able to solve the problem of private property. Rousseau has a similar idea that once man was introduced to property, he began to want more commodities. This eventually led to a few having more than others, which in turn created

where is Plato's view?

greed and jealousy among man. However, Rousseau differs from More in that he believes that private property was the first thing to introduce inequality to man: "The first man who having enclosed a piece of land, thought of saying 'This is mine' and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of society" (109). By founding society in this manner, that first man exposed society to crimes, wars, and murders all things that may arise as direct outcomes following private property. Through Rousseau's and More's arguments, private property begins with the individual and gradually spreads amongst the rest of members in society. It is through this gradual acceptance of private property, that inequality is born. More describes a small group of people enjoying the goods of the many, as the main members of society that can be happy when private property exists. Both Rousseau and More speak of how private property introduces man to inequality, and in doing this society as a whole is not happy.

you've made a big jump in the sequence of events.

unclear

Rousseau continues to chart the progress of man and in doing so describes the stages in which man developed the idea of private property. Rousseau introduces the family as the first revolution of man; "Established and differentiated families, and which introduced property of a sort from which perhaps even then many quarrels and fights were born" (112). As relations between man and woman caused "movements of the heart", man and woman eventually united into one dwelling. The single-family dwelling was not the origin of private property but the actions of man that followed led to private property. As man had more leisure time in the home: "man used it to procure many sorts of commodities unknown to their fathers" (113). These commodities that started off as wants ended up becoming engrained needs in society. The problem arises because as man begins to "need" more commodities, it becomes impossible for anyone to be content with

good summary of Rousseau

their own share of things. Where Rousseau states the problem of private property by tracking the steps of man, More states the same problem by speaking of the inequality of property and the ensuing happiness that follows. More goes on to say that, "There is no way that property can be equitably and justly distributed or the affairs of mortal men so as to make them happy unless private property is abolished" (47). More's use of happiness is significant because it addresses happiness as something for the common good not just the good of a few. A utopia by definition is supposed to be a better, happier place for the largest number of people but private prevents happiness from reaching all members of a society. More therefore, addresses the progress of inequality to show that although you may attempt to equitably distribute goods amongst everyone, eventually things will slip out of the hands of the many and fall into the hands of the few. Thus, communal property and private property cannot coexist as the former attempts to create happiness for the largest amount of people while the latter creates happiness for a select few.

Rousseau's solution to the inequality that private property creates is for man to strip himself of his excess commodities and revert back to his state in nature. Rousseau poses the idea that people can attempt to unite to "protect the weak from oppression" but that in doing so they ultimately run "toward their chains believing that they were securing their liberty" (122). Rousseau believes that even if man attempted to join forces in order to protect each other from the powerful, his very protector would end up becoming his oppressor. By neither being able to rely on one another or on the magistrates, private property ultimately backs all members into a corner of unhappiness and oppression. Rousseau's solution is able to work because savage man never had to

unclear how "tracking" is part of the problem

Good reasoning

I don't see the connection here bet. M+R.

really?

Good

deal with oppression because he did not rely on the help of others. Next, savage man did not experience unhappiness because he found contentment in survival, not in the number of commodities that he owned. More suggests that communal property is the solution to the inequality that develops from private property. He answers the counterargument that communal property leads to inefficiency by saying that, "If you had been with me in Utopia and had seen their customs and institutions in person as I did you would quite agree that you had never seen a people well governed anywhere but there" (48). More says that people opposed to his notion of communal property have never truly seen it used in society. More describes a society that is only able to eradicate inequality because the community property of its people is backed by a strong and just government. Both More and Rousseau agree that property causes idleness but because More eliminates all idleness from the lives of the Utopians, he is able to create an efficient society that can share its property without anyone being exploited. More expands on this point when he says: "Such behavior on the part of the people is bound to create an abundance of everything. And when it is distributed equitably to everyone, it follows that no one can be reduced to poverty or forced to beg" (73). More's solution of communal property is successful because no one person works more than anyone else, therefore there is no exploitation occurring. Rousseau tracks inequality throughout the progress of society to show how property was the building block for the inequality that continued to grow and develop along with the rest of humanity. The stages according to Rousseau are: "The establishment of law and the right of property was the first stage, the institution of the magistrates second, and the transformation of legitimate into arbitrary power the third and last stage" (131). Therefore, because each stage is a direct effect of the one before it,

*This # lacks coherence.  
to many points strung together.*

*where is this proposed as a future solution?*

if

Rousseau sees that the only stage before law and the right of property were established is when man was in his natural savage state. While Rousseau presents a solution that requires man to return to his state in nature, More depicts a solution that instead of ridding itself of property entirely instead requires man to progress to the point where government has been able to create a system of efficiency that in of itself eliminates the exploitation and inequality that may arise from communal property.

good attempt at integration

examples?

While both More and Rousseau succeed in creating their own unique happy places, More presents a society that can be achieved. It seems plausible for mankind to eventually work towards the idealistic society that More creates. However, Rousseau's solution focuses on society stripping itself to its bare necessities. In many ways, this is not exactly possible. It is extreme to think that we as a society can simply go back to our natural states in nature and forget the advancements that have been achieved since man lived in his natural state. Advancements in technology have created many commodities that we in some cases do not have a true need for; nevertheless, some of these advancements have also helped to save millions of lives. While Rousseau says, "With so few sources of illness, man in the state of nature has little need fore remedies, and even less for physicians" (85) he also ignores that illness may arise at any given time in nature. Therefore, the technology to be able to combat such instances of misfortune are extremely important in today's society and display the progression that man has made since he lived in his natural state. More on the other hand, creates a utopia based on ideas of even more forward progress. Although his idea that everyone will be content with their role in society might seem idealistic, More's utopia focuses more on creating happiness for the largest amount of people rather than for the individual. When creating a better

good point

how?  
So?

yes

place, the most important element of that society must be happiness for the whole rather than happiness of the individual. Thus, More proposes a more achievable solution to the issue of private property than Rousseau's proposition of returning to our natural state in nature.

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I have neither received nor given unauthorized help during the completion of this work.

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#### Works Cited

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