

Essay Question:

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality* (1755):

The savage man breathes only peace and freedom; he wishes only to live and remain idle, and even the serenity of the Stoic does not approach his profound indifference toward every other object. The ever-busy civilized man, in contrast, sweats, scurries about, and constantly frets in search of ever more laborious occupations; he toils until death, and even hastens toward his grave in getting ready to live, or surrenders his life to acquire immortality.

How does Rousseau's view of progress and civilization, expressed in the quote above, compare to other notions of progress and civilization explored throughout this course? You may focus on certain topics or thinkers in your response.

### **Let's Be Kids Again:**

#### **There is Hope for Equality in a Knowledge Based Economy**

Once ownership of land emerged, humanity fell into a power struggle that demonstrated itself through the productive advantages of competition and the destructive consequences of rivalry. In his *Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1999/1755) claims that humanity would be saved from many wars and misery if someone just said: "Beware of listening to this charlatan. You are lost if you forget that the fruits of the earth belong to all and that earth itself belongs to no one!" (p. 55). The ones who spoke up were not heard and today it is almost absurd to think that the resources of the earth actually belong to all; we are lost indeed. David Attenborough defines earth as our "Garden of Eden" in his documentary *A Life on Our Planet* (2020), and explains how we have had the perfect conditions to live: this

delicate balance is built with so many components such as wild jungles around the equator adding oxygen to global air currents and the polar ice reflecting sunlight to keep the earth from heating up. This balance had been preserved for thousands of years before humankind invented farming and began to exploit seasons to produce more crops. Greta Thunberg puts the climate crisis into perspective in her iconic Ted Talk: *The disarming case to act right now on climate change* (2018) by saying there are no grey areas when it comes to survival: we either go on as a civilization or we face extinction. We have not only demolished equality, but we have also broken the balance and we have to do something about it. Rousseau claims that “the savage man breathes only peace and freedom [and that] even the serenity of the Stoic does not approach [this] profound indifference toward every other object” (1999/1755, p. 83-84). This essay aims to breed hope that the “ever-busy civilized man” has been hard at work building the technologies that make it possible for us to be equal and free again, enjoying earth as our “Garden of Eden”, not as savages, but as technology aided global citizens.

According to Marx and Engels, the idea of land led into feudality and “the bourgeois society sprouted from the ruins of feudal society” (1847, p. 14). The bourgeoisie can simply be defined as the class who owns the means of production. The movie *Metropolis* shot by Fritz Lang in 1927 is a strong depiction of how the members of the bourgeois society have been disconnected from the people who are part of the production process. This depiction is still mostly valid nearly a decade later, and we suffer the consequences of a capitalist economy. The Industrial Revolution spanned roughly through 1760 to 1850, and the progress humanity achieved in these years lay the foundation for the class polarization we experience today. However, the economical paradigms have been shifting as progress continues and we have recently created the “24 hour machine man”:

robots replacing blue collar jobs in factories and artificial intelligence replacing white collar jobs especially in fields such as accounting and human resources.

Today, together with the developments in especially computational sciences, the idea of property is making a shift from land towards intellectual property which can be thought of as virtual land, and there is no foreseeable end to the progress that can be achieved in terms of proprietary technology and data. Quantum technologies are the driving force behind super-fast personal and industrial computers and many things we use in our daily lives; such as GPS navigation, digital cameras, lasers, and led screens (Walliman, 2017). Stephan Hawking said “the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics have given us both nuclear energy and the microelectronics revolution” (1988, p. 7). The greatest nuclear disaster Chernobyl had happened 2 years before, in the Ukrainian SSR and we feel the effects even today. We have not yet lived through the disasters the microelectronics revolution is capable of generating, but the fear that most jobs will be replaced by machines is common and steadily growing. It is in the hands of the bourgeoisie to determine whether this is something to be feared or something to be cherished; companies such as Google, Microsoft and IBM are in a new power struggle of who will have “quantum supremacy” (Minsky, 2019). Currently we do not feel much of the destructive consequences of rivalry between these firms, but we know how expensive this power struggle is. We know poverty is one of the major problems today; and we know that if our economic system does not change, poverty will increase as machines replace jobs.

It is not possible to wipe out all progress and go back to being “savages” as depicted by Rousseau, but we have developed technologies that can bear most of the workload that is necessary for our survival on Earth. Instead of staying stuck in the age old power struggle, it is now possible to spread knowledge and technology across the globe to re-establish equality. In this imaginary future, human capital is considered key to innovation and creativity, whereas machines bear the repetitive workload. Sociologist and cyberneticist Louis André Leydesdorff explains a detailed structure of “The Knowledge-Based Economy” and explains how knowledge can be the basis of an economic system; giving the example of how the meaning of the word “energy” is very different in physics from what we understand of it in the current economic context (2008). This model offers an economic system where computers become means of production, making it possible to generate an all bourgeois society.

In the Fall Semester of 2020, most schools had to continue online due to the pandemic and it was proven that education is accessible to anyone with a computer and internet access. To back this claim with further proof, educational researcher Sugata Mitra introduces “Self-Organized Learning Environments” in his award winning Ted Talk and explains how curious children can manage to solve very complex problems by using only a computer (2013).

During this same period, civilized adults have stopped their search over “ever more laborious occupations” (Rousseau, 1755, p. 83), because we were forced to stay at home in order to stop the spread of the virus. Since curiosity is key to learning and learning is key to knowledge, we all need to foster our child-like curiosity in order to make this imagined future into our reality.

The year 2021 has come bearing a unique opportunity for us to stop and reflect upon how our societies have evolved and to think about how distribution of wealth and climate change are about to cause another mass extinction. There is hope for a sustainable future rather than continuing to “sweat, scurry or fret”. If we focus on distributing access to knowledge through already developed technologies, we could potentially re-establish equality among the current world population. If we fail to realize this and continue our battle on quantum supremacy, we will bite the apple of the tree of knowledge: banning us from The Garden of Eden, which is our planet; the pale blue dot that can not offer us more than it has.

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