SooJin Yoon

Government and International Relations
University of Sydney
Merewether Building-HO4
Sydney NSW 2006 Australia
s.yoon@econ.usyd.edu.au

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Living the General Will:
Formation, Operation and Dissipation of General Wills
in Rousseau and Intentional Communities

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Living the General Will: Formation, Operation and Dissipation of General Wills in Rousseau and Intentional Communities

Introduction

Central to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Social Contract* is the notion of the general will. The general will is an essential tool of social transformation which enables inherently self-focused individuals to become moral beings capable of citizenship. Accordingly, I argue the general will needs to be expressed continuously and, as such, expressions or manifestations of the general will cannot simply be political in nature. Taking the general will to be formulated and expressed only in sporadic but regular assemblies does not fully account for Rousseau’s vision of a legitimate society sketched in his *Social Contract*. I suggest the general will is encapsulated not just in overtly political acts but more importantly in mundane activities in community that reinforce each person’s bond with the community and commitment to fellow citizens.

In order to further assess Rousseau’s insights, I turn to the experiences of intentional communities. I find the general will in intentional communities to be manifested in commitment generating mechanisms. People in intentional communities pursue their shared ideal or belief by living and working together. To act out this common ideal, they institute tightly knit communities where intense personal relationships and communal experiences ensure the communities’ continued existence and allow members to attain a deeper self understanding and betterment. Membership in intentional communities generally entails an extraordinary level of commitment and planning which provides rare glimpses into how Rousseau’s general will may be embodied and actualised in practice. Yet the difficulties inherent in establishing a lasting bond as well as many intentional communities’ failure in the initial stage of their existence suggest the criteria for legitimacy in Rousseau may be impossible to fully satisfy in practice.

1. The General Will
The notion of the general will lies at the heart of Rousseau’s Social Contract.¹ It is an essential tool of social transformation which enables inherently self-focused individuals to become moral beings capable of citizenship. Hence it is no exaggeration to state that Rousseau’s ideal society is legitimate because it is governed by the general will. Simply put, the general will is the will of an individual qua citizen, which is aimed at the common good.² Therefore it cannot have an existence outside a body politic. A general will an individual has as a citizen is different to a private will an individual has as a man because a citizen no longer enjoys an “absolute and naturally independent existence” (SC I vii 55).³ The act of association in Rousseau’s social compact creates “a moral and collective body, composed of as many members as there are voices in the assembly, which receives from this same act its unity, its common self, its life and its will” (SC I vi 53). Citizens are bound to this body politic, “the public person, formed thus by the union

² SC I viii 55, II i 59.
³ Rousseau wrote about men, for men. Women were relevant only insofar as they could satisfy men’s needs or desires and accordingly women were never the focus of Rousseau’s investigations in their own right. Hence seemingly gender neutral terms like people, citizens, savages etc. in Rousseau’s writings only refer to men. For feminist analyses of Rousseau, see Nannerl O. Keohane, "but for Her Sex... the Domestication of Sophie," University of Ottawa Quarterly 49, no. 3-4 (1979); Susan Moller Okin, "Rousseau's Natural Woman," The Journal of Politics 41, no. 2 (1979); Susan Moller Okin, Women in Western Political Thought (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); Susan Moller Okin, Justice, Gender and the Family (Chicago: Basic Books, 1989) 10-13.; Ann Charney Colmo, "What Sophie Knew: Rousseau's Emile Et Sophie, Ou Les Solitaires," in Finding a New Feminism: Rethinking the Woman Question for Liberal Democracy, ed. Pamela Grande Jensen (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1996); Penny A Weiss, Gendered Community: Rousseau, Sex, and Politics (New York: New York University Press, 1993); Elizabeth Rose Wingrove, Rousseau's Republican Romance (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Lori Jo Marso, (Un)Manly Citizens : Jean-Jacques Rousseau's and Germaine De Staël's Subversive Women (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999). Rousseau’s oversight of women is certainly a significant shortcoming of his work which, quite justly, questions his evaluation of society and humanity. Many theorists, including Rousseau, failed to account for women. Yet they present their male-centric theories as if they should and do apply to everyone, that they are universal, even when women are excluded. On this point see, Anne Phillips, "Universal Pretensions in Political Thought," in Democracy and Difference (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993); Iris Marion Young, "Polity and Group Difference: A Critique of the Ideal of Universal Citizenship," Ethics 99, no. 2 (1989). Rousseau’s blindness for the plight of women in a patriarchal society is best illustrated in his interaction with Henriette, an unmarried woman writer, who upon Rousseau’s advice abandoned the only activity that gave her joy, writing. For more on this sad tale, see Mary Trouille, "The Failings of Rousseau's Ideals of Domesticity and Sensibility," Eighteenth-Century Studies 24, no. 4 (1991). While I do not endorse Rousseau’s failure to perceive women as being an equally important part of humanity as men, I do not address this issue. My purpose here is to investigate and evaluate fundamental components of Rousseau’s thoughts, limited as they are for treating women as mere instruments in a men’s world. To be consistent with Rousseau’s own understanding of the world, I use male pronouns in presenting his thoughts. For to refer to Rousseau’s savages or citizens as ‘she’ would neither do justice to Rousseau nor to feminist sensibilities, which when properly addressed, require more than cosmetic changes to pronouns.
of all the others,” and therefore to each other by “a reciprocal engagement between the public and private individuals” (SC I vi 53, I vii 54). Driven by the need for self-preservation in the pre-social state governed by the right of the strongest, Rousseau conceives people will “act in concert” to overcome threats to one’s existence by binding themselves to a social contract which places him “under the supreme direction of the general will” (SC I vi 52-53). The social contract becomes the source of authority and obligation in the body politic. It is each citizen’s pledge to fellow citizens and as such a citizen is morally bound to act according to the promise one has made. Citizens are thus bound by both interest and duty to the social contract.

Under the social contract, citizens have to conceive of oneself as an intricate part of the social union whereas outside the social compact such pressure simply does not exist. Rousseau is convinced that outside a body politic, a person could consider oneself the centre of the universe and would in fact be quite justified in doing so. The general will allows this much needed reorientation of focus by converging citizens’ self interests. This in turn makes it possible for citizens to discover the common interest which is invariably directed to the common good. The social union creates obligation for citizens to observe the general will as without such assurance individuals have no interest in joining the union in the first place. And there is, Rousseau assures, no need for citizens to fear the general will for by its nature it always tends toward equality. Most importantly, Rousseau argues individuals reach the pinnacle of their development via the operation of the general will: they become moral beings.

Being such an important key to the Social Contract, the concept of the general will has been subject to much scholarly interest and scrutiny over the years. Yet the term has generated a wide range of interpretations which portray it as anything from a simple concept directed to the common good to a pernicious concept that destroys individuals in the name of community. Perhaps it is not surprising that there exists such a wide range of

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4 Rousseau explains the essence of the social contract can be reduced to the following: “Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will; and in a body we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole.” (SC I vi 53)
5 SC II i 59.
6 SC II i 59.
views given Rousseau himself is both hailed as the champion of individual liberty and
cursed as the progenitor and apologist for the Terror that smeared the French Revolution
and, more recently, totalitarianism. Given all these interpretations are supported by ample
textual evidence from Rousseau’s writings, it is quite possible to choose a Rousseau and a
reading of the general will to suit one’s own concerns and goals. However, I argue in
order to understand and assess Rousseau’s social contract, the notion of the general will
must be examined within the context of concerns and goals that Rousseau was
preoccupied with.

Throughout the Social Contract, Rousseau repeatedly asserts the absolute
sovereignty, supremacy, indivisibility and rectitude of the general will. It is always right
and it must always be enforced.8 When anyone refuses to obey the general will, not only
does Rousseau recommend ‘constraining’ the deviant to obey, he thinks such coercion is
fully justified.9 Given the general will is endowed with the supreme authority, one could
easily expect Rousseau to elaborate at length its specific contents and to provide a
detailed exposition into the operation of the general will. Yet Rousseau could not be
vaguer regarding the nature and operation of the general will. Apart from stipulating it is
always directed to the common good and it is general both in its source and application—

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8 SC I vii 55, II vi 67.
9 SC I vii 55.
that it comes from all and applies to all—Rousseau is silent on what seems to be the most important issue.\(^\text{10}\) Following this vein of thought, it is easy to dismiss Rousseau for granting much too much power to a concept without any substance, which makes it highly susceptible to abuse and usurpation. Yet such an easy dismissal does not do justice to Rousseau who must have anticipated such an objection.\(^\text{11}\) I argue the concept of the general will can be better understood if it is read in light of the problems it seeks to overcome.

### 2. On Human Misery

Having identified and examined the source of social ills in his early writings,\(^\text{12}\) Rousseau presents a solution to woes that plague society in the *Social Contract*. Therefore it is difficult to evaluate his solution without first understanding the problem he seeks to address. Rousseau starts his evaluation of social ills in the *Discourses* where he identifies *amour-propre*,\(^\text{13}\) a dangerous form of self-love that is developed in society which engenders, among other things, disunity, competitiveness and dependence, as the chief source of vice in society.

Rousseau was firmly convinced that “nature made man happy and good but society depraves him and makes him miserable” (*Dialogues* 213).\(^\text{14}\) Consequently, he had

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\(^\text{10}\) *SC* II i 59, II vii 68.

\(^\text{11}\) Roger D. Masters calls for a careful examination of Rousseau’s ideas. Rousseau was able to bring together “the most fundamental knowledge available, synthesize it, and go beyond the limits of time and place to pose crucial issues whose existence is not even suspected by lesser intellects” (Introduction to *SC* 33). I concur with Masters in his observation that “[i]t is likely that, in such cases, the author had good reasons for writing as he did—and probably even thought of our questions or objections in advance. Hence we ought to study the great works with a special care and seek to understand what they mean, word by word if need be, before we start to criticise them” (Introduction to *SC* 34).


\(^\text{13}\) Variously translated as vainglory, self love, pride and selfishness, this term, *amour-propre*, is crucial in Rousseau’s thought because he identifies it as the source of “all the irascible passions” (*Dialogues* 179).

much to criticize of society. His critiques are manifold and multifaceted. He condemns various social perversions, ranging from disunity, loss of harmony, forced servitude, inflammation of passions, lack of virtue to loss of natural freedom. His dissatisfaction with society at large is both positive and negative. Society as it is does not develop virtue in its members, divides people and their inner selves, creates dependence on others which leads to mindless submission and ultimately promotes the worst form of self-interest to overwhelm individuals making it impossible for them to experience harmony and deep contentment. His discontent with society is resoundingly comprehensive. In a direct opposition to the Christian doctrine of the original sin which places the fault with people, Rousseau accuses society and *amour-propre* it begets for corrupting and debasing men and for creating “the most frightful disorder” (*SD* 52).

The troublesome *amour-propre* is ‘ignited’ once the savage leaves the state of nature and this vicious passion, once activated, soon takes the hold of the person, even manipulating the faculty of reason to further its end.\(^{15}\) Rousseau explains

\(\textit{Amour-propre} \text{ is only a relative sentiment, artificial and born in Society, which inclines each individual to have a greater esteem for himself than for anyone else, inspires in men all the harm they do to one another} \quad (SD \ 91)\)

As a perverted form of self-interest, *amour-propre* even demands other people to esteem oneself more than they esteem themselves.\(^{16}\) That is, my *amour-propre* dictates me to focus solely on myself and not to be satisfied until I also persuade, or force, others to regard and esteem me as much as I do myself. Rousseau argues each person has his own *amour-propre* urging him, convincing him, he should be the focus of the world. Clearly this can only lead to conflict, hostility, deceit and duplicity. What makes this passion particularly dangerous and damaging is its continual presence. Rousseau elaborates that

\(\textit{Amour-propre}, \text{ the principle of all wickedness, is revived and thrives in society, which caused it to be born and where one is forced to compare} \quad (SD \ 36, \ 51-2, \ 91-2)\)

\(^{15}\) *SD* 36, 51-2, 91-2.

\(^{16}\) “[c]onsuming ambition, the fervor to raise one’s relative fortune less out of genuine need than in order to place oneself above others, inspires in all men a base inclination to harm each other” (*SD* 52).
Rousseau is so emphatic in his condemnation of *amour-propre* because it places a person under the worst form of slavery.\(^\text{17}\) It traps a person under “the yoke of the will of men,” under “the yoke of opinion” (*Dialogues* 143; *Reveries* 73).\(^\text{18}\) Driven by a ceaseless desire, which in time becomes a need, to obtain approval, the self is no longer able to enjoy happiness and contentment independent of other people. Dependence can be both benign and malicious. What distinguishes these two types is the object of dependence. Rousseau explains,

There are two sorts of dependence: dependence on things, which is from nature; dependence on men, which is from society. Dependence on things, since it has no morality, is in no way detrimental to freedom and engenders no vices. Dependence on men, since it is without order, engenders all the vices, and by it, master and slave are mutually corrupted. (*Emile*, 85)\(^\text{19}\)

Dependence can be tolerated if it has no morality, if it does not interfere with one’s desire and capacity to focus on oneself. Dependence on things or nature does not interfere with one’s ability or desire to focus on oneself and to be independent. Dependence on people, however, is detrimental because it takes one’s focus away from oneself and makes one constrained by capricious wills of others.

Though no one did it as convincingly as Rousseau, he was not the only person to criticise society for its vices in his days. In fact, there were many who were equally

\(^{17}\) *Amour-propre* has devastating effects on transparency and freedom: “They all seek their happiness in appearances, none is concerned about reality. They all place their being in appearance. Slaves and dupes of amour-propre, they live not to live but to make others believe they lived.” (*Dialogues* 214) On themes of transparency, see, Jean Starobinski, *Transparency and Obstruction*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988).


indignant at the corrupt state of affairs in society and called for an overhaul. Yet Rousseau stood out among the critics of society because he did not share their enthusiasm for reason. When he delivered his powerful indictment against society, Rousseau was always equally hostile to the sciences and the arts. Embedded in his vehement attacks against society, the sciences and the arts is an important shortcoming of reason that is often overlooked by those who heralded the reign of reason: reason, by itself, cannot overcome *amour-propre*.

Speaking of his time, Rousseau claimed “we live in the climate and the century of philosophy and reason” (*Morales* 1088). Yet he asserted there was little to celebrate about. Unlike animals of instinct, human beings are endowed with “the faculty of self-perfection” largely thanks to our ability to think, to reason (*SD* 26). Yet Rousseau doubted whether reason on its own could do much to improve society. Though his intellectual contemporaries pinned their hopes on reason to create a just and free society, Rousseau remained deeply sceptical of reason’s ability to break the bonds of *amour-propre* that bind men in countless vices and corruption, which in turn make society, for Rousseau, truly perverse. For him, reason did not have a sufficient motivational force to quash the urgings of *amour-propre*. Though one could use reason to discover what it is and how to be good and just, it was simply incapable of convincing and motivating a person to renounce positions that passion has led him to take. What made Rousseau to emphatically reject his contemporaries’ praise of reason was reason’s malleability. Not only is reason impotent against *amour-propre*, it is too easily manipulated by it. In fact, Rousseau argues reason is also to blame for vices in society because it “engenders *amour-propre* and reflection fortifies it” (*SD* 37). Therefore, Rousseau suggests one may need to be compelled to do the good whose virtue one is rationally convinced of.

3. Living the General Will

How Rousseau characterised the nature and source of vices in society is important

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21 Though Rousseau grants that reason may help some individuals to become moral, he argues the multitude is incapable of using reason. (*Dialogues* 221)
because they signal how the tool that is meant to counteract the perils, the general will, is to operate in the social contract. Reading the general will in light of the incessant *amour-propre* it must battle continuously then, challenges the notion that the general will is expressed only in activities that are normally considered political, for example, meetings and assemblies, policy debates and discussions, elections, voting and lobbying. Taking the general will to be formulated and expressed only in sporadic but regular assemblies does not fully account for Rousseau’s vision of a legitimate society sketched in his *Social Contract* given the nature of *amour-propre*: it is incessant, easily manipulates reason and therefore is difficult to check. This is especially so given the particularly limited manner in which Rousseau envisioned assemblies were conducted.

If, when an adequately informed people deliberates, the citizens were to have no communication among themselves, the general will would always result from the large number of small differences, and the deliberation would always be good. (*SC II iii* 61)

Provided citizens are adequately informed before deliberations, the idea of barring communication during deliberations may be justified for the purpose of encouraging a citizen to deliberate or participate directly. Yet how is one to obtain adequate information? Ordinarily this is done in society by like minded people coming together to share knowledge and concerns with each other. However this is not allowed in Rousseau’s social compact because he explicitly bars partial associations and factions. Rousseau explains

But when factions, partial associations at the expense of the whole, are formed, the will of each of these associations becomes general with reference to its members and particular with reference to the State…In order for the general will to be well expressed, it is therefore important that there be no partial society in the State, and that each citizen give only his own opinion. (*SC II iii* 61)
Social Contract stipulates that every citizen needs to deliberate together in periodic assemblies. I argued that the general will must be understood as a tool specifically aimed at counteracting the incessant amour-propre. Then it is logical to assume the general will must be manifested continuously if the amour-propre threatens the self at “each instant” (Dialogues 100). This leads to an obscure conclusion that the social contract must be a continuous assembly which clearly is not the case. Rather assemblies are seldom, much less frequent than expected. Though they are periodic, these assemblies are few and far in between. In order to be adequately informed to participate in assemblies as is required of all citizens in the Social Contract, one could obtain the needed knowledge from, say, interest group meetings. However this is not a solution as it is clearly prohibited.

I have attempted to explain the procedural aspects of the Social Contract assuming the general will to be manifested only in activities that are normally considered political. As illustrated above, such an attempt renders Social Contract counterintuitive. Therefore I argue in order to understand the Social Contract and the way in which the general will operates, assumptions such as the one I state above must be discarded. The realm and means by which the general will manifests itself transcend the boundary of politics as it is generally understood. To do justice to Rousseau’s vision then, the general will’s operation in society clearly needs to be reconceptualised and duly broadened.

The general will must be encapsulated and expressed not just in overtly political acts but more importantly in mundane activities in community that reinforce each person’s bond with the community and commitment to fellow citizens. The general will has the important task of transforming men into citizens, of turning inherently selfish beings who are enslaved to envy, greed, competitiveness and deceit into moral beings who can control their passions and construct healthy relations with others, in which one learns to value and esteem others as moral beings whose interests and needs must be respected. This transformation entails a citizen obtaining mastery over his amour-propre.

For Rousseau, the threat from amour-propre was palpable every moment. He felt, for the general will to be successful, it had to manifest itself constantly and remind citizens of the need to overcome the irresistible call of this pernicious and flattering

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22 SC III xviii 106.
passion. This is why Rousseau thought the general will must be supported by civil religion, censorship, simple agrarian economy and patriotism which are directed to changing the moeurs of citizens by instituting a “simple, regular, and solitary way of life” (SD 23).

In order to give the social compact “the best possible form,” there must be laws regarding four important relations: first, “the relationship of the whole to the whole” must be regulated by a constitution or, as Rousseau calls it, “fundamental laws”; second, the relationship “of the members to each other or to the entire body” which gives rise to “civil laws”; third, the relationship between “man and the law, namely that of disobedience and penalty,” which gives rise to criminal laws. Now Rousseau declares the fourth type of laws is “the most important of all” because the success of all the others depends on it (SC II xii 76-7). The fourth type of laws

is not engraved on marble or bronze, but in the hearts of the citizens; which is the true constitution of the State; which gains fresh force each day; which, when other laws age or die out, revives or replaces them, preserves a people in the spirit of its institution, and imperceptibly substitutes the force of habit for that of authority. I am speaking of mores, customs, and especially of opinion—a part of the laws unknown to our political theorists, but on which the success of all others depends (SC II xii 77: emphasis added)

Reaching out to the hearts of the citizens is the most important task of the general will. It must keep the civic or the communal self alive by tending to the mores, customs and opinions. The general will must be manifested in mundane activities, so much so that it needs to be lived. This is not, of course, to slight the legislative and decision making processes. It is important for the general will to be captured and expressed in laws and regulations. The general will must transform selfish beings into moral beings who find freedom in “obedience to the law one has prescribed for oneself” (SC I viii 56). It is also

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the common good. Then those elements which facilitate and bring forth this moral transformation and make it possible for individuals to perceive and embrace the common good—whether it be laws, systems of control or influence, attitudes, beliefs, physical and emotional boundaries, a daily routine or even the wisdom of the semi-divine legislators—can be said to express or manifest the general will. Rousseau repeatedly asserts that people cannot discern the common good outside the *Social Contract* because there is an inadequate protection against *amour-propre*. Given Rousseau’s characterisation of this evil, it seems nothing less than a radical transformation is needed to escape its treacherous grasp. Radical transformations would require stringent systems of control and influence, and much sacrifice and investment. It would also make sense for these mechanisms to be present continuously. This leads to the conclusion that what is presented in the *Social Contract* is a way of life. It does not just provide a constitutional or a legal framework of a legitimate society. It identifies means by which such a society can come into being, express the general will and be governed by it.

This reading is better equipped to explain those ‘strange’ tools Rousseau discusses at length like the legislator, civil religion, censorship and sumptuary laws which are all aimed at creating and maintaining the social bond which must underlie any attempt to express the general will. These tools constitute an important part of Rousseau’s polity because they are essential to creating and maintaining the general will, the ultimate source of legitimacy. Institutional infrastructure in the *Social Contract* cannot be separated from systems of influence that he suggests for the control of morals, attitudes and opinions which make it possible for citizens to internalise the common good, the general will. Hence Rousseau’s infamous tools must be given their due recognition for the important role they play in manifesting and upholding the general will and must be carefully considered, not ignored or ridiculed.

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24 The general will in my reading turn out to be far more pervasive and comprehensive than what has been suggested. Yet it is not as menacing as some have feared for, after all, it is directed at the common good which is not someone’s private will in disguise.

25 These tools are often overlooked in many commentaries, especially those which praise Rousseau’s liberal strain and consider him even a precursor to modern day participatory democracy. For example, see, Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).
4. Mores and Laws

The double generality condition of the general will—it needs to come from all to apply to all—is expected only to be adequately met in legislation, that is, in laws. This is not surprising as Rousseau makes this point repeatedly throughout the *Social Contract*. In fact, he explains that a law is created “when the entire people enacts something concerning the entire people,” for only then can “the subject matter of the enactment” be “general like the will that enacts” (*SC* II vi 66). To emphasise this point further, Rousseau states clearly that “the laws are only authentic acts of the general will” (*SC* III xii 99).

The secondary literature on Rousseau is particularly well known for its diverse and often contradictory interpretations in which commentators find many points of contention in each other’s rendering of key concepts. Yet disagreements disappear when it comes to the relationship between the general will and laws. It seems there is nothing unclear about the idea that the general will is encapsulated only in laws. Rousseau’s repeated assertions appear to have convinced even the severest critic on this point. Rousseau’s admiration for laws’ unique ability to facilitate the moral transformation of individuals is clear throughout his writing. He believed in the transformative power of laws and was a fearless advocate for laws. Hence it is not surprising that laws feature prominently in his sketches of an ideal polity. What made laws particularly valuable for Rousseau was laws’ ability to remove particularity. That is, he envisioned that when people gather together to enact something concerning the entire people, they had to set their private interest directed to private goods aside in order to consider the common interest directed to the common good. The law, by combining “the universality of the will and that of the object,” made it necessary for individuals to focus on the needs of all (*SC* II vi 66). This was a remarkable achievement especially given Rousseau’s diagnosis of the source of corruption, *amour-propre*. This selfish concern for the preservation and interest of the individual was so strong that it dominated individuals outside the social compact. The social contract provides a rare opportunity, Rousseau argues, to overcome this urge and to broaden our scope.

Therefore, it is easy to be imbued with Rousseau’s enthusiasm for laws when examining the nature of the general will and accept his repeated assertion that only laws
express the general will. However I argue a deeper understanding of the nature and operation of the general will can be obtained when this assertion is put aside. Before the general will can be expressed in legislation, there must be appropriate and sufficient mores that supplement laws. Admittedly laws are products of rational consensus. Yet mores or social bond that must underlie any attempt to express the general will need not stem from reason. Rousseau understood this need for irrational basis for rational consensus more than any other theorist. He acknowledged and highlighted the importance of the role of the legislator in establishing suitable mores directed to the discovery of the general will among a people.\textsuperscript{26} The legislator creates habits and traits that must be continuously present and cultivated to support the discovery of the general will, to give force and meaning to various acts of legislation. This task requires such an extraordinary individual so much so that Rousseau does not delve into details into the workings of the legislator. He argues it is useless to discuss the arts of the legislator since they cannot be learned or acquired. Be that as it may, Rousseau does make it clear that the legislator is to mould the morals, attitudes and opinions of the people in order to make it possible for them to discern the general will and to be guided by it.

To argue that the general will is whatever a people enacts ignores the importance of mores and social bond that must be present to complement and supplement any legislation. Rousseau argued thus for he considered only semi divine legislators with their “sublime reason, which rises above the grasp of common men” could achieve such a feat (\textit{SC II vii 69}). For him, it was futile for “common men” to ponder about such an extraordinary person as the legislator. Rousseau explains

\begin{quote}
One who dares to undertake the founding of a people should feel that he is capable of changing human nature, so to speak; of transforming each individual, who by himself is a perfect and solitary whole, into a part of a larger whole from which this individual receives, in a sense, his life and his being…The legislator is an extraordinary man in the State in all aspects. If he should be so by his genius, he is no less so by his function. It is not magistracy, it is not sovereignty. This function, which constitutes the republic, does not
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{SC II vii 67-70}
enter into its constitution. It is a particular and superior activity that has nothing in common with human dominion. (SC II vii 68)

Rousseau does not discuss how mores or social bonds are created because he assumed the wisdom of the legislator would establish them. Hence his discussions of the general will focus on legislation which “common men” can understand, unlike mores that lie outside the “human dominion.”

Therefore, the simplistic portrayal of the general will as laws does not reveal the complex relationship between mores and laws. Mores and laws need to supplement each other in order for the general will to be created, acknowledged and adopted by all. It is true that the general will is embodied in laws. However the general will, in order to exist not just in principle but in practice as well, must also be supported by mores. The traditional view constructs a narrow domain of the general will which must be expanded. The general will is not a simple political tool aimed at obtaining consensus. For Rousseau, it was a moral tool. And as such it needs to be expressed in laws as well as in mores and opinions.

Issues that Rousseau attributed to the role and wisdom of the legislator and therefore hesitated to discuss—the means of founding a people, creating mores and opinions, and creating institutions that constitute and govern a community—can be found routinely and mundanely in intentional communities. In their effort to constitute a community, people in intentional communities, individually and collectively, need to tackle these issues of founding as the community’s existence depends on their success in solving the riddles of constitution. Intentional communities, therefore, demystify the role and wisdom of the legislator and make it possible for “common men” to analyse them. They provide a rare opportunity to observe issues Rousseau discusses, and does not discuss, in practice. Therefore I turn to intentional communities to obtain insights into how the general will can be acted out daily in real life through laws and mores.

5. Applying Rousseau

Important concepts in political theory, like Rousseau’s general will for instance, attract
much scholarly interest and scrutiny. Both Rousseau and his ideas have been subject to countless analyses which have over time created a substantial secondary literature. Yet despite its extensive scope and varied interpretations, this secondary literature contains surprisingly small number of practical applications. Rousseau’s ideas, following the norm in political theory, are generally examined in abstract: commentators conduct their examinations by (1) focusing solely on Rousseau’s numerous texts and correspondences; or (2) comparing Rousseau to other theorists; or (3) applying ideas to historical events. Most applications focus on Rousseau’s legacy in relation to the French Revolution. Outside the French Revolution, little attempt has been made to observe and test Rousseau’s ideas in practice.

This may be so given the *Social Contract* is a theoretical work which examines the composition and operation of a legitimate society. Accordingly commentators like Judith Shklar have argued that the *Social Contract* presents an ideal, though impossible to implement in practice which, however, can nevertheless be used to castigate society for its flaws. If the *Social Contract* is valued primarily as a measure or a yardstick, it may be appropriate that an examination into it be abstract in nature. After all, if it is agreed that the ideas contained in the *Social Contract* are ideals—more specifically ideals based on idiosyncratic yearnings of Rousseau—then perhaps calls for a practical application may be inappropriate. This line of thought explains why a vast majority of commentators on Rousseau have adopted the first two methodological approaches identified above.

Yet concepts, however abstract and complex, can and must be examined not simply for conceptual soundness but for practical applicability and utility as well to the extent possible. Rousseau himself declares from the outset he wishes to examine “whether there can be a legitimate and reliable rule of administration in the civil order, taking *men as they are* and *laws as they can be*” (*SC* I 46: emphasis added). He may have ended up sketching an impossible dream of unity and contentment but he certainly did not start with a grossly exaggerated view of men and laws if his declaration is taken to be earnest. If a theoretical exposition is composed taking “men as they are” and “laws as they can be,” it would not be erroneous to apply and observe it in practice among men and laws as they actually are. Even if the author never intended his ideas to be directly

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applied in practice, there is still much to be gained from applying and testing ideas in practice. As effective as conceptual explorations are in exposing hidden assumptions, relationships and expectations, a new light may be shed on a concept by observing its application or manifestation in practice. Indeed, concepts utilised effectively in hypothetical settings can produce unexpected consequences when adopted in actual societies inhabited by people who are more complex than a series of theoretical conjectures.

In order to test Rousseau’s ideas, then, I turn to intentional communities. In the *Social Contract*, Rousseau presents ancient city states like Sparta and Rome as worthwhile models of emulation. He admired the unity and cohesiveness valued and cultivated in these ancient polities because he believed they made public welfare the foremost concern of the citizens. In such ancient polities, the mores and laws combined to attach citizens’ hearts to the state. The ancient polities’ small size, homogenous cultural and linguistic background, shared history, simple agrarian economy and common religion created the perfect social, cultural, economic and political milieu in which people developed close affinity with each other. This affinity created a strong social bond between citizens which made it possible for them to identify the general will that pointed to the common good. In other words, Rousseau favoured “a small, face to face, egalitarian, non commercial, highly intrusive, democratically ruled city state” with political preconditions of obedience and patriotism.28 Rousseau bemoans that this admirable practice cannot be found among the modern people because the will and freedom to exercise sovereignty as a people can no longer be found.29 Such indictment may be valid as only a handful of nations in existence today can be compared to the ancient city states in their size, composition, political organisation, public involvement and economy. Yet Rousseau’s charge that modern people as a whole have lost the will for exercising their sovereignty through the general will cannot be sustained when it comes to intentional communities.

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29 SC III xv 103
6. Intentional Communities

Intentional communities are composed of individual who strive to implement a communal life that expresses their belief, ideology or vision. Dissatisfied with the status quo in society, people willingly enter into an agreement to share their lives together. Driven by a deep yearning for close relations with one another, members live and work together, sharing their labour, resources, and time. Of course, not all intentional communities fit into the mould I sketch here but many communities focus their energy on creating just that, a community. A long time community documentarian and advocate, Geoph Kozeny notes that

Over the past decade, the word community has become a buzz word used to conjure up images of togetherness, cooperation, wellbeing, and a sense of belonging. The primal feeling evoked is that a community is a safe haven, a place where everyone looks after each other, where everyone feels at home and where everyone’s needs are met.\(^{30}\)

Much like Rousseau’s vision of “a perfect and solitary whole” transformed to become “a part of a larger whole,” members in intentional communities can be said to receive from “the large whole” a heightened sense of self, of the inner being (SC II vii 68). In order to create a community, then, it appears that each person must reorient one’s focus making the everyday practice of community the central focus in life.\(^{31}\) Reorienting would mean each person identifying and willingly adopting the common ideal, belief, vision or good that underlies a particular community.

Each intentional community adopts political, economic, and social structures that embody the common ideal, belief or vision that bring members together. The community is not simply a place that provides shelter, nourishment, work and leisure. Though these functional roles are important, a community must also actively adopt the principles members consider important and provide an environment where desired values and

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\(^{31}\) Ibid.
behaviours can develop and flourish. Rousseau claims that he wrote the *Social Contract* having made the important discovery that “no people would be anything other than what it was made into by the nature of its Government” (*Confessions* 340). People in intentional communities also recognize the influence a government, or the way in which a polity is organized, has on the character and aspirations of the people. They voluntarily ‘leave’ society at large having been disenchanted with the widespread values and practices there. A community can be conceived as a means that allows individuals to reach their specific goals with respect to self realization. It can raise people to ‘higher’ levels of existence which embodies belief or vision that they value. People voluntarily choose to create or join a social, political and economic framework that supports and encourages them to attain the belief or vision they value as they feel the society at large falls short of their beliefs or vision and actually hinders their efforts to attain their ideals.

Rousseau argued that self betterment is only possible through the general will. He argued that only the general will could transform selfish ‘animals’ into higher beings capable of citizenship. For Rousseau, becoming a citizen is inherently a moral act that allows each person to transcend the clutches of *amour-propre*. He felt that individuals, by themselves, could not hope to undertake this task of overcoming *amour-propre* successfully. But together a group of people could venture to check each other’s *amour-propre* through intense personal relationships, communal experiences, and a deeper self understanding. Intentional communities espouse similar yearnings for personal growth through intense personal relationships and communal experience. They are a fertile source of information for examining how various economic, political, cultural, spiritual and ideological institutions function to the benefit, or detriment, to the individual. Therefore I use experiences in intentional communities to obtain valuable insights into how the general will can be acted out daily in real life.

People in intentional communities pursue their shared ideal or belief by living and working together. To act out this common ideal, they institute tightly knit communities where intense personal relationships and communal experiences ensure the

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32 It is impossible for people to ‘leave’ the society at large as intentional communities exist within the framework of nation states. However many intentional communities restrict members’ interaction with the outside world to varying degrees. Hence people can be described to be leaving society to the extent that they adhere to a communal life that results in a reduced interaction with society outside the particular community they belong to.
communities’ continued existence and allow members to attain a deeper self understanding and betterment. Membership in intentional communities generally entails an extraordinary level of commitment and planning. In order to create and maintain the community, members voluntarily adhere to demanding systems of control and influence. Researches into intentional communities show those communities which have stringent systems of adherence and cohesion tend to last longer than those which do not. 33 These communities do not rely solely on political tools to generate commitment and communion. The terms of membership, in order for the community to last, cannot be so narrowly constructed. Being a member in a community is a way of life where a member’s belief, faith and commitment are expressed in and reinforced by everyday activities. These mundane activities build one’s commitment to the community and to other members.

The road to membership usually requires a person to leave the old self behind. The old self is shed and a new communal self is created within the confines of the community, with the help of others who are also undergoing the same transformation. Generally, this transformation is consciously and enthusiastically embraced by prospective members as they are attracted to the peace and contentment of a communal lifestyle. Often, members attest that the deep bond, which is created within the community when people forge intense personal relationships as a result of living and working together, leads to personal growth and development. The community makes it possible for those members to rise above self-interest and to become a better person. With this goal in mind, individuals adhere to strict communal patterns which are expressed not only in written laws and regulations but also in subtle social influences.

Rosabeth Moss Kanter’s research into commitment mechanisms is significant as it identifies specific commitment producing organisational strategies which have been actually used.\(^{34}\) She argues the problem of organisation in these communities can be “summarised as one of commitment.”\(^{35}\) She focuses on the notion of commitment because it reflects how members become committed to the community’s work, to its values, and to each other, and how much of their former independence they are willing to suspend in the interests of the group.\(^{36}\)

To constitute a lasting meaningful social bond, nineteenth century intentional communities which lasted for more than 25 years in Kanter’s study structured every aspect of group life. Commitment mechanisms in these groups defined the group’s identity and daily practices by embodying and strengthening abstract ideals members strove to. She argues

> Every aspect of group life has implication for commitment, including property, work, boundaries, recruitment, intimate relationships, group contact, leadership, and ideology. These pieces of social organization can be arranged so as to promote collective unity, provide a sense of belonging and meaning, or they can have no value for commitment. The strength of a group and the commitment of its members will be a function of the specific ways the group is put together. Abstract ideas of brotherhood and harmony, of love and union, must be translated


\(^{35}\) Kanter, *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective* p. 65.

\(^{36}\) Ibid.
into concrete social practices.\textsuperscript{37} (emphasis added)

The insight that “every aspect of group life has implication for commitment” is of particular interest. Intentional communities did not just rely on laws to produce commitment. Abstract ideas were translated into daily activities and “concrete social practices” led to fostering members’ commitment. By following the daily routine of collective life and participating in common activities, members reaffirmed their commitment to the common belief, to the group and to each other. Just as the general will has this task of facilitating individuals’ transformation into citizens, the commitment generating strategies help individuals to become members of a particular group. Hence I argue the general will is manifested in commitment generating mechanisms. Whereas Rousseau describes the theoretical transformation via the general will, Kanter outlines substantive procedures and mechanisms of this transformation.

Identifying six steps to commitment, Kanter argues these steps are used to create three different grades of commitment: sacrifice and investment lead to instrumental commitment; renunciation and communion lead to affective commitment; mortification and transcendence lead to moral commitment.\textsuperscript{38} What is of interest is the way in which sacrifice, investment, renunciation, communion, mortification and transcendence mechanisms manifest themselves in daily lives of members. For instance, investment mechanisms take the form of physical participation, financial investment and irreversibility of investment.\textsuperscript{39} Communion mechanisms take the form of homogeneity, communistic sharing, communistic labor, regularized group contact, ritual and persecution experience.\textsuperscript{40} Surrender mechanisms take the form of insititutionalized awe (ideology), insitutionalized awe (power and authority), programming, ideological conversion and tradition.\textsuperscript{41} Members relinquished relationships that could disrupt group cohesion and communities maintained a clear demarcation between the group and the outside world. In order to develop a strong ‘we-feeling,’ common beliefs and ideals were

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid. p. 75.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid. p. 74.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.: p. 511.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.: p. 515.
embodied and reinforced in daily activities.

Intentional communities strive for communion which according to Martin Buber is “the inner creation of a life in common with others.”42 This goal of communion is attained in a community when it successfully creates commitment via social practices and beliefs. Commitment mechanisms forge physical, emotional, and spiritual bonds through dissociative and associative processes. Rousseau notes “what makes the work of legislation difficult is not so much what must be established as what must be destroyed” (SC II x 74). The dissociative process focuses on limiting individual’s attachment to and reliance on the outside world. In order to immerse oneself fully, individuals’ focus should not be divided between the community and the outside world. Individuals are physically, financially, emotionally and spiritually removed from the outside world. This is an important process for although members are attracted to the common goal and activities of the group, their attachments to the practices and ideas outside the group may prevent them from investing heavily into the group. For this end, communities may structure their daily life to induce sacrifice, investment and renunciation. These mechanisms create and protect the boundary between the community and the outside world thereby making it possible for members to look toward the group as the primary source and means to meeting individual needs and attaining contentment. Associative processes focuses on linking individuals to the group’s ideals, beliefs, practices and activities. Members hold property in common and work without compensation. In return, the community provides for member’s daily needs and constructs an environment where members are brought into continual contact with the group. Members participate extensively in communal activities and consequently develop strong affection and regard for each other. Often, charismatic leaders motivate members to adhere to the core beliefs and in some cases, the state of members’ beliefs was examined through confession and mutual criticism.

Overall, Kanter reports that nineteenth century intentional communities which lasted for more than 25 years tended to create a comprehensive community which affected every aspect of the member’s life.

The successful groups asked people to give up separateness, personal pride

and vanity, exclusive ownership, conflicting social ties, other value systems, and disruptive personal prerogatives, and to submit to the control of the group over even their thoughts and feelings. In return, successful groups provided for their members strong feelings of participation, involvement, and of belonging to a family group. They built a world centered around sharing-of property, work, living space, feelings, or values. They offered identity and meaning, a value-oriented life with direction and purpose. Both the giving up and the getting were perceived by members as rewarding.

The daily routine of collective life and participation in common activities along with common belief and symbols are crucial for creating physical, emotional, and spiritual bonds necessary for the continued existence of a communal group. Rousseau argued the legislator, civil religion, censorship, a simple agrarian economy and patriotism are important parts of the Social Contract for they institute and maintain a citizen’s life. These ‘unusual’ tools Rousseau advocated can also be observed in intentional communities. Charismatic founders and leaders, communal sharing of resources, common belief, ideology or vision, economic self-sufficiency, rituals, small size, and submission to group control are some themes frequently mentioned in the intentional communities literature. Studies point to the importance of charisma, beliefs and cultural patterns, and social controls for the continued existence of intentional communities. Commitment in intentional communities is a product of laws governing specific social behaviour which needs to be supported by attitudes, mores and beliefs to be meaningful and effective.

Conclusion

The general will is a means to morality. Being a true citizen in the *Social Contract* entailed becoming a virtuous person who could identify and willingly embrace the common good. As Patrick Riley points out, Rousseau wants the best of both worlds: Rousseau fuses the ancient idea of a homogenous state, which is a symbol for republican virtues, with an element of will which provides moral obligation and causality in the concept of the general will.\(^{46}\) In order to facilitate this moral transformation of inherently selfish beings, Rousseau constructs a broad form of politics which dismantles liberalism’s barrier between public and private spheres. In other words, Rousseau treats politics as a way of life. Consequently, above all things, the social contract must instil in its citizens a taste and a habit for seeking and willing the general will, the common good. Rousseau thought this could only take place within a small state in which citizens have a face to face contact with each other. This direct personal interaction with others is important because Rousseau felt that one is more likely to seek and to desire the common good, which can frustrate one’s particular wills directed to particular goods, if one knows the others for whom one’s particular wills need to be constrained.

As he explains “the more the social bond stretches, the looser it becomes, and in general a small state is proportionately stronger than a large one,” he was fully aware that it was difficult to articulate the common good “when the social tie slackens” (SC II ix 71, IV i 108). Hence I argue the concept of the general will must be interpreted so as to include legal, social and cultural tools that help individuals to maintain the social tie and to find the common good.

Substantively, conclusions to be drawn here are (1) the general will is expressed daily to assist the transformation process which turns a man into a citizen, that is, overcoming *amour-propre*; (2) tools which are used to bring about this change are highly unorthodox and this calls for an expansive understanding of how the general will can

\(^{46}\) Riley persuasively argues that two concepts of *generality* and *will* unite to compose the general will. He identifies *generality* as stemming from the unified ancient city *polis* of Greek poets and *will* as a product of modern liberal thinking. See, Riley, *Will and Political Legitimacy: A Critical Exposition of Social Contract Theory in Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel*. especially Chapter 4.
manifest itself in practice; and (3) Rousseau’s characterisation of *amour-propre* may have been excessive for it gives rise to a solution that may in fact be difficult to achieve in practice.

Methodologically, conclusions to be drawn are (1) it is important to understand theory in the context of concerns of the author; and (2) it is useful to look for real life examples of theories as they shed new light on what may not have been considered abstractly.

The general will is not treacherous nor is it devious. It appears to be impossible to implement it fully in practice but it is not appropriate to attribute bad intentions on Rousseau’s part. Rather it must be understood within the context of Rousseau’s deep seated progressive pessimism. History is a tragedy. Judith Shklar even called him “the Homer of the Losers.” Even in the utopia he has created, Rousseau could not imagine keeping *amour-propre* out. But we can draw some important lessons. (1) Politics could and to the extent possible should be a means to an end, that of moral transformation leading to the common good and contentment; and (2) Societies should be assessed not simply in terms of legality of rules but also in terms of the extent to which it aids or detracts from each individual’s struggle to morality, of seeking the better self via the common good.

Intentional communities answer Rousseau’s challenge of creating a meaningful society that contributes to self betterment. People in intentional communities share Rousseau’s insight that ultimately people are what the society makes them. Hence they adhere to social, economic, political and cultural institutions and practices which incorporate and promote belief, ideology or vision they value. Kanter illustrates that commitment generating mechanisms can be found in every aspect of life because commitment is essential to the community’s continued existence. Life in intentional communities is comprehensive. Social mores and attitudes provide meaning to often strict regulations in individual behaviour. Consequently, a member’s acceptance of the terms of communal life can be seen as his or her reaffirmation of values espoused in the community. Intentional communities illustrate the complementary relationship between social mores and laws. Communal mores and beliefs provide meaning and value to the

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daily routine of the community. Rousseau’s general will should reflect practices in intentional communities and should to be understood not merely as laws but also as attitudes or social bond that provide meaning and value to the daily routine adhered to by citizens.
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