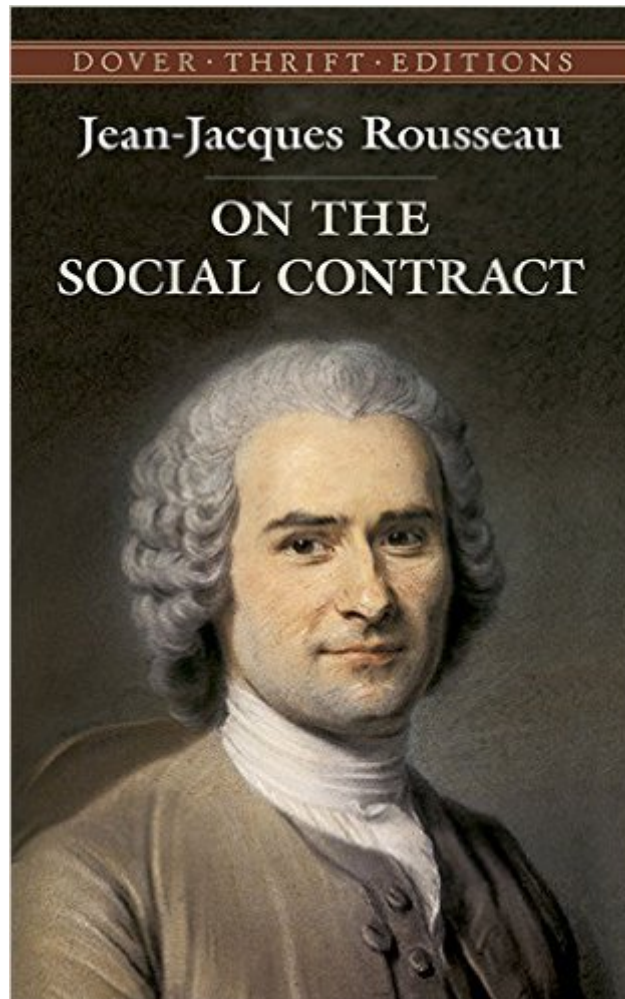The book was found

On The Social Contract (Dover Thrift Editions)

Synopsis

"Man was born free, but everywhere he is in chains." Thus begins Rousseau's influential 1762 work, in which he argues that all government is fundamentally flawed and that modern society is based on a system of inequality. The philosopher posits that a good government can justify its need for individual compromises and that promoting social settings in which people transcend their immediate appetites and desires leads to the development of self-governing, self-disciplined beings. A milestone of political science, these essays are essential reading for students of history, philosophy, and other social sciences. G. D. H. Cole translation.

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Customer Reviews

This is a valuable historical document, because it shows us the thinking that led up to the French Revolution. Rousseau wrote: "Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains." What Rousseau means by this is that Man is born free in the State of Nature - it is society, government, and urban life that are the corruptive forces. Without those things, Rousseau argues, man would exist in peaceful co-habitation. What is striking to the modern reader about this claim is how blatantly wrong it is. Rousseau was trying to refute Thomas Hobbes who wrote that the State of Nature is the same as the State of War. Apparently Hobbes got the better of the argument because, as soon as the French Revolution took effect, peaceful liberty went out the window in favor of the Reign of Terror.But, back to Rousseau. He claims that, even though men in nature peacefully co-exist, it is

more beneficial for them to come together to form a society. Thus they SHOULD come together and form a Social Contract. The ideal contract for Rousseau would entail the individual GIVING UP ALL HIS RIGHTS on entering the contract with the understanding that he will get them all back from the Sovereign. Who is the Sovereign? Well, for Rousseau, the Sovereign is the People. If Rousseau's Ideal State were an organism, it would be a large one-celled organism with no differentiation. This is very much unlike Hobbes' Leviathan, with the Sovereign at the head and each part assigned its individual task. For Rousseau, only the SOCIETY AS A WHOLE has the right to govern.Of course, this system is incredibly unwieldy, that is why - in Rousseau's world - there are a whole bunch of little city-states, like ancient Athens. HERE COMES THE SCARY PART.

On Social Contract is now considered Rousseau's most important work, and it is easy to see why. He of course did not invent the social contract; Thomas Hobbes' 1651 Leviathan is generally considered its foundation, but elements are visible at least as far back as Plato. It had dominated Western political thought since Hobbes, though, and Rousseau's contribution is one of the most important. He looks at the question more thoroughly and systematically than anyone since Hobbes and, though he admired the latter, comes to almost the opposite conclusion. His arguments for a social contract are strong - nay, near-undeniable - but, more importantly and unlike many, he actually goes into how to implement one in considerable detail. The work is again remarkable for being very well-written. As it is significantly longer than the Discourses, the quality is not as uniform; several chapters, especially those on the Roman republic, are more or less tangential, and there are other weak spots. That said, the vast majority is extremely engaging and generally lucid. One can come away from On Social Contract with an almost spiritually intense belief in its central tenets, and many have; Poland and Corsica both asked Rousseau to propose a constitution, and the French Revolution may well not have happened without him. The book was enormously influential throughout the twentieth century and continues to be. Unfortunately, though, the vaguest parts are precisely those that are the most specific about how Rousseau's social contract can be actualized. His infamous claim that we must be "forced to be free" has long been controversial, as have related statements about the General Will's infallibility, absolute sovereignty, anti-monarchialism, and religion.

I am a huge fan of Rousseau's Discourse on Inequality, and was hoping to appreciate this book just as much. There is a telling irony in that in the former text, Rousseau sees civilization as incapable of being repaired, and the source of most of the problems of inequality through wealth and politics.

Private property is an overall pariah to him, which ought not to exist.As Rousseau got older he seems to have changed his mind a bit, and tempered that anarcho-primitvism. In the Social Contract we see Rousseau setting himself the task, he would have once found impossible: developing a legitimate state, in the interest of the sovereign, that constantly develops towards equality, and not away from it. Unfortunately we are given zero insight into how the old ideology of the corrupt states, and rotten civilization are to be overcome at the moment of developing this grandiose social contract; this is a serious problem of praxis, probably not fully taken up until Gramsci.Now it is worth pointing that Rousseau's contract is significantly more radical, or left-wing, than anything Locke, Hegel, or Hobbes proposed. Rousseau does see excess property as a problem (unlike Hegel), and unlike Locke, Rousseau does see the origin of property as corrupting, and not beneficial. Moreover, Rousseau categorically rejects the idea of slavery, and a wage slave. Locke doesn't touch upon the former, and in a single line in his entire Treatise, says a wage slave is A-OK. Given the overall momentum of the Treatise, it's a perplexing passage. Rousseau asserts that labor ought to create products for itself and some excess for the community (so long as the community is doing the same), but not for private owners to capitalize on.

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