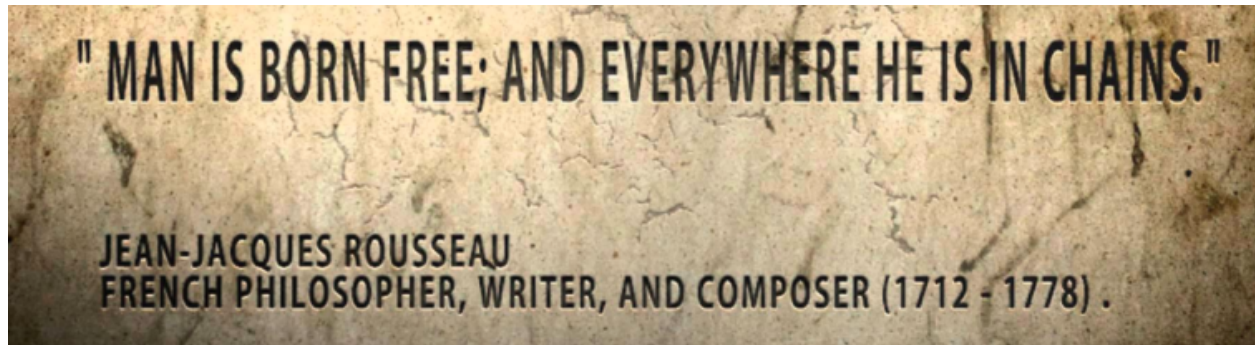


The Social Contract



Significance

1762. The world was at war. But this was unlike any war humanity had ever seen before. This was a war of the mind, of words and of thinking.

This war was fuelled by many men. One of these men was named Jean-Jacque Rousseau.

Rousseau penned one of the single most important declarations of human rights in the history of Western political thinking. It was called The Social Contract and it introduced a powerful new idea; the “consent of the governed.” This meant that a government, or a monarch, or a ruler of any kind, could not rule without having the permission of the people.

The Social Contract gave birth to the modern version of human rights, rights that underpin democracy as we understand it.

Today, the ideas published in The Social Contract may not sound like an extreme idea, but it was considered radical when it was published. The world we live in now has been founded on that single document.

Analysis

Rousseau begins The Social Contract with the most famous words he ever wrote: “Men are born free, yet everywhere are in chains.”

Rousseau goes on to describe the “chains” that society has put on people and how these suppress the rights of every man woman and child.

For Rousseau, the only legitimate government is one that the people have given permission to. This radical idea was then followed up with a notion that should the people become unhappy with the ruling government, then they have the right to overthrow it.

Rousseau explains that it is crucial that all the people exercise their human rights. For if they don't, the government will find it easier to take their people's rights away.

As we move further into the 21st century it is important to remember the teachings of Rousseau.

That a government cannot continue to exist without the consent of the people. That if a government begins to step on the rights of its people then the people can overthrow it. As government begins to tread this line, Rousseau's words are just as important today as they were in 1762.