

M. VARGA BENEDEK

Two concepts of progress: Rousseau and Morgan on history and social development

Consultant: Dr. Jane Nadel-Klein (Trinity College, CT)

Abstract

The focus of this comparative study is placed on the idea of progress in the philosophy of Jean Jacques Rousseau and Lewis Henry Morgan. Rousseau's pessimistic view of Western society originates in the idea of property, which makes people to struggle against one another and causes the loss of liberty. Morgan adopted the view of Darwinist concept of evolution, which enabled him to construct a universal model of social evolution. In his philosophy gaining property is the driving force of progress and civilization, which at the end places liberty and equality on a higher, and more developed ground.

Keywords: progress, property, evolutionism, history, society, freedom, morality, Enlightenment, civilization, Darwinism, J.J. Rousseau, L. H. Morgan

This comparative study will examine the idea of progress in the philosophy of two thinkers whose contribution to and impact on the birth of modern social theories could be hardly measured. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712 –1778) and Lewis Henry Morgan (1818–1881) were remarkable thinkers of their age, whose thoughts were deeply embedded in the intellectual substratum of their era. Both Rousseau and Morgan wanted to describe the way human society develops and history evolves, however their answers have substantial differences.

In this essay I would like take a closer look at the main problems with which these great thinkers were concerned, compare them to each other, reveal similarities and differences in their way of thinking, while examining those major ideas which marked their philosophy.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was one of the most important philosophers of the 18th century, which could be called The Age of Enlightenment. It was the time, when philosophers in Europe committed themselves to laying down the foundations of a better world. *Emulation, amelioration* and *education*, became key terms of the era.¹ It refers to the belief of leading intellectuals in progress, and in the idea that people can become

¹ Im Hof 1994., Ulrich: *The Enlightenment*. Cambridge, 1994, Blackwell. 159.p.

better through education. Many of the philosophers were convinced that – as Leibniz put it - this world “was in any case the best of all possible worlds.”²

As a result of the Enlightenment, by the middle of the 18th century European intellectuals started to realize, that - as part of colonization - human beings from different cultures were enslaved and humiliated on the colonies. As Ulrich Im Hof summarizes: “If the talk in Europe was all of equal rights and self-determination for all, then that should indeed apply to everyone, and hence even to ‘savages’, whom people were actually beginning to see as good and ‘noble’.”³

Thomas Hobbes, on the other hand, thought that human life was “solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short”⁴ before any sort of government was introduced. The idea that humans are endlessly fighting against each other in the state of nature was an important argument for Hobbes who promoted the concept of the absolute sovereignty in his *Leviathan* (1651).⁵ However, some philosophers came to see the disadvantages of Western society.⁶ Montaigne, having experienced the French wars of religion, in his famous essay *Of Cannibals* (1580) talked about native American people, who eat their enemies. Montaigne compared them to the ‘civilized’ Europeans who burn alive and torture people having different opinions about religious matters.⁷ Similarly, Voltaire’s *The sincere Huron* (1767) or Montesquieu’s *Persian letters* (1721) criticize the morals of contemporary French society. Voltaire’s *Essay on the Manner and Spirit of Nations* (1765)⁸, was one of the first writings, which gave up the traditional concept of Christocentric universal history.⁹

One has to notice, however, that while both Voltaire¹⁰ and Montesquieu¹¹ remained on the side of progressive thinking, Rousseau’s work, *A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality Among Men* (1754), formulated a deeply pessimistic view of culture, and inspired a sense of cultural insecurity. Rousseau regarded himself as “an uncompromising critic of contemporary society.”¹² Unlike others, he did not celebrate the progress

² Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm: *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*. New Haven, 1952, Yale University Press. 228.p.

³ Im Hof 1994. 226.p.

⁴ Hobbes, Thomas: *Leviathan*. London, 1973, Everyman’s Library. 65.p.

⁵ Warrender Howard: *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: His Theory of Obligation*. Oxford, 1957, Calrendon Press. 70.p.

⁶ Pagden, Anthony: *The Savage Critic: Some European Images of the Primitive*. *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 1983. 13 s.: 32–45.p. The famous term of the ‘noble savage’ was formulated by John Dryden’s heroic play *The Conquest of Granada* (1672).

⁷ Michel de Montaigne: *The Complete Works of Montaigne*. Stanford, 1958. Stanford University Press. 150-159.p.

⁸ In this essay Voltaire outlines his presentist approach to history where he focuses on modern history and recent events instead of the ancient past. (Force, Pierre: Voltaire and the necessity of modern history. *Modern Intellectual History*, 2009 (6) 3. sz. 457–484.p.)

⁹ Im Hof 1994. 226-227.p.

¹⁰ Im Hof 1994. 227.p.

¹¹ Macfarlane, Alan: *The Riddle of the Modern World*. London, 2000, Palgrave Macmillan. 21.p.

¹² Grimsley, Ronald: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Philosopher of Nature. In: Brown, S.C. (ed.): *Philosophers of the Enlightenment*. Sussex, The Harvester Press, 1979. 184.p.

of his society and cast light on its disastrous dimensions, although he failed to provide remedies for it.¹³

Like other thinkers of the Enlightenment,¹⁴ Rousseau drew an evolutionary scheme of human history from the state of nature to the modern society. One of Rousseau's most important observations was that the true nature of human beings has been distorted by the historical process.¹⁵ Rousseau used the theory of the *state of nature*, which was embodied by the savage man. The savage was described by Rousseau as a free and independent person, who was "wandering about in the forests, without industry, without speech, without any fixed residence, an equal stranger to war and every social connection, without standing in any shape in need of his fellows"¹⁶, or in a simpler form: without society. Rousseau also stressed that "there was neither education, nor improvement."¹⁷ It must be noticed, that at this point he referred to the two most essential concepts of his age, which could be interpreted as a sign of his contempt. Generations followed each other from the same starting-point, centuries passed as underdeveloped as the beginnings.¹⁸ This means that there was no history, everything remained unchanged; it was a timeless existence.

The question emerges whether Rousseau did believe that the *state of nature* was really a period in the development of human society. It seems that he did not think so. Rousseau himself called this just a „supposition of this primitive condition."¹⁹ I think the state of nature is similar to the zero point of a coordinate system. It has no length and no size. It is just a starting point from which Rousseau could draw his function graph, explaining his theory of social development. In Grimsley's – rather psychological - interpretation "the eulogy of the 'state of nature' is intended to contrast the unity and contentment of primitive man with the inner conflicts of modern man."²⁰

After explaining the characteristics of the savages, Rousseau focused on the question of how and why people left the state of nature. His answer led to the idea of property, which ultimately caused the birth of society: "one man began to stand in need of another's assistance (...) property started up; labour became necessary."²¹ The invention of metallurgy and agriculture deepened the difference between "mine and thine."²² Life became ferocious, people struggled for existence. Competition and rivalry were introduced, conflicts of interest dominated human society and the latent

¹³ Grimsley 1979. 185.p.

¹⁴ Condorcet created a ten stages model in his *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795), where the accumulation of knowledge leads to a better society. (Rossiedes, Daniel W.: *Social Theory: Its Origins, History, and Contemporary Relevance*. New York, 1988, General Hall Inc. 80-82.p.) Montesquieu created a three-stage model of social development in *The Spirit of Laws* (1748).

¹⁵ Grimsley 1979. 187.p.

¹⁶ Rousseau, Jones James: *A Discourse upon the Origins and Foundations of Inequality among Mankind*. London, Printed for R. and J. Dodsley, 1765. 86.p.

¹⁷ Rousseau 1765. 86.p.

¹⁸ Rousseau 1765. 87.p.

¹⁹ Rousseau 1765. 87.p.

²⁰ Grimsley 1979. 187.p.

²¹ Rousseau 1765. 254. p.

²² Grimsley 1979. 189.p.

desire to pursue advantage at the expense of others, when equality disappeared a terrible disorder came. Changes in property forced them to leave the state of nature, they got goals, and as a result, history.²³ What humanity lost was freedom. Finally, Rousseau explained his vision of the future: “The mankind thus debased and harassed, and no longer able to retreat, or renounce the unhappy acquisitions it had made; laboring, in short merely to its confusion by the abuse of those faculties, which in themselves do it so much honour, brought itself to the very brink of ruin and destruction.”²⁴ In Rousseau’s account time is marked by development of society, which worsened the human species, making it wicked and sociable.²⁵

From the above cited thoughts it became clear that Rousseau saw men as originally free beings, whose abilities can be improved. However, the more humanity develops its abilities, the more needs it will have. Needs cause interdependence, competition and struggle between men. As human society develops freedom and equality disappears.

Rousseau draws a very dark picture of history and social development in an era, where philosophers were constantly talking about progress and the bright future of the human race. For him, history divides the time worthy for human dignity from the period when humanity lost its freedom.

As a result of Rousseau’s pessimistic visions, a growing interest could have been discerned in the 18th century toward ‘savages’ of North-America and the South Seas. During this time in Europe, Switzerland had hitherto been regarded as an unfriendly country, whose uncivilized population and inhospitable places kept away foreign travelers. All of a sudden, Alpine democracy turned out to be the ideal political system.²⁶ The status of the civilized, European man as the apex of human development was challenged by Rousseau and his followers.

Almost a hundred years later Lewis Henry Morgan came up with a different conception of history and social development. The 19th century, in which Morgan lived, was marked by the ethos of imperialism, due to the acceleration of European colonial expansion. The view of servile, barbarous and childish people, living in forests of Africa and South America was dominant throughout the century.²⁷ Around the 1840’s scholars of Western-Europe and the United States were laying down the foundations of anthropology.²⁸ Morgan took an important part of this process.

At the beginning of his remarkable work, *Ancient Society* (1877), Morgan acknowledges that “the mankind” is subject to evolution, which leads from the state of savagery to the state of civilization. This development is characterized by the “slow accumulation of experimental knowledge.”²⁹ Furthermore, he describes this development as a

²³ Grimsley 1979. 188.p.

²⁴ Rousseau 1765. 132.p.

²⁵ Rousseau 1765. 93.p.

²⁶ Im Hof 1994. 100.p.

²⁷ Leach, Edmund: *Social Anthropology*. Oxford, 1982, Oxford University Press. 16.p.

²⁸ Leach 1982. 15.p.

²⁹ Morgan, Lewis Henry: *Ancient Society*. Chicago, 1877, Charles H. Kerr & Company. 45-46.p.

“necessary sequence of progress” and as a “protracted struggle with opposing forces.”³⁰ The idea of struggle during the development of mankind refers to the Darwinist discourse on evolution.³¹

For Morgan, time means a long term progress, but unlike Rousseau, he thinks that the state of civilization is the aim of the social development. By saying that human beings are “winning their way to civilization”³², Morgan describes civilization as a reward at the end of human “struggle.”

It is essential to understand that Morgan adopted from Darwin not only the theory of evolution but also the unity of the human species, the animal origin of man, and the concept of the human order as part of the natural order.³³ Morgan argued that the mental operation is uniform among human beings, and he rejects the theory of degeneration.³⁴ As Terray concludes Morgan’s point of view: “If our species is one natural species among others, then human history becomes a moment in the history of nature, the result of the same mechanisms and subject to the same laws.”³⁵ Looking from this perspective Morgan’s work can be interpreted as an attempt to construct the theory of the history of humanity.³⁶

In order to do so, Morgan wanted to describe the principal and universal stages of social development through inventions and discoveries as well as evolution of institutions. He recognized the formation of the primary institutions of property, family and government more important, than that of inventions and discoveries. According to his concept the beginnings – or as he says the ‘germs’ – of modern institutions can be traced back to the period of barbarism and to the period of savagery. “They have had a lineal descent through the ages, with the streams of the blood, as well as logical development.”³⁷ In one word, Morgan constituted here the idea of unilinear cultural evolution.

Furthermore, Morgan placed subsistence among the essential ideas, which marked human development. As we have seen in Rousseau’s case, the view of social evolution had important predecessors in the 18th century. Montesquieu created a three-stage model of social development in *The Spirit of Laws* (1748): hunting, herding and civilization. This was used by Morgan who established a similar scale organized into ethnical periods (savagery, barbarism, civilization) at the stages of which human development had different conditions.³⁸ Each period has its specific structural laws and means which are determined by the sphere of subsistence, and by which society can preserve

³⁰ Morgan 1877. 3.p.

³¹ Terray Emmanuel: *Morgan and Contemporary Anthropology*. In Terray Emmanuel (ed.): *Marxism and “Primitive” Societies*. New York, 1972, Monthly Review Press. 15.p.

³² Morgan 1877. 3.p.

³³ Terray 1972.15.p.

³⁴ Morgan 1877. 60.p.

³⁵ Terray 1972.16.p.

³⁶ Terray 1972.24.p.

³⁷ Morgan 1877. 4.p

³⁸ Hirschl, Ran: *Montesquieu and the Renaissance of Comparative Public Law*. In: Kingston, Rebecca E. (ed.): *Montesquieu and His Legacy*., New York, 2009, State University of New York Press. 204.p

its own continuity among the difficulties that environment presents to them.³⁹ What important here is that arts of subsistence are among those decisive factors which determine the development of human society and history. This notion connects Morgan to the idea of materialism. Marx and Engels appreciated his work, as a confirmation of their own approach to human history, based on class struggle.⁴⁰

In Morgan's work, cultural, and social development is a long term process which begins with the simplest forms of the society that becomes more and more complex. For instance "the principal institutions of mankind have been developed from a few primary germs of thought."⁴¹ The more complex the society and institutions were the higher stage of civilization they reached. Arguing the unity of the human species, he thought that these stages are identical everywhere in the world, thus people living in different parts of the world could be examined and compared by means of general aspects. In other words, Morgan assumed a universal ladder of human progress at the top of which "capitalist society of European Christianity" held its positions.⁴²

Whereas Rousseau and some other thinkers of the Enlightenment thought that the essence of true human morals is kept by savages who were not distorted by modern civilization, Morgan - echoing the self-confidence of Western colonialism - stressed the "inferiority of savage man on the mental and moral scale" who is "held down by his low animal appetites and passions".⁴³

Morgan argued that passion for property "over all other passions marks the commencement of civilization."⁴⁴ The notion of property, it seems, is equally important for Rousseau and Morgan, and indicates the beginnings of political institutions. Again, in Rousseau's account this leads to the decay of human beings, while for Morgan this gives the main impulse for humans on the way towards civilization and society. Rousseau describes the effects of getting property, as a phenomenon which results moral changes for which reason human beings became wicked. He does not condemn social development and civilization for simply their achievements, but because they distort human character, erode freedom, and thus make life a hardship.

However, the way they were thinking about property has some interesting similarities as well. Morgan - such as Rousseau - expressed his concerns about his time, when property became an "unmanageable power". He thought that a society, where "property career" is the most important aim, "contains the elements of self-destruction".⁴⁵ Unlike Rousseau, Morgan concluded that humanity finally "will rise to the mastery of property".⁴⁶ His vision of future was that human society will experience a "revival, in a higher form, of the liberty, equality and fraternity of the ancient gentes".⁴⁷ While

³⁹ Terray 1972.57.p.

⁴⁰ Terray 1972.23.p.

⁴¹ Morgan 1877. 18.p.

⁴² Leach 1982. 17.p.

⁴³ Morgan 1877. 41.p.

⁴⁴ Morgan 1877. 6.p.

⁴⁵ Morgan 1877. 561.p.

⁴⁶ Morgan 1877. 561. p.

⁴⁷ Morgan 1877. 562.p.

Rousseau regarded himself as a prophet who warned humanity about the loss of freedom before it was too late, Morgan believed that civilization would overcome the dominance of property, thus making society better and morally superior.

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Absztrakt

A fenti tanulmány Jean Jacques Rousseau és Lewis Henry Morgan fejlődésről alkotott elképzeléseit hasonlítja össze. Rousseau társadalomkritikája szerint az emberek közötti harmonikus állapotot a tulajdon megjelenése bontotta fel, amely harcot és a szabadság elvesztését hozta az emberiségre. Morgan az darwini evolúció szemléletét alkalmazva dolgozta ki a társadalmi fejlődés új modelljét. Számára a tulajdon jelenti a civilizáció fejlődésének hajtóerejét, amely végül az emberi szabadság és egyenlőség eszméjét is magasabb szintre fogja helyezni.

Kulcsszavak: fejlődés, evolucionizmus, történelem, társadalom, szabadság, erkölcs, felvilágosodás, civilizáció, darwinizmus, J. J. Rousseau, L. H. Morgan

