

Rousseau's thoughts on Democracy and Democracy in Vietnam at Present

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Abstract: *Jean Jacques Rousseau's thoughts (1712 - 1776) on democracy reflected the revolutionary spirit of the times, which is still valid today. Inheriting the progressive values of the Enlightenment era, in Vietnam democracy was soon built to exercise the people's mastery. The practice of building democracy in Vietnam has gained many outstanding achievements in the country and the world. This paper aims at analyzing and comparing Rousseau's theory to the reality of democracy in Vietnam, contributing to raising awareness about democracy in general and democracy in Vietnam in particular. The results show that democracy in Vietnam today has many similarities with Rousseau's concept, especially since our country is gradually building and moving towards improving direct democracy to promote the right to mastery for the people. However, democracy in Vietnam also contains its own values and forms, consistent with the history of Vietnam.*

Keywords: Rousseau; the rule of law State; people's power; common will

1. Introduction

Democracy is considered a general progressive achievement of humans, but there is no ready - made paradigm for all countries. Following its own historical and political conditions, democracy in Vietnam has a unified and specific connotation compared to the general theory of democracy in the world. The reality of Vietnam's democracy over the years shows that this "specificity" not only does not "distort" democracy but also contributes to enriching and deepening the theory of progressive democracy among people. Therefore, it is crucial to analyze and clarify the characteristics and values of democracy in Vietnam because mutual understanding and respect, in the spirit of "openness" is a necessary prerequisite of globalization, international cooperation, and dialogue for development.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Rousseau's thoughts on Democracy and Historical Values

Democracy is the optimal form to protect people's sovereignty and civil liberties.

Democracy means that government is founded by the people, whereby the supreme power belongs to the people. According to Abraham Lincoln, democracy means a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people".

In the 18th century in France, feudalism gradually weakened. The idea of a democratic state replacing the old regime was raised by some philosophers. In particular, Rousseau's thoughts on the democratic state built via the theory of "Social Contract" had a great impact on political life at that time. Naturally, the theory of "social contract" is to explain the birth of the state based on human consensus to move from the natural state to the civil state. The ultimate goal is to build a democratic state, ensuring civil liberty and social equality.

Rousseau's thoughts of democracy are expressed in many works, first in his Treatise on the Origins of Inequality and then further improved and developed in "On the Social Contract". In his Treatise on the Origins of Inequality, Rousseau asserted his desire to be born under a democratic government. The main content of the work is the critique of inequality, private property, and finally, absolute monarchy. According to Rousseau, state power belonging to only one or a group of people is completely "absurd". It aims to "create new shackles on the poor and give new power to the rich." (p.136) [1]. As a result, it brings forth wars among nations, battles, murder and revenge, concussion of nature and indignation of reason along with all the terrible prejudices that see the shedding of human blood as honor and dignity (p.137) [1]. Thereby, Rousseau directly condemned and criticized the absolute monarchy of France, where civil liberties and social equality were not guaranteed. Rousseau asserted: "I am sure that government does not begin with arbitrary power, this is a corruption, an extreme of government. However, if it had begun in this way, such a force - which in itself is illegitimate - cannot serve as the basis for social laws, nor for the inequalities that have been set up (p.148) [1]. Thus, although he did not discuss much about democracy, in this work, Rousseau showed his opposition to contemporary feudalism.

Following this thought, in his work "On the Social Contract", Rousseau outlined the principles of a new regime, which were "basically democratic" (p.322) [2], guaranteeing freedom and equality for all citizens. As Rousseau pointed out, human nature is free, so the most reasonable form of social organization is to put everything under the control of the "common will". The central spirit of this work is to uphold the "common will", that is, the "will of the people". Power belongs to all people, and the political obligations of citizens are based on the principle of fairness. In this work, Rousseau built the dialectical unity between democracy and freedom based on "common will". A democratic state is a basis for ensuring civil liberties. Civil liberties are the foundation for democratic decisions. Here, Rousseau

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emphasized not only the right to participate in socio-political life, but the more important is participation itself. In other words, it is not enough for citizens to have rights, they also need to participate in decision-making on matters related to their political life. Alfred Coban argued that, when Rousseau gives priority to the community over the individual, "this priority can only be realized to the extent that the state actively develops the moral character of the individual and protects the individual's moral character and their freedom (p.7) [3]. According to Lee Ward, Rousseau was one of the few who "contributed an important idea to the fundamental combination of the liberal principle of natural rights with the democratic principle of popular rights" and played the largest role in building the concept of "democracy" in the term "liberal democracy" (p.1) [4]. Although he did not shy away from the possibility that ordinary people can be wrong, he still believed that the only possible defense against autocracy is state power in the hands of the people. As Karl Popper pointed out, "we choose democracy not because it has many virtues, but only to avoid dictatorship." (p.18) [5].

2.2 Rousseau's thoughts on the defense and promotion of democracy

First, it is necessary to build a rule of law to control state power. In the rule of law state, the law is the most important tool in controlling power. The law must be respected, placed in the highest position, controlling all fields of political life, and governing the two branches of state power, the executive and the judicial power. "No one is above the law". Because of the importance of such laws, the masses must be the ones who directly hold the legislative power. Citizens of a democracy invoke the law because they understand that, indirectly, they are appealing to themselves as the legislators of the law. When the law is made by the masses themselves, who must obey the law, then both law and democracy will be enforced.

However, during the analysis of Rousseau's plan, we can see that he worried about the possibility of the state degenerating into a tyrannical form of government. "Rousseau has always been suspicious of executive power, even in a political system where legislative power belongs to the people. For him, the price to pay not only for freedom but also for sovereignty itself is perpetual vigilance; In other words, it is a sharp eye for abuses of power" (p.254) [6]. Therefore, Rousseau asserted that those entrusted with executive power are not the masters of the people, but only the executors. The people can raise them and remove them as they want. For the people, there is no contract but observance, and, when the people take on the duty that the state gives them, they do nothing but fulfill their civic duty without having the right to contest the conditions by which they must abide. Therefore, "the government must always be ready to sacrifice itself for the people but never sacrifice the people for the government." (p.113) [7]. The people could hold an unscheduled meeting, where two things could be decided: first, whether the people wanted to keep the existing form of government; second, will the people be willing to hand over the rule of law to those who currently hold it? It shows that there is no power that cannot be revoked if the people gather together.

Second, building political qualities in each citizen. While sharing with his predecessors the ideas of controlling state power in a democracy, Rousseau was more profound than Montesquieu and Locke. According to Rousseau, in the end, it is the human factor, not the institution, that is the basis for defending freedom and democracy. Rousseau was the first to outline the necessary political and moral qualities in each citizen as a condition for building a democracy, where each citizen is a master. Since the democratic regime is the most easily disturbed, there is always a strong tendency to change to another regime. He wrote: "Unlike all political institutions, in a democracy, the people must provide themselves with strength and loyalty to the regime" (p.123) [7]. According to Rousseau, the necessary moral qualities of citizens to build a democratic institution are freedom-loving, equality, competence, active participation in political life with a view towards the common good, and willingness ready to fight for democracy - "Citizens of a democracy must remember clearly the famous saying of the virtuous governor: it is better to be in danger and be free than to live peacefully in slavery" (p.113) [7]. At the core of democratic action is the active and voluntary participation of citizens in the public life of their community or country. Without this widespread participation, democracy will wither and become a privilege reserved for specific groups and organizations. That's the reason why democracy, despite its great appeal, has rarely been sustainable, or simply existed in its "true" way. In his *Treatise on Political Economy*, Rousseau wrote: "If our politicians had not been blinded by their ambitions, they would have found that the greatest support of public authority lies in the heart of the citizen, and there is no substitute for morality in maintaining the government." (p.106) [1]. It can be said that Rousseau was not the first person to discuss democracy, but his great contribution in creating the modern democratic era was outlining the psychological characteristics, or necessary qualities for democracy (p.85) [4].

The historical value of Rousseau's thoughts on democracy

Rousseau's ideas on democracy directly became the theory of the bourgeois revolution of the 18th century, against the tyranny of the monarchy. Fight for freedom, equality, property rights, and people's sovereignty. Rousseau's analysis shows that his hatred was directed at the broken feudal system, a self-styled power apparatus that strangled freedom and pushed the people into the shackles of slavery. These arguments attacked fiercely the contemporary feudal system, infuriating King Louis XV and heralding great changes in French political life later. The fall of Basti prison, the outbreak of the bourgeois revolution in 1789, and the birth of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen were all imprinted with Rousseau's thoughts on democracy. As the representative of the lowest class of the "third class", although Rousseau gave the French progressive bourgeoisie the spiritual impetus for the revolution, it did not completely stand in the same line with it. "Rousseau has sharper sides than his friends, such as his awareness of social inequality and his hatred of all forms of oppression and exploitation (p.186) [2]. Rousseau's critical thinking at the same time towards bourgeois society was about to arise on the decline of feudalism. He denounced the disparity in wealth and luxury of the rich, "starving wolves, when they have eaten human flesh, they are fed up with all other food, only want

to eat people” (p.66) [1]. Rousseau was more revolutionary than Montesquieu, Vonte, Didoro and many others by asserting one more human right, namely the right to live in democracy. Direct democracy is a form that is consistent with human nature. Living in a direct democracy is a basic condition for people to live following their nature. Therefore, he rejected any form of government that compromises with feudalism and also with representative democracy after the bourgeois revolution. He affirmed that legitimate political power only comes from the consent of the people. People must make their own laws, and leaders are responsible for citizens. “Revolutionary level of the Rousseau thoughts is in the complete opposition: With the absolute monarchy, Rousseau brings opposite to the people's sovereignty” (p.353) [2].

Thus, Rousseau's thoughts on democracy contributed to the general development of the spirit of the French Enlightenment. His ideas on democracy not only reflected people's aspirations, but also their belief in human abilities. Rousseau put the ideal state in the hands of each citizen through the guidance of the "common will" and not under the guidance of a group of rich people. What he was interested in is not only the power of the people on the legal paper but a matter of political practice. To ensure real freedom and equality, Rousseau wanted to build a direct democracy. Although direct democracy is difficult to become true, it still demonstrates the author's efforts to fight for human freedom and happiness.

By removing the limitations of Rousseau's thoughts on direct democracy, we can see that some of the arguments are still valid today. First, democracy must be built on a legal system that reflects the "common will", that is, a legal system that reflects the will and serves the interests of the people. Second, the subject of building democracy is the people, so they must have the political capacity and morals to work together towards the common good, remove the love of dominating others, consider each other as equal, and jointly build their own social life. Third, there must be mechanisms for the people to control the government's power continuously and throughout to prevent the government's abuse of power and authoritarianism. These are major views, significant not only in their opposition to feudalism but also in the theoretical principles that shape modern democracy today.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Democracy in Vietnam today – from legal documents to political practice

Inheriting the progressive ideology of mankind, from the very early stage, President Ho Chi Minh once advocated building a democratic state, establishing the people's right to mastery associated with the idea of "divine rule of law". He considered the rule of law as the main principle in realizing a democratic state. Since its establishment until now, the socialist rule of law state in Vietnam has always been consistent in its goal of exercising the people's right to mastery. The Party's platform for nation - building in the transitional period to socialism (added and developed in 2011) of the Party affirms that the system built by the

Vietnamese people is a society "led by the people" (p.70) [8]. Articles 2 and 3 of the 2013 Constitution emphasize: The State of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is a socialist rule of law state of the People, by the People, and for the People. The State guarantees and promotes the people's right to mastery; recognize, respect, protect and guarantee human and civil rights. Continuing to perfect the state institution to promote the people's mastery is continuously set by the Party and the State of Vietnam as a "key task" during the 13th National Party Congress. – “Complete the legal system, mechanisms, and policies to strongly promote socialist democracy and the people’s right to mastery”. The main content of democracy in Vietnam today is to respect and guarantee human rights, citizenship, and the people's mastery. That is to always associate rights with the responsibilities and obligations of citizens. Democracy and law, democracy and freedom, and democracy and social discipline do not contradict each other, on the contrary, they lie in dialectical unity. Democracy creates a premise for the development of individual freedom, promoting human development.

The mechanism for implementing democracy in Vietnam today is the leadership of the Party, the management of the State, and the mastery of the people. In particular, the Party and State set out guidelines, policies, and laws to create a political and legal foundation to ensure the people's right to mastery. In this mechanism, the role of the subject, the central position belongs to the people. The people are the masters of society, so they not only have the right, but also the responsibility to contribute to the process of planning and implementing the guidelines of the Party, policies, and laws of the State. The people exercise their mastery through direct democracy and representative democracy, especially through the National Assembly - the highest body in the State, and the people decide on important issues related to the country's destiny. In the practice of more than 35 years of reform and democracy building, the Communist Party of Vietnam has effectively issued and implemented many guidelines, policies and laws in order to promote the people's right to mastery, implement better and better the people's mastery. The State represents the people's right to mastery, and at the same time is the organizer of the implementation of the Party's guidelines. The State has an increasingly complete and strict legal system, strengthen the legal system for the people to exercise their right to direct ownership and representative democracy in all fields of social life, and participate in social management. The National Assembly - the highest State power agency has many innovations and operates more effectively and efficiently. The Fatherland Front and socio - political organizations have gradually reformed in the direction of promoting democracy and the people's mastery, "promoting the practice of democracy at the grassroots, carrying out social supervision and criticism, participating in the prevention and fight against corruption and negativity, contributing to building an increasingly clean and strong Party and political system (p.105) [9]. The reality of innovation in our country has initially supplemented and piloted several new forms of democracy implementation, such as questioning, direct reporting of interrogations in many activities of the National Assembly; getting votes of confidence for positions elected and approved by State agencies; promulgating regulations on self - nomination,

regulations on questioning and answering questions within the Party; diversify forms of collecting people's opinions to contribute to draft Party documents and draft legal documents. These can be considered as new forms, demonstrating efforts in promoting the people's right to mastery. All have contributed to gradually improving the quality of democracy, "contributing to consolidating and raising the people's confidence in the Party, State, and the socialist regime" (p.86) [9]. Besides, democracy and people building in our country still have many limitations. As the Resolution of the 12th National Congress pointed out, the awareness of democracy in society is still limited. The people's right to mastery in many places and fields is still violated; at some times and in some places, the implementation of democracy is limited or formal; there is a situation of taking advantage of democracy to cause division and internal disunity (p.79) [10]. On that basis, the lines and policies of the Party in recent years show that the promotion of the People's mastery must always be concerned and promoted.

3.2 Similarities and differences between democracy in Rousseau's thoughts and democracy in Vietnam

Regarding the similarities

Based on analyzing Rousseau's conception of democracy and democracy in Vietnam today, we can see that democracy in Vietnam today has the values of a "common denominator" with the progress of mankind. This is a democracy associated with a state governed by the rule of law, respecting the law, with human rights, unified power belonging to the people, with a clear division and coordination between branches of power, preventing the government from taking power and going against the interests of the people. In regards to democracy in Vietnam, the law dominates all aspects of social life, "all citizens are equal before the law". The Party leads and the state manages society following the law, not standing outside or above it. The cadres live and work in compliance with social laws. The unified state power belongs to the people, via the National Assembly to enact laws. Although it is not possible to immediately implement direct democracy as Rousseau conceived, however, in the context of the 4.0 revolution, Vietnam has favorable conditions to increasingly expand direct democracy. Practice shows that the organization of opinion polling and direct exchange with the people through multimedia communication channels has been invested in and developed. Grassroots organizations are making efforts to build and implement a dialogue mechanism with the people in an active, broad, public, and open manner to promote the people's mastery. Thereby, ensuring that the people can participate in all stages of the decision - making process related to their interests, as well as supervise the elected bodies. The organs of state power are divided into three branches: legislative, executive, and judicial power. In which the legislative power belongs to the National Assembly - the elected body, representing the interests of the whole people. The executive and judicial branches of power operate independently within the framework of the law. There is no balance between the three branches of power, but unity in power and transparency in functions. In general, democracy in Vietnam today has many similarities with Rousseau's concept, especially since we are gradually

building and moving towards improving direct democracy to promote the right to mastery for the people.

Regarding the difference

Democracy is an "open" category, without a specific paradigm. Each country and ethnic group has different socio - historical characteristics, and the content and organizational form of democracy is also different. As analyzed above, democracy in Vietnam today always has the "common values" of humanity. However, it also contains its own values and forms, consistent with the history of Vietnam.

Compared with Rousseau's theory on democracy, the paper finds out that the basic difference in democracy in Vietnam is that always thoroughly grasping the principle of democratic centralism under the leadership of the Communist Party, democracy is closely associated with discipline and the law. This principle in political practice is reflected in collective respect, open democracy, encouraging frank and constructive debate, and at the same time upholding individual responsibility, strengthening supervising by discipline. President Ho Chi Minh wrote: everyone can discuss every issue of the country. When solving any problem, the people vote, and whichever opinion is more followed will be chosen. That is called democracy. If the lot has been cast, then it is assigned to the members of the Association, then all members must follow the orders of that Association. That is concentration. The collective leadership is democratic, and the individual in charge is centralized. Collective leadership, individuals in charge, that is, centralized democracy" (p.505) [11]. Thus, democracy in Vietnam today is consistent and unified according to the principle of democratic centralism, under the sole leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam. Many foreign scholars and researchers believe that the democracy that Vietnam is building goes against the connotation of a democracy that the world knows, formed from the bourgeois revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Because centralization is no longer a democracy, but once a democracy, there is no need to focus, if you want to strengthen democracy, you must reduce concentration. Some scholars also believe that democracy in Vietnam is a centralized, authoritarian, conservative regime that distorts democracy and turns democracy into a political game. Such point of views stem from the reason that they do not understand the true essence of the principle of democratic centralism and at the same time not understanding the historical and political conditions of the Vietnam.

The history of the Vietnam has gone through many difficult periods in the work of preserving, building, and defending the Fatherland. The strength of unity and concentration of the whole people is always decisive in every moment of life and death of the nation. That power is concretized in the content of democracy. Democracy goes hand in hand with centralization, which is the source of the strength of Vietnam. Since the establishment of the Party, with the role and historical mission that the Party has shouldered, the Party has been recognized and trusted by the whole nation. The Party becomes a banner for the concentration of people's strength and will. The nature of the Communist

Party of Vietnam is the party of the working class, but because the interests of the working class are united with the interests of the people in general, the Party represents the interests of the people. That is why the Communist Party of Vietnam is called by a very close name, "Our Party". Although in reality, the Party has made mistakes, and some cadres and party members violated the law, affecting the interests of the people, but in general, over the years, "the people's heart" and "the party's will" "have a close agreement with each other". The people believe in the Party, and the Party is for the people. The leadership of the Party not only does not limit the people's right to mastery but also promotes the strength of the whole nation in the cause of national construction and defense.

Besides, it is necessary to mention another factor that makes democracy in Vietnam associated with the principle of centralization, which is led by a single political party. People who are masters must have the ability to master. The ability to master is shown first of all at the level of awareness of issues related to democracy, the law, and the right to directly attach the interests of individuals and society. They must have the ability to judge independently, the ability to consider immediate and long - term interests, and the ability to argue and criticize to find solutions for their social life. Especially, in the context of globalization, international integration, and complicated political life, democracy faces many challenges. If it can be promoted, democracy will become a driving force for the development of the country. On the contrary, if democracy is exploited, it will become a major barrier. Faced with such country requirements and conditions, the fact is that democracy in Vietnam is still young (formed in 1945 but has not been continuously improved because of the war) and the people's mastery capacity also has limitations. In addition, influenced by the living habits and thinking of the feudal regime, associated with an individual and closed method of agricultural production, the culture of "allowing the king to lose to the village rules" has been deeply ingrained in people's subconscious, directly hindering society from living and working in compliance with the law. Therefore, while building democracy, it is necessary to gradually lead and educate the people to improve their mastery capacity. Freedom may be an innate aspiration, but practicing democracy requires learning [5]. As Rousseau once wrote: "People always want good for themselves, but they rarely see what those good things are" so "they need guidance...and taught to know what they want." (p.79) [7].

4. Discussion

In short, the nature of democracy is inherently perturbed. The history of Vietnam has concluded a lesson, whenever the domestic political situation is unstable and the nation is divided, Vietnam will be invaded. With such circumstances, the Vietnamese people always need a centralized and unified leadership organization to create stability in the country. Centralization is a prerequisite for the existence of the nation and also for democracy. Under the leadership of the Party, the Vietnamese people will gradually improve their mastery capacity in peace and development. Therefore, the current centralized democracy in Vietnam is the "solution" to the

political problem of Vietnam, completely consistent with the specific historical and cultural characteristics of Vietnam.

With the principle of democratic centralism, under the leadership of the Party, democracy in Vietnam has obtained many achievements, making great contributions to the common development of the country. Every citizen has the right to freedom, equality, and mastery within the framework of the Constitution and laws. As a result, over the years, Vietnamese democracy has not become excessive democracy, anarchism, or bureaucratic democracy. Political life is stable and developed. The country has never had religious or ethnic conflicts or civil wars. Vietnamese people are increasingly united based on both "love" and "law". The Party and the whole people join hands to build the country and fight against natural disasters, enemy sabotage, and most recently the Covid - 19 epidemic. Through the last epidemic, Vietnam proved to be one of the few countries to successfully fight the epidemic, and one of the basic reasons is that the whole people trust and devote themselves to implementing the Party's guidelines and policies, and the policies of the Vietnamese government. But most importantly, there is still consistency in the line between the Party and the State of Vietnam when always putting people as the center of any action. In all situations, our Party and State always ensure policies and mechanisms to support businesses; social security, and people's lives, especially workers, the poor, the vulnerable, and those heavily affected by the epidemic with the determination "Leave no one behind!". That is the reason why experts as well as domestic and foreign investors believe in the stable, peaceful, and developing environment of Vietnam after the pandemic.

In addition to domestic and international achievements, the United Nations always highly appreciates Vietnam in international peacekeeping and security activities, making many positive contributions to the Central African Republic and South Sudan; aiding and support to many countries and territories around the world. This fact makes many individuals and organizations, even though they lack goodwill towards the Party and State of Vietnam cannot help but acknowledge it. In fact, over the years, Vietnam has always been a country that always respects and strives to protect human rights, citizens' rights, peace order, and world security. Recently, Vietnam officially became a member of the United Nations Security Council for the second time for the term 2023 - 2025 with a very high level of trust. The election to become a member of the UN Security Council, the agency that plays a leading role in the United Nations system in protecting and promoting human rights, demonstrates the international community's recognition of Vietnam's efforts and achievements in a better and better guarantee of people's rights in all fields. Thereby showing the prestige of Vietnam in the international arena and the positive value of Vietnamese democracy in the present. Democracy in Vietnam is not necessarily superior to the world, but simply that it is suitable and meets the requirements of the reality of socio - political life in Vietnam. The above analysis points out that democracy in Vietnam are built based on clinging to the reality of people's lives and the country's circumstances. For many years, under the leadership of the Party, democracy in Vietnam has contributed to political stability in the country, promoting

human rights protection and world peace. Currently, democracy in Vietnam continues to be perfected to get closer and closer to the common progressive values of mankind.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, according to Rousseau, a direct democracy protects and enhances civil liberties and equality in society. "Self - legislation" – this requirement is very strict, but what Rousseau wanted to emphasize is that everyone has an equal opportunity to participate in making laws. This is an idea that is still valid to this day. Democracy in Vietnam inherits progressive values in the thought of the Enlightenment. At the same time, the practice of building democracy in Vietnam shows that, in any form, if it can bring a stable, peaceful, prosperous political life and mastery to the people, democracy is always valuable. From an objective and open perspective, we can identify the reality of democracy in Vietnam, which contributes to enriching the theory of humanity's democracy, all aiming for the happiness of the people.

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