

# **The Influence of the Concept of “Noble Savage” in Political Philosophy, Freedom and Social Organization from the Perspective of the Utopia of Primitive Society**

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**ABSTRACT:** The perception of primitive society as a positive one, based on freedom, natural law and virtue, has been the subject of humanities since Antiquity. Although the myth of the “Noble Savage” crystallized only in the Age of Enlightenment, the same fundamental ideas continue to arouse interest in the field of ethics or political philosophy. This paper focuses on the writings of two prominent philosophers who lived and created in different periods of human development, but who saw the distant past of mankind in the light of idealism: Lucius Annaeus Seneca and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

**KEY WORDS:** noble savage, political philosophy, social organization, limits of freedom

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Thinkers from different areas of the humanities (political sciences, social sciences, etc.) have tried over time to imagine how mankind was organized before the existence of the current forms of government and social structuring, trying to explain how the forms of political and social organization appeared as we know them today, with all the intermediate forms, from emergence to the present. What were the circumstances that made these things possible?

Often, ethics and political philosophy go hand in hand for some authors; the two cannot be clearly separated. If political philosophy says how society should be organized from a political point of view, so that the purpose of this organization consists in providing a good life for citizens, ethics establishes codes of moral conduct for people living in society, correlated with the axiological universe existing at that time. Also, another characteristic connected to human behavior, in relation to the form organization of the state, but also as a member of society among its fellows refers to legality, to the appearance of and compliance with the laws. However, one of the main issues that both ethics and political philosophy address is freedom. Theories of freedom have undergone changes, just as the values or ideologies of different eras have changed. Some of these theories refer to how human life was organized in the early days, when there was no form of government, nor state, and there were no laws that constrained the behavior of human beings. So as to be able to provide patterns of behavior and organization, it was necessary for the journey of these disciplines to probe, therefore, the beginnings of mankind.

The myth of the “noble savage” is found in literature, being specific to the Modern Age, characterized by the great geographical discoveries made possible by explorers, but also marked by the emergence and expansion of colonialism. Several authors suggest that at the basis of this concept is the Romantic Movement, which influenced the art and literature of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. A special role in conceptualizing this myth was played by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the French philosopher and writer who lived in the Age of Enlightenment (Cro 1990, 1-8). This concept is found not only in literature or art, but it will also help several ethnologists or sociologists in developing theories on primitive cultures. Within this myth, the primitive society is seen as a utopian society, in close connection with nature and its laws. Savages are endowed with noble feelings, displaying virtuous behaviors in everyday life. They were not corrupted by the European civilization ([www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com)).

Although, according to specialists, the concept of “noble savage” came into being in modern times, it also existed in the works of the great ancient thinkers. A telling example of this is Lucius Annaeus Seneca, with his “Letters to Lucilius”. As is known, Roman philosophy was largely influenced by the

currents of philosophical thought that shaped ancient Greece. Seneca is no exception to this, as he finds inspiration in Plato's philosophy, but also in the philosophy of the Stoics (Coplestone 2008, 383). In Seneca's mentioned work one can see the philosopher's interest in ethics, but the social organization in the era in which he lived can also be observed.

In his writings, the teacher of the Roman Emperor Nero refers to three periods in the history of mankind:

- ✦ the golden age or the primitive period, when society was not well structured or organized politically and socially.
- ✦ the time of the right reason or the time of the wise men, characterized by the emergence of the main philosophical ideas aimed at orienting man towards the cultivation of virtues, towards the exercise of spiritual development.
- ✦ the period represented by the time in which the philosopher lived, characterized by greed and the desire for a luxurious life.

The three epochs are presented antithetically, to highlight the qualities that certain ways of living had, more precisely the good things that mankind had and lost forever, because of the appearance of vices. The positive example in this case is the golden age, that period in the history of humanity when people lived in collectivities, in accordance with the laws of nature, like brothers. At that time, he says, "men and their offspring obeyed innocently the laws of nature, which were both their guide and their law, allowing themselves to be led by the best of them" (Seneca 1967, 306). As in Plato, primitive society is ruled by the wise - that is by the worthy, chosen for their spiritual attributes, which is why the holding of power by these persons did not lead to a leadership based on tyranny. Power was given only to the people considered to be the most suitable for this role; for they made sure that the weak were defended against the strong, thus not putting anyone in danger and preventing possible conflicts. The leader also had the quality of being foresighted, as he made sure that the other members of the community lacked nothing. He also showed his subjects what was useful or useless (Seneca 1967, 306).

Plato's influence is clear, because even in the 'Republic' (his main work on political philosophy), society is ruled by philosophers, according to the

principle of *oikeiopraxis*, which stipulates that each person must do what he does best, what suits him, what is his own (Platon 1986, 218). This way the justice will reign in the city because the philosopher is a lover of truth, of wisdom and learning, he hates lies and can devote himself to the rule of the city (state), as he is temperate and can give up the bodily pleasures (Platon 1986, 267, 276 – 278).

Seneca's wise man shows the community what is necessary and what is not, the emphasis falling on functionality, utility, and practice. This is because the life of people in the golden age is based on empiricism, that is, people learned through experience. The primitive period is considered by the philosopher as a time when humanity knew happiness, because people did not have many worries, living in the midst of the elements, closer to nature, which brought them joy. There was no private property, people living from what nature offered them. At the time nature was more generous, "the goods of nature were sitting together close by, within the reach of anyone" (Seneca 1967, 314). The goods were used in common, they belonged to the community.

In addition to foresight, courage and wisdom, the ruler possessed other virtues, such as kindness. The virtues presented are not chosen at random, among them being the four cardinal virtues of Plato's philosophy: justice, temperance, wisdom, and prudence. For the Greek philosopher, prudence lies in the ability of the wise to know what is good for man and how that good can be achieved (Coplestone 2008, 197). Or, to prevent possible conflicts and anticipate the needs of the community so that it does not lack the necessary, Seneca's leader also appeals to foresight. Being a society that lacked conflicts, the whole collectivity obeyed the leader. Weapons, therefore, were not necessary - people did not fight each other, there was no homicide. They defended themselves only from wild beasts.

To live according to the laws of nature means that other virtues inspired by Greek philosophy were considered: generosity (which for Aristotle is situated in the middle, between vice by deficiency – stinginess, and vice by excess – waste) (Coplestone 2008, 307), but also temperance. As for temperance, it existed in all aspects of life, "for the measure in everything was

as the need required” (Seneca 1967, 310). Whoever lives by this principle leads a moderate life in which the balance between needs and the resources is preserved. This prevents waste, for nature makes available to man everything he needs, and he will take from nature only as much as he needs. It is to such a life that Seneca urges our fellows: we must be content with what is enough for our basic needs, with what is useful to us, for “we can have everything we need, if we will be content with what the earth has put at our fingertips” (Seneca 1967, 309). As the author states, the limitation of desires according to the necessary means, that is, the desire to live in moderation is seen in his contemporaneity as a gross behavior, contrary to what is valued in his society: luxury, opulence, and abundance.

Guided by the principles mentioned above, the primitive man had a free life, without great constraints, leading a happy life, for there was no social segregation between the poor and rich. People were modest, content with simple things, and lived without fear, taking care of their peers. Livelihoods were adapted to the basic needs of the human being. This happy age ended, however, with the advent of a great vice: greed, accompanied by poverty, luxury, fornication, division, and frivolity.

In the dichotomy between the natural life - living in the age of happiness and the artificial, lush life that Seneca’s contemporaries live, life according to the laws of nature is preferable. For, with the advent of greed, man turned away from nature, from what was simple, easy to procure, carefree. Nature is generous; through it one can easily obtain everything that the human being needs, for nothing. The resources we need are easy to get. Instead, man gave up living lightly; we complicated our own lives, creating artificial needs for us. The luxurious life and abundance tire the man and create additional worries and fears - man has come to struggle in hardships. The philosopher explains how luxury was born: first, man “began to desire vain things, then inappropriate things, and eventually he enslaved the soul to the body, and commanded it to do all its lusts” (Seneca 1967, 310). It all started from the fact that man gave excessive importance to the body and its needs, which, if he (the body) was once treated like a slave, now came to be treated like a master, pleasure becoming more important than virtues or reason. Greed and luxury are the consequences of a life based on hedonism.

Seneca's description gives us a picture of how the two societies are reflected, similarly: "The reed housed free people. Under marble and gold dwells slavery" (Seneca 1967, 308).

The flourishing of crafts is also due to the fact that we complicate our existence, the Roman thinker criticizes the abundance of workshops and crafts in his current era, many of which are superfluous, because they do not take into account the ascension of the soul or the means necessary for life. Although they are still the result of reason, of the skill of men, they do not come from temperance or wisdom. Crafts came into being because they were necessary for man, but their multiplication is also due to the artificial need for luxury - for virtue has come to serve pleasure. Natural man does not need so many crafts or art to live his simple life. Constructions and architecture initially followed simple lines; they were not based on ornaments, but on functionality.

The connection between the two periods mentioned is made by the period of the right reason, when true sages made known to man the principles by which he should be guided, according to reason, which is his main attribute. Thanks to this period, the contemporary man (of Seneca) could distinguish what is right and what is wrong for himself. The higher activity to which one can indulge is the training of the soul by cultivating virtues. The true sages revealed the truth, they made possible the transition of the human being from the stage of being similar to animals, who did not know the gods, to that of a being that lives in accordance with the divinity, which he imitates and which he obeys. Thus, people learned the law of life, which they applied in everything and came to accept "all that chance brings, as they receive that which is decided" (Seneca 1967, 314). Boundaries and delimitation appeared in human society with the advent of greed, when man coveted more than he had, taking possession of the land, and making it his property. Greed, "wanting to pull something to her side and to appropriate it, she alienates everything, and from the boundlessness before, reached the strait. Greed brought poverty: wanting too much, it lost everything" (Seneca 1967, 315). Decision-making can, however, be interpreted in another way: once the wise man brought knowledge and made the gods known, man came to know the law of life, that is, also what was restricted by the gods. And the

man owes it to himself to obey them. Boundary establishes certain limits - physical, geographical, and behavioral: those boundaries that restrict the freedom of the individual.

The influence of Stoicism on Roman philosophy, and in this case on Seneca's philosophy, is also observed in other parts of the Letters. The attitude of accepting fortuitous events to the same extent as those whose appearance can be anticipated, which are delimited, is the acceptance due to the law of life. It will materialize in the ease of accepting everything that life brings. A similar recommendation is also found in the urge for detachment, a practice characteristic of the Stoics, aimed at obtaining a state of tranquility by avoiding the disturbance of the soul:

“But that's not why I'm advising you to be detached. Beware of all the evils you fear, expect everything that wisdom urges you to wait for, watch and remove from you anything that can harm you, long before it is fulfilled. For this, your confidence in yourself and a spirit ready to endure any misfortune will be of great benefit to you. The one who is able to bear it can be protected from fate; of course, a man reconciled does not allow himself to be troubled” (Seneca 2018, 35).

The period in which the principles of true reason were made known was highlighted by the focus on rational thinking, which makes the difference between what is right and what is wrong, is focused on eternal good, on true happiness, on the grounds and definition of truth, and, finally, on virtue. The right reason is about true greatness, the things that last forever; the wise man would not have been concerned with the crafts of men, but with things worthy of perpetual use. The happiest man is not the one who seeks fleeting happiness, but he who does not need happiness, just as the most powerful man is “he who has power over himself” (Seneca 1967, 314). Virtue (Seneca 1967, 314), like freedom, cannot be bought. It is in everyone's power to give themselves freedom, but also to demand it from themselves. Freedom can be achieved through abandoning fear: fear of death and fear of poverty (Seneca 2018, 28).

In the description of the primitive period, the Roman philosopher does not compromise on praise, appreciating the characteristics that mankind lost with the advent of vices, and displaying nostalgia for its origins. He also

mentions that although to be admired, this specific period was not the home for a perfect society. Primitives acted as if a wise man should act, but they did so without being wise (Seneca 1967, 314). They did not know virtue and did not know how to become virtuous people, which is only possible by practicing virtues. Unlike Seneca's contemporaries, they were stronger by nature and more trained to overcome hardships, but spiritually they were less perfect, due to their ignorance. The fact that they did not have many vices is due to their ignorance, their simple way of living, not to the fact that the right reason would have guided them how to lead their lives. Virtues can only be found in those who are aware of them and have trained themselves to reach perfection. As human beings, we have a propensity to virtue, we can cultivate it through uninterrupted exercise, but not all people follow this path of wisdom.

Another important philosopher, this time representative of the Modern Era who made use of the image of the "natural man" is Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He is one of the philosophers who developed the social contract theory in political philosophy. This time, however, we can talk about a different perception regarding the idea of "noble savage": the birth of the state took place based on the model of the family. Therefore, Rousseau uses both the theory of social contract, which stipulates that the state was born naturally, based on an unwritten contract between the subjects and the government, and the patriarchal theory (from Latin, *pater* = father) to explain the emergence of the state according to the model of the family. The way in which the "noble savage" is portrayed by the French in his main work, "The Social Contract" considers how the state organization of society imitates the family: led by the father or husband, who is the head of the family. According to the philosopher, men are naturally free. If in their early life the children live with the father, being forced to stay with the family until they grow up, once they mature, both they and their parents regain their independence. When children choose to continue living with their parents, this is due to a convention, they do not do this naturally, but make use of their own will. Rousseau states that "the family is the oldest of the societies and the only natural one" (Rousseau 2007, 24), and the state is organized according to its image, the role of the head of the family being taken by the leader, and



that of the children is taken by the people. Both the leader and the people give up their freedom only for their own benefit, just as they do in the family. People are born equal, slavery is not a natural state of the human being, but is contrary to nature, slaves losing everything in chains, even the desire for freedom (Rousseau 2007, 25). From the principle of equality, it follows that no man can have natural authority over his fellows, nor even a father can alienate his children, just as a people cannot alienate themselves. Freedom is a human right (Rotaru 2019, 201-215), but it is also part of its essence: “to give up one’s own freedom is to give up the quality of man, to rights and even to human duties” (Rousseau 2007, 28).

Government must not be based on physical strength, on force. Strength must be replaced by the just (the law), for only in this way can there be legitimacy to rule. Force, which is a physical power, requires obedience out of necessity, because the life of the least powerful can be endangered. But with the replacement of force with the just, it leads to willing obedience to the leader, an act that involves will, consent given rationally. For the just is the legitimate power. And in the face of physical power people are not obliged to obey. Legitimate power, however, ensures obedience, for it is based on conventions. As no one can have authority over one’s fellow human beings naturally, at the core of human society remain the conventions on which legitimate authorities rely. Several rights are respected in these conventions: no perfect authority or boundless submission can be attributed to any party (Rousseau 2007, 28).

Another feature of the primitive society envisioned by Rousseau is the state of independence, which comes to complete equality and freedom. Primitive men are not enemies of each other naturally, as this would involve different relationships. In the type of family-oriented organization, relationships between people are simple, personal. The links between them are not so precise as to allow the appearance of the state of war. This fact is also possible due to the lack of ownership. Even though there may still be fleeting conflicts, war does not constitute a natural state in the primitive society. The existence of wars in human history is due to abuses by feudal-type government. Relations between people are different from relations between states; therefore, in the case of the establishment of a state of war, it is not

justified to kill the enemy soldiers if they give up their weapons, or to enslave the enemy people.” In the case of war, there is a relationship from state to state, in which the citizens of the two enemy states end up being enemies by chance, since their role changes, from that of a citizen, to that of a soldier or defender of the country, which involves other rights and obligations. The conflict is not based on the interhuman relationship, which is why one state can have as its enemy only another state, not a group of citizens, because states and people have different natures. When the soldiers drop their weapons, their role returns to the original one, that of a citizen, the enemy state having no right over their lives. Following the same pattern, the enslavement by slavery of a people is illegitimate (Rousseau 2007, 29-30).

The need for a social pact arises when people can no longer remain in the state of nature, because obstacles appear in their path that cannot be removed, such as the vicissitudes of nature or the difficulty of obtaining the necessary food. There is a question of establishing conventional freedom and renouncing natural freedom. For the people not to perish, they must join forces, which they must direct to the same purpose. Through association, individuals and their property can be protected from danger, even if this involves giving up full individual freedom. The social contract is based on the union of several individuals, who agree on tacitly admitted, universally recognized causes. If the pact is violated, each member of the association “immediately regains his original rights and resumes his natural freedom” (Rousseau 2007, 33). Through the social pact, the public person is born, formed by the union of all private persons. If in the past this form of organization made up the city (state), in the present, it is the basis for the founding of the republic. The French philosopher sums up the nature of the social pact as follows: “each of us pools all our person and power under the supreme leadership of the general will and then we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole” (Rousseau 2007, 33-34). Although it restricts individual freedom, the social pact does not destroy it, but replaces the physical inequality that exists between people with moral and legitimate equality. Their natural equality is replaced by moral and legitimate equality, that is, by the convention for which they have given their consent and by the right guaranteeing legitimacy (Rousseau 2007, 40).

The Rousselian work aroused great interest in the epoch, exerting influence on literary, ethnological, or philosophical studies. It is believed that Rousseau created and popularized the concept of “noble savage” (Ellingson 2001, 100), presenting the myth to highlight the fact that the only viable alternative to feudal ordering, tyranny or despotism lies in social organization through the social contract/pact. This can be achieved due to the willingness of individuals to associate, thanks to their freedom to decide how to act jointly to ensure their own existence and avoid dangers.

Ideal society, with free, equal, independent people, neither good nor bad - the natural state of human beings leads to the spontaneous emergence of the state, out of necessity. Man is perfectible; he can better himself and organize himself in his own interest, by creating “positive mutual relations” (Drago and Boroli 2004, 949). With all the satisfactory characteristics, the human society can still be corrupted; inequality appears due to development (people do not have equal attributes, some are stronger than others or, over time, end up owning more property). The problems arising in the organized society after the appearance of the social contract, the fact that man gets to live according to the law of the general will in civil society, his corruption by society can be repaired by a behavior that leads to liberation from the harmful influence of society and by regaining freedom.

While it was easier for Rousseau to rely on the work that appeared at the time in connection with the way in which recently discovered primitive societies were organized, being influenced by the research and literature specific to his time, Seneca was not equally familiar with the life of those societies. The writings that influenced him belonged to the Greek philosophers, who, like him, made an exercise in rational imagination, by which they tried to justify why primitive societies were in one way or another and what they had the best. It cannot be said that the Roman philosopher was influenced by the concept of “noble savage”, this concept appearing much later, but he also presented an idealized perspective of primitive society, occupying through his work an important place in the political philosophy of late antiquity (Rotaru 2005, 204-205).

The paradisiacal vision of life in primitive societies still arouses the imagination. Its influence is observed even today, through the more visible orientation towards a living as close as possible to that of traditional societies,

in harmony with the rhythms of nature, based on sustenance. There is a tendency of young families to migrate from urban areas to rural ones, able to offer a more satisfying life on the spiritual level, stress-free, more oriented towards the spirit of economy and avoiding waste, and more attentive to protecting the environment. The return to origins is the reason for the social change that began to grow in Romanian society as well.

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