RE-READING ROUSSEAU*

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Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) is a rather curious case in the history of ideas. After two centuries, he is still the object of truly passionate opinions (you either love him or you hate him), and few authors have given rise to as many contradictory interpretations. He is commonly seen as an inspiration for the French Revolution, but also as an influence on German nationalism. He is seen as a convinced individualist, a social misfit, a gentle dreamer seeking self-dissolution—and as a fanatical logician devoted to Spartan discipline. He is seen as a rationalist, but also as the prophet of a morality and religion based solely on sentiment. He has been represented as the father of romanticism and one of the precursors of state socialism. Hyppolite Taine accused him of collectivism, Benjamin Constant of despotism. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, who blamed him for the "great deviation of 1793,"[1] saw him as a theorist and apologist of tyranny.

Rousseau is the *bête noire* of the French right, though they seldom read him. The liberals, for their part, blame him for the excesses of the Revolution of 1789 and claim he is the source of a "totalitarian" current leading straight to Karl Marx.[2] Indeed, for Rousseau, the social

* Alain de Benoist, "Relire Rousseau," in *Critiques—Théoriques* (Lausanne, Switzerland: L'Age d'Homme, 2002), 313–31. The translator wishes to thank Alain de Benoist for permission to translate and publish this essay, and for checking the translation. Thanks also to Michael O'Meara and F. Roger Devlin for checking the translation.

[1] The Terror—TOQ.

[2] Cf. notably J. L. Talmon, *Les origines de la démocratie totalitaire* [*The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*] (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1966), which presents Rousseau as a kind of Montagnard *avant la lettre.* Undoubtedly Marx would not have contradicted this point of view. Louis Dumont, however, showed that the Marxian reading of Rousseau rests on a remarkable series of misconceptions (cf. *Homo æqualis: Genèse et épanouissement de l'idéologie économique* [*Homo aequalis: The Genesis and Development of Ecnomic Ideology*] [Paris: Gallimard, 1977], 151–56). Dumont also thinks that "the totalitarian aspects of democratic movements result not from Rousseau's theories but from the confrontation of the artificialist project of individualism with experience" (*Essais sur l'individualisme. Une perspective anthropologique sur l'idéologie moderne*

contract remains in large part still to be written: the limits of the possible have not yet been attained and the better society is still to come. The traditional right is more radical in its criticism, reproaching Rousseau for the very idea of the social contract and using the term "Rousseauism" to designate a "utopian" anthropology of undeniable maleficence. Rousseau is then presented as nothing more than the father of egalitarianism and the author of absurd theories of the "noble savage" and the "naturally good man."

Typical of this mentality is Charles Maurras' portrait of "poor Rousseau":

> Neither the spirit of the family, nor of the party, nor the political interests that would have moderated every other Genevan, was capable of tempering the mystic rage of this tub thumper, born in misfortune, scourged silly by an elderly spinster, and spoiled rotten by his first friends. Jack of all the trades, including the most disgusting, in turn lackey and minion, music master, parasite, kept man, he knew only one thing: his intellectual and moral bankruptcy. . . . Born sensitive and versatile, completely incapable of holding fast to the truth, his divergent arguments never harmonize with his whining. He is a criminal, a savage, and a madman, in about equal parts.[3]

Rousseau's thought nevertheless exerted a considerable influence, which extends far beyond the intellectual or political context to which it is often restricted.[4] But this influence, even in Rousseau's own time,

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[Paris: Seuil, 1983], 96; in English: *Essays on Individualism: Modern Ideology in Anthropological Perspective* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986]). The accusation that Rousseau paved the way for the excesses of the Revolution is found in Nietzsche (cf. *Human, All-Too-Human*, I, §463). The thesis that Rousseau is a precursor of totalitarianism is contradicted by Raymond Polin, *La politique de la solitude: Essai sur la philosophie politique de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* [*The Politics of Solitude: Essay on the Political Philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*] (Paris: Sirey, 1971) and Eric Weil, "Rousseau et sa politique" ["Rousseau and his Politics"], in Gérard Genette and Tzvetan Todorov, *Pensée de Rousseau* [*Rousseau's Thought*] (Paris: Seuil-Points, 1984).

[3] Charles Maurras, *Romantisme et révolution* [*Romanticism and Revolution*] (Paris: Nouvelle Librairie Nationale, 1922).

[4] In Germany, in particular, Rousseau did not just influence Kant in a decisive fashion (which is well-known). By way of romanticism, his influence was also felt by a whole series of theorists advocating the "return to nature" and some forms of social organicism, beginning with some *völkisch* authors. Maurras, who accused Rous-

seems to be located much more on the level of sensibility than of doctrine. Besides, his influence was based less on his texts than on often hostile interpretations and simplifications. Rousseau is an author who is often quoted but almost never read. Moreover, only his early works are commonly cited; his constitutional projects for Corsica and Poland are too often ignored, especially by his adversaries. Finally, it was only in the twentieth century that serious study of his work began and the unity of his thought was recognized.[5] In any case, all these controversies show that Rousseau's thought does not lend itself to easy summation in neat formulas. Thus I propose that we re-read Rousseau, not to "rehabilitate" him—for he does not need it—but to go beyond the received view and discover an author who undoubtedly deserves better than the image often offered by his admirers as well as his enemies.

ROUSSEAU ON NATURE

Rousseau writes that "man is naturally good." However, one reads at the beginning of *Emile*: "Everything that comes from the hands of the Author of things is good; everything degenerates in the hands of man." What are we to think of a being who is alleged to be naturally good, but who causes everything he touches to "degenerate"? Moreover, in the formula "naturally good," which word matters most? Does Rousseau want to say simply that man is good, and on top of that this kindness is natural for him, or does he want to say that it is as a natural being that man is good? The importance that Rousseau gives "nature" evidently suggests the second interpretation. But this term is also equivocal for him. The "back to nature" theme was all the rage in the eighteenth century. For Diderot, Guillaume Raynal, and so many others, it nourished all kinds of speculations about the "golden age," the "primitive virtues," etc.[6] Is this really the case with Rousseau?

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seau of having imported "Germanic" ideas into France, was undoubtedly aware of it. In any case, the idea that Rousseau is nothing more than an author of "the left" (particularly widespread in France and the United States) can only appear quite summary to one who knows a bit about the complexity of the history of ideas in Europe. His intellectual legacy is undoubtedly more varied than is usually believed.

[5] Cf. Ernst Cassirer, *The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, trans. Peter Gay (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963).

[6] Cf. André Delaporte, *Bergers d'Arcadie: Le mythe de l'Âge d'Or dans la littérature française du XVIII^e siècle* [*Shepherds of Arcadia: The Myth of the Golden Age in the French Literature of the Eighteenth Century*] (Puiseaux: Pardès, 1988).

Moreover, such a watchword has very different meanings depending on one's idea of "nature." The Church, for example, always preached an "ethics according to nature," whereas Nietzsche denounced "morality as anti-nature" (the title of the one of the chapters of *Twilight of the Idols*). In fact, one need only read Rousseau to realize that "natural" is used with two very different meanings. Sometimes "natural" refers to what is original, sometimes to what is authentic or essential. Very quickly, the second meaning took precedence.

When he evokes the "state of nature," Rousseau proves to be much less utopian than many Enlightenment philosophers. At the beginning of his *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men*,[7] he says explicitly that he never intended to depict an original state of humanity, because one can never know what it was, or even if the "state of nature" ever existed. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Rousseau does not turn towards a far distant past, which he reconstructed in his own fashion, any more than he believed it possible to learn something of human "nature" from so-called "savage" tribes. The state of nature for him is less a historical concept than a speculative and regulative idea allowing one to organize facts. It is a fiction he uses to explain the appearance of the phenomena he wishes to critique. The same applies to the idea of the "social contract" which he says belongs among "the hypothetical and conditional truths." Today, one would say: a working hypothesis.

Rousseau opposes "natural man" and "civilized man." But both of these categories are immediately subdivided: just as civilized man includes the bourgeois as well as the citizen (more on this below), the natural man includes the savage natural man and the natural man living in society. However, one wonders whether the first of these two "natural men" is truly a man. Rousseau describes him as a "stupid and limited being," "bound by nature to instinct alone": "limited to physical instinct alone, he is null, he is stupid" (*Discourse on Inequality*). This savage, guided only by "self-love," is a recluse who lives in autarky. He is self-sufficient in the sense that he does not maintain individualized relations with anybody. He has neither morality, nor beliefs, nor reason,

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[7] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men*, in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 3, *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality (Second Discourse), Polemics, and Political Economy*, ed. Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly, trans. Judith R. Bush, Roger D. Masters, Christopher Kelly, and Terence Marshall (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1992).

nor language. Such a being is thus in no way distinguishable from an animal. The savage natural man, subject to strict natural selection, is initially one living thing among others. By this, Rousseau thinks he is affirming the animal origin of man. It is a point of view rather different from that of his contemporaries.

Rousseau does not see the "state of nature" as the starting point of an ineluctable linear development. The state of nature described in the first part of the *Discourse on Inequality* is essentially static; in theory, man could have remained there eternally, perpetually enjoying the "happiness" connected to his animal embodiment. This savage man is by all evidence an imaginary being, a kind of ideal type that Rousseau needs in order to set up his other categories. For if the savage is not an actual man, he is nevertheless potentially one. He is solitary, but not asocial. He has the "social virtues potentially."[8] For Rousseau, although sociality does not strictly speaking arise from nature, neither does it go against it. Man is social as soon as he is man, in the full sense of the term. It is thus no exaggeration to say, with Louis Dumont, that Rousseau, contrary to most interpretations of his thought, fully recognizes the social character of man, i.e., his membership in a concrete society as a condition of his humanity.

NATURAL GOODNESS AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

It is, in short, necessary to place Rousseau in the context of his time. Rousseau's theory of the "naturally good man" initially aimed at answering the classical question of theodicy, i.e., the problem raised by the existence of evil in a world supposedly freely created by a God who is both all-powerful and infinitely good. Apparently this problem can be solved in only two ways: either we exonerate God by explaining evil by the original sin, i.e., by man's misuse of his freedom before his entry into history; or we exonerate man, and one is then obliged to doubt the goodness or the absolute power of God.

Rousseau's position is more original. Against the Encyclopedists, Rousseau advocates the "justification of God." Against the Church, he disputes the idea of original sin, which represents man as naturally bad. By affirming that evil comes neither from man nor from God, but from a third source, i.e., society, Rousseau by no means intends to plead in favor of an irresponsible individual who blames "society" for

[8] *Emile*, IV. In English: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979).

all his acts, which is the common meaning of "Rousseauist." He intends, rather, to answer a fundamental theological problem, which immediately confronts any speculative reflection.

His critical conception of the social is equally original compared to the philosophy of his time. The idea of a distinction between civil society and the state was certainly common in the eighteenth century, when all philosophical reflection rested on the assumption that modern man first lives in a private social sphere, in opposition to the public sphere dominated by the state. The early liberal theorists articulated their criticism of institutions starting from the idea that there is a civil society that must be continuously defended against the encroachments of power. For Encyclopedists, civil society is thus *a priori* good in itself. What is bad is the political system, absolute monarchy, power which always tends to expand itself.

But Rousseau concludes the exact opposite. Absolutism, in his eyes, is only an epiphenomenon. For the Encyclopedists, it is the cause of social and political evil; for Rousseau it is only a consequence. These are two very different perspectives. The Encyclopedists, who reason in a purely mechanist manner, believe that it would suffice to limit power so that civil society could function "freely" in a more or less optimal way. Rousseau himself realized quite well that social reality is much more complex, and that one does not solve all problems by curbing the authority of the state or changing institutions.

Above all, it was the Church which, having recognized Rousseau as an adversary of the idea of original sin, worked to blame every excess on the "natural goodness" of man. In fact, for Rousseau, man in the state of nature is neither good nor bad, for the simple reason that there is no morality in him. In the state of nature, there is, "neither goodness in our hearts, nor morality in our actions."[9] In addition, man is fully man only when he is "denatured," i.e., when he ceases being a solitary and perfect whole to become part of the social whole. Rousseau, who often returns to this idea, writes that "good institutions are those that best denature man . . . so that each individual no longer believes he is one, but part of the whole." His thought on this point is very clear.

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[9] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Geneva Manuscript* (the first version of *On the Social Contract*), I, 2, in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 4, *Social Contract, Discourse on the Virtue Most Necessary for a Hero, Political Fragments, and Geneva Manuscript*, ed. Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly, trans. Judith R. Bush, Roger D. Masters, and Christopher Kelly (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1994).

Rather than "good," man is naturally *innocent* as long as his humanity is just virtual; he is neither good nor bad (or both good and bad) as soon as he fully attains his humanity.

In the second sense, which takes on a greater importance in Rousseau, "natural" means essential. Ultimately, for Rousseau "natural" man is not the original man, man without society, who bears an essence that he himself authenticates. The "nature" of man becomes at the same time what is specifically human in him. Consequently, the problem of human nature becomes an exclusively moral and philosophical problem. To know what is "natural" in man, one must undertake a reflection on his inner being, on the ideal type that corresponds best to the human phenomenon. I agree with Louis Dumont who writes: "The core of Rousseau's message lies much more in moral and religious consciousness than in feeling for nature, as is sometimes is believed."

FREEDOM, PERFECTIBILITY, HISTORY

What then is the "nature" of man? First and foremost, it is his *freedom*. Rousseau opens an important inquiry when he wonders whether man really belongs to "nature," and not rather to freedom. His answer is that the two terms are integral to each other. And from this fundamental freedom, Rousseau immediately derives the concept of "perfectibility." What distinguishes man from all the other living things is that he is perfectible: he has the capacity to change himself. Here Rousseau is not very far from the idea, presented in particular by Arnold Gehlen, of man as "open to the world," not strictly determined, free to "denature" himself, i.e., to *enculturate* himself in his own fashion. Far from preaching the return to any state of nature, Rousseau defines real man as a being who never sticks to his state of origin, but unceasingly seeks to exceed himself and create new forms of existence. "The nature of man is to have no nature, but to be free" (Pierre Manent). That, of course, can be understood in various ways. But the fundamental idea remains: freedom initially consists in constructing oneself, which applies to individuals as well as to peoples.

In addition, for Rousseau freedom is neither a gift nor a passive state. From a dynamic point of view, it exists only insofar as one is ready to conquer it. Contrary to the philosophers of the Enlightenment, Rousseau does not intend to base the social bond on "sympathy" or self-interest. He does not expect society to guarantee well-being or "happiness," but rather to provide man the conditions in

which he can conquer his freedom. This is far from the presuppositions of the economists and utilitarians of his time and ours.

It is important to grasp fully that it is perfectibility that inserts man into history and makes him a historical being in the full sense of the word. Through this conception of man, Rousseau poses a philosophy of history far removed from modern historicism. Rousseau does not, like Hegel, see continuous progress in human development, an ever-intensifying rise of reason in history. The concept of perfectibility, for him, does not immediately answer the question of progress. On the contrary, Rousseau wonders why the history of human perfectibility is so often a history of evil. Contrary to liberal optimism, he believes neither in the intrinsic virtues of progress nor in a utopia that will necessarily come to pass. In a certain way, in his eyes, to become historical is neutral. Perfectibility is the source of errors and hopes, successes and failures. It is the cause of misfortune and all human "misery." It is the source of the alienation of everything most authentic in him. But it can also help him get it back. In fact, according to the circumstances, it can lead to servitude or a better society.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, who were avid pastoralists, Rousseau did not believe it possible to return to an original state: "Human nature does not go backwards." He did not dream of a Golden Age or wish to restore a lost paradise. His social contract is not, like Locke's, an event of the past, but a part of the future that still remains to be founded. It is not to be reconstituted, but to be realized. Intended to rescue man from the corruptions of a degenerate society, it does not reveal the image of the self-sufficient individual, but calls for collective action. This is equivalent to moving from a history unconsciously suffered to one consciously engaged. Rousseau knew well that society was always much more the result of human action than human design. But his conclusions were the opposite of Hayek's. Rousseau is resolutely "perspectivist." Society has gone wrong precisely because hitherto it has developed without man's knowledge—and this is why man must try to take control of it. Human existence is not inevitably inauthentic and "depraved." It is not a question of seeking "happiness" or returning to the "state of nature," but of taking the path of freedom. The idea that man is a good savage who has been corrupted by society seems, in this light, somewhat inadequate. Rather, according to Rousseau, man is a perfectible animal whose perfectibility resulted in self-alienation, but who can recover his authenticity without having to revert to a former state.

To work for the advent of a better society ultimately comes down to knowing how man can conform to his essence, how he can be himself. This preoccupation with "authenticity" explains Rousseau's influence on the German Romantics and the *Sturm und Drang* generation, an influence, moreover, that would be expressed in two different forms according to whether one gave primacy to the feeling for nature or the requirements of morality. For Rousseau's morality was not reduced to the prerogatives of feeling, to the "right of the heart" which likened Goethe's *Werther* to Rousseau's *New Eloise*. It is a more fundamental ethical imperative that already foreshadows Kant. Moreover, Kant worked out his moral theory in explicit reference to Rousseau, and it was really "between Kant and Rousseau" that the discourse of the young writers of the *Sturm und Drang* would be worked out.

EQUALITY

Let us now consider the problem of equality. Here too, we tend to stick too closely to a formula: "All men are born equal and free" (*On the Social Contract*). Rousseau's conception of equality is actually very complex. It has nothing to do, for example, with the embryonic communism of François-Noël Babeuf. Rousseau reduces the equality of nature to membership in the species—men are equal insofar as they belong to the same species (*sub specie naturae*)—and also to the metaphysical constitution of human nature: men are subject to a common finitude; we are all equally doomed to death.

Along with this equality of the human condition, there is a natural inequality that Rousseau does not deny for an instant. On the contrary, in the *Discourse on Inequality*, he explicitly mentions this "natural inequality," "established by nature," "which consists in the difference of ages, health, physical strength, and qualities of the mind, of the soul."

Certainly, the social contract represents one moment when equality between men is perfectly realized. But Rousseau describes this equality as a "reciprocal commitment of all towards each." This concept of reciprocity is rather close to the Aristotelian definition of justice, and steers the idea of equality towards that of proportion or right measure: to each his own.

In addition, on the social level, Rousseau unambiguously challenges what Montesquieu calls the spirit of "extreme equality." In his eyes, the despotism of all is no better than the despotism of just one, and he rightly sees that extreme equality leads to the tyranny of all. In

his projects for Corsica and Poland, he even recommends instituting a hierarchy of three nonhereditary classes, having distinct functions and privileges.

Thus Rousseau does not recommend the disappearance of social differences. He asks only that social inequalities agree with natural inequalities and do not involve unbearable domination. "With regard to equality," he writes, "this word does not mean that the degrees of power and wealth are absolutely the same, but that, as for power, it is never comparable to violence and is never exerted but in virtue of rank and laws and, as for wealth, that no citizen is so rich he can buy another, and no one so poor that he has to sell himself" (*Discourse on Inequality*).

To use Isocrates' famous distinction: Rousseau in the end tends more toward a "geometrical equality," i.e., a distributive justice, than toward the arithmetic equality characteristic of modern egalitarianism. As Raymond Polin writes, "Rousseau always defended the other equality, the proportional and moderate form of equality that recognizes the legitimacy of moral and political distinctions and differences, provided that they harmonize with the inequalities established by nature."[10]

Rousseau, in the same way, does not criticize property rights, but intends to firmly limit their abuse. "Property," he affirms, "is the most sacred of all civil rights and more important, in certain regards, than even life." In addition, property is "the true guarantor of the commitments of citizens," because the law would be inapplicable if the people could not respond to how it applies to their goods. For this reason, Rousseau disputes Locke's idea that one has a natural right to property based on work. Property, he says, is "a human convention and institution," which means that the right to property is a social right. The state for Rousseau, unlike Diderot, is not a "dispenser of happiness." It ought to intervene only when the inequalities of fortune reach such a point that they condemn certain categories of citizens to an economic dependence reducing them to the status of objects. Generally

[10] Polin, *La politique de la solitude*, 133. Heinrich Meier writes: "The opinion—still widespread—that had the strongest historical influence, namely the idea that the *Discourse on Inequality* is above all a moral, not to say moralizing, treatise with the goal of promoting egalitarianism, blocks access to the central core of the enterprise, which is more broached than revealed by Rousseau in his book" ("*The Discourse on the Origin and the Foundation of Inequality Among Men*: On the Intention of Rousseau's Most Philosophical Work," *Interpretation*, Winter 1988–89, 212).

speaking, Rousseau is quite aware that there can be rights only where there are relations: rights are born with society. Human rights in the sense defined by liberal theorists, as eternal rights that man brings from his "state of nature," leave Rousseau completely indifferent.

The importance Rousseau gives to broader society leads him to recognize that the central power in society resides in opinion. It is what fixes the position of men and the esteem they enjoy. It is what determines the social comparisons from which most inequalities result. (Here one can still see Rousseau's originality: inequalities do not give rise to social comparisons, but social comparisons give rise to inequalities.) With these observations, Rousseau again expresses his anti-liberalism. Some take self-interest as axiomatic: society "necessarily entails that men hate one another to the extent that their interests conflict." He perceived quite well that, in modern societies, the assignment of comparative values to men is above all based on the process by which things are priced. The value allotted to each individual aligns with exchange value. However, for Rousseau, the value of men is not reducible to a price. Thus he shows that, personal qualities being at the origin of inequalities and the phenomena of subordination that they involve, "wealth is the last thing they are reduced to in the end, because being most immediately useful for well-being and easiest to pass on, one easily makes use of it to buy everything else" (*Discourse on Inequality*).

Rousseau observes that this "competitive" inequality is found as much in Paris as in London, Naples, or Geneva. The power of money is integral to modernity, which installs the bourgeois in place of the citizen. Modern man lives neither for others nor for his fatherland, but only for the approval of an opinion that spontaneously models social value on monetary value, i.e., on money. Rousseau calls this attitude vanity (*amour-propre*) and sees it as a corruption of self-love (*amour de soi*). As Pierre Manent stresses:

> Vanity is not self-love: it is even in some way the opposite. Vanity lives by comparison, it is the desire to be esteemed by others at as high a price as one esteems oneself, and it is condemned to be unsatisfied, since everyone has the same vanity and feels the same desire. Vanity knows that it cannot be satisfied, and it hates others for their vanity. It nourishes in the soul distaste for oneself and impotent hatred of others. The man of such a society

lives only by the approval of the others, whom he hates.[11]

Thus envy and frustration seem to form the cursed pair of the modern spirit. One sees here the beginning of an analysis of resentment and mimetic competition that presages Nietzsche, Tocqueville, and René Girard all at once. Furthermore, the transformation of natural man into sociable man, into "man of man," as described in the second part of *On the Social Contract*, attests to the importance of the role of vanity and resentment from the angle of preferences and comparisons. Comparison causes preferences, preferences generate individualized personal relations, the latter being mediated by the opinions of others, which is the origin of inequality. Describing this process, Rousseau reveals the connection between man's domination of nature and his alienation from himself. The more man sets himself up as the master of a world reduced to objects, the more he is withdrawn from a relationship of mutual belonging with the world; the more he changes himself into an object, loses the meaning of his existence, and becomes a stranger to himself. The idea will be found in Heidegger. Rousseau notes finally that in the society produced by this evolution, "freedom" is nothing but illusion: when all members are slaves of opinion, the freedom of each is only the impotence of all. This is what justifies his strikingly formulated critique of the bourgeois spirit.[12]

Rousseau describes the bourgeois as a "double being," divided, entirely subject to the dictates of opinion, and, for this reason, concerned entirely with appearances. Referring to the birth of the bourgeois, he writes in the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*: "To be and appear became two completely different things, and from this distinction came imposing splendor, deceptive trickery, and all the vices that follow in their train. . . . When everything is reduced to appearances, everything becomes false and deceptive." This passage is important, because it shows what Rousseau really wanted. The bourgeois is defined less by his economic position than his psychic type, his mentality. The bourgeois is the very negation of everything authentic, of eve-

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[11] Pierre Manent, *Histoire intellectuelle du libéralisme: Dix leçons* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1987; 2nd ed, Paris: Hachette-Pluriel, 1988), 155; in English: *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, trans. Rebecca Balinski (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). Chapter 6 is entitled "Rousseau, Critic of Liberalism."

[12] Heinrich Meier, in his article on the *Discourse on Inequality* cited above, claims that Rousseau introduced his politico-anthropological use of the concept of the "bourgeois" in the first book of *Emile*.

rything that connects man to his essential being. He is a false man, without consistency; a decadent who lives only for the opinion of others; a being characterized by lies, prudence, and calculation; by a servile spirit, debased morals, and tepid feelings: "He will be one of these men of today, a Frenchman, an Englishman, a bourgeois; he will be nothing."[13]

Here the opposition to liberal authors is total. Whereas they criticize power but not wealth, Rousseau blames the rich much more than the powerful. Whereas the Encyclopedists sought above all to modify the institutional and political system, Rousseau realizes quite well that the problem raised by the absolute power of a social situation founded on envy, and in the final analysis on the power of money, is infinitely more complex. Rousseau is quite far from contrasting French absolutism to the liberal English regime so much admired by the Enlightenment. He sees that beyond their differences, the two systems are devoted to the rise of the same bourgeois type, i.e., of the type of man who aims always above all at his own self-interest.[14]

Finally, Rousseau does not believe for an instant that private life, left to itself, can make men happy, nor that the pursuit of selfish interest can, thanks to the "invisible hand," end up benefiting all. In truth, he reviles selfishness: "When one wants to be happy only for himself, then there is no happiness for the fatherland."[15] This is why he intends to fight against indifference towards the commonweal and wants to keep "in narrow boundaries this personal interest that isolates private individuals to such an extent that the state is weakened by their power and can expect nothing from their good will."

ROUSSEAU'S CRITIQUE OF PROGRESS

Nor does one find in Rousseau the optimistic confidence with which the Encyclopedists observed the rise and the progress of the sciences. Rousseau does not share the idea that there is a natural harmony between the requirements of society and those of positive science. Nor does he expect the diffusion of knowledge to roll back

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[13] *Emile*, I.

[14] Rousseau even thought that France was much more bourgeois than England. According to him, the French monarchy had continuously supported the emergence of the bourgeois type, without ever giving rise to the citizen, whereas English history, at least in certain periods, made a place for the latter.

[15] "On Public Happiness," *Political Fragments*, in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 4.

"superstitions." In a famous text addressing the question *Whether the progress of the sciences and the arts has contributed to the corruption or the purification of morals* (1750),[16] he expresses his doubts about the emancipatory powers of science. Elsewhere, he recalls that "if reason illuminates us," "passion leads us."

It is probably in light of this critique of scientism that we should understand the importance he gives to feeling. For him conscience plays the same role that instinct does for the body: "Too often reason misleads us . . . but the conscience is never mistaken," one reads in *Emile* (IV). This moral subjectivism, this idea that the personal conscience alone is able to determine good and evil ("all that I feel to be good is good, all that I feel to be bad is bad; the best of all casuists is the conscience") earned Rousseau justified criticism. It should be seen, however, that if Rousseau gives such a place to the impulses of the conscience, if he defends feeling and passions, if he praises the "heart of nature" and the surging sensations it generates, he does so—against the spirit of the Encyclopedists, who conceive of society only in the form of a social mechanism—to establish the infirmity of reason and oppose to it the prerogatives of the heart—perhaps also to affirm the existence of a bond between man and the world at a time when incipient industrialization was turning the latter into a simple object of which human reason was to take possession.

To the figure of the modern bourgeois, Rousseau significantly opposes that of the citizen, of whom he finds the most perfect examples in antiquity. He writes:

> When ancient history is read, one believes oneself transported into another universe and among other beings. What have the French, the English, the Russians, in common with the Romans and the Greeks? Almost nothing but their shapes . . . . They existed, however, and they were human like us. What prevents us from being men like them? Our prejudices, our base philosophy, and the passions of petty interest and selfishness in the hearts of all the foolish institutions that genius has ever dictated.[17]

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[16] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 2, *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts (First Discourse) and Polemics*, ed. Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly, trans. Judith R. Bush, Roger D. Masters, and Christopher Kelly (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1992).

[17] *Considerations on the Government of Poland and its Planned Reformation*, ch. 2, in

The enthusiasm and the bitterness that inspire these lines are revealing. Rousseau is a passionate admirer of antiquity. He has an acute sense of heroism and loves great men. Did he not learn how to read with Plutarch's *Lives*? It is in antiquity that he sought proof that there is a form of existence other than the bourgeois. It is his study of antiquity that sparked the idea of a society where distinctions rest on real virtues, not on wealth, birth, or even simple skill. It is in Rome and Sparta, in "noble Lacademonia," that he sought the model citizen. Thus he does not at all share the criticisms Hobbes formulated of the ideal society of the ancients. And contra Montesquieu, who admired the ancient city, but reproached it for imposing an exhausting civic discipline on its members, he pleaded forcefully for a return to the public-spiritedness of free citizens.

He also used the ancient example when he based equality on liberty, and not liberty on equality. His conception of liberty is much nearer to what Benjamin Constant called the "liberty of the ancients" than that of the moderns, who understand liberty exclusively as the liberation of the individual ego and the independence of the subject. Liberty as Rousseau conceives it is inseparable from the idea of participation in the social order.

ROUSSEAU ON DEMOCRACY

Rousseau believes in direct democracy. Ideally, he says, this is the best regime, because the people always remain in control of the sovereign power. It guarantees every man total liberty and perfect autonomy, while ensuring that government conforms with the general interest. This leads to Rousseau's fundamental criticism of the concept of representation. Contrary to the social contract of Hobbes or Locke, Rousseau excludes any delegation of sovereignty to rulers and requires that elected officials act according to the will of the voters rather than their own conscience.

In his system, the people do not sign a contract with the sovereign: their relations are governed exclusively by law. The prince is only the executive of the people, who retain sole title to legislative power. The prince does not represent the General Will; he is not its incarnation,

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The Collected Writings of Rousseau, vol. 11, *The Plan for Perpetual Peace, On the Government of Poland, and Other Writings on History and Politics*, ed. Christopher Kelly, trans. Christopher Kelly and Judith R. Bush (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2005).

but only its instrument; at most he is elected, commissioned, to express it. Indeed, remarks Rousseau, if the people are represented, then it is the representatives who have power, in which case the people are no longer sovereign. For Rousseau, popular sovereignty is inalienable. Any representation is thus equivalent to an abdication.

In this scheme, the sovereign holds executive power, but not legislative power. Rousseau calls "democratic government" the system in which the people would also hold executive power, a possibility that appears entirely utopian to him. This is why he writes: "If there were a people of gods, it would be governed democratically. A government so perfect does not agree with men. . . . True democracy never existed and never will."[18] This remark, the subject of countless misconceptions,[19] must be interpreted correctly. Rousseau means only that the legislative power cannot merge with the executive power, because "it is against the natural order that the great number governs."[20] The people cannot govern itself, but it can, on the other hand, legislate and then "appoint" its governors.

The rejection of any representative system entails the rejection of factions and parties. This is why Rousseau harshly critcizes the English constitution which, according to him, does not guarantee liberty so much as the privileges of the representatives: "The English people think themselves free; they are quite mistaken; they are free only during the election of members of Parliament; as soon as their representatives are elected, the people are slaves, they are nothing. In the brief moments of their liberty, the use they make of it merits its loss."[21]

Whereas the philosophers of the Enlightenment wanted to limit the prerogatives of power and disputed the very notion of popular sovereignty, Rousseau instead made the latter the cornerstone of his entire political system. Calling sovereign the body politic which gave birth to the social contract, he deduced from this that, the General Will being one, the sovereignty resulting from it cannot be fragmented without losing all meaning. Thus Rousseau rejects any separation of powers, any attempt to divide sovereignty.

Rousseau also rejects the distinction between liberalism and despot-

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[18] *On the Social Contract*, III, 4, in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 4.

[19] Cf. for example Jean-Jacques Rouvier, *Les grandes idées politiques, des origines à Jean-Jacques Rousseau* [*The Great Political Ideas, from the Origins to Jean-Jacques Rousseau*] (Paris: Bordas, 1973), 342.

[20] *On the Social Contract*, III, 4.

[21] *On the Social Contract*, III, 15.

ism, because he thinks that by establishing citizenship, one can ensure political and social unity without falling into despotism. That said, he is rather indifferent to the form of government. He is not hostile, for example, to aristocratic government, which he says quite openly is the "best government."[22] But that must be understood within his system. What is essential, for Rousseau, is that the people hold legislative power and never relinquish it. Once that is acquired, executive power can just as well have an aristocratic form. The power to govern does not merge with sovereignty.

In principle, the reasoning is completely sound. It is clear that to the degree it is human, democracy is truly realized only in direct form: a citizen who delegates his right to approve or reject a law to a representative, even one elected by him, thereby alienates his autonomy and uses his liberty only to relinquish it. But it is equally obvious, at least in theory, that only the rule of unanimity truly respects autonomy. It follows that true democracy requires, not just the assent of a majority, but the assent of all. On this point, one can of course be skeptical. Unanimity can perhaps be reached in very small cities or communities, with populations having common values and interests. On the other hand, the greater the population, the greater the risk of a diversity of irreconcilable opinions. Unless one falls into despotism, the ideal of unanimity then becomes an inaccessible dream. (Georges Sorel, of course, reproached Rousseau precisely for having imagined a democracy copied from the Genevan model.)

Rousseau does not dodge the problem. He is conscious of the fact that direct democracy requires conditions that are only seldom met. This is why he appears hardly inclined to propose universal solutions: his project for Corsica differs notably from the one he conceived for Poland. His tendency is rather to resort to the principle of authority: he thinks that the more subjects a government has, the stronger it must be.[23] He even thinks that, in a state of emergency, a Roman-style dictatorship (*rei publicae servanda*, "for the commonweal") can be justified.

HOLISM AND INDIVIDUALISM

Rousseau appears especially obsessed by the dangers of division. On the political plane, if he admires the ancient city, it is first of all for

[22] *On the Social Contract*, III, 5.

[23] *On the Social Contract*, III, 1, 13, and 15.

its unity. On the anthropological plane, he describes the bourgeois as a divided being. Moreover, he draws an interesting parallel between, on the one hand, the distinction between temporal and spiritual power, and, on the other, liberalism's distinction between the citizen acting in the public sphere and the isolated individual pursuing his self-interest in the private sphere. Like Hobbes, he thinks that the conversion of Europe to Christianity could only entail a disastrous distinction between spiritual and temporal power, creating "a perpetual conflict of jurisdiction that made any good polity impossible in the Christian states."[24] The conflict between the Christian and the citizen thus presages the conflict between the individual and society.

As a result, Rousseau sees what liberalism and absolutism—which the philosophy of the Enlightenment treats as polar opposites—really have in common: the importance attached to the individual—the difference being that absolutism believes in the rebellious nature of individuals and thus in the need to use force to make them obey, while liberalism professes in this respect a greater optimism. Rousseau criticizes the liberal idea that the social can be based on individualistic impulses and the autonomy of civil society. But at the same time, he reproached the French monarchy, to the extent that it reflected the influence of the bourgeoisie, for having dismantled the traditional corporations and professions, in order to transform them into entities made up only of individuals.[25]

Rousseau returns to the Aristotelian definition of the citizen: the citizen is he who participates in the sovereign authority. Thus citizenship is directly related to political life. The political sphere constitutes the essential medium for relationships between citizens; it is the place where they can find a unity apart from membership dictated by origin alone. In the city, the citizen depends only on the law, not on men. Contrary to the bourgeois, he shows from the beginning that this essential characteristic is not to be divided. It is a unity, and a good society has to preserve this unity. In the final analysis, society must allow each citizen to identify himself with the city of which he forms a part. The individual should be seen only as part of the body politic. One sees from this that Rousseau is completely alien to any scheme inspired by "class struggle." He characterizes the well-ordered society by the harmonious integration of all its components. Society is first of

[24] *On the Social Contract*, IV, 8.

[25] This process was accelerated by the Revolution.

all a community, a whole where each party is subordinated to all. Plato said: "Nothing is made for you, but you are made for the whole" (*Laws*, X). Rousseau advocates "the total alienation by each member of the community of all his rights to the whole community" (*On the Social Contract*).

Unlike Hobbes, who described society only in mechanistic terms, Rousseau sometimes even happens to compare the social body to a living organism. He is not, however, an organicist in the strict sense, because for him the solidarity between parties comes not just from organic cohesion or common origins, but in the political realities of the social contract and General Will. Referring to the social contract, Rousseau wrote: "This act of association produces a moral and collective body made up of as many members as the assembly has votes, deriving from this same act its unity, its common self, its life, and its will."[26]

Thus in the end, Rousseau's reasoning departs from individualistic premises to arrive at holist conclusions. Rousseau says that it is because man is free and originally one that he can be autonomous, and this model of individual autonomy must found the autonomy of society as a whole: "He who dares to undertake to institute a people must feel in a position to change, so to speak, human nature; to transform each individual, who by himself is a perfect and solitary whole, into part of a very great whole from which this individual receives to some extent his life and his being."[27] Thus he uses a holist model, but a holism "built" on the model of the individual.

This passage from the individual level to the social status raises obvious difficulties. How can the citizen, the ideal figure of real humanity, constantly align his own interest with that of the city without making him fundamentally alienated from it? How can individual autonomy amalgamate with social autonomy without the latter, inevitably, restricting the former? Rousseau answers these questions by turning again to the social contract and the General Will. Implying a discontinuity between natural man and man in society, the social contract marks the true emergence of humanity in the strict sense. However, the social contract implies the General Will, which permits Rousseau to re-establish holism against the individualism that had previously sustained his discourse.

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[26] *On the Social Contract*, I, 6.

[27] *On the Social Contract*, II, 7.

THE GENERAL WILL

What is the General Will? Rousseau sometimes gives the impression that he confuses the General Will with the will of all, i.e., with the simple addition of individual wills. But it is nothing of the kind. The General Will is based on the unanimous preference of those who instituted the body politic. It is the will of this body as an established whole. Its only acts are laws, and these are the acts that make it possible to put the general interest, the common good, above individual opinion and private interests. Rousseau, as we have seen, defines liberty as an autonomous ability to participate in society. From such a perspective, authentic liberty consists in the autonomous movement of the will that adheres to the law, and this is why it is realized to the highest degree in the General Will. Of course, "each individual as a man can have a specific will contrary or dissimilar to the General Will which he has as citizen. His private interest can tell him something completely different than the common interest." The individual, Rousseau continues, should put nothing before the General Will. It is here that he makes a remark for which he is reproached so often:

> When one proposes a law in the assembly of the people, what one asks them is not precisely if they approve or reject the proposal, but if it is in conformity or not with the General Will that is theirs. . . . Thus when a opinion contrary to mine prevails, that proves only that I had been mistaken, and that what I thought was the General Will was not in fact it.[28]

And as individual autonomy is supposed to have fused with social autonomy, Rousseau can affirm that while submitting to the General Will, individuals in the end submit only to themselves!

The question inevitably arises of whether the General Will is infallible. Rousseau answers it in a way that can make one smile: "The General Will is always right, but the judgment that guides it is not always enlightened." That leads him to imagine the figure of the "Legislator," a rather ambiguous character who would have the power to control the laws without possessing either "legislative right" or governmental office. Commentators, of course, have not failed to compare this "Legislator" to the providential "guides" of which modern totalitarianisms

[28] *On the Social Contract*, IV, 2.

made great use.[29] It should not be forgotten, however, that in Rousseau the General Will is more a force of resistance than a force of command. Its essential goal is to express right, just as the government incarnates force, both being necessary to the operation of the state. Expressing the law, the General Will literally animates the social body, gives it "movement and will," becoming thus the principle of its conservation. It is consequently "the sole form appropriate to the will as an ethical will in general, the sole institution that can bring about the passage from mere arbitrariness to law" (Cassirer).

The General Will thus escapes any reductionistic interpretation. Incarnating sovereignty, it transcends individual wills and has particular characteristics that one does not find in any of its components taken separately, exactly in the same way that the common interest transcends private interests. Rousseau, moreover, is emphatic that "what realizes the will is less the number of votes than the shared interest that unites them." The theory of the General Will thus exceeds the idea of the majority that comes from universal suffrage. Centered around the concept of "common interest," it implies the existence and maintenance of a collective identity. Whence the importance Rousseau attaches to the "character of a people," to the "feeling of membership," "shared habits," etc. It is known that Rousseau puts the law above all, because in his eyes it alone can realize the justice that is the condition of freedom. And yet, above the law, he still places mores. "By reason alone," he writes, "one cannot establish any natural law,"[30] while mores are what makes the "true constitution of states."[31] When the laws grow old and fade away, it is mores that revive them. Customs and traditions thus constitute the natural adjuncts of political authority: "Nothing can replace mores for the maintenance of government."

Thus the people is identified with the whole citizenry and opposed quite naturally to the masses ("the multitude"): whereas the multitude can always be controlled by a tyrant, the people no longer exists when the Republic is dissolved. Thus the General Will can be likened to Durkheim's "collective conscience," or even the "popular soul" (*Volksseele*) dear to the Romantics, although the conditions of its formation are exclusively political. Indeed, there is little doubt that the General

[29] Cf. Talmon, *Les origines de la démocratie totalitaire.*

[30] *Emile*, IV.

[31] *On the Social Contract*, II, 12.

Will implicitly preexists its expression in a majority vote. It is, as Louis Dumont writes, "the emergence at the political level and in the language of democracy of the unity of a given society as it preexists in its members and is present in their thoughts and projects."[32] To be legitimate, therefore, power must be exercised by a community that has first become conscious of itself. As Kant saw so well, the General Will is the act by which the people constitutes itself as a state and creates the conditions of an identity of will between the people and the sovereign: the society resulting from this act, says Rousseau, is one where "a unity of interest and will reigns between the people and their leaders."

Furthermore, against the universalism of the Enlightenment which, with Diderot, advocates the "society of mankind," Rousseau affirms that the General Will of a nation is specific to it, which leads him to challenge cosmopolitanism. The citizen, according to him, is first of all a patriot. In *Emile*, he writes:

> Forced to fight nature or social institutions, it is necessary to choose between making a man or a citizen: because one cannot do both at the same time. . . . Every patriot is hard on strangers: they are only men; they are nothing in his eyes. This disadvantage is inevitable, but it is small. What is essential is to be good to the people with whom one lives. . . . Beware of those cosmopolitans who search far and wide in their books for duties that they scorn to observe where they are.[33]

In the *Discourse on Inequality*, he adds: "If I had been forced to choose the place of my birth, I would have chosen . . . a state . . . where this sweet habit of seeing and knowing one another turned love of the fatherland into love of the citizens rather than of the Earth." Just as individual liberty corrupts itself when it falls under the domination of others or when it is alienated and becomes a stranger to itself, ceasing to belong to itself, the liberty of the nation is essential for him. Rousseau even goes so far as to make autarky one of the conditions of freedom: "The national condition most favorable to the happiness of individuals is not to need the help of any other people in order to live happily."[34]

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[32] Dumont, *Essais sur l'individualisme*, 100.

[33] *Emile*, I, 2.

[34] "On Public Happiness."

ECONOMICS VERSUS FREEDOM

Montesquieu naïvely maintained that the expansion of trade in Europe would oblige states "to cure themselves of Machiavellianism." Rousseau, who knew that the "state of nature" always persists between nations, did not believe for a moment that trade and economic exchange in general were conducive to peace.[35] Besides, he obviously did not like economics and scarcely wrote anything about it. When Mirabeau tried to make him read the Physiocrats, he balked. On his return from England in 1767, he denounced the idea of an autonomous economic sphere and developed a radical critique of Physiocratic ideas. His economic ideal is nothing at all like free trade: here too, he remains autarkical and even archaic. Rousseau wishes above all to reduce as much as possible the role of money in exchanges, and proposes to support agriculture against industry. A nation with prosperous agriculture, he says, is already on the path of self-sufficiency; in addition, its inhabitants, having kept contact with nature, have healthier mores than townspeople or workmen: "Trade produces wealth, but agriculture ensures freedom."

This opposition between "wealth" and "liberty" is characteristic of Rousseau's thought. Just as he defends the primacy of politics over economics, Rousseau—preoccupied with "morals" above all—upholds values contrary to those of the bourgeois or the merchant. He extols virtue, which is to be understood as "political virtue," i.e., as good citizenship. To adapt his particular will to the General Will, to place the common interest above all else, to put themselves at the service of the fatherland, i.e., at the service of all free individuals who compose the people and of the laws they give themselves, this is what virtue is. An admirer of Sparta, Rousseau loved the frugal life, "simplicity in manner and ornament." The thesis of *Emile* is that one should spare no effort, no pain, no suffering if one wants to educate the character and the will. Indeed, for Rousseau, the public authorities ought to be educators. In order to forge and maintain the will of the citizens, they should make money contemptible, discourage useless luxury, maintain "simple manners, healthy tastes, a martial spirit without ambition, form courageous and disinterested souls." Above all, on all occasions, they must cultivate love of the fatherland, which

[35] Rousseau, moreover, did not believe in the supreme value of peace. Citing the ancient ideal once more, he prefers freedom to peace, and states that freedom merits fighting battles to preserve it.

merges with the love of liberties and laws. In opposition to Christianity which, he says, inspires "humanity rather than patriotism" and tends "to make men rather than citizens," Rousseau proposes in his book on the government of Poland to educate citizens in the worship of the fatherland alone: "It is education that ought to imbue men's souls with the force of the nation and direct their opinions and tastes such that they are patriotic by inclination, by passion, by need. A child, when opening his eyes, must see the fatherland and, until his death, should see nothing else."[36] At the end of his life, he went so far as to envisage the formation of a national and civil religion inspired by antiquity, which was to be the highest degree of patriotic worship and civic education.

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The commentators on Rousseau have stressed his contradictions, real or imagined, a thousand times. He himself says: "System of any kind is above me; I have none of it in my life and actions."[37] A complex thinker heralding the whole modern agenda through the very critique he made of it, Rousseau never hesitated to correct himself when he thought it necessary. The closer he came to the end of its life, the more he seemed to realize that the objective he had chosen—to find a form of government that puts laws above man, without falling back into divine right monarchy—was the political equivalent of squaring the circle. His letter to Mirabeau of July 26th, 1767 even suggest that the form of government he proposed was to a great extent chimerical.

Many criticisms of Rousseau are superficial and erroneous, but others are sound. Maurras is obviously wrong to attach Rousseau to the liberal school. The model of society proposed in *On the Social Contract*, and more still in the later texts, is incontestably holist. The whole problem comes, as we already noted, from basing a holist model on individualistic premises. Rousseau remains individualistic in the very idea of the social contract: he believes, mistakenly, in the voluntary origin of politics; he believes that politics is about "commission." To support the idea that the city is an artifice if man is not naturally a social being, he had to imagine a "natural" man whose existence, how-

[36] *Considerations on the Government of Poland*, ch. 4.

[37] Letter to Mirabeau, March 1767.

ever, he was the first to regard as doubtful. The contradiction falls apart when he attempts to posit society as an enlarged projection of the individual. How can one compose a society that is one and independent of individuals who themselves prefer to be and remain one and independent? The social contract makes it impossible to solve this problem. It is necessary for men to be autonomous by nature if society is conceived in their image, but as soon as society exists, it is necessary that they cease being autonomous. Rousseau hopes "to find a form of association . . . by which each, uniting himself with all, nevertheless obeys only himself and remains as free as before."[38] This objective is unrealizable.

Rousseau's main error is to believe that one can fuse the law and the constitution. He thinks it possible to found a constitution where the law alone is sovereign, so that there is no longer any reason to limit the sovereignty of such a constitution. The General Will would then have all rights: "Alienation being made without reserve, the union is as perfect as it can be and no associate has anything more to claim." Consequently, one could not violate the law, since it would amount to contradicting oneself. And no law could be unjust, since one could not be unjust towards oneself. Disobedience consequently becomes impossible. But there is no more freedom when it is not possible to disobey. The simultaneous search for unanimity and undivided direct democracy is thus quite likely to lead to a new form of tyranny, a tyranny all the more frightening as the system, bathed in an eminently moral atmosphere, does not so much state what politics is as what it should be.

Although idealist and "virtuist" in many respects, Rousseau is nonetheless eminently realistic. He gleefully denounces the majority of "enlightened myths" supported by the philosophy of the Enlightenment and flatly opposes liberal optimism. His conception of man clarifies both his "animal" origins and the "world-openness" that enables him to realize his humanity within a social whole. His "final" holism is undeniable, and his definition of human authenticity deserves to be pondered. The Precursor of a certain modernity, he nevertheless embraces the ancient ideal and pleads for a people's community against the bourgeois society growing before his eyes. His entire social philosophy is based ultimately on the primacy of politics, which is enough to make him one of the most original minds of his

[38] *On the Social Contract*, I, 6.

time. Consequently, his thought is much more "Machiavellian" than is generally supposed. His whole treatment of the conservation of a political order founded on sovereign authority and instituted by the General Will, with a sovereign personifying the order and identified with the will of all, inevitably evokes Machiavelli's *repubblica ordinata bene*. His theory of political order thus seems quite foreign to the individualistic foundations of his theory of the social contract. This reveals his major contradiction: he borrows from republican political doctrines as well as the philosophy of natural right, which he misappropriates. This contradiction was indeed noted by Maurizio Viroli, who writes:

> Whereas republican political doctrines are based on virtue and community, the political doctrines of natural right are based on self-interest and consider the function of the state to be the protection of the private interests. The former posits love for the fatherland and identification with the community as essential conditions for maintaining good political order and freedom. The latter speaks the language of interests and rational calculation. Rousseau uses both. But is it possible to be a republican and a "contractualist" at the same time?[39]

It is a pity that so complex an author is always over-simplified. We need to re-read Rousseau.

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[39] Maurizio Viroli, *La théorie de la société bien ordonnée chez Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988), 20 ; in English: *Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the "Well-Ordered Society,"* trans. Derek Hanson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).