

**Rousseau and the Ancients**  
**Rousseau et les Anciens**

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**sous la direction de**

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## Rousseau's Platonic Rejection of Politics

A discussion of Rousseau and the ancients does well to begin with Patrick Riley's analysis in *Will and Political Legitimacy*. Riley argues that the paradoxical quality in Rousseau's political thought can be attributed to a kind of quarrel between two fundamental political ideals, one ancient and one modern. The ancient ideal is what Riley calls "common good morality": the notion that the good of the city serves as the moral standard for individuals' actions. The good city is thus one whose citizens see and pursue their own welfare in terms of the welfare of the city as a whole. Sparta and republican Rome are the paradigms of political experience in Rousseau's imagination precisely because, to him, their citizens were unified through their identification with their state. The modern ideal is voluntarism: the notion that the state is made legitimate by the willed consent of its citizens. The social contract tradition expresses in narrative form the belief that the moral basis of government is the free choice made by individuals to be governed — a belief based in turn on the notion that the human capacity for choice, i.e. the will, is the root of morality altogether.

According to Riley, Rousseau's doctrine of the general will represents an attempt to amalgamate these two ideals: "he wanted voluntarism to legitimize what he conceived to be the unity and cohesiveness, the generality, of ancient polity" (99). For, from a modern perspective, the value of unity is not enough to make it the basis of political legitimacy; legitimacy requires voluntary consent. But for Rousseau consent itself is insufficient as well, since individuals might will policies that are not in fact in their common good. Thus, Riley argues, Rousseau's yoking together the ancient commitment to social unity and the modern commitment to individual consent makes for an uneasy match: the two ideals pull in different directions. "It is this [...] attempt to fuse two modes of political thought — to have common good and individual will — that gives Rousseau's political thought the strange cast that some have thought contradictory" (109). In particular, it generates what Riley calls

the greatest paradox in all of Rousseau: the paradox created by the fact that in the original contractual situation the motives needed by individuals to relinquish particular will and self-interest and to embrace a general will and the common good cannot exist at the time the compact is made but can only be the result of the socialization and common morality that society alone can create. (110)

Our recognition of this paradox is intensified when we admit that Rousseau's Legislator, who is necessary to the founding of the state, is something of a *deus ex machina*. Not only does he use frankly stagy means; more importantly he appears at the crucial moment when the paradox Riley mentions could not otherwise be resolved. The literal miraculousness of the Legislator's accomplishment (he reverses the order of nature, making the effect become the cause)<sup>1</sup> is a measure of the gulf between ancient unity and modern voluntarism — and of the importance Rousseau attached to reconciling them.

In this paper I want to show that Rousseau's efforts at reconciliation fail, due to the preeminence of his commitment to the ancient ideal of the common good. I will first show that Rousseau holds that there are correct answers to questions about what is best for society, a position I will call realism with respect to the common good, and that he shares this view with Plato. But, I will argue, Rousseau fails to acknowledge the importance of educating citizens to be able to discern the common good, leading him to relegate the citizens' role to the ratification of expert opinion. Finally, I will argue that behind the difficulties within Rousseau's theory is another fundamental notion he inherits from Plato, regarding the nature of politics.

### 1. Rousseau's realism

The conflict Riley diagnoses in Rousseau between voluntarism and common good morality reflects a wider problem any voluntaristic theory must face. Consider two alternative political standards by which acts of collective willing, e.g. votes of an assembly, could be assessed. One standard would hold that any result that met certain procedural criteria (e.g., uncoerced balloting, one person-one vote) is legitimate; this is voluntarism in the extreme, which holds that the results cannot fail to be legitimate as long as the procedural rules are followed. The other standard would hold that the legitimacy of the results must be judged according to criteria that are independent of the procedures that produce them; the participants can follow the procedures to the letter and still fail to produce legitimate results. We can borrow a term from epistemology, and call the second a realist standard; the first we can call a constructivist standard.

According to Riley, traditional social contract theorists were realists in this sense of the term.

The contractarian tradition was never interested in will as creative of values that did not exist; it was interested in legitimizing principles and institutions whose value was not simply derivative from voluntarism as

such. Its proponents wanted men to consent but rarely urged that whatever is consented to is valid simply because will has come into play. The tradition held that some things *deserve* or *merit* consent [...]. (20, my emphasis)

With Locke, for example, the values embodied in natural law determine what merits consent: as illustrated by his proscription of state interference in the natural right of property, natural law is the criterion he uses to rule on the legitimacy of acts of the legislature. For Rousseau, by contrast, the criterion is the common good.<sup>2</sup> Rousseau defines legitimate government as “a government that has the good of the populace for its object.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, he holds, not every vote of an assembly is legitimate — unless a policy conforms with the common good it is not worthy of consent. Rousseau therefore shares the realist stance Riley identifies: the results of an assembly’s deliberations are subject to review according to an external standard.

We can elaborate Rousseau’s realism further, by considering his comments on the results of assemblies. Ideally, assemblies serve to discover a fact: the content of the common good: “So long as several men together consider themselves to be a single body, they have but a single will, which is concerned with their common preservation and the general well-being. Then [...] the common good is clearly apparent everywhere, demanding only good sense to be perceived” (*SC* IV.i.1; *OC* 437, trans. Cress 203). Thus Rousseau is said to hold an “epistemic” conception of voting.<sup>4</sup> Individuals’ votes are not to be understood as expressions of preferences regarding the policies at issue — certainly not private preferences, but also, strictly, not preferences for the polity as a whole. Rather, votes are to be understood as stemming from judgements about what in fact would benefit the state — i.e., about what in fact is in the common good. For Rousseau the task of the assembly is to declare the general will — which has the common good as its object. He describes this task in epistemic terms: “When a law is proposed in the people’s assembly, what is asked of them is not precisely whether they approve or reject, but whether or not it conforms to the general will which is theirs. Each man, in giving his vote, states his opinion on this matter, and the declaration of the general will is drawn from the counting of votes” (*SC* IV.ii.8; *OC* 440–41, trans. Cress 206). Thus, Rousseau insists, individuals’ votes can be mistaken: “When, therefore, the opinion contrary to mine prevails, this proves merely that I was in error, and that what I took to be the general will was not so” (*ibid.*).<sup>5</sup> Note that this claim would make no sense if votes were expressions of preference, which cannot be correct or mistaken. But if Rousseau holds an epistemic conception of voting, he is committed also to the belief that there

is some fact about which voters are making judgements. That fact is the state of affairs that constitutes the truth conditions pertinent to the question Rousseau declares voters must answer with their votes: is or is not the policy at issue advantageous to the state (*SC* IV.i.6; *OC* 438)? Rousseau makes clear that he thinks the results of votes by assemblies can be mistaken as well. First, when individuals place their private advantage before the good of the state as a whole, they will vote against policies that are in the common good. Thus, under such corrupt conditions, the assembly might vote incorrectly, i.e. for policies that are not in the common good (*ibid.*).<sup>6</sup> We can attribute these mistakes to the failure of voters to vote from the proper motivation, defined as the willingness to use one's vote to express one's judgement of what is in the common good; the presence of the proper motivation is the condition Rousseau describes as that whereby "all the characteristics of the general will are still in the majority" (*SC* IV.ii.9; *OC* 441, trans. Cress 206). Second, by contrast, individuals may have the proper motivation, but simply lack the skills to judge what is in their common good, hence to identify the correct policies to support with their votes. We can attribute these mistakes to a kind of cognitive failure:

By itself the populace always wants the good, but by itself it does not always see it. The general will is always right, but the judgement that guides it is not always enlightened. It must be made to see objects as they are, and sometimes as they ought to appear to it. The good path it seeks must be pointed out to it.<sup>7</sup>

Now Rousseau takes cognitive failure to be typical of a people at the earliest stages of its political experience; it is this failure that generates the need for the Legislator. But note that his account of the Legislator does not address the cognitive problem he articulates. Rousseau focuses instead on the Legislator's use of religious symbolism to reinforce a people's nascent public spiritedness, i.e. he has the Legislator address individuals' motivational structures (*SC* II.vii.11; *OC* 384.). We shall return to this point below; for now, however, we should observe that the doctrine of the Legislator nonetheless affirms Rousseau's realism. For it is the Legislator's task to identify the set of laws that best suits the particular geographic, climactic, demographic, historical and cultural circumstances of the people for whom he legislates — i.e. the laws that are, in fact, in their specific common good (*SC* II.x-xi; *OC* 388–93).

## 2. Rousseau's platonism

Rousseau, then, held the realist belief that votes by assemblies could be meaningfully evaluated as correct or incorrect, according to a standard

defined by the common good. As Riley shows, this standard derives from Rousseau's idealization of the ancient *polis*, in particular his image of Sparta, where the common good both justified political action and motivated citizens to serve the state. In this regard Rousseau is very much a follower of Plato. Plato famously held unity to be a preeminent political value — recall that one of Aristotle's main criticisms of the *Republic* is that it sought to achieve too much unity (*Politics* II.ii). Thus, in the *Republic*, Plato uses the analogy between the state and an individual body to argue that the well-governed state will be highly unified; all citizens will feel pleasure and pain at the same things, so that if one person is injured the whole will suffer, just as a person as a whole is said to suffer due to an injury to a specific part of his body (462d). Correlatively, each individual feels an essential kinship with all others in the city, since all “will have one and the same thing in common which they will name *mine*.”<sup>8</sup> Rousseau endorses this platonic notion of a community of feeling in *Emile*, where close to a reference to the *Republic* he argues that imaginative identification with fellow citizens creates a *moi commun*; this process takes man's “absolute existence from him in order to give him a relative one and transport[s] the I into the common unity, with the result that each individual believes himself no longer one but part of the unity and no longer feels except within the whole.”<sup>9</sup>

Let us consider what Plato thinks must be done to maintain the unity he values, by reviewing Socrates' response to Adiemantus' objection that the mode of life prescribed for the guardians will not make them very happy (*Republic* 419–21). Socrates notes that “the object on which we fixed our eyes in the establishment of our state was not the exceptional happiness of any one class but the greatest possible happiness of the city as a whole” (*Republic* 420b). This objective, of course, requires that the citizens receive and contribute their due, according to their inherent capacities. Farmers are to grow food, cobblers are to make shoes, guardians are to rule; “and so, as the entire city develops and is ordered well, each class is to be left to the share of happiness that its nature comports” (*Republic* 421c). How are these shares to be apportioned? Plato would vehemently deny that individuals are themselves qualified to judge how much they should receive. It is easy for us to imagine that *pleonexia* might make a cobbler seek riches beyond his station — but, Socrates insists, riches would lead to idleness and negligence, and the ruin of his abilities as a cobbler (*Republic* 421d). Thus if the cobbler does not “stick to his last” he will harm himself as well as the city. In other words, true benefits are independent of individuals' desires. Instead, Plato holds, they are to be determined by expert judgement, as his analogies to doctors and other specialists illustrate. The

moral of the *Gorgias*' metaphor of a cook prosecuting a doctor is that while the cook influences members of the jury by giving them what they want, hence think is good for them, the doctor knows what is in fact good, even though it is not desired (*Gorgias*, in x and Cairnes 521e). In the *Republic*, of course, the doctor's expertise is possessed by the philosopher kings, who in virtue of their knowledge are able to apportion the appropriate burdens and benefits to all. Since each receives his due the city is happy as a whole. And since all are happy in respect of the same thing — specifically, the social order maintained by the guardians — the conditions for the city's unity are fulfilled.

Of course to speak of the happiness of the city as a whole is to speak of the common good; Plato holds that attaining the common good is the primary aim of the city's rulers. He is a realist in the sense we have developed in that he takes the common good to be something other than what the citizens say they want — that is why rulers should be like doctors rather than like cooks. The philosopher kings, he holds, will be able to identify the goods and policies that will attain what is the common good in fact. But the theory of forms makes Plato a realist in a more technical, metaphysical sense as well. The reason the best state must have philosophers for kings is that only philosophers can grasp the eternal, absolute truths that structure the nature of things, hence which determine what is in fact best for the city (*Republic* 484b). Thus we can call the kind of knowledge Plato thinks is required for discerning the common good "transcendent" knowledge: it is knowledge of a realm beyond the empirical circumstances of the actual city the guardians rule, accessible only through rational contemplation.

Now Rousseau adopts Plato's positions that the common good is given as a fact, independent of citizens' stated wants, and that the provision of the common good is the key to social unity. But in contrast with the transcendent knowledge of the forms that leads to the platonic recognition of the common good, for Rousseau recognizing the common good requires what we can call "immanent" knowledge: knowledge of specific facts about the individuals whose collective good is at issue, including facts about what these individuals themselves want.<sup>10</sup> Were the common good not to be based on a particular constellation of the wants of the members of society the self-interested individuals about whom Rousseau theorizes in *The Social Contract* ("men as they are" [SC, I.1; OC 3:351]) would have no reason to obey the laws designed to attain it. The common good thus contributes to social unity precisely because each citizen recognizes a personal stake in what is good for all. That Rousseau elevates immanent over transcendent knowledge is consonant with his general distrust of speculative philoso-

phy, for example his scorn for natural law theory in the preface to the second *Discourse* (preface ¶ 6–7 [Cress 34–35]; *OC* 3:124–25). And in Rousseau’s account of the ideal polity the cognitive skills the Legislator requires for grasping the common good are less a matter of rational contemplation and more a matter of surveying the contingent facts about the given society — broadly speaking, the skills needed to conduct the kind of empirical political analysis pioneered by Montesquieu, which Rousseau argues must be applied by the Legislator at the state’s founding (*SC* II.xi.4; *OC* 393).

### 3. Rousseau’s incomplete theory of sovereignty

The distinction between two ways of knowing the common good leads us to recognize a deep flaw in Rousseau’s political theory — revealed when we consider the relation between sovereignty and education. Plato and Rousseau clearly have very different theories of sovereignty, i.e. different accounts of who in society has sovereign authority over the state. In contrast to Rousseau’s commitment to the sovereignty of the people, Plato’s theory affirms the legitimacy of rule by the philosopher kings. For, in virtue of their unique ability to know the forms, they are uniquely able to discern the common good. But Plato pairs this explanation of the legitimacy of the sovereignty of the philosopher kings with an explanation of how they come by the abilities they need to rule. In addition to an account of their superior genetic endowment (maintained by his notorious program of eugenics), Plato provides a detailed account of their education. It is their careful education in dialectic which enables the top guardians to grasp the forms, hence which entitles them to rule (*Republic* 535–40). Thus, Plato’s theory of sovereignty relies on an educational program that will inculcate the abilities that the theory sets forth as necessary to legitimate the rulers’ authority.

In my view Rousseau seriously misunderstood the place of education within Plato’s overall theory in the *Republic*. As a result, his own theory of sovereignty is incomplete: it explains why no other element in the state than the people can legitimately be sovereign, but not how the people obtains the capacities to wield its sovereign authority legitimately. That is, Rousseau’s theory lacks an adequate account of public education. Note that when Rousseau lauds the *Republic* as “the finest treatise on education ever written” he declares that it contains an account of public education, i.e., education for citizenship.<sup>11</sup> But he has a limited understanding of what public education demands. The lessons he takes Plato to be teaching are about the need for selflessness — i.e., about the motivation to subsume oneself into the unity of the state. Rousseau’s own proposed plan for public

education in the *Discourse on Political Economy*, clearly inspired by the communal rearing of the guardians, makes this objective clear: from their common upbringing children “will learn to cherish one another as brothers, never to want anything but what the society wants” (*DPE* II; *OC* 261, trans. Cress 126). But what this program will *not* teach them is what Plato’s system of advanced education is designed for — how to determine *the content* of what society wants, in the normative sense of what is in the common good. That is, Rousseau fails to grasp Plato’s central lesson, that the politically authoritative agents in the state must be trained in the capacities that legitimate their rule.

Rousseau’s failure here seems particularly odd, given his platonic commitment to the common good. We might expect him to be very interested in public educational programs that cultivate what we have called the immanent knowledge needed to discern what is best for society. There is a hint that he recognizes this need in his proposal for Poland, where he urges that young Poles commit to memory the details of their country’s geography and history.<sup>12</sup> But it is unclear whether his intention here is to develop the ability to recognize what is good for the Polish people, or instead to instill an unalterable sense of personal identification with the nation which would direct the students’ motivations to conformity to cultural norms. Emile also receives instruction in the concrete conditions of his nation (and others).<sup>13</sup> But note that Rousseau explicitly frames Emile’s training as an example of private, not public education — appropriate to corrupt conditions where true citizenship is impossible. Consider again, then, the doctrine of the Legislator, who in Rousseau’s ideal theory is able to see what is best for the people under his charge. But Rousseau declares that the Legislator’s ability is not trained, but rather is the result of this figure’s extraordinary genius. Other than intimating that the Legislator might read *The Spirit of the Laws* Rousseau gives no indication (in contrast to Plato) of a program of study that will cultivate the abilities the Legislator needs to fulfill his theoretical duties. The Legislator’s necessary distinctiveness means that he is not a paradigm for public education.

But without a theory of public education that explains how citizens acquire the ability to make correct judgments about the common good Rousseau’s theory of sovereignty is fatally deficient. For, of course, his theory holds that it is the people as a whole who are sovereign. Rousseau’s theory of legitimacy is ineluctably voluntarist; even the wisdom of the Legislator must be ratified by the people to be politically effective (*SC* II.vii.7; *OC* 383). Thus Rousseau must account for how it is that the people can at least recognize that the proposals they endorse are in fact in the common good. But recall what Riley called “the greatest paradox in all of Rousseau”:

at the moment of the founding, the people are incapable of knowing their common good, hence they must be manipulated into accepting the laws proposed by the Legislator who does have that knowledge. Apparently, then, the state the Legislator founds is, by voluntaristic criteria, illegitimate: though the people willed their common good, they did not know it as such, hence cannot be truly be said to have willed it.

We might grant Rousseau the need for a miracle at the commencement of political life, as long as he explained how subsequently the people come to have the abilities needed to recognize that policies on which they must vote are in the common good. But Rousseau consistently avoids this responsibility. As we noted above, he holds that under ideal conditions citizens will need no more than “good sense” to discern the common good (*SC* IV.i.1; *OC* 437). Whatever training citizens are to receive — both formally in schools, and informally through their *mœurs* — will address their motivations: their willingness to pursue the common good once it is pointed out to them.<sup>14</sup> Their training, that is, prompts Rousseau’s citizens to respond reflexively to the summons of the common good, without any critical assessment of whether the policies their leaders present to them are in the common good in fact. Indeed, as Richard Fralin has argued, Rousseau’s institutional proposals seem designed to place the people in the position of merely ratifying laws the content of which has already been formulated by the government (106).<sup>15</sup>

There is an platonic echo in Rousseau’s institutional thought that has an ominous resonance here. Rousseau indicates that he believes the state ought to be governed according to policies framed by guardian-like experts. Fralin’s reading of the *Letters from the Mountain* takes Rousseau to endorse just this sort of constitutional structure for Geneva, but we can observe the core of the position as early as the first *Discourse*’s call for academies of scholars to advise monarchs (*Cress* 20; *OC* 26). But Rousseau’s support for intense state supervision of cultural life — voiced at length in the *Letter to D’Alembert* as well as in *The Social Contract*’s chapter on censorship — is reminiscent of Plato’s doctrine of the noble lie (*Republic* 389b–c). Now strictly within the terms of Plato’s theory the noble lie can be justified: if, for example, the class system in fact serves the common good, the guardians are justified in using the “Phœnician tale” of the metals to induce the citizens to believe it (*Republic* 414c). But for Rousseau, even if the policies suggested by the government in fact are in the common good, if the people do not understand that fact their consent to them is hollow: it does not carry the moral force associated with the will if their choice is not based on adequate reasons. Surely Rousseau ought not hold that the only reason the people should vote for a policy is precisely that the

government has proposed it — i.e., that fact should not be their sole evidence that the policy is in the common good.<sup>16</sup> Rousseau's voluntarist account of legitimacy, that is, requires an explanation of how the people are *themselves* able to discern the common good; without it his theory cannot explain what makes the people's sovereignty legitimate.

#### 4. Rousseau's conception of politics

So far I have tried to show a flaw in Rousseau's political theory. His commitments to the common good and to voluntarism entail that the people ought to have the capacity to recognize policies that are best for them, so they can legitimize these policies by their consent. But his conception of education for citizenship centers on a program of intense socialization, rather than any genuine training in the skills needed to discover the common good. Following Fralin, we might think that Rousseau is less sanguine about the capacities of the public than his enthusiastic paeans to popular sovereignty might lead us to believe.<sup>17</sup> If this is indeed the case, we might conclude that Rousseau's two commitments are actually inconsistent, since the people's willing the common good is both necessary and impossible.

But at this point I would like to step back from my criticism of Rousseau's arguments to draw out, and criticize, a broader theme his theory expresses: what Sheldon Wolin has called the distinction between politics and the political. Wolin associates the political with a public order:

Political philosophy [deals] with public matters [...] the words "public," "common," and "general" have a long tradition of usage which has made them synonyms for what is political. [...] From its very beginnings in Greece, the Western political tradition has looked upon the political order as a common order created to deal with those concerns in which all of the members of society have some interest. (9)

By contrast, Wolin associates politics with conflict:

I shall take "politics" to include the following: (a) a form of activity centering around the quest for competitive advantage between groups, individuals, or societies; (b) a form of activity conditioned by the fact that it occurs within a situation of change and relative scarcity; (c) a form of activity in which the pursuit of advantage produces consequences of such a magnitude that they affect in a significant way the whole society or a substantial portion of it. [...] Thus politics is both a source of conflict and a mode of activity that seeks to resolve conflicts and promote readjustment. (10–11)

Thus, for Wolin, “politics” and “the political” represent two opposing motifs within political philosophy — conflict and order. Positions political philosophers have taken can be characterized with reference to these poles — as being more concerned with order, hence averse to conflict; or more open to conflict, hence accepting of a looser order.

Plato, in Wolin’s scheme, elevates the political over politics. Actual societies are riven by politics; Plato takes as his task the construction of an ideal political system that can replace conflict with perfect order. “Political philosophy and ruling alike had as their objectives the creation of the good society; ‘politics’ was evil, and hence the task of philosophy and of ruling was to rid the community of politics.” Wolin notes that Plato regards the evil of politics in medical terms: the conflicts associated with politics are “the symptoms of an unhealthy society”(42). This analogy of conflict as disease grounds the analogy of the ruler as a doctor we touched on above. Thus if the ruler seeks to “cure” conflict just as a doctor cures disease, it follows that just as the doctor knows what is in fact the proper treatment the ruler knows what is the proper policy. That is, Plato’s realism regarding the common good is linked to his hostility toward politics. Political life, in his vision, can be ordered properly, in accordance with a metaphysically given order; the conflicts of politics can only ensure that the state will not conform to the ideal pattern discovered by the philosopher kings. We can interpret Plato’s contempt for rhetoric in this light. Rhetoric is the medium of politics — the means by which conflicts of interests and values are conducted within the political structure (discounting violence as a sign that politics has broken down the political altogether). And, as he indicates with his analogy of the beast (*Republic* 493), Plato regards the speech of politics as based on the very opposite of transcendent knowledge of the common good: rhetorical success does require knowledge of what is good for the public in fact, but rather familiarity with what the public in fact wants. Plato’s rejection of rhetoric thus implies, in Wolin’s words, that “the Good at which the Platonic community aimed was in no way dependent on the community, nor was it in any real sense a matter for political decision” (51).

Rousseau replicates Plato’s hostility to politics, as illustrated by his own condemnation of eloquence. In Rousseau’s pastoral ideal, politics in Wolin’s sense are absent; political decision making consists of intuiting the common good as a matter of fellow feeling.

A state thus governed needs very few laws; and in proportion as it becomes necessary to promulgate new ones, this necessity is universally understood. The first to propose them merely says what everybody has already felt; and there is no question of either intrigues or eloquence to

secure the passage into law of what each has already resolved to do, once he is sure the others will do likewise. (*SC* IV.i.2; *OC* 437 (trans. Cress 203–4))

The presence of politics, i.e. expressed disagreements over public policy, is a sure sign that policies promoting the common good will not be passed (*SC* IV.i.4-5; *OC* 438). And eloquence is a marker of this condition; it is the technique by which individuals engage in politics to pursue their own private benefit. Thus, the assembly fails in its task of discovering the common good when “the populace is seduced by private interests which certain clever men have managed to substitute for those of the state by means of personal trust and eloquence” (*DPE*; *OC* 246, trans. Cress 115).<sup>18</sup> Now whereas Plato emphasizes the rhetorician’s status as flatterer of the people’s given beliefs, Rousseau emphasizes eloquence as a tool of the speaker’s private interest. Still Rousseau shares with his predecessor the conviction that eloquence serves politics at the expense of the political, by distracting its hearers from the truth about what is in fact best for society. Thus, Rousseau’s hopeful boast that in upright republics “sly orators” would be imprisoned represents a deep wish for the elimination of politics altogether, in order to preserve a vision of the political as the unimpeded provision of the common good (see *SC* IV.i.3; *OC* 438). As Wolin observes, Plato’s denigration of politics has unappealing implications. Social life is by nature marked by conflicting interests and values; thus, for Wolin, politics is the inevitable context for the political. He concludes that “the neglect of the political context is likely to produce a dangerous kind of political art, especially when it is motivated by an animus against ‘politics.’ The art of ruling becomes the art of imposition” (43). Wolin’s warning, though directed at Plato, is well taken with respect to Rousseau as well. For Rousseau, explicitly looking backward to antiquity, repeatedly stresses that governments must regulate *mœurs* in order to induce citizens to be obedient. Rousseau’s version of the political art, that is, is not to reconcile conflict but to forestall it — not by direct imposition, but by subliminal manipulation. “If it is good to know how to use men as they are, it is better still to turn them into what one needs them to be. The most absolute authority is that which penetrates to the inner part of a man and is exerted no less on his will than on his actions” (*DPE* I; *OC* 251, trans. Cress 119). This frankly totalitarian impulse is symptomatic of a theory in which conflict is anathema — hence of a political theory devoid of politics.

Rousseau, then, suffers from the same central weakness Wolin attributes to Plato:

The Platonic conception of political philosophy and ruling was founded

on a paradox: the science as well as the art of creating order were sworn to an eternal hostility towards politics, towards those phenomena, in other words, that made such an art and science meaningful and necessary. The paradox has serious consequences for both thought and action. A science that is at odds with its own subject-matter, one that tries to get rid of the distinctive context in which the problems of that science take shape, is an instrument ill-adapted for theoretical understanding. Similarly, action designed to extirpate what are the inescapable givens of social existence will be driven to using the harsh methods that Plato himself grudgingly admitted were necessary. These criticisms suggest that the central weakness in Plato's philosophy lay in the failure to establish a satisfactory relationship between the idea of the political and the idea of politics. (42–43)<sup>19</sup>

The paradox Wolin detects in Plato helps us fully understand the paradox in Rousseau's theory with which we began. As Riley argues, the paradox of a people who must be as society would make them in order to enter into society in the first place springs from the opposition between Rousseau's paired commitments to voluntarism and to a morality of the common good. His commitment to voluntarism is starkly limited by the fear that if will is given free play society will dissolve into competing factions, destroying society's ability to obtain the common good; voluntarism is necessary, that is, only until it gives rise to politics. Thus Rousseau's profound theoretical uneasiness with the phenomena of politics — the conflicts between parties that are the stuff of social life.<sup>20</sup> Like Plato, then, Rousseau promotes a vision of the political in which the need for politics has been removed. This vision is as utopian for Rousseau as for his predecessor: it can be realized no place. As Wolin reminds us, however, politics is the very condition of political life. "A truly political art [...] would be one framed to deal with conflict and antagonism; to take these as the raw materials for the creative task of constructing areas of agreement, or, if this fails, to make it possible for competing forces to compromise in order to avoid harsher remedies" (43). Yet in response to the ineluctable fact of conflict Rousseau fantasizes a world where conflict, the very basis of political life, is absent. Like Plato before him, therefore, Rousseau fails to reconcile the idea of the political with the idea of politics — and, as with his master, the dissonance between the two ideas is quite menacing.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *On the Social Contract*, Bk. II, ch. vii, ¶ 9; original *OC* 383.

<sup>2</sup> Though it is true that Locke does refer to the common good, he does not emphasize it to the same extent as Rousseau. For example, in the *Second Treatise* he mentions the duty of the legislature to direct its powers to the public good almost as an afterthought (chapter ix, sec. 131).

<sup>3</sup> *Discourse on Political Economy* (henceforth *DPE*), sec. I, p. 115; *OC* 247.

<sup>4</sup> See Barry, Levine, Cohen, Grofman, Grofman and Feld; and Grofman, Feld, Estlund, and Waldron.

<sup>5</sup> The term “general will” here is synonymous with “the common good”: it is not simply the result of the vote, but the result the vote should have.

<sup>6</sup> See also *DPE* I (Cress 115); *OC* 247.

<sup>7</sup> *SC* II.vi.9; *OC* 380 (trans. Cress 162). My argument in this section defends the interpretation I offer in my book *Making Citizens: Rousseau's political theory of culture* (New York: Routledge, 1993) against the criticisms raised by Victor Gourevitch in his review essay “Recent Work on Rousseau” (*Political Theory* 26 [1998]: 536–56. Gourevitch rejects my realist reading that allows for the majority to be simply wrong in favor of a constructivist reading by which Rousseau “very clearly” implies “that the vote of the majority is right because it is the vote of the majority.” He argues that “the common good is what a public-spirited majority decides it is” (550), where public-spiritedness is simply a matter of the proper motivation. I believe I have shown, however, that Rousseau clearly distinguishes between motivation and cognitive competence — a distinction that is meaningful only if he is a realist.

<sup>8</sup> 464a; trans. from *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).

<sup>9</sup> Bk. I, trans. Allen Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), p. 40; *OC* 249.

<sup>10</sup> See my interpretation of the general will in *Making Citizens* 7–29.

<sup>11</sup> See *Émile* I, Bloom 40; *OC* 250.

<sup>12</sup> *Considerations on the Government of Poland*, ch. iv, *OC* 966.

<sup>13</sup> *Émile* v. Note that *Émile* is to begin by learning the abstract principles of right (the doctrine of *The Social Contract*); then he will proceed to the empirical details of actual nations. This reverses the order of the training of Plato's guardians, for whom the highest level of dialectical training comes as the culmination of their studies, after lengthy service “in the cave.” For Plato, the immanent knowledge Rousseau advocates would be at best what is learned in the cave about how to merely control the populace, not truly benefit them.

<sup>14</sup> See *Making Citizens* 230–38.

<sup>15</sup> In general, for Fralin, there is a substantial discrepancy between the ideals of popular sovereignty Rousseau enunciates in *The Social Contract* and the proposals he offers in other writings regarding the institutions by which he thinks society is actually governed.

<sup>16</sup> This intuitively plausible claim is given analytical support within the epistemic theory of voting: see footnote 2.

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., Fralin 87.

<sup>18</sup> Note the similarity of the figure of the clever man to the Legislator, who influences his people by means of the force of his personality and his figurative language.

<sup>19</sup> For a similar line of criticism of Plato, which can be traced back to Karl Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, see Sharples, Bambrough, Leys, and Sparshott.

<sup>20</sup> Rousseau's aversion to conflict perhaps has a practical source in his experience of civil unrest in Geneva.

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