

**Jean-Jacques  
Rousseau  
et la  
Révolution**

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## FROM VINCENNES TO VARENNES

Two turning-points: October 1749, in the life of Rousseau, the illumination on the road to Vincennes when he ceases to be a bright young intellectual of the Enlightenment seeking fame and fortune on the ladder of the ancien régime to become a radical critic of both the ancien régime and the Enlightenment; June 1791, in the history of the French Revolution, when the King's flight to Varennes dooms all prospects of France being remodelled as a constitutional monarchy inspired to a large extent by Montesquieu and ushers in a period of republicanism inspired to a large extent by Rousseau.

Before Vincennes, we can only see Rousseau's political opinions, insofar as he had any political opinions, as being conservative:

It would not be a good thing for society  
If in its ranks there were less inequality

he wrote in an early poem. If he was proud to be a citizen of Geneva, he had little sympathy for those who resisted the patrician oligarchy by which that republic was governed. His greatest satisfaction as a young man was enacting the role of an emissary of the King of France, floating in a coloured gondola along the canals of Venice.

On the road to Vincennes (if we are to believe his accounts of what happened) he ceased to think that the world was in order as it is. Far from getting better, the human race was getting worse; progress, that great article of faith of Bacon and Voltaire and the imprisoned Diderot, was an illusion. Man, born innocent, was now almost universally corrupt. Pursuing these reflections, Rousseau came to be obsessed with the problem of restoring men's natural goodness, a mission for which he believed himself, as one who had somehow never lost his natural goodness, to be singularly equipped to undertake.

Henceforth, the things he wrote were never simply designed to enlarge knowledge. His philosophy, no less than that of Marx, was meant to change the world. In the *Lettres écrites de la montagne*<sup>1</sup> he explains

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1. *Œuvres complètes*. (Éd. Pléiade) Vol. III, p. 810.

that *Du Contrat social* was not intended to offer a sketch of a utopia, like Plato's *Republic*, but to hold up a real republic (that of Geneva) as an example for others to imitate.

As early as 1790, Edmund Burke in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* named Rousseau as the theorist who had inspired what the revolutionists were doing; and, of course, Burke was not alone in saying this. What he said came to be true, but it was not true at the time he said it. Burke had an almost miraculous prophetic vision, but he was not a good historian. Tocqueville and Lord Acton could say with greater justice that the philosophy of the Enlightenment generally had inspired the French Revolution, but that judgement overlooks the fact that the various philosophers of the Enlightenment put forward conflicting theories, so that the revolutionists could not at the same time adopt, for example, the enlightened absolutism of Voltaire, the liberal constitutionalism of Montesquieu, the puritan monarchism of Holbach and the republicanism of Rousseau. What they might be said to have done, and broadly speaking did, was to try out more than one of those theoretical systems in turn.

The first phase of the Revolution was not Rousseau's turn. It was Montesquieu's. The phase of the purest form of Montesquieu's doctrine was the earliest, that beginning in 1787 when, in the words of Barnave, "le combat commença" and ending in the summer of 1789 when the control of the revolution passed from the nobility to the middle-class politicians. In its pure form the doctrine of Montesquieu can fairly be called, as Voltaire called it, the old *thèse nobiliaire writ new*; the institutions which are visualized in *L'Esprit des lois* as sharing the sovereignty of the kingdom, checking and balancing the despotic tendencies of the Crown, are mostly aristocratic institutions: parlements, seigneurs, clergy, provincial estates. Between 1787 and 1789 the forces challenging the monarchy were substantially of the upper classes—which, if we accept the ruling of François Furet that there was no aristocracy in the *ancien régime*, we must call the nobility. It was natural that Louis XVI (and his Queen) should assume that these privileged persons, bent on imitating the English Whigs of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, were trying to force him to become another William III, a monarch beholden to his peers. Faced with what he apprehended as another 1688, Louis chose to play the part of a William III, or rather to pretend to play that part, in order to avoid the fate of another James II.

When he fled to Varennes, he revealed the insincerity of his performance to all except those who refused to see it. By the time he fled,

he had ceased to imagine he was confronted by another 1688; detecting something (from his point of view) worse, he decided to join the Counter-revolution, only to meet, as a result of being trapped at Varennes, that fate of which Turgot had warned him, the fate of Charles I.

Burke was one of the first to point out that 1789 was not a reneactment of 1688. An Irishman, with some vestigial devotion to an ultramontane church and romantic yearnings for an aristocratic order, he was horrified, where most English and American liberals were pleased, by the manifestations of rationalist egalitarian ideology among the deputies of the *Assemblée Nationale* which gave birth to itself in the spring of 1789. He saw those deputies as Rousseau's disciples. But they were not. Burke had not really studied Rousseau, nor had he followed at all carefully the debates in the assemblies. But he was correct at least in observing that the leadership of the French Revolution had passed to a different class of person from the English Whigs of 1688. Liberal noblemen such as Mirabeau, Lafayette, and Condorcet might still seem to be leading the Revolution after the Third Estate had, on the initiative of the bourgeois Sieyès, proclaimed itself on 17 June, to be the only House that represented the nation, but most members of the Second Estate dissociated themselves from the enterprise, preferring to keep the privileges they had enjoyed under the *ancien régime* rather than struggle to acquire or (as readers of Boulainvilliers might think) recover the sort of rights which English peers enjoyed. If French noblemen were vastly more numerous than English ones, French Whigs were remarkably few.

In the absence of such French Whigs, the middle-class members of the Third Estate were all too eager to enact the role assigned to their social superiors in the theory of Montesquieu. This does not mean that they were any less faithful to Montesquieu's project of reconciling liberty and law by means of a constitutional monarchy. The aim was still to divide sovereignty between the crown and the institutions of a legislative and judiciary kind, similar to, if not exactly the same as, those which Montesquieu had suggested. There was nothing of Rousseau in all this.

Rousseau's political ideas were not adopted until after the flight to Varennes had propelled the French Revolution into an entirely new direction. Yet we continue to hear Burke's thesis repeated: that the French Revolution was Rousseau's revolution, right from the start. Even historians who have actually read *Du Contrat social* (and they are clearly in a minority) say this. Talmon,<sup>2</sup> for example, asserts first that during the

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2. J.L. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*. London, 1952, pp. 69-75.

period 1789 to 1791 Sieyès was “the chief spokesman of the Revolution” and secondly that Sieyès was “interpreting Rousseau.” In no sense whatever can the champion of representative sovereignty and passive citizenship be “interpreting Rousseau.”

What Sieyès and most of the deputies in the *Assemblée* were attempting to do was what Rousseau had expressly excluded: to represent the sovereignty of a sovereign people. In fact Sieyès was simply taking over the claim that had previously been asserted by the French parlements: throughout the eighteenth century they had been saying that they represented the sovereignty of a sovereign people.<sup>3</sup> Even when Sieyès and the other politicians dropped the language of the parlements to take up such “Rousseauesque” expressions as “the general will,” they were using words that had also been used by Montesquieu, Diderot, Holbach and others, the standard terminology of the current political scene. So neither Sieyès nor any other politician was “interpreting Rousseau” when he employed the same vocabulary as Rousseau. What those politicians were doing was mollifying Montesquieu, a point made forcefully in an anonymous pamphlet, said to have been written by P.A. Grouvelle, published in Paris in 1789, under the title *De l'autorité de Montesquieu dans la Révolution présente*.

The author observes that Rousseau's name is on many people's lips, but that it is Montesquieu's scheme of a liberal constitutional monarchy which is actually being adopted. It may be that there was a political motive for those who followed Montesquieu to adopt the colours, so to speak, of Rousseau. Montesquieu had the reputation, after all, of being an ideologue of the *robe*, a man of the past. The Comte d'Antraiges, for example, was considerably to the right of Montesquieu, and his political proposals were undoubtedly aimed at restoring a form of feudalism in which the peers, as representatives of the people, would dominate the King and the kingdom, and yet in his *Mémoire sur les États-généraux*, d'Antraiges dressed up his ideas in the sort of radical and even democratic language that might have come straight from *Du Contrat social*.

Mercier is hardly less outrageous in his treatise *De J.-J. Rousseau considéré comme l'un des premiers auteurs de la Révolution*, published in 1791, where we find him distorting Rousseau's argument to the point of saying that Rousseau advocated the representation of popular sovereignty by deputies and the deployment of checks and balances between

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3. Alfred Cobban, “The Parlements of Paris.” *History*, XXX (1950), p. 79.

the several powers of government. Mercier does at least admit that while Rousseau was one of the “premiers auteurs” of the Revolution, not many people in France had actually read *Du Contrat social*.

The readership of *Du Contrat social* is a subject which has received the attention of several scholars. Daniel Mornet, in *Les Origines intellectuelles de la révolution française*,<sup>4</sup> argued that *Du Contrat social* passed “à peu près inaperçu” compared with most of the books of the Enlightenment. He added that his researches revealed that there was only one copy of *Du Contrat social* in 500 private libraries compared with 85 copies of *La nouvelle Héloïse*.<sup>5</sup> Joan McDonald in *Rousseau and the French Revolution*<sup>6</sup> says much the same thing: “There is little evidence to support the argument that Rousseau’s *Social Contract* was widely read at any time between 1762 and 1789.”

Rousseau himself never expected *Du Contrat social* to reach a wide market. When Rey decided to publish it at the same time that Duchesne published *Émile*, Rousseau warned him that *Du Contrat social* would be suffocated by the other book, because of the “matière ingrate et propre à peu de lecteurs”<sup>7</sup> of *Du Contrat social*.

I think it probable that both Mornet and Joan McDonald underestimated the circulation of *Du Contrat social*. Even though, as Dr. McDonald notes, Rey’s consignment of copies of *Du Contrat social* that he sent to Paris were sent back to him, the book was widely pirated in France, as Rey was painfully aware, and must have been read by a good many others besides Robespierre and St. Just. Statistical studies of the circulation of Rousseau’s books give us a somewhat false idea of the extent of the impact of his ideas.<sup>8</sup> What the evidence does entitle us to say is that *Du Contrat social* was far less widely read than *Émile*, *La nouvelle Héloïse* or the *Confessions*, less even than the *Lettre à M. d’Alembert*, and that in consequence a colourful image of Rousseau the radical democrat entered the public consciousness without any clear

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4. Paris, 1933, p. 96.

5. *Annales de la Soc. JJR*, Vol. VIII, p. 44.

6. London, 1965, p. 48.

7. *Correspondance complète* (ed. Leigh), Vol. X, no. 1731.

8. Indeed, Dr. McDonald’s own statistical researches hardly support her thesis that Rousseau’s writings, other than *Du Contrat social*, were of importance to the French Revolution, for she reports that in 513 pamphlets from the period of the Estates-General there are only 18 citations of Rousseau’s name; in 265 pamphlets relating to the Assemblées Nationale and Constituante only 7, and in 216 pamphlets relating to the Paris clubs only 6 (McDonald, *op. cit.*, pp. 64-65).

understanding of what his political ideas really were. But why should anyone wish to attribute to Rousseau ideas that were not really his?

One likely explanation is that his name already enjoyed some extraordinary prestige, a prestige even among those deputies in the Assemblée who did not think at all as he did. For example, as early as December 1790, his bust was installed in the meeting place of the Assemblée, with copies of *Émile* and *Du Contrat social* placed beneath it (was this the "one copy" to be found in Daniel Mornet's 500 libraries?), a pension was awarded to the widow, and similar busts were placed in provincial buildings. It seems that the Assemblée would have authorised already in 1791 the removal of Rousseau's remains to the Panthéon had not Girardin persuaded them that the rustic and romantic Île des Peupliers was a more suitable resting place for the philosopher of Nature.

Outside the Assemblées, people made busts of Rousseau from the stones of the Bastille for private veneration. This is perhaps more significant. The politicians were mostly lawyers, economists, and other such persons for whom the style and content of Montesquieu's reasoning was congenial; Montesquieu, a lawyer, was a lawyer's philosopher. Equally, Rousseau, the self-styled plebeian, was a people's philosopher. He was also the favourite plebeian philosopher of a certain type of nobleman, just as, in real life, he had been the darling of the Luxembourgs, of Malesherbes, of Conti, of Mesdames de Boufflers, de Verdelin, de Créqui, de Chenonceaux and the rest of them. And why not? Does not the ideal society of Clarens depicted in *La nouvelle Héloïse* bear a distinctly feudal aspect, with the authority of the Baron absolute and the docility of the servants total? And did not the very extravagance of Rousseau's attacks on the ancien régime make it all the more attractive to spoiled sons of the privileged? The Comte de Ségur in his *Mémoires*<sup>9</sup> speaks of Rousseau's writings as prompting the action of those noblemen in the Assemblée who voted on the memorable night of 4 August, 1789, to renounce their own titles and "feudal rights":

The concept of liberty, however it was expressed, attracted us by its audacity, the spirit of equality, overall convenience. Men are happy to lower themselves from their customary rank, as long as they feel they can easily resume it at will, and because we closed our eyes to the future, we could simultaneously exploit the gifts of aristocracy and the luxury of plebeianism.

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9. Paris, 1834.



These words suggest that the Rousseauism of such noblemen was not more than skin-deep, and indeed Dr. McDonald<sup>10</sup> herself observes that "there appears to have been no appeal to Rousseau's authority on 4 August, 1789, the so-called 'night of dupes'." There was also a cult of Rousseau in the earliest phase of the revolution among women. Mme Roland, for example, whose salon is said to have been the most important politically, was an ardent exponent of the Rousseauesque dream of recovering in the modern world the republican virtues of ancient Rome and Sparta, although Mme Roland freely admitted that she could not understand *Du Contrat social*.<sup>11</sup> Besides, her devotion to Rousseau was not exclusive of other philosophers. In her *Vie Privée*<sup>12</sup> Mme Roland recalls a "pilgrimage" to Ermononville in company with M. de Bois-morel: as they sat under the poplars by Rousseau's tomb, Bois-morel read aloud, not from the works of Rousseau, but from those of Montesquieu.

Arthur Young, in his *Travels in France*, noted the prevalence of republican ideas among French country people as early as 1787. These ideas probably owed less to Rousseau than to the propaganda that circulated in France at the time of the American Revolution, when the French government, in order to make popular a war which was ruinously expensive to the French taxpayer, had allowed the distribution in support of the American rebellion against the British monarchy of material which inevitably proved subversive of the French monarchy.

We should not overlook the fact that the experience of the American revolution enabled Rousseau's theories to assume a greater immediacy in France than he himself intended them to have; for it served to remove a limitation which Rousseau had placed on the practicability of republican government. Since the Americans had shown that republican government could be extended to a nation of millions, no longer need Frenchmen heed Rousseau's warning that his system could be applied only to a political society of small dimensions, a city-state.

The most important of Rousseau's followers in France, other than those few politicians, such as Robespierre, who made *Du Contrat social* his Bible, and St. Just, whose *Institutions législatives* was based on that same book, were the humbler members of the population, the sort of men relegated by Sieyès to the class of passive citizens, and who afterwards achieved immortality as sans-culottes. Such men did not attain power in

10. McDonald, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

11. *Œuvres*. Ann. VIII, Vol. i, p. 207.

12. *Op. cit.*, p. 231.

the French Revolution until the Sections of Paris were opened to them in 1792. If they were not educated enough to read *Du Contrat social*, they were able to grasp the central argument of the second *Discours* and the *Lettre à M. d'Alembert*, and were above all responsive to the image of Rousseau as the frail victim of social injustice, Jean-Jacques the martyr.

Much has been written about the identity of the sans-culottes, but it seems to be agreed that while they were socially a cut above the proletariat, as artisans, small shopkeepers and the like, they had reason to feel, being no better than passive citizens, a sense of exclusion; they were, in the words of Pétion, the "have-nots," "les hommes qui n'ont pas," the kind of person Rousseau himself chose to be and was seen to be in the mythology which surrounded his name.

The Rousseauism of the sans-culottes differed from that of Ségur's noblemen in being other than skin-deep. Rousseau's impact on these humbler individuals was as much that of a "role-model" or exemplar as that of an ideologue.<sup>13</sup> The "sans-culottes révolutionnaires," as described by Richard Cobb,<sup>14</sup> were "des puritans pour qui le vice était fonction de la contre-révolution. Ils condamnaient donc le célibat, la gastronomie, le jeu, la prostitution, l'obscénité, la parure, le luxe, mais ils faisaient preuve par contre d'une grande indulgence envers l'ivrognerie."

The "typical sans-culotte révolutionnaire," as Cobb describes him in another article,<sup>15</sup> was an artisan who believed that property was sacred so long as it was not excessive, who worked hard, because he considered laziness evil, who scorned all frivolous trappings of dress and manners, who was diligent in his attendance at his société populaire, who believed in the separation of the sexes, who favoured public festivities, but despised theatres, balls, and private amusements. In short he was just the kind of man that Rousseau, in his *Lettre à M. d'Alembert*, had described as the model citizen of Geneva.

If sans-culottes did not assume a significant role in the Revolution until after Varennes, even then they emerged as adversaries, rather than supporters, of the politicians who were in charge of the revolution. For despite the fact that the King had manifestly betrayed them by his flight on 20 June, 1791, those politicians made frantic efforts to pretend he had

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13. Rousseau could also be said to have served as a "role model" for Robespierre, who claimed that he "always tried to be like Rousseau" (see Jean Matrat, *Robespierre*, trans. Kendall, London, 1975, p. 21). One can only regret that he did not succeed in his effort.

14. *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine*, Vol. VI, 1959, pp. 81-120.

15. *History*, Vol. XLII, 1957, pp. 181-196.

not done so, proclaiming palpable nonsense about his being kidnapped and so forth in order to keep him on his throne and the constitutional monarchy intact. The *Assemblée Législative* which took over from the *Assemblée Constituante* on 1 October was, if somewhat less talented, remarkably similar in composition to its predecessor despite its changed membership. The deputies were the same natural constituents of Montesquieu, two-thirds of the 745 députés being lawyers or local government officials, all eager to prop up the monarch in order to save the constitution.<sup>16</sup>

But there was really no more hope for constitutional monarchy in France. After Varennes, the Revolution began to take shape in the character that Burke had ascribed to it, as the people, in the sense of "les hommes qui n'ont pas," came on to the centre of the stage. The return of Louis XVI to Paris was observed by the populace with mute hostility. As months passed and the *Assemblée* continued to protect the King, that hostility became less mute. In the summer of 1792, when fédérés from the country were summoned to Paris for the fête of 14 July, they took the opportunity to present a petition to the authorities for the dethronement of Louis XVI, and the Commune of Paris, no longer dominated by middle-class moderates, but by sans-culottes, made the same demand; and words were reinforced by action on that fateful 10 August, when members of the Paris Sections invaded the Tuileries, and many lives were lost among both attackers and defenders. Only 284 deputies remained in the *Assemblée* after these bloody exchanges and liberal noblemen who had stayed in Paris then left or were imprisoned (only to be massacred, in many cases, in September, at Marat's instigation).

Aulard,<sup>17</sup> in his *Histoire de la Révolution française* records that Condorcet, who had himself been converted to republicanism, was "the first to invoke Rousseau's name" in support of the cause, and that when he did so, "le parti républicain se sent anobli, légitimé par cette intervention éclatante de l'héritier des philosophes."

The revolutionary "moment" of Montesquieu had ended; then, and only then, did the "moment" of Rousseau begin.

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16. Norman Hampson, *A Social History of the French Revolution*, Toronto, 1963, p. 132.

17. F. A. Aulard, *Histoire politique de la Révolution*, Paris, 1901, p. 138.