

**Jean-Jacques
Rousseau
et la
Révolution**

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ROUSSEAU'S PREDICTION OF THE EUROPEAN REVOLUTION

I hold it to be impossible that the great monarchies of Europe still have long to last. All have shined, and every state which shines is on the decline. I have reasons more particular than this maxim for my opinion, but it is unseasonable to tell them, and everyone sees them only too well.¹

Rousseau's well-known prediction of the coming, not only of the French, but also of the European revolution, is as clear as anyone could wish. However, its very clarity and accuracy may turn our attention away from Rousseau's reasoning. Either we fail to wonder because hindsight makes what happened seem obvious or we marvel excessively at what seemed to be a superhuman prescience. The opposite would probably have been the case if the prediction had been incorrect. When someone has made an inaccurate prediction we are quick to look for the causes of the mistake: we wonder whether it resulted from bias, miscalculation, lack of information, or some other equally identifiable cause. If Rousseau had argued that there could be no revolution in France, there might well have been many detailed discussions about how he could have been so mistaken; as it is, most of us have neglected to seek the reasons for his accuracy.

Rousseau's prediction, however, begs for further analysis. First, he presents the prediction as a simple deduction from a general "maxim," thereby suggesting that he has a science which allows him to make accurate predictions: what is that general science of human history? Second, he piques interest by referring to unspecified "particular" reasons: what were these causes unique to the eighteenth century? Finally, Rousseau indicates that these "particular reasons" are visible to all but unsafe or inappropriate to mention: why not explain in full the reasons for the coming revolution? To understand Rousseau's prediction it is thus

1. *Émile, or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), p. 194.

necessary to keep in mind not only his general and specific analyses of the political conditions of the great monarchies of Europe, but also the purpose served by his public prediction.

Rousseau's General "Maxim"

In the vocabulary of Rousseau's political science, a "maxim" is a general rule that can be applied to particular circumstances.² It allows one to fit more fundamental principles (for example, the nature of a good government) to the limitations of particular communities (for example, to a large rather than a small community). Maxims can be used to judge the possibilities available in a given set of circumstances and therefore can be useful for predicting the future.

Scholars have noticed that the general maxim to which Rousseau appeals in making his prediction is announced at the beginning of his career and repeated at the end.³ More specifically, this maxim is the thesis of a large part of the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*. Part One of the *First Discourse* is in large part a catalogue of those places that have "shone" in the arts and sciences and subsequently declined. Rousseau refers to Egypt, Greece, Rome, Constantinople, and China: each cultivated the arts and sciences and then was conquered by peoples who did not. In Part Two of the *First Discourse*, Rousseau attempts to demonstrate that this relative weakness of sophisticated people is not accidental, although he does so by showing that the cultivation of the arts and sciences is as much a symptom as it is the cause of decline.

The remark in *Émile* that "every state which shines (*brille*) is on the decline" is thus a reformulation of a maxim already posed as a rhetorical question in the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* when Rousseau asks: "whether it is more important for Empires to be brilliant (*brillans*) and transitory or virtuous and durable."⁴ To apply this maxim means to see how it fits a given set of circumstances. One could say that the mere fact that the European monarchies are great in

2. For a discussion of what Rousseau means by a "maxim" of politics, see Roger D. Masters, *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968), ch. 7.
3. *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade 1959-69), vol. IV, pp. 1439-40. Further references will be noted as O.C.
4. *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, in *The First and Second Discourses*, ed. Roger D. Masters, trans. Roger D. Masters and Judith R. Masters (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964), p. 52. Further references to the *First* and *Second Discourses* are to this edition.

the sense that they are luxurious and brilliant is a proof that they are ripe for an overthrow. The prediction of revolution would then be the outcome of the simplest of syllogisms: All brilliant regimes must fall. The European monarchies are brilliant regimes. Therefore the European monarchies must fall.

The regimes used in Part One of the *First Discourse* fell due to conquest from outside. Nevertheless, both the *First Discourse* and the *Second Discourse* indicate what is either an alternative pattern of development or an earlier stage of decline. For example, Rousseau dates the beginning of the degeneration of Rome to the beginning of the second century B.C. and its fall to a period two hundred and fifty years later.⁵ The conquest of Rome from outside did not take place until more than four centuries later after its "decline" had begun. Rousseau's history of Rome can be divided into several clear stages: first, the semi-barbarous period prior to the foundation of the Republic by the first Brutus;⁶ second, the period of political health under the Republic; third, the decline of the Republic; fourth, the period of despotism; and fifth the conquest by the barbarians. Because the fifth stage depends on external conditions it could have occurred earlier or have been postponed almost indefinitely. At the end of the *Second Discourse*, the fourth period—despotism—is described as the culmination of Rousseau's "hypothetical history of governments."⁷ At this stage, which Rousseau calls a new state of nature, true government ceases to exist and societies are controlled by the simple rule by the stronger. This can be considered the true fall of the society. Thus only the first four stages belong to the purely internal history of a community.

This framework seems to clarify the prediction in *Émile* because it pinpoints a stage of decline and distinguishes it from a later fall, but a certain ambiguity remains. The history of Rome is not precisely analogous to that of the European monarchies because the latter does not seem to have had a period of political health comparable to that of the Roman Republic at its peak. The European monarchies at best might have enjoyed a period of relative health and, at worst, might have always been despotisms that are sinking into a final decline. In other words, Rousseau could be warning either that the monarchies are about to turn into despotisms or that the already despotic monarchies are moving into an

5. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

6. On the importance of Brutus, see O.C., vol. III, pp. 88-89 and *Second Discourse*, pp. 80-81.

7. *Second Discourse*, p. 97.

even more advanced decline. The precise significance of the prediction depends on its minor premise. Aside from shining, what are the particular characteristics of the European monarchies? Rousseau's "particular reasons" promise to answer this question.

Rousseau's "Particular" Reasons

One might well expect that the particular reasons leading to the revolution would illustrate the corrupt brilliance of the European monarchies. In becoming specific about these particular reasons, students of the French Revolution during this year of its bicentennial are likely to point to any number of causes particular to France. In Book XI of the *Confessions*, Rousseau provides a list of such factors as might satisfy any political historian. He says that during 1761 (while he was preparing *Émile* for press), he considered leaving France because he was sure a revolution was about to occur. He lists a number of factors:

The disasters of an unfortunate war all of which came from the fault of the government; the incredible disorder of the finances; the continual tugging of the administration until then divided between two or three ministers in open war with each other, and who to injure each other ruined the kingdom; the general discontent of the people and of all the ranks of the state; the stubbornness of an obstinate woman who, always sacrificing her intelligence (if she had any) to her tastes, almost always put aside the most capable office-holders to place those who pleased her the most.⁸

This is a portrait of a fiscally and morally bankrupt France, a discontent populace, and an ineffective government at war with itself. These seem to be the particular signs of France's degeneration that dispose it to revolution.

It could be objected that, at the end of the paragraph in which he lists these factors, Rousseau says that they would have led to the death of the monarchy had it not been for the rise of the Duke of Choiseul as head of the government. If these were the particular reasons to which he refers in the passage in *Émile*, it would appear that Rousseau not only predicted the revolution in 1762 (when *Émile* was published), but also that he retracted his prediction in 1770 while he was writing Part Two of the *Confessions*. In fact, one could even argue that Rousseau retracted his prediction in 1762. While waiting for the publication of *Émile*, he had a footnote praising Choiseul

8. O.C., I, 564.

inserted into the *Social Contract*.⁹ One could respond that Rousseau never retracted his specific prediction, and that the monarchy remained in jeopardy (even if not in such urgent danger) as long as its safety was dependent on a single exceptional head of government. It is reasonable to conclude that although the factors listed in the *Confessions* are among Rousseau's "particular" reasons for predicting the revolution, they are not the deepest causes for that prediction.

Other considerations confirm that Rousseau's description of France in 1761-62 does not exhaust his list of particular causes for the coming upheaval. He predicts an age of revolution for the monarchies of Europe as a whole, not only for France. This raises a question about Rousseau's view of the distinctive characteristics of Europe as a whole during the age in which he lived. What is the particular characteristic that distinguishes Europe on the eve of the age of revolutions from the Europe of the past? Perhaps the cause of the general corruption can be found by identifying the reason that Old Regimes had been stable up to this point and why this cause of stability is no longer effective.

Rousseau's answer to this question is found in his complex view of the political consequences of Christianity. This view has a negative and a positive side. Prior to the restoration of the arts and sciences, Europe lived in a condition that was "worse than ignorance."¹⁰ The intellectual rule of false prejudice had political consequences which Rousseau regards as equally deplorable. Furthermore he does not restrict his criticism of Christianity to those who traffic in religion for their own gain. As is well known, he holds Christianity to be, in principle as well as in practice, incompatible with sound politics.¹¹ Medieval Europe is far from Rousseau's model of the best regime.

In spite of his theoretical and practical condemnation of Christianity, however, Rousseau does not regard it as engendering the worst possible political situation. When one of the readers of the *First Discourse* accused him of preferring the situation of Europe prior to the restoration of learning, Rousseau responded, "What does

9. The note in which Rousseau predicts the coming revolution is not in the first draft of *Émile*, although the more general passage to which the note was appended is (O.C., vol. IV, p. 201). On the addition of the footnote praising Choiseul, see O.C., vol. III, p. 1482 and O.C. vol I, pp. 576-77.

10. *First Discourse*, p. 35.

11. *Social Contract*, IV, viii (O.C., III, 460-467).

he understand by this word *situation*? Does he apply it to the enlightenment or morals (*mœurs*) or does he confound the things that I took so much trouble to distinguish?"¹² With this response Rousseau clearly shows that he is open to the possibility that even the prejudice of the Middle Ages was morally superior to the enlightenment of the Eighteenth Century in some respects. In *Émile* he goes further. He praises Christianity precisely for the stability it brought to modern governments.

Our modern governments incontestably owe their more solid authority and less frequent revolutions to Christianity. It has made these governments less sanguinary themselves. This is proved by actually comparing them to ancient governments.¹³

As in one of the notes to the *Second Discourse*, revealed religion is a powerful source of political obedience.¹⁴

It may seem strange to see a partisan of both Sparta and Rome praising Christian governments for stability as well as gentleness. Although one should keep in mind that Rousseau goes on to compare contemporary monarchies only to corrupt regimes such as the Athenians, the Roman emperors, and the Chinese, Rousseau's praise—albeit qualified—is genuine. He presents Christianity as a religion that can make bad governments less harsh to their subjects while also making these governments less subject to being overthrown. Under the influence of Christianity, the great monarchies could be said to have been in an arrested state of decline. Something has happened, however, so that these once stable monarchies are about to be changed fundamentally.

Rousseau's analysis could lead to a condemnation of Christianity if one expected the overthrow of these governments to lead to the restoration of ancient republicanism or to something better. Such a conclusion would lead to an attempt to weaken the influence of Christianity. Rousseau's claim is that such attempts, like those being undertaken by the Encyclopedists, are misguided and can only lead to a despotism that is harsher and less stable than that of the Roman empire. His analysis of contemporary Europe is that it is moving away from its basis in Christianity and is on the verge of despotism.

12. O.C., III, 31.

13. *Émile*, p. 313.

14. *Second Discourse*, Note 1 (ed. Masters, pp. 201-202).

Rousseau's clearest statement of this view occurs at the end of the *Dialogues*, although it can only be identified as his own with some caution because it comes from the mouths of his characters. "The Frenchman," who has just been convinced of the existence of a plot against the author "Jean-Jacques," argues that the present age is characterized by a uniquely successful attempt to control public opinion. This attempt has been successful due to an unfriendly alliance between "the philosophic sect" and the powerful. These men and women, after observing the Christian attempt to rule by authoritatively interpreting moral opinions, have concluded that ruling in this manner will always be limited by the moral opinions themselves. Therefore they conspired to undermine any moral opinions, such as beliefs in conscience or rewards and punishments after death, that could make their subjects resist their rule.¹⁵ "Rousseau," the other participant in the *Dialogues*, details the political consequences of a "generation" in Europe when there are both "peoples without faith" and "Kings without law, without a Superior whom they fear and free of any kind of limit, all the duties of conscience destroyed, patriotism and attachment to the Prince extinguished in all hearts, and finally no social bond other than strength."¹⁶ He predicts that Europe (not merely France) will find itself "inundated everywhere with soldiers." In short, the relatively moderate monarchies of the Old Regime will fall and be replaced by sultanates founded on force.

In the *Dialogues*, "Rousseau" goes on to suggest that future generations will experience a restoration of the moral order, but he makes no suggestion as to when or exactly how this will occur. This character in *Rousseau Juge de Jean Jacques* is thus more hopeful than Rousseau ever showed himself to be about an almost spontaneous future "revolution."¹⁷ For the present, however, even the optimistic "Rousseau" of the *Dialogues* offers no prospect for

15. O.C., I, 964-66.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 971. In the *First Discourse* Rousseau argued that learning was a sign of corruption in all ages. In defending the *Discourse* he argued that the distinctive character of modern corruption was to be found in the widespread broadcast of "poisonous doctrine." See O.C., vol. III, p. 95.

17. For an excellent account of Rousseau's pessimism about future revolutions and about the various misinterpretations of his position, see Arthur M. Melzer, "Rousseau's 'Mission' and the Practical Intention of his Writings," *American Journal of Political Science* Vol. 27 (May 1983), pp. 294-320.

successful political action. In the short term, the fall of the European monarchies will lead to no improvement. The “particular reasons” for the inevitability of revolution reveal both a corruption that is in some ways like that of other corrupt ages and a cause of corruption that is new and particularly dangerous.

The Practical Purpose of the Prediction

Rousseau’s understanding of the probable future of Europe provides the necessary background for understanding the purpose of his prediction of revolution. Further information is revealed by the context of the prediction in *Émile*. The immediate context is provided by the passage to which the prediction serves as a footnote:

You trust in the present order of society without thinking that this order is subject to inevitable revolutions, and it is impossible for you to foresee or prevent the one which may affect your children. The noble becomes commoner, the rich becomes poor, the monarch becomes subject. Are the blows of fate so rare that you can count on being exempted from them? We are approaching a state of crisis and the age of revolutions.¹⁸

Here Rousseau addresses himself to parents—not merely to *Émile*’s parents—but especially to parents who are noble, rich, and even royal. His prediction of revolution is an answer to objections that he foresees such parents will make to his choice of a career of manual labour for *Émile*. In addition to being Jack-of-all-trades, *Émile* is to be master of the trade of carpentry. The prediction of revolutionary upheaval is intended to convince the reader that *Émile* (and other children) must be made independent of any particular social order. Although in *Émile*, the fictional student will finally be tied to a particular community by his marriage, Rousseau’s sequel (*Émile and Sophie*) shows that he can cope with any social condition, from the harshest slavery to advisor to a despotic ruler. Thus Rousseau’s treatise on education is, on one level, a survival manual for those who will live through the unprecedented flux foreseen by Rousseau.

A feature worth noting in the quoted passage is the direction Rousseau gives to social change. Each of the reversals of stations he mentions is from a valued status to a worse one. He does not suggest that the poor will become rich or that commoners will become noble or royal. *Émile* himself is simultaneously the son of an aristocrat and an orphan,

18. *Émile*, p. 194.

a combination which will befall many when the revolution comes. Rousseau shows compassion for the future hardships of the great without forgetting that it is within their power to prepare themselves. Most of all, Rousseau makes no suggestion that deserved benefits will come to anyone from a revolution.

The broader context of Rousseau's prediction—his understanding of human politics as set forth in his *Émile* and other writings—has implications which become clear when his attitude toward the revolution is compared to other such predictions. When a Lenin predicts the coming of an age of revolutions, he proclaims the achievement of a universal benefit. Furthermore, his prediction is as much a statement of his own intentions for practice as it is a conclusion drawn from a theory. His prediction will help to bring the revolution about. In Rousseau's case, the prediction is meant to give guidance to those who are fated to live through the age of revolutions.

Ultimately, Rousseau was pessimistic about the direction of human history.¹⁹ As he put it in another prophetic passage in the *Second Discourse*:

O man, whatever country you may come from, whatever your opinions may be, listen: here is your history. . . . There is an age at which the individual man would want to stop: you will seek the age at which you would desire your species had stopped. Discontented with your present state for reasons that foretell even greater discontents for your unhappy posterity, perhaps you would want to go backwards in time. This sentiment must be the eulogy of your first ancestors, the criticism of your contemporaries, and the dread of those who will have the unhappiness to live after you.²⁰

Even though he saw the future upheaval as destroying illegitimate regimes, the Citizen of Geneva recognized few if any chances—apart from the possible exceptions of Corsica and Poland²¹—for salutary political communities in the modern world. Can we be surprised by this fact when reflecting that, for Rousseau, civilization and government are unnatural whereas “savage society”—the conditions of the primitives being destroyed by the

19. Bertrand de Jouvenal, “Rousseau the Pessimistic Evolutionist,” *Jean-Jacques Rousseau; Yale French Studies*, Vol. XXVIII (Fall-Winter 1961-62); Roger D. Masters, “Nothing Fails Like Success,” in J. MacAdam, *et al.*, eds., *Trent Rousseau Papers 1978* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1980), p. 106.

20. *Second Discourse*, pp. 103-104.

21. *Social Contract*, II, x (O.C., III, 389-91).

Christian nations of Europe—was the “best for man”?²² The principles underlying Rousseau’s “system”²³ seem to explain not only his ability to predict the French revolution, but also his profound ambivalence toward its prospect.

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22. *Second Discourse*, p. 151.

23. Rousseau called his principal writings “the true system of the human heart,” (*Dialogues*, O.C., III, 697).