

**Jean-Jacques
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et la
Révolution**

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ROUSSEAU'S OWN REVOLUTION

Let me sketch two replies to the question of the relation between Rousseau and Revolution. The first is the Arrogance Reply or, as it might also be called, the three R's: from Rousseau to Robespierre to Revolution. The arrogance reply never makes clear precisely what it is that is being claimed. It leaves the learned impression that, of course, Rousseau's political writings were a principal cause of the French Revolution and there really is no reason, amongst those who know, to specify the causal claim or to support it. And yet if the causal claim is given out as an historical claim (and what else could it be?), then it must be supported in the mundane manner that historical claims of the causal kind are supported, for example, something akin to specifying which particular words in which particular writing of Rousseau's caused which revolutionary agent to perform which revolutionary act. The arrogance account never stoops so low. Practitioners of the Arrogance Reply are Hegel, Talmon and Arendt.

The modesty reply¹ begins with no assumptions about the three R's or indeed about the effect of Rousseau's writings on the Revolution. It asks more modest, internal questions, namely: Is a revolution necessary to Rousseau's system of thought? If "yes" then what place or role does revolution have in Rousseau's political philosophy? What would be the end or purpose of the revolution? Can one characterize Rousseau's revolution in such a way as to enable a contrast with philosophical writings about Rousseau and the French Revolution?

Of course, it might be claimed that revolution has no place at all in Rousseau's argument, that the question of "Rousseau and Revolution" gets asked only because scholars two hundred years later want to visit foreign parts and read papers at one another! I shall argue that Rousseau's theory overall does necessitate a revolution in the sense that his theory, considered as an argument, is incomplete without it. It is incomplete, in a very general sense, because of the absence of the intermediate question and the answer to it. That is, if we regard *The Discourse On Inequality*

1. W.H. Newton-Smith, in discussing the problem of unobservable causes in science, distinguishes between the "ignorance response" and the "arrogance response". See *The Rationality of Science*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981, pp. 41, 42.

as devoted to answering the question: How did modern peoples become corrupt and alienated from their nature? and the *Contract* to the question: What kind of state enables free and equal agents to live together? then the intermediate question is: How can human beings pass from a condition of alienation to one of freedom and equality? Rousseau never asks the intermediate question, but the answer to it must be via revolution. What is significant about this contention, if it is correct, is that any thoughts or feelings of Rousseau regarding the desirability or non-desirability of revolution become irrelevant. Revolution may be revolting to him, and he may think that it has no place in his philosophy. But if the theory necessitates revolution, then it does.

In the next section I will set out the argument for the necessity of revolution. I will begin with a discussion of Rousseau's conception of human excellence, holding that this ideal becomes the purpose or end of revolution. The ideal, on the one hand, will justify revolution and, on the other, will necessitate it.

Rousseau's Revolution

Rousseau's ideal of human excellence involves human beings acting together in community as free and equal moral beings. Freedom, both personal and political, is self-rule: being obedient only to rules made by all citizens for the good of all citizens. Such freedom, expressed negatively, is one of not being subject to the will of others and not being subject to one's own selfish passions. Equality is the right of each citizen to participate in politics as a moral agent, that is, to have self-rule by means of the general will. Citizens whose ruling will is the general will are related to one another politically as moral agents ought to be. That is, the only political relationship that is morally acceptable is rule by the general will. Any other form of political rule is a denial of human nature and thus is morally intolerable. All of this is the statement of the ideal found mainly in the *Social Contract* (except for the great paean to law in *Political Economy*²).

The real, in contrast to the ideal, is set forth principally in the *Discourse on Inequality*. Reality is very different: it provides conditions which can be rectified only by a revolution having an end of a particular kind. This conclusion follows from two claims, one of which Rousseau

2. J.-J. Rousseau, *Political Economy*, in *On The Social Contract*, edited by Roger D. Masters, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1978, p. 214.

does not emphasize, the other of which he does. The first claim is that the enslavement peculiar to modern peoples is the effect of a reciprocal causal relationship involving individuals and society: individuals form a society of a distinct kind, that society forms individuals of a distinct kind.³ The second claim is the unacceptability of representation. What is important regarding the first claim is that the causal relationship between the alienated individual and society is such that each unit forms, fits and supports the other. As is now well understood, Rousseau holds that the governing passion of modern peoples is the urge to distinguish oneself, a hunger to exist in the eyes of others⁴ and that this self-in-other-esteem is both caused by and in turn causes particular kinds of social relationships. In our own day we might illustrate the social relations that fuel self-esteem in economic terms (for example, how advertisements trade on our sense of self-esteem). But Rousseau's awareness that the other causal agent in the enslavement of modern peoples is society bears significantly on the necessity of revolution.

It does, because the relationship of mutual causation between individual and society also includes the type of government appropriate to that relationship. In other words, when we think of the kind of association that produces the enslavement described in the second half of *Inequality* then we must think of an entire social whole embracing three causal agents, the individual, society and government, all three of which causally act on one another. What distinguishes the government in this social whole is one quality in particular, representation. The will of the government in fact represents the will of the people. In believing that a causal agent of alienation is always a government actually representing the will of the people, Rousseau thus condemns to the fire all governments of his day. Following from Rousseau's most fundamental beliefs, all governments have to be destroyed:⁵ none allow the sover-

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3. In particular, see the final pages of *Inequality* where Rousseau contrasts savage and civilized man and says of the latter: "It is enough for me to have proved that such is not man's original state, and that *the spirit of Society alone*, together with the inequality society engenders, change and alters all our natural inclinations in this way." (My emphasis.) Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The First And Second Discourses*, edited, translated and annotated by Victor Gourevitch, New York, Harper and Row, 1986, p.199.
 4. *Ibid.*, pp. 198, 199.
 5. In a letter Maurice Cranston writes: "I am uneasy about your ascription to Rousseau of proposals to 'destroy' representative government. The word 'destroy' makes him sound like an insurrectionist, which he wasn't." My statement is preceded by the words: "Following from Rousseau's most fundamental beliefs." What I seek

eignty of the people. As Rousseau puts it: "Sovereignty cannot be represented for the same reason that it cannot be alienated. It consists essentially in the general will, and the will does not allow of being represented. It is either itself or something else; there is nothing in between." (*Social Contract*, Book Three, Chapter 15)

This idea, that the will cannot be represented, is very important with regard to representation and revolution. In the passage above, Rousseau must mean that free will (or the will of a free person or people) cannot be represented. The necessity of revolution in Rousseau's theory arises from the fact that modern peoples, individually and collectively, accept representation. Allowing others both to make laws and to execute them is a root part of the enslavement of modern peoples.⁶ Thus, the necessity of revolution comes from the ideal of humanity—freedom of self-rule—together with the denial of the ideal reflected in the acceptance of representation, the willingness to let others rule. A conflict between ideal and real that goes this deep requires a revolution to resolve it. Even the substitution of major political players, a parliament for a king, for instance, is insufficient. Therefore, all representative governments must be destroyed to enable freedom and equality. Firstly, then, revolution is necessary in one clear sense; the realization of human nature as moral nature, the ultimate end of morality itself, cannot occur unless representative government is destroyed, for it prevents self-rule.

As has been suggested, revolution is necessary for a second reason: the agents who could bring about revolution would not do so voluntarily.

to express is that destruction of representative government is a logical consequence of Rousseau's argument, since self-rule and representative government are contradictory.

6. Chapter 15 of Book III of the *Contract* is very important to the understanding of Rousseau on representation: it should be read closely. One should ponder: "As for you, modern peoples, you have no slaves, but you are slaves." Directly after the passage quoted in the text, Rousseau adds: "The deputies of the people, therefore, are not nor can they be its representatives; they are merely its agents." Thus the concept of "representative government" should be handled with care. The significant issue is Rousseau's distinction between legislation and execution. Only the people can legislate, and then only when their will meets the requirements of the general will. When the legislative will is the general will, then the government can act on behalf of the general will by executing and enforcing what the general will has proclaimed as law. Only in these limited senses can a government "represent" the sovereign people. There is one puzzling exception to an otherwise obvious attempt to restrict strictly the action of government, namely, the government may propose the wording of the statement upon which the legislative will of the people pronounces.

If the government is representative, in the sense that the government suits the whole way of life of individuals, then neither the individuals nor the government will want or allow revolution. Individuals and government mirror one another. In this special sense, any government represents the people if the strongest desires of the individual citizens and the government complement one another. The deep difficulty is not that the government does not represent the wills of individual citizens; on the contrary it represents a way of life that its citizens will not give up voluntarily. When that is the case, then revolution is necessary since only the explosive force of a revolution could break this agreement between individuals and government.

Perhaps one more issue requires mention in relation to Rousseau's revolution. Would the revolution that is logically necessitated by Rousseau's philosophy differ in kind from other revolutions? It would in two respects: first, in having a different end and second, in being universal. Neither of these differences seem fully appreciated in the scholarly literature devoted to the topic "Rousseau and the Revolution." The difference of end is misunderstood because it is assumed that Rousseau means much the same by "freedom" and "equality" as do his political rivals and commentators. That is false, since Rousseau alone excludes representation from the meanings of freedom and equality. The second issue, that revolution should take place everywhere, is neglected perhaps because readers think of the argument of the *Contract* as merely utopian: it doesn't really call for action. Let me now turn to the Arrogance Accounts of "Rousseau and the Revolution" given by Hegel, Talmon and Arendt, recalling that an Arrogance Reply is one that claims or implies that Rousseau's writings were a cause of the French Revolution.

Hegel: "Absolute Freedom and Terror"⁷

The reader deserves an apology for my treating Hegel in relation to the Arrogance Reply. I am not a scholar of Hegel and the task of properly understanding the connections amongst Hegel's thoughts on

7. Hegel, G.W.F., *Phenomenology of Mind*, translated by J.B. Baillie, New York, Harper Books, 1967, p. 599. In addition, see Hegel's: *Lectures On The History of Philosophy*, translated by E.S. Haldane and F.R. Simson, Volume Three, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968, pp. 400-402, 503; *Lectures On The Philosophy of History*, translated by J. Sibree, New York, The Colonial Press, 1900, pp. 438, 439, 442, 450; *Philosophy of Right*, translated by T.M. Knox, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 156-57, 261.

Rousseau, and Rousseau's possible influence on the French Revolution are excluded here by space and time. However, the above title from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind* is too good a bait to resist a nibble. Hegel's qualification as a practitioner of the Arrogance Reply is indicated sufficiently by a passage from the *Philosophy of Right* published some fourteen years after the *Phenomenology of Mind*:

The merit of Rousseau's contribution to the search for (the concept of the state) is that, by adducing the will as the principle of the state, he is adducing a principle which has thought both for its form and content, a principle indeed which is thinking itself. . . . Unfortunately . . . he takes the will only . . . as the individual will The result is that he reduces the union of individuals in the state to a contract and therefore to something based on their arbitrary wills . . . and abstract reasoning proceeds to draw the logical inferences which destroy the absolutely divine principle of the state, together with its majesty and absolute authority. For this reason, when these abstract conclusions came into power, they afforded for the first time in human history the prodigious spectacle of the overthrow of the constitution of a great actual state . . . the Idea was lacking; and the experiment ended in the maximum of frightfulness and terror. (156)

The simplest interpretation of Hegel's title is: all desire unlimited freedom and when the desire is frustrated, violence follows. Yet something must be said too about the interpretation of the general will which is implicit in this passage and elsewhere. Hegel means that Rousseau is confused about the general will. Sometimes Rousseau means that the general will is to be understood as rational and as universal. At other times, the general will is the capricious, arbitrary will of the individual. And sometimes Rousseau means both at once. Using Hegelian language, Rousseau conceives of the general will both as abstract universal will and as abstract individual will. When Hegel signifies that the general will is abstract universal will, he means to identify Rousseau's conception of the general will with Kant's conception of the moral will. Perhaps Hegel makes this identification with reference to Kant's notion of being a legislator in the realm of ends, wherein all legislate for all.⁸ Whatever Hegel's justification may be, he is mistaken. Rousseau's general will differs from Kant's moral will in applying to all of the citizens of the state rather than to all rational beings. (*Social Contract*, Book II, chapters 4 and 6) Hegel's remarks on the abstract individual will are also mistaken in not taking account of Rousseau's distinctions between the general will

8. I. Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, translated by L. W. Beck, edited by R. P. Wolff, New York, Bobbs-Merrill, 1969, Second Section, p. 64.

and the will of all, (*S.C.*, II, 3) on the one hand, and the general will as the constant will for the common good, (*S.C.*, IV, 1 & 2) on the other. An issue related to the general will as moral will is Rousseau's insistence that the will to obey is the proper basis of the state. To justify his title Hegel should show that historical agents desired self-rule rather than, for instance, the absence of obstacles to whatever they desire. He does not.

J. L. Talmon: "The General Will, Popular Sovereignty and Dictatorship"

The above is the title of one of the sections of Talmon's well-known book *The Origins Of Totalitarian Democracy*.⁹ Talmon's style of criticism is of the "your mother wears army boots" school first popularized with regard to Rousseau by Edmund Burke. A good example of Talmon's style and of the Arrogance Reply is the following: "Three other representatives (besides Rousseau) of the totalitarian Messianic temperament to be analyzed in these pages show a similar paranoiac streak. They are Robespierre, Saint-Just and Babeuf." (39) Such amateur psychoanalysis is much easier than argument that must appeal to historical evidence. More relevant to our enquiry, however, is the following: "The real people, or rather their leadership, once triumphant in their insurrection, become Rousseau's Legislator, who . . . shapes the 'young nation' with the help of laws derived from his superior wisdom." (49) At first glance, this is a preposterous misreading of Rousseau. The will of the people, the general will, cannot be represented; not even by the Legislator, who himself has no political power. (*S.C.*, II, 7) How could Talmon get Rousseau so wrong? The answer lies in an unsupported conclusion that Talmon draws earlier on: "Ultimately the general will is to Rousseau something like a mathematical truth or a Platonic idea. It has an objective existence of its own, whether perceived or not". (41)

Of course, if you believe that this is what Rousseau really believed then you won't be opposed to representation of the general will; in fact, precisely the opposite, you will want this independently existing good to be brought into being by whoever perceives it. If the independently existing good is what really matters then the leader who perceives it, dictator or whoever, is justified in whatever he does. It is in this way that Talmon connects: "The General Will, Popular Sovereignty and Dictator-

9. J.L. Talmon, *The Origins Of Totalitarian Democracy*, New York, Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1960, p. 43. Hereafter only page numbers are given in the text.

ship," at least to his own satisfaction. But now, call Talmon's interpretation of the general will the "realist" general will, since "it has an objective existence of its own, whether perceived or not." Contrast that with the non-realist or "constructivist"¹⁰ general will according to which the general will is a particular kind of willing: namely: "if all the people will the good of all the people then the general will is whatever the people so willing do will." What is significant in the concept of the constructivist general will, in addition to its accuracy, is that the sovereign people cannot be eliminated from it, as Talmon does too easily.

**Hannah Arendt: The cry for bread will
always be uttered with one voice¹¹**

The words *le peuple* are the key words for every understanding of the French Revolution, and their connotations were determined by those who were exposed to the spectacle of the people's sufferings, which they themselves did not share. (69) ... It was to this emphasis on suffering, more than any other part of his teachings, that (Rousseau) owed the enormous, predominant influence over the minds of the men who were to make the Revolution and who found themselves confronted with the overwhelming sufferings of the poor to whom they had opened the doors to the public realm and its light for the first time in history. (72)

Arendt, as the above quotation establishes, qualifies as one of the arrogant replies. However, her impressive work on revolution, which makes Rousseau one of the chief characters in the understanding of it, has the interesting objective of uniting Rousseau, poverty, the people, the general will and the French Revolution. Rousseau cried out for the poor, identified the people with the poor, proclaimed that the people (and thus the poor) had but one will, the general will, which willed the French Revolution. The result is a much more Marxist interpretation, in the sense that the forces of production cause the poor, who in turn cause the French Revolution. Whether this characterization of Rousseau and the Revolution is any better than its rivals cannot be said shortly.

To begin, we may note two matters. First, in any straightforward sense, the general will cannot be the will of the poor only. It has to be the

10. R. Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1977, p. 160. Andrew Levine suggests that there is a sense in which the general will is both real and objective. My only intention here is to deny that Rousseau's general will exists independently of mind or consciousness, in particular of conscious acts of willing.
11. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, New York, The Viking Press, 1963, p. 89. Hereafter only page numbers are given in the text.

will of everyone. Hence, what must be meant is that the poor, who are a part, somehow represent the whole (perhaps by expressing the neglect of humanity in their cry?). Second, Rousseau does express passionately, eloquently and bitterly the plight of what Fanon calls "the wretched of the earth."

But if there is anything in such an analysis of Rousseau, then it must be acknowledged that the argument cuts both ways. Rousseau is sometimes a passionate advocate of the people (the poor people) but he can also express an upper class disdain for the people (the cannel). When that is so, then you have to pick the Rousseau that supports your argument and shrug off the one that doesn't. Much evidence for this thesis of ambiguity is given by L.G. Crocker.¹² But even if Rousseau consistently identified the general will with the poor then he would have to redefine the general will. It would no longer mean all willing the good of all.

Conclusion

To begin to conclude, it seems that Hegel, Talmon and Arendt each focus on one aspect of the general will and combine that with an observation of the Revolution. Hegel associates it with the birth of the will for freedom for all and the terror that follows when freedom is denied. Talmon focuses (wrongly) on the belief that the general will presupposes a general good that exists independently of the citizens willing it and that Robespierre *et. al.*, although acting dictatorially, were faithful to Rousseau in attempting to realize that general good. Arendt is interested in distinguishing the American from the French Revolution. One of her major distinctions is that while the mass of the French people suffered absolute poverty, this was not true of America. No doubt the poor do cry with one voice and it is inviting to link that desire with the oneness of the general will. But Arendt's account misapplies Rousseau's general will in the other direction. Talmon applies it to the leader and omits the people: Arendt, to part of the people. Both, as the modesty reply shows, rely on incompleteness.

I have argued for the modesty reply and against three examples of the Arrogance Reply. The difference between modesty and Arrogance is to establish, on the one hand, the nature of the revolution necessitated by Rousseau's philosophy versus, on the other hand, Rousseau's writings

12. L.G. Crocker, "Rousseau and the Common People", *Studies In Voltaire And The Eighteenth Century*, III, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1976, pp. 73-93.

as a cause of the French Revolution. The strongest objection to the thesis of this essay is against its political naivety. Who, besides a philosopher, would fail to appreciate that revolutionaries care not a fig for accurate interpretation? If the mention of Rousseau's name or one of his terms, such as the general will, produces a desired response, then it will be used. There is much truth in this objection. But to the extent that it is true, the objection lowers the temperature on the causal claim. The causal claim is then vaguer,¹³ much less specific and less interesting. It would tell us virtually nothing about the effect of Rousseau's philosophy.¹⁴

However, the objection raises a matter worthy of mention. Instead of asserting or implying grandiose causal claims, it might be held that Rousseau's political philosophy explains aspects either of the French Revolution or of revolutionary theory or both. Every causal truth is part of an explanation: not every explanation is a causal statement. With regard to explanation, one would expect to find emphasis put upon the general will. The general will has two qualities important to any revolution: it suggests a good common to everyone plus a unity or oneness of agreement. A successful revolution, one supposes, cannot be based upon diverse goals and a variety of opinions concerning their priority or rank. But just as one aspect of the general will offers superb explanatory language, equally Rousseau's adamant opposition to any representation of the general will renders the whole concept unsuitable. Other revolutions will be based always upon a case for better representation of the will of the people; Rousseau's revolution could never have that aim. Appropriately, the conclusion of this essay is modest: understand Rousseau's revolution before you judge that of others by reference to his.

Jim MacAdam
Trent University

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13. Imagine that you are a historian who is given the task of determining the truth or falsehood of the following causal claim: "What matters . . . is that what (Rousseau) said and the way in which he said it aroused the passionate enthusiasm of the generation that was to make the French Revolution." See Norman Hampson, *Will and Circumstance, Montesquieu, Rousseau and the French Revolution*, London, Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1983, p. 28.
14. See also: Gordon McNeil, "The Cult of Rousseau and The French Revolution," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Volume 6, 1945, pp. 197-212; Joan McDonald, *Rousseau and the French Revolution, 1762-1791*, London, The Athlone Press, 1965.