

**Jean-Jacques  
Rousseau  
et la  
Révolution**

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## ROUSSEAU, REVOLUTIONARY ZEAL, AND MODERN FRENCH NATIONALIZATIONS

This essay traces the origins of a certain form of revolutionary zeal to the life and works of an author whose name is invariably associated with the French Revolution, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The feeling derives in large part from Rousseau's conception of freedom and—when explored in some of its manifestations in the demolition of buildings and division of property during the French Revolution—allows a reevaluation of his role in that period's violent events. It also gives a new understanding of the modern political concept of nationalization. At first blush, Rousseau's political writings do not seem to provide a key to understanding modern theories of wealth.<sup>1</sup> Upon further scrutiny, however, his work reveals a particular view of freedom that informed the activities of revolutionaries at the end of the eighteenth century and continues to influence the collective political unconscious today. Freedom indeed constituted the cornerstone of Rousseau's political philosophy, and he came to cherish freedom above all else in the political sphere.

Rousseau ultimately uncoupled freedom from equality and conceived of the former in negative rather than positive terms. Although he considered both freedom and equality the greatest "good of all" and "the end of any system of legislation,"<sup>2</sup> Rousseau was ill inclined to advocate in any rapid fashion the radical measures equality necessitated. Equalization of wealth was to take place

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1. See my article "Rousseau's Theory of Wealth," *History of European Ideas*, 7 (1986), pp. 453-67. The present study serves as a companion piece to the earlier article, hereafter referred to as *HEI*, developing ideas formulated in it.
  2. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Contrat social in Œuvres complètes* (hereafter abbreviated as *OC*) tome III, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (Paris: Gallimard [Bibliothèque de la Pléiade], 1964), p. 391. All translations of passages from Rousseau's works and unattributed titles in French are my own. His political writings are contained in tome III of the *OC*. Page references to Rousseau's texts are to this volume unless another tome is specified. The other three tomes from the Pléiade series (published between 1959 and 1969) that are used in this essay will be indicated by the same acronym for the title of the complete works and followed by the respective tome number.

slowly and “imperceptibly.”<sup>3</sup> His respect for the right to property, which he believed to be “the most sacred of all the rights of citizens, and more important in certain respects than freedom itself,” underscores a conservative stance on wealth—at least from a Marxist perspective—and kept him from postulating any radical measures to achieve equality for all.<sup>4</sup> Although Rousseau wished to avoid extreme conditions for the rich or the poor, he did not directly advocate the confiscation of the lands and riches of the wealthy.<sup>5</sup> His solution consisted “not in the absolute destruction of private property because that is impossible but in enclosing it within narrower limits, giving it bounds, [a] guide, a brake that contain, direct, subjugate and keep it always subordinate to the public good.”<sup>6</sup> As he further states in his *Project of a Constitution for Corsica*, “no law can deprive an individual of any portion of his goods.”<sup>7</sup> All it can do is “to keep him from acquiring more of them,” according to Rousseau.<sup>8</sup> Despite his diatribe against property in the second *Discourse*, in which he chastises the first self-declared landowner as an impostor and the person responsible for many of society’s shortcomings,<sup>9</sup> Rousseau accepted a certain inequality. He recognized the existence of inborn physical and mental inequalities “established by Nature, and which consist in the differences of age, of health, of bodily strengths, and of qualities of the Mind or Soul,” although he expressed the wish to eradicate them as much as possible over time.<sup>10</sup> Basing as he did virtually the entirety of his *œuvre* on the mental construct of the state of nature and never veering (sometimes to the detriment of his system of thought) from his belief in the goodness of nature, Rousseau could not help but see the disturbing implications of his way of thinking. If nature, whose goodness and absolute qualities Rousseau always asserted, can create inequalities, then those inequalities must be if not good then inevitable.

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3. *Économie politique*, p. 277.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 263.

5. *Contrat social*, p. 392, note 1.

6. *Projet de Constitution pour la Corse*, p. 931. Unless otherwise indicated, emphasis in the quotations from Rousseau and other authors, is my own. The importance of the notion of destruction will become clear with the subsequent discussion of events during the French Revolution.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 936.

8. *Ibid.*; *Économie politique*, p. 258.

9. *Second Discourse*, p. 164.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

Faced with the inability, given his sacrosanct model of nature, to formulate a positive ideal of freedom by proclaiming the categorical equality of all men and women, Rousseau turned to ways of defending their freedom, which he still viewed as a birthright. The forceful words of the *Social Contract* ring with conviction: "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in shackles."<sup>11</sup> In short, people are born unequal but free. But the pitfalls to freedom are everywhere present in society, which Rousseau condemned as corrupt. Indeed, the whole challenge for him in writing the *Émile* consists in giving adequate advice on raising a child in a supposedly wanton society. Just as this pedagogical treatise aimed to protect the young *Émile*'s goodness, so, too, do Rousseau's political writings strive to uphold against great odds man's freedom in society. For Rousseau, goodness and freedom represent two sides of the same coin—vestiges, like pity, of a way of life and conduct that has all but passed from this earth. Moreover, freedom allows one to maintain his or her innate goodness.<sup>12</sup> With a dogged unity of purpose, Rousseau insisted on holding on to what he believed to be our fundamentally human characteristics so that we would not suffer the same fate as the statue of Glaucus. Ravaged by time and the elements, this statue of a god came to resemble a "ferocious beast"; its divine characteristics could no longer be identified as such.<sup>13</sup>

In his own life, Rousseau sought not so much to promote man's freedom as he did to defend it. Consequently, he himself stood throughout his lifetime in opposition to the perceived corrupting influence of society, living as he did outside of it. One can rightly call him a marginal man.<sup>14</sup> In his eyes, freedom existed in excessively limited circumstances for him to proclaim in vain its universality. True, the celebrated line from the *Social Contract* quoted above does affirm man's freedom, but it quickly goes on to lament the chains of servitude in which humanity finds itself. Slavery, the absence of freedom and the evil to be avoided at all cost, would soon reduce man to a beast in a Hobbesian war of all against all.<sup>15</sup>

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11. *Contrat social*, p. 351.

12. See *HEI*, 456.

13. *Second Discourse*, p. 122.

14. Bronislaw Baczko, "Rousseau and Social Marginality," *Daedalus*, 107 (Summer 1978), 27-40.

15. *Second Discourse*, pp. 176, 183.

The best definition of what one might call Rousseau's defensive or "negative" sense of freedom appears in the pages of his *Letters Written from the Mountain*: "Freedom consists less in doing one's will than in not being submitted to that of other people; it consists furthermore in not submitting others' will to our own. Whoever is master cannot be free, and to reign is to obey."<sup>16</sup> In this important passage, Rousseau defines freedom not in terms of what it is but in terms of what it is not. He was intent on liberating not only the weak but also the powerful and did not hesitate to use the strong hand of the state in accomplishing his goals: "whoever refuses to obey the general will will be constrained to it by the entire body: which means

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16. *Lettres écrites de la montagne*, pp. 841-42. Judith N. Shklar has also taken note of Rousseau's negative definition of freedom, but considers its implications primarily for the state and not for the individual, as I do in the present essay. According to Shklar, "freedom is defined, here, as the unimpaired strength of the state, not as personal choice. . . . For one then is not doing anything one does not want to do, which is Rousseau's definition of freedom in society. It is exceptionally negative." See her article in *Daedalus*, 107 (Summer 1978), 17 (Shklar's emphasis). Although Shklar does recognize at other points in her essay (pp. 21-24) Rousseau's desire to protect the weak, she does not link it to his conception of freedom.

Robert Wokler has identified two ideas of freedom in Rousseau's thought: a negative one in his formulation of natural liberty and a positive one in his theorizing on civil and moral liberty. For Wokler, the negative idea of freedom sets man apart from animals. Unlike them, we are lacking "a set of prescribed responses to our natural drives. . . ." Wokler goes on to say that "[t]his idea of liberty as a merely inchoate trait distinguishing man from beast is perhaps the most remarkably negative conception of freedom in Western social and political thought." Wokler's argument is designed to respond to the claims of Rousseau's liberal critics whose own "negative liberty," to borrow Isaiah Berlin's term, is derived from Hobbes's definition of liberty as "the absence of external impediments." See Robert Wokler, "Rousseau's Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Lives, Liberties and the Public Good: New Essays in Political Theory for Maurice Cranston*, eds. George Feaver and Frederick Rosen (London: Macmillan Press, 1987), pp. 61-100, esp. pp. 62-63 and 75. My use of the term "negative freedom" closely approaches that of liberal thinkers, with the important distinction that the external power from which Rousseau strove to protect individuals' freedom lay in the eighteenth century in the privileged hands of private groups that did not represent public interests. It was precisely these powerful, *private* groups such as the nobility and the clergy that had to be dismantled in order for the freedom of the masses to become and remain free from "external impediments." In Rousseau's view, the forces that might restrict freedom arise invariably from the private sphere and not from a well-legislated and public-minded form of government. Quite aware of the abuses committed in the name of the public good, Rousseau never intended his proposed system of government to become a totalitarian scourge of the people, as some of his liberal critics like Lester Crocker charge. See Rousseau's *Économie politique*, p. 258.

nothing other than he will be forced to be free . . . .”<sup>17</sup> Immediately after this statement, Rousseau gives the *raison d’être* for the social contract which echoes the negative definition of freedom above: “because such is the condition which in giving each Citizen to the Fatherland *guarantees him from any personal dependence. . . .*”<sup>18</sup> Only with this guarantee are civil engagements legitimate; without it they would be “absurd, tyrannical, and subject to the most enormous abuses.”<sup>19</sup> Although Rousseau was interested in the freedom of all, including the rich and powerful, he directed his efforts especially toward the poor and weak with whom he identified.<sup>20</sup> The “most necessary, and perhaps the most difficult” task of government lies in “rendering justice to all, and especially in protecting the poor against the tyranny of the rich.”<sup>21</sup> There emerges thus from Rousseau’s writings a mandate to defend the rights of the poor and weak. Allan Bloom goes so far as to assert that “Rousseau singlehandedly invented the category of the disadvantaged,” whose legitimate claim on civil society was based not on what they contributed, as it had been previously, but on what they lacked in society.<sup>22</sup>

To safeguard man’s freedom and particularly that of the weak and poor, Rousseau built up the state as a means of avoiding the evil into which he believed, in his profound pessimism, society tended to degenerate.<sup>23</sup> In perhaps one of his most collectivist moments while describing the social compact, Rousseau calls for the total alienation of the individual to the community.<sup>24</sup> Although there is of course a subsequent restitution of rights and property, the state continues fully to oversee its members’ goods.<sup>25</sup> In Rousseau’s mind, the state represented the natural extension of an original, pure, and good love of self (*amour de soi*). This

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17. *Contrat social*, p. 364.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*

20. See *HEI*, 454.

21. *Économie politique*, p. 258.

22. Allan Bloom, “The Education of Democratic Man: *Émile*,” *Daedalus*, 107 (Summer 1978), p. 149. Bloom traces this new category to Rousseau’s “teaching on compassion [which] fostered a revolution in democratic politics, one with which we live today.”

23. On the subject of Rousseau’s pessimism, see Bertrand de Jouvenal, “Rousseau the Pessimistic Evolutionist,” *Yale French Studies*, 28 (1962), 83-96.

24. *Contrat social*, p. 360.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 365; see also *L’État de guerre*, p. 608.

type of love, along with pity, constituted the basis of natural right.<sup>26</sup> In cultivating it, Rousseau hoped to wean man away from selfish love (*amour-propre*) the pernicious, artificial product of society. This latter form of love resulted in actual harm to others as people constantly measured themselves with and compared themselves to one another, attempting to place everyone *beneath* [them].<sup>27</sup> Conversely, a positive love of self “seeks to expand and reinforce the feeling of our being” and produces “all the loving and sweet passions.”<sup>28</sup> Rousseau considered quite natural the expansion of one’s world from a love of self to the love of another, for the latter stems from the former.<sup>29</sup> In political terms, positive self-love, which has as its center the individual human self, becomes transformed into love of one’s species, which takes for its object the communal or corporate self. Simply put, the “I” in one’s existence has by natural moral imperative dilated to a “we.” What one wants for oneself, one also wants for others in the community. Rousseau’s concept of the general will springs from just such a rationale, which ultimately places supreme trust in the state rather than in the hands of individuals who might be tempted to act out of self-interest.

The preceding explanation serves to illuminate the crucial transition from the state of nature to the civil state: “this passage . . . produces in man a very remarkable change, by substituting in his behavior justice for instinct, and giving to his actions the morality that was lacking in them previously.”<sup>30</sup> In the process, an initial loss is compensated for by a real gain: “What man loses by the social contract is his natural freedom and an unlimited right to everything that tempts him and that he can reach; what he gains is civil liberty and the ownership of everything he possesses.”<sup>31</sup>

In his ideal state, Rousseau protected the citizens’ freedom from dependence on other people by strengthening its laws. He states in the *Émile*: “if there is some means of remedying this evil [the dependence of men] in society it is by substituting law for man, and by arming the

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26. *Second Discourse*, p. 126.

27. *Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques or Les Dialogues*, in *OC I*, pp. 669, 805-06; see also *Second Discourse*, pp. 169-70.

28. *Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques or Les Dialogues*, in *OC I*, p. 805.

29. *Émile*, in *OC IV*, p. 492.

30. *Contrat social*, p. 364.

31. *Ibid.*



general wills with an actual force that is superior to the action of any individual will.”<sup>32</sup> The laws of the state would presumably ensure freedom and circumvent the necessity of having citizens obey other men: “A free people obeys, but it does not serve; it has leaders but not masters; it obeys Laws, but it only obeys Laws and it is through the force of Laws that it does not obey men.”<sup>33</sup> Its laws, in turn, depended entirely on so-called mediocrity, that is, the middle ground between the extreme poles of wealth and poverty: “It is on mediocrity alone that all the power of laws is exerted; they are equally impotent against the treasures of the rich and the misery of the poor . . . .”<sup>34</sup>

In discussing the various climates that suit different types of people, Rousseau assigned to free peoples “the places in which the excess of product from work is mediocre” and assumed that “revolutions” would “bring things back into the order of nature.”<sup>35</sup> When laws fail to protect the weak and curb the avidity of the powerful, as they do according to Rousseau in countries marked by great disparities of wealth, revolutions become necessary. Despite his words of caution elsewhere about the desirability of slow changes, Rousseau suggests here, at a minimum, the possibility of revolutionary intervention to achieve a salutary “mediocrity” that would allow the state to govern effectively with its laws.<sup>36</sup>

In their zeal, French revolutionaries—regardless of their political party—had for the most part assimilated, sometimes of course with the government’s encouragement, Rousseau’s negative sense of freedom. It is particularly in certain well-defined destructive acts that one best discerns their deep understanding of it. Indeed, revolutionary zeal lies in an apparent attempt to make whole or strengthen that which was previously weak and divided and to divide or weaken that which was formerly strong and whole. This division was intended especially to enhance the people’s feeling of freedom. According to Article IV of the 1789 *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, “freedom consists in being able to do anything that does not harm others.” The

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32. *Émile*, in *OC IV*, p. 311.

33. *Lettres écrites de la montagne*, p. 842.

34. *Économie politique*, pp. 258, 277.

35. *Contrat social*, p. 416.

36. For a discussion of Rousseau’s concept of mediocrity, perhaps best illustrated by the Genevan bourgeoisie in Rousseau’s day, see Robert Derathé’s notes to the essay *Économie politique* in *OC III*, pp. 1398-99.

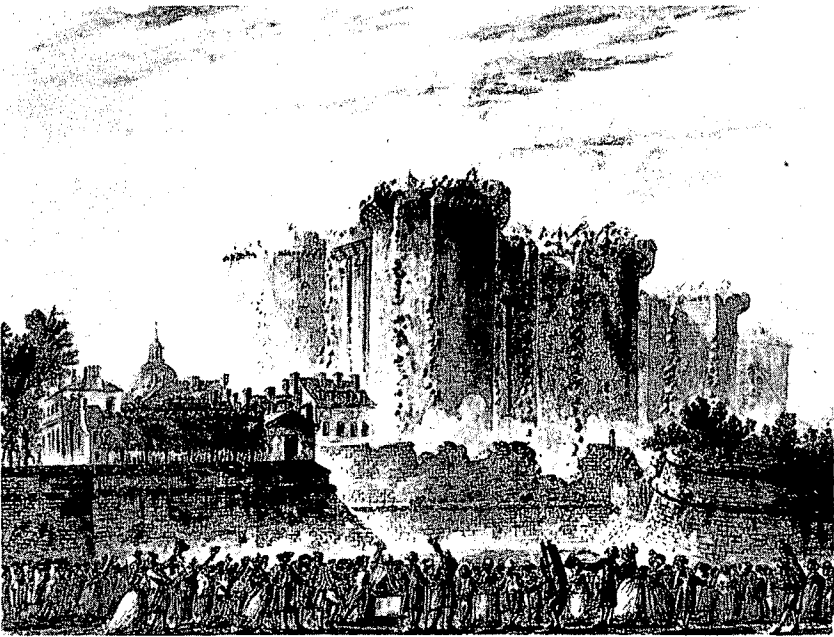


Figure 1.  
Jean-Pierre Houël. *The Demolition of the Bastille*. Reproduced in *La Révolution française—Le Premier Empire: Dessins du Musée Carnavalet*, and with the permission of the Musée Carnavalet.

exercise of freedom does not therefore result in harm to other people. If so, those who misuse it, by extension, represent a harmful force, pose a threat to freedom, and ought for the continued good of the free society to be either weakened or removed from their influential positions. Now in the Revolution, these forces were believed to reside in the powerful, private interests of the monarchy and aristocracy. These had to be dismantled so that in their place a presumably virtuous state could be constituted. In its constructive phase, particularly during the war and the Terror, revolutionary zeal may then be regarded as the nationalistic fervor often associated with the French Revolution.

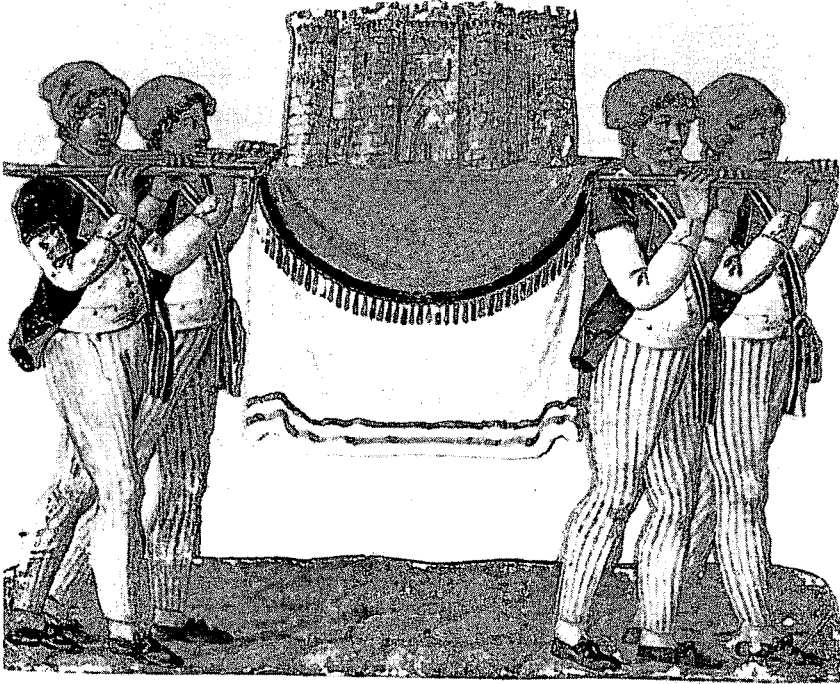
It is on the destructive form of this zeal, however, that the present essay will attempt to focus in particular. Rousseau contributed substantially to the century's formulation of freedom. The revolutionaries identified not just with his self-proclaimed virtue but also with his status as a persecuted underdog.<sup>37</sup> It is precisely against this status that Rousseau struggled fiercely and developed a definition of freedom in order to prevent anyone's having to suffer such a degrading humiliation. A discussion of the demolition of buildings during the French Revolution, notably the Bastille and Chantilly, serves to illustrate the close connection between revolutionary zeal and Rousseau's negative definition of freedom.

The destruction of the Bastille offered to the people of Paris one of the first scenes of revolutionary zeal. It constituted no less than a live theatrical event that was witnessed by large crowds of spectators, many of whom paid to see the "show" (Figure 1). The demolition of the building, which had been considered five years before 1789 as a practical and economic measure, now became invested with important visual symbolism for the incipient revolutionary movement. The revolutionary forces of freedom were razing these powerful, well-nigh phallic, vertical towers of feudal privilege and private interests. Before their eyes, freedom was emerging, as it were, from a destructive, albeit "systematic" and "rational" act.<sup>38</sup> Freedom would at last be theirs after this supposedly evil colossus and others like it had

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37. Cf. Carol Blum, *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue: The Language of Politics in the French Revolution* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986), esp. the chapter "Identification with Virtue," pp. 133-52. In Rousseau's exemplary state and in the Revolution, a social uplifting follows closely the moral one.

38. G. Dubois-Desaulle, "L'Entreprise de la démolition de la Bastille," *La Revue Blanche*, 28 (1902), 401. Dubois-Desaulle distinguishes between the close supervision in the destruction of the Bastille and the random pillaging and razing of certain châteaux.



MODÈLE DE LA BASTILLE.

*Quatre hommes portoient ainsi ce modèle dans les marches  
des processions civiques.*

Figure 2.

**Le Sueur.** *The Stone Model of the Bastille carried by Four Sans-Cullottess at the Festival of Liberty. 1792. Guache (detail). Reproduced in *La Révolution française—Le Premier Empire: Dessins du Musée Carnavalet*, and with the permission of the Musée Carnavalet.*

disappeared. No longer would they be overshadowed by and have to remain *underneath* this domineering force.

Although Rousseau had asserted that "true freedom is never destructive by itself," he did not rule out the possibility of a destructive will that was just and *orderly*: "Thus freedom without justice is a veritable contradiction; because however one sets about doing it everything becomes a hindrance in the execution of a *disorderly* will."<sup>39</sup> Rousseau himself could not have penned a more effective allegorical script for his definition of freedom than the methodical, well-administered demolition of the Bastille. He would surely have decried any unrestrained, illegal use of force and acts of vandalism—a term coined in 1793 by the abbé Grégoire who wished to check the growing violent iconoclasm among revolutionaries.<sup>40</sup>

In finally completing the demolition of the Bastille, Palloy, the contractor in charge of the operation, made a sensational gesture of revolutionary zeal. He commissioned one of his workers, a certain Dax, to carve the stones from the building into models of the Bastille. The first was offered to the Constituent Assembly; 246 others were taken by the "conquerors of the Bastille" known as "apostles of Liberty" to the eighty-three departments. In this series of events, there are two consecutive and quite striking acts of division. First, the Bastille itself is destroyed, leaving myriad separate stones. Then, the stones themselves are distributed among the officials in the 83 departments and the other new, increasingly numerous administrative divisions—the districts and cantons which numbered 547 and 6,000 respectively in 1790.<sup>41</sup> In view of the almost sacred way in which the people considered their freedom, this event takes on religious and ritualistic proportions. In civic parades, *sans-culottes* would bear on their shoulders one of these models atop a kind of litter draped with the colors of the Republic (Figure 2). In the

39. *Lettres écrites de la montagne*, p. 842. My particular characterization of revolutionary zeal is designed to take account of one of Rousseau's apparent contradictions. On the one hand, he insisted on not being a revolutionary himself. On the other hand, he did allow for *legal* solutions of a revolutionary nature.

40. On the iconoclasm of the period, see Stanley J. Idzerda, "Iconoclasm during the French Revolution," *American Historical Review*, 60 (1954), 13-26.

41. For an account of these events, see Jacques Godechot, *The Taking of the Bastille: July 14th, 1789*, trans. Jean Stewart (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), pp. 264-65 and Sophie de Bussierre's remarks in *La Révolution française — Le Premier Empire: Dessins du Musée Carnavalet*, eds. Jean-Marie Brusson, Sophie de Bussierre, et al., (Paris: Les Musées de la Ville de Paris, 1983), p. 90.

secular world of the French Revolution, these sculpted stones replaced in many ways the Church's monstrances in which the Holy Eucharist is traditionally shown to the faithful. Rather than believing in their later salvation through the body of Christ, the French people looked to the immediate present for concrete proof of their freedom. Its essence consisted precisely in what Rousseau had formulated—the protection of the poor and weak from dependence on others stronger than they. What is more, its realization came from the orderly division and destruction of the powerful bastions of the Old Regime.

Apart from Versailles, whose strength diminished rapidly with Louis XVI's departure in October of 1789, and the Tuileries, captured as it was in the massacre of its Swiss guards on August 10 three years later, the one stronghold of monarchical support was Chantilly. Even in exile, the prince de Condé, Chantilly's proprietor and an outspoken opponent of the Revolution, was feared as the probable leader of any foreign invasion. The discoveries of large caches of arms and munitions on the property confirmed suspicions among the people about its military importance. Shortly after his departure from Chantilly, National Guards arrived at the estate and seized a total of 30 cannons. Two years later, as a precautionary measure, troops returned and found "a veritable arsenal."<sup>42</sup>

Unlike the Bastille, Chantilly was not immediately or entirely destroyed, although it was subject to frequent looting and continual digs for treasure and arms. At Chantilly, revolutionary zeal becomes especially apparent with the eventual sale of the property in 1799 after a short period during which it served as a prison.<sup>43</sup> Again, what strikes one in the history of these times is the systematic division and destruction of Condé's property. According to Gustave Macon, who himself points out the "zeal" of the central administration within the *département* of the Oise, it was important that *nothing* be left of this property.<sup>44</sup> Godde, an

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42. Gustave Macon, *La Ville de Chantilly*, vol. 4 (Senlis: Imprimerie E. Vignon Fils, 1912), p. 21.

43. For various reasons, most of the properties belonging to royalty or aristocracy remained unsold. The Petit-Trianon, for example, despite several attempts to sell it during the Convention and the Directory, was never sold. Apparently, small entrepreneurs who rented property on the grounds and were making a handsome profit opposed any proposed sale of the Petit-Trianon by the district of Versailles. See Gabrielle Meyer, "Les Châteaux Royaux pendant la révolution," *Feuilles d'Histoire de XVIII<sup>e</sup> au XX<sup>e</sup> Siècle*, 9 (1913), p. 113.

44. *La Ville de Chantilly*, vol. 2, p. 110.

architect at Liancourt, divided the estate (excepting both the Château d'Enghein housing national veterans and the stables) into 126 lots. Pierre Damoye and Gérard Boulée bought the large lot containing the main château whose materials they wished to extract for sale. As soon as they possessed this piece of property, their workers undertook the destruction of the château and soon arrived at its foundations.

Orderly division and demolition thus characterized the revolutionary zeal at Chantilly as it had at the Bastille. Should one doubt this for a moment, one has only to review the conclusion to this story. For Boulée and Damoye were ultimately accused of having cheated the Republic by purchasing the château at too low a price. In their defense, they offered these revealing words:

We believed we were doing a patriotic act, by putting ourselves in a position to overthrow this odious château, confining ourselves to speculation on the price of materials we could extract from it. In this operation, aristocrats will perhaps see only a destructive act; already their rantings tell us so. For us, in these ruins, we believe patriotism will envisage a trophy erected in republican times.<sup>45</sup>

The remarks of Boulée and Damoye, however motivated they may be by hypocritical self-interest, reflect a sense of constructive intent that stems from a destructive act. As at the Bastille, by destroying in a methodical way a massive institution that inspires fear in the individual, one builds a republic based on a freedom that will protect the individual from any fear of being dwarfed and intimidated by powerful private interests.

Although separated in time from the events of the French Revolution, the postwar nationalizations in France resemble closely the division and destruction of buildings and property at the end of the eighteenth century. After the defeat of Hitler's Germany, the protection of freedom took on new meaning. The Occupation had disenfranchised an entire nation which needed safeguards from within and without to protect it from domination of any kind in the future. It is my contention that the same zeal that informed the revolutionary activities mentioned above also characterized the dramatic rash of nationalizations after the second

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45. Alexandre Sorel, *Le Château de Chantilly pendant la Révolution* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1872), p. 151.

World War. (Before that time, they tend to follow the gradual process of centralization of industries undertaken by Colbert under Louis XIV.)<sup>46</sup>

After the fighting ended, one of France's major solutions to its various problems consisted in radically accelerating the movement toward nationalization. With tremendous popular backing, the state moved at this time to further the work done earlier by the Popular Front in this domain during the economic crisis of the 1930s. When the Resistance leaders assumed power in 1944, Renault and many of the coal mines became nationalized. Joining the list of fully nationalized industries or companies in the next two years were electricity, gas, Air France, the Bank of France, thirty-four insurance firms, the four largest clearing banks, and the remaining coal mines.

A negative conception of freedom—perhaps best formulated by Rousseau—connects the revolutionary events at the close of the eighteenth century with these postwar nationalizations in the twentieth. These latter are widely believed to have psychological underpinnings that are at least as important as the economic and political ones such as enhanced economic development and labor conditions.<sup>47</sup> After the liberation of France, large, private enterprises represented, as it were, the evil power and corruption of the Old Regime. They posed a threat to the freedom of patriotic individuals not only by their

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46. For an account of the nationalizations of industry in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Warren C. Baum, *The French Economy and the State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), pp. 171-74.

47. Baum, p. 175. My colleague Philip Uninsky has suggested to me a noteworthy alternative to the views of Gendarme and Baum on nationalization. According to him, the French accepted nationalization, to which they remained relatively indifferent, only because it constituted an explicit rejection of the *immobilisme* of the Third Republic's economic and political policy and because they thought it would accelerate reconstruction. My own perspective of course corroborates Baum's observation about the significance of the psychological factor in the period of nationalization. Raoul Girardet has also obligingly pointed out to me the seeming contradiction between Rousseau's anti-monetary policies and modern nationalizations, which presuppose to some extent the notion of progress. True, Rousseau was skeptical of progress of any kind, economic or other. But he recognized early on the capital role of politics—that everything depended on politics (*OC* III, xi). His solutions were of a political nature and subordinated economic interests to political ones. Moreover, in the political sphere Rousseau sought above all else, as I have emphasized, and despite his pessimistic attitude towards progress, the protection of freedom. Indirect results of his political philosophy, such as nationalizations, can be explained by this primary concern. The economic considerations of nationalization, although important, can be seen from a Rousseauian viewpoint as secondary.



monolithic size and economic strength but also by their purported close political collaboration with the enemy during the war. No one or no institution ought to rival the integrity of the nation. The state presumably would safeguard the freedom of all French men and women by removing the menace of these economic giants. For any country that itself had just been controlled by a foreign military presence, it was imperative that power remain in the hands of French individuals. By virtue of a perceived national character that has its roots deep in the country's folk culture, the small shall triumph over the great; and the forces within, over the forces without.<sup>48</sup> Rousseau's writings on freedom and the self indeed give political and moral legitimacy to such a credo.

The situation after the war, however, raised serious problems about the state's inner purity and the innocent size of several industries. These characteristics became highly questionable in light of the collaboration of some French enterprises (notably Renault) with the Germans during the Occupation. Remarkable in General de Gaulle's support of the reform program including nationalizations is his rhetorical use of terms evocative of the French Revolution and its zealous partisans: "For France, where the disaster and betrayal have disqualified most of the owners and men of privilege and where the great mass of people have, on the contrary, remained most valiant and faithful, it would be unacceptable for this terrible trial to leave *standing* a social and moral order which has worked against the nation."<sup>49</sup>

In France during the times of crisis like the second World War, at the end of which the French of course regained their freedom, the stock response consists, just as it had during the French Revolution, in striking a blow at large bastions of power and private interest. It parallels the Rousseauian call launched by the *sans-culottes* for small workshops and stores.<sup>50</sup> Such an image of orderly destruction as a kind of fail-safe cure

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48. Robert Darnton has noted the recurrence in French fairy tales of characters who despite their physical smallness have inner qualities (especially cunning and intelligence) that allow them to conquer foes far greater than they in appearance. In German tales, however, the heroes must call upon extraordinary powers outside of themselves to overcome their difficult circumstances. See Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), ch. 1, pp. 9-72, esp. p. 56.

49. Quoted in Baum, pp. 174-5.

50. The petition formulated on September 2, 1793 by the Parisian section of the *sans-culottes*, formerly Jardin-des-Plantes, read as follows: "Que nul ne puisse avoir qu'un atelier, qu'une boutique." This proposal is cited by Albert Soboul, "Audience des Lumières: Classes populaires et rousseauisme sous la Révolution" in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778): Pour le 250<sup>e</sup> anniversaire de sa naissance* (Gap: Imprimerie Louis-Jean, 1963), pp. 45-46.

in reestablishing freedom indeed pervades the collective political unconscious of the French. It immediately signifies to all in the culture the weak's triumph over the rich and powerful by systematically dividing that which was previously whole. The division of a whole into parts, already assimilated on the epistemological level by the French after Descartes's description of the ideal operations of a rational mind, becomes legitimized as a safeguard for freedom in the political sphere with the French Revolution. Freedom, Rousseau had shown the people of eighteenth-century France, needed important precautionary measures. They, in turn, used his negative conception of freedom to justify their revolutionary zeal, at times, alas, with purely violent results rather than the virtuous and salutary one he envisaged.

In accordance with the French people and the three chief political parties during the Liberation, De Gaulle favored nationalizations in a zealous way.<sup>51</sup> He did not want to let corrupt companies remain "standing"; they were to be leveled in a way not unlike that in which the Bastille and Chantilly had been wholly or partly razed. Although many managers in fact remained in their positions even after the process of nationalization and one could argue that little real change had occurred on the inside of these enterprises, the public's perception of this movement from the outside was quite different. This *mentalité* can indeed be profitably compared to the perception prompted by the state's appropriation of many statues in museums during the Revolution. As long as these symbols stayed in the streets, bands of zealous revolutionaries damaged them. Not until they were taken over by the state and housed in public museums did these statues lose their association with a corrupt nobility and could they be considered harmless and admired for their artistic qualities. Likewise in the postwar period, large companies, once nationalized, no longer posed a threat to individual freedom.<sup>52</sup> The orderly

51. For a discussion of the various parties' motives for nationalization, most of which excluded any wish to inaugurate a socialist regime, see Richard F. Kuisel, *Capitalism and the State in Modern France: Renovation and Economic Management in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 202-11.
52. For an account of the destruction of statues and the rise of the museum during the French Revolution, see Idzerda's article, esp. p. 24. Georges Lefebvre in his essay "Foules révolutionnaires," *Annales Historiques de la Révolution française*, 11 (1934), 1-26, stresses the importance of "collective mentality," what I term the public's perception, in assessing the behavior of crowds. Lefebvre singles out as an example the perceived threat of an aristocratic plot. Pursuing a similar line of reasoning, Octave Aubry cites the mistaken belief that burning the parchments of

division and destruction of the Bastille and Chantilly has its modern counterpart in the state's public ownership of the numerous industries mentioned above. From purposely created ruins, freedom can arise once again. But before such political magic takes place, the freedom of numerous French individuals, if not the entire state, must be at stake.

The relative failure of Mitterrand's presidency to nationalize industries and maintain popular support for increased public ownership stems precisely from the lack of a crisis among the French in their perception of freedom. The *sine qua non* of freedom for the French during the Revolution and immediately after the second World War lay for the most part in a Rousseauian understanding of this concept, that is, the absence of any personal dependence on or subjugation to the will of others. When the French believe they have lost freedom in this sense, as they did in the two earlier historical moments under study, their zeal to recapture it takes on revolutionary proportions. This zeal itself also follows Rousseau's indirect prescription for orderly division and destruction of the institutions that endanger the individual's vital freedom.

The France of the eighties, however, hardly resembles the France that had been liberated from the yoke of the Third Reich. Although, according to an aide in the Socialist camp, Mitterrand felt it "necessary to strike an irreversible blow at the power base of capitalism," the French people remain indifferent to his program of nationalization.<sup>53</sup> Destruction on this scale calls for an immediate and pressing threat of some kind. Today's large, private industries in France, in spite of their multinational size, do not apparently overshadow the people and cause them to fear a real loss of freedom. The current mood of privatization in France reflects ultimately Mitterrand's inability to have the French change their basic perception of freedom. Nor has he succeeded in making them believe it is seriously jeopardized, as it indeed had been in at least two crucial times during the country's past since the late 1700s.

In conclusion, Rousseau's negative conception of freedom constitutes a fundamental part of the revolutionary mentality and has over-

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nobles would abrogate feudal rights, a belief that undoubtedly caused the devastation of numerous châteaux. See Octave Aubry, "La Révolution à Versailles," *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 52 (1 juillet 1939), p. 124.

53. John Ardagh, *France in the 1980s* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), pp. 117-19 (emphasis added). Ardagh believes that the nationalizations under Mitterrand were carried out for purely dogmatic reasons and points out the Socialists' inconsistency in justifying, on the one hand, decentralization and, on the other hand, a raise in public ownership of the economy from 35 percent to 50 percent.

tones in our own times as well. It can on occasion give rise to a revolutionary zeal that aims to demolish in an orderly way large institutions that represent a threat to freedom. The writings of Rousseau did not, however, unleash the purely destructive and criminal forces for which Burke and Taine stigmatized him. Rather, they called for rational moderation and *legal, systematic* demolition in achieving the revolutionary goals of empowering the weak and protecting their interests.<sup>54</sup> The similarity of events during the French Revolution and the postwar nationalizations, which appear on the surface as ruptures in history between the Enlightenment and the contemporary modern world, serves ultimately to underscore Rousseau's continuous and abiding legacy to the French. It is his essential definition of freedom that informs their zealous actions at those critical times during which liberty becomes the entire nation's unified purpose.

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54. I am not claiming here that the question of violence never arises in Rousseau's work. Carol Blum has kindly reminded me that Rousseau sometimes had recourse to violence as a solution to various problems in the *Lévite d'Ephraïm*, *Confessions*, and *Contrat social* (see her book, pp. 130-32, and Michèle Ansart-Dourlen, *Dénaturation et violence dans la pensée de J.-J. Rousseau* [Paris: Klincksieck, 1975]). In her work, Blum suggests that Rousseau and his revolutionary interpreters rehabilitated violent acts in the name of virtue (pp. 130 and 169), whereas Ansart-Dourlen stresses the goal of behavioral engineering. I am arguing, however, that Rousseau usually has in his political philosophy a lawful justification for the use of violence and can for this reason indeed be called, to borrow Alfred Cobban's term, "a champion of constitutionalism and legality" (Cobban, p. 9).