

Rousseau on Arts and Politics
Autour de la Lettre à d'Alembert

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Rousseau's *Lettre à d'Alembert*: The Montagnons Revisited¹

Although Rousseau always resented and rejected the accusation of utopianism, a term he reserved particularly for the writings of the abbé de Saint-Pierre, Plato's *Republic*, More's *Utopia*, and Vairasse's *Histoire des Sévarambes*,² his works abound in fragmentary and more developed portraits of ideal societies of all kinds. From the brief, nostalgic description of republican Rome provided by Fabricius in the first *Discours*, the 'jeunesse du monde' of the second, the two communities of Le Valais and Clarens in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, the pastoral retreat proposed by *Emile*, the model political structure of the *Contrat social*, to the 'monde idéal' of the opening of the *Dialogues*, to mention only the most obvious of these imaginary worlds, Rousseau offers us a series of variations on the theme of the perfect life of the individual the citizen.

Despite this persistently idealistic feature of his work, controversy has raged from Rousseau's own day up to the present over the extent to which he may be classified as a utopian writer.³ The problem arises partly because of the different ways in which utopianism is classified, and because of its dubious relationship to the literary genre of utopian writing. In the case of Rousseau criticism, the word is most often used in two generally accepted and not necessarily exclusive senses, one

¹I am grateful to my colleague, David Smith, for his most helpful suggestions.

²In his discussions about the future of Corsica, and in response to accusations of utopianism, Rousseau wrote in the *Lettres de la Montagne*: 'Puisqu'il y avait un gouvernement existant sur mon modèle, je ne tendais donc pas à détruire tous ceux qui existaient. Eh! Monsieur; si je n'avais fait qu'un système, vous êtes bien sûr qu'on n'aurait rien dit. On se fût contenté de reléguer le *Contrat Social* avec la *République* de Platon, l'*Utopie* et les *Sévarambes* dans le pays des chimères. Mais je peignais un gouvernement existant' (III: 810). In the *Confessions*, he refers to the abbé de Saint-Pierre's foolish belief in 'la bonne foi dans les hommes' (I:436).

³See, for example, J. Fabre, 'Réalité et utopie dans la pensée politique de Rousseau,' *Annales Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, vol 35 (1959-62), 181-221; B.Baczko, *Rousseau, solitude et communauté*, (Paris, 1974); C. Gillet, 'Jean-Jacques Rousseau et l'utopie,' *Revue du Nord*, vol. 66 (avril-septembre, 1984), 817-826; M.Tomaszewski, 'Rousseau, éducation des Polonais' in *Rousseau, l'Emile et la Révolution*, (Paris, 1992), 461-462.

intended to be laudatory, i.e., rationally idealistic, and the other pejoratively, i.e., purely theoretical in that the writer has little regard for or awareness of the reality of social and political dynamics.

To give examples, one might argue that all Rousseau's proposals for the future that derive from his studies of the republics of Sparta and Rome belong to the category of rationally idealistic, since such organizations did indeed once exist and could, therefore, exist again, given the right conditions. Similarly, his projects for Corsica and Poland were grounded in reality, even if it was not always accurately perceived. On the other hand, the accounts in the second *Discours* of the state of nature, solitary, natural man, and the development of a perfectly balanced society before the discovery of agriculture and metallurgy, together with the unique circumstances surrounding the education of an abstract Emile and an imaginary Sophie, may be more appropriately classified as purely theoretical. The *Contrat social*, with its appeal to the practices of the Roman republic, its close affinities with the situation in Geneva,⁴ but with the premiss of a group of individuals unanimously agreeing to sacrifice their 'freedom' for the sake of an as yet unformed and hypothetical collectivity, seems to partake of both categories. Another of these self-contained model societies that belong to both categories is that of the Swiss Montagnons, inhabitants of the high valleys rather than of the lower Val-de-Travers, whose way of life is summarily sketched in the *Lettre à d'Alembert*.⁵

Here Rousseau recalls a community of mountain dwellers, 'peut-être unique sur la terre' (V: 55), in the vicinity of Neuchâtel, that he first visited in the winter of 1730-31. The group consisted of a collection of land-owning families, living in houses 'à distances aussi égales que les fortunes des propriétaires' (V: 55), and occupying the whole of a mountain. The inhabitants, free from taxes and all other forms of interference in their private lives, cultivated their lands and, in their leisure time, especially in the winter when communication was difficult and the roads impassable, practiced such useful and self-supporting artisan skills as that of carpenter, locksmith, glazier, turner, clockmaker,

⁴See, for example, L. Althusser, 'Sur le *Contrat social*' in *L'Impensé de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, (Paris, 1969), 5-42; R.A. Leigh, 'Le "Contrat social," oeuvre genevoise?' in *Annales Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, vol. 39 (1972-77) 93-111; and J. Terrasse, 'Rousseau, Tronchin et les Représentants: aspects du débat politique à Genève en 1763-64,' *Swiss-French Studies*, vol. 2, no.2, (1981), 58-72.

⁵For the precise location of the Montagnons, see F.S. Eigeldinger, 'Les Montagnons: un archétype social,' in F.S. Eigeldinger et R. Kaehr, éd. *La Ville s'étend sur tout le pays*, (Neuchâtel, 1993), 76, n. 3.

tool and instrument manufacturer, and the like. Many of their products were sold to foreigners and were in great demand even in so sophisticated a milieu as Paris. The Montagnons were reasonably well-educated and highly rational. They all knew how to sketch and paint, many were well versed in music, could play the flute and sing, talents that were passed down from generation to generation. One of their favorite pastimes was singing psalms in four-part harmonies. Rousseau regrets that, because of his youth, he paid only scant attention to the character of this society, and now remembers only that: 'j'admirois sans cesse en ces hommes singuliers un mélange étonnant de finesse et de simplicité qu'on croiroit presque incompatibles, et que je n'ai plus observé nulle part' (V: 57).

Rousseau goes on to list the nefarious effects that the introduction of a theater would have on the integrity of this community. Apart from taking up time from work, it would destroy the essential fusion of industry and pleasure that was a unique feature of Montagnon life. In no other society, to Rousseau's knowledge, were labor and leisure so indistinguishable.⁶ Second, the introduction of a theater would involve additional expenditure, for the price of admission and for the purchase of suitable attire. Because of decreased productivity, prices would have to be raised and this would lead to a decrease in trade. Roads would have to be built to make the theater accessible in winter. As a consequence, taxes would be levied. The wives of the Montagnons would compete with each other in dress. The schoolmaster's wife would want to emulate the fashion of the magistrate's wife, and this competition would have to be financed by their husbands. In short, luxury would supplant sobriety.

The reasons for and the significance of Rousseau's evocation of this mountain community have been discussed by a number of critics, notably Pierre Hirsch, whose important article on the subject has given rise to several conflicting reflections.⁷ Most critics have accepted Hirsch's proposition that the Montagnon society is 'un ordre égalitaire, une sorte de régime cellulaire de la liberté autarcique, un semis de 'chaumières-palais des miroirs' où l'homme authentique se reflète à

⁶As I have argued elsewhere, in the account of the Montagnon society lies one of the solutions proposed by Rousseau for the problem of man's alienation. It is not the abolition of private property that Rousseau recommends for restoring the balance of the community but rather the elimination of the distinction between work and play. This, too, is one of the lessons of *Emile* in which the young pupil is educated almost entirely through pleasurable games. See A. Rosenberg, 'Rousseau's View of Work and Leisure in the Community,' *Australian Journal of French Studies*, vol 18, no. 1, (1981), 3-12.

⁷P. Hirsch, 'Le Mythe des Montagnons,' *Revue Neuchâteloise*, no.19 (été 1962), 1-6.

l'infini dans l'amour de soi.⁸ Jean Terrasse, for example, refers to the inhabitants as 'égaux en richesses.'⁹ This is because of Rousseau's earlier quoted reference to the houses as being distributed 'à distances aussi égales que les fortunes des propriétaires', translated by Allan Bloom as 'separated by distances as equal as the fortunes of the proprietors.'⁶⁰ But, as Patrick Coleman has correctly observed, in his catalogue of the misfortunes that would befall the community on the introduction of a theater, Rousseau, as we have just seen, speaks of the competition in clothes that would occur between the schoolmaster's wife and that of the magistrate. It would seem from this observation that Rousseau's supposedly self-sufficient collectivity, based on *amour de soi*, embodies an 'inequality deep-rooted enough to be reflected in comparisons of social status.'¹⁰ In which case, we should translate, not as Bloom does, but in a way that would reflect the idea that the distances between the houses were in equal proportion to the different states of wealth of the householders. At least, this is the only way one could reconcile the apparent contradiction, unless of course we are to suppose that the schoolmaster was as prosperous as the magistrate, a somewhat untenable supposition. The purportedly egalitarian society, then, turns out to be élitist, perhaps an oligarchy such as existed in Geneva. It could be objected, however, that the Montagnon society might correspond more to a meritocracy of the sort Rousseau describes in the *Contrat social* where he justifies a modicum of inequality:

'Au reste, si cette forme comporte une certaine inégalité de fortune, c'est bien pour qu'en général l'administration des affaires publiques soit confiée à ceux qui peuvent le mieux y donner tout leur temps, mais non pas, comme prétend Aristote, pour que les riches soient toujours préférés. Au contraire, il importe qu'un choix opposé apprenne quelquefois au peuple qu'il y a dans le mérite des hommes des raisons de préférence plus importantes que la richesse'. (III: 408)

At all events, there is an obvious discrepancy in the portrait of a classless community based on the self-regulating, self-sufficiency of equal and individual families that, at the same time, embodies hierarchical structures.

There is a further problem of interpretation having to do with the

⁸Hirsch, 2.

⁹J. Terrasse, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et la quête de l'âge d'or*, (Bruxelles: Palais des Académies, 1970), 158.

¹⁰P. Coleman, *Rousseau's Political Imagination. Rule and Representation in the 'Lettre à d'Alembert'*, (Genève: Droz, 1984), 95.

social and financial status of the Montagnons. Rousseau describes them as 'Ces heureux paysans, tous à leur aise' (V: 55-56). Bloom translates this as 'These happy farmers, all in comfortable circumstances' (60). Lester Crocker similarly refers to them as farmers whom he characterizes as 'well-to-do landowners,'¹¹ whereas Terrasse sees them as 'ces paysans, qui ont tout juste de quoi vivre.'¹² These readings are all open to question, given that the seventeenth and eighteenth-century meanings of the word 'aise' include a variety of levels of wealth from the marginal to the comfortable, although it is true that Rousseau's use of the term generally leans to the former.¹³ Presumably, if they were all well off, they would be able to afford the costs of a theater. If they all had just enough to live on, it is easy to see that the extra expense occasioned by the establishment of a theater could be ruinous. On the other hand, if some were wealthy and others only moderately so, the social balance could be disturbed because of the deprivations suffered by part of the community as a result of the introduction of a theater. This would be in line with Rousseau's earlier observations, in the second *Discours*, about the way in which inequality upsets the equilibrium of the *juste milieu*.

In his seminal article, Pierre Hirsch emphasized the masculine qualities of the Neuchâtel community as opposed to the feminine characteristics of the Valaisans portrayed in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. He further contrasted the spiritual elements of the latter with the more pragmatic preoccupations of the Montagnons whose ideal was to be self-sufficient. Moreover, while the Valaisans pursued a policy of togetherness, each family of the Montagnons constituted a society within itself: 'Le Montagnon est dans sa maison comme Robinson dans son île.'¹⁴ Hirsch also pointed out that, in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Rousseau considers harmony in music to be vastly inferior to natural and sentimental melody whereas, in the *Lettre à d'Alembert*, he praises the more intellectual polyphony practiced by the free and egalitarian Montagnons.

Since Rousseau was working on *La Nouvelle Héloïse* at the time of writing the *Lettre à d'Alembert*, it is not surprising that he should make some attempt to differentiate between the ideal community of Le Valais

¹¹L. Crocker, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The Prophetic Voice (1758-1778)*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1973), 15.

¹²Terrasse, 158.

¹³See E. Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, (Paris: Hachette, 1863-1872).

¹⁴Hirsch, 2-3.

and the one bordering Neuchâtel. However, Hirsch seems to overdo the differences, especially since, in Rousseau's mind, there seems to have been some hesitation about their distinctiveness. In the *Lettre*, for example, as Michel Launay has pointed out, in citing a prominent member of the Montagnon community, Rousseau refers to him, in a footnote, as 'M. Rivaz, célèbre Valaisan.'¹⁵ There are also instances of Rousseau's use of almost identical vocabulary to describe similar aspects of the two societies. Nevertheless, Launay argues for a fundamentally moral portrait of the Valaisans as opposed to the more pragmatic characterization of the Montagnons. Both Launay and Terrasse interpret these differences not so much as oppositions but rather as indications of the contrasting purposes for which these communities are introduced in the two works. In the *Lettre*, the section on the Montagnons prepares the ground for the discussion of the effects of a theater on Geneva whereas, in the novel, according to Terrasse, the presentation of the Valaisan community provides a necessary transition between the sublimity of the exterior landscape and the purity of the interior one in the hearts and souls of Julie and St-Preux.

So far, I have outlined some of the difficulties involved in fully understanding the account of the Montagnon community. It could be argued that I have made too much of what Coleman refers to as 'Rousseau's admittedly vague description.'¹⁶ Whatever Rousseau's intention was, there is general agreement that he attached some importance to this 'digression,' and there can be little doubt that he presents us with an idealized portrait of a small, pastoral and 'innocent' society to be contrasted with the corrupt reality, at least in Rousseau's philosophy, of the city. Certainly, this is how d'Alembert, in his sarcastic reply to the *Lettre*, understood the description, and it is fair to assume that his contemporaries did likewise. It is also worth noting that d'Alembert, too, confused the Montagnons with the Valaisans:

Vous nous transportez d'abord dans les montagnes du Valais, au centre d'un petit pays dont vous nous faites une description charmante; vous nous montrez ce qui ne se trouve peut-être que dans ce seul coin de l'univers, des peuples tranquilles et satisfaits au sein de leur famille et de leur travail, et vous prouvez que la comédie ne serait propre qu'à troubler le bonheur dont ils jouissent. Personne, Monsieur, ne prétendra le contraire; des hommes assez heureux pour se contenter des plaisirs offerts par la nature ne doivent point y en substituer d'autres; les

¹⁵M. Launay, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, écrivain politique (1712-1762)*, deuxième édition revue et augmentée, (Genève: Slatkine, 1989).

¹⁶Coleman, 91.

amusements qu'on cherche sont le poison lent des amusements simples, et c'est une loi générale de ne pas entreprendre de changer le bien en mieux... Je veux croire qu'il n'y a rien d'exagéré ni de romanesque dans la description de ce canton fortuné du Valais où il n'y a ni haine, ni jalousie, ni querelles, et où il y a pourtant des hommes. Mais si l'âge d'or s'est réfugié dans les rochers voisins de Genève, vos citoyens en sont pour le moins à l'âge d'argent, et dans le peu de temps que j'ai passé parmi eux, ils m'ont paru assez avancé, ou si vous voulez assez pervertis, pour pouvoir entendre *Brutus et Rome sauvée* sans avoir à craindre d'en devenir pires.¹⁷

In short, in Rousseau's imaginary world, perfect beings may be corrupted by 'unnatural' entertainments such as the theater but, according to d'Alembert, in real life, especially in Geneva, normal human beings are not so easily debased.

The awareness of the danger of being corrupted by outside influences deriving from so called 'civilized' societies is one of the characteristic features of utopias. This is why, beginning with More's *Utopia*, almost all these communities are isolated from the rest of the world, and access to them is extremely difficult, protected as they are by high mountains, raging seas, and the like.¹⁸ It seems almost as if imported ideas are a kind of virus against which the inhabitants have no immunity and are destroyed, much as the 'isolated' natives of South America were destroyed by the European explorers, soldiers, merchants and missionaries. In utopian fiction, the natives sometimes manage to resist the source of infection, as in the case of the fanatical Christian in More's *Utopia* who was exiled for threatening to undermine the spirit of tolerance, and that of the Christian missionary, in Tyssot de Patot's *Voyages et aventures de Jaques Massé* (1714?), who met a similar fate for similar reasons,¹⁹ as did the politically incorrect poets of Plato's *Republic*.

Rousseau's ideal societies, by contrast, are so delicately constructed that they cave in at the slightest sign of contamination. Why does Rousseau hypothesize, for example, that the community of

¹⁷D'Alembert's reply is found in the Appendix to Léon Fontaine's edition of the *Lettre à d'Alembert*, (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1889), 328-329.

¹⁸Numerous examples of this utopian feature are available in R. Trousson, *Voyages aux pays de nulle part*, deuxième édition revue et augmentée, (Bruxelles: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1979).

¹⁹For a detailed discussion of this imaginary voyage cum utopia, see the introduction to my edition of Simon Tyssot de Patot, *Voyages et aventures de Jaques Massé*, (Paris: Universitäts/Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1993).

Montagnons, so self-contained and independent, so happy and peaceful at work and play, would collapse in an instant when confronted with theatrical entertainment? Where are their inner resources, their values and their familial loyalties? Similar questions may be put with regard to the society of Clarens on the death of Julie,²⁰ and Emile and Sophie whose ideal education amazingly provides no protection against the baleful influence of Paris. There is something profoundly fragile in Rousseau's closed, utopian communities that are incapable of withstanding the slightest association with the exterior or tolerating the least degree of discord from inside. But as far as the Montagnons are concerned, they are portrayed as experiencing no inner discord despite the fact, as we have seen, that they are exposed to the outside world through the goods they produce.

The *Contrat social* teaches us that it is in the very nature of social and political organisms to degenerate: 'le corps politique, aussi bien que le corps de l'homme, commence à mourir dès sa naissance et porte en lui-même les causes de sa destruction' (III: 424). The 'vice inhérent et inévitable' (III: 421) that brings about this destruction is *amour propre*. But the society of Montagnons is depicted as free of this tragic flaw until the hypothetical institution of an unnatural form of entertainment brings it out in the form of competition among the women over who is the best dressed. Perhaps this manifestation of *amour propre*, originating with the women, is the primary source of corruption. This would be consistent with the uncompromisingly anti-feminist stance of the *Lettre à d'Alembert*. Whatever the explanation for the sudden collapse of the Montagnon society, the inescapable conclusion is that, in this idealized community, as in all Rousseau's models of humanity, as I have argued more extensively elsewhere,²¹ *amour propre* was already present, but dormant, waiting only to be activated by the establishment of a theater or some other evil. Indeed, one critic has characterized the Montagnons as representing 'un idéal à mi-chemin entre l'état sauvage et le contrat social,' reminiscent of the golden age, the *juste milieu*

²⁰See Jean-Michel Racault, *L'Utopie narrative en France et en Angleterre 1675-1761*, (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1981), 725-729.

²¹*Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Providence*, (Sherbrooke, Naaman, 1987; 'Eighteenth-Century Theories of Generation and the Birth and Development of Rousseau's Natural Man,' in *Rousseau and the Eighteenth Century: Essays in Memory of R.A. Leigh*, (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1992), 271-280; 'Charles Bonnet's Criticism of Rousseau's *Second Discourse*,' in *Rousseau and Criticism/Rousseau et la critique*, (Ottawa: Pensée libre, no. 5, 1995).

portrayed in the *Discours sur l'inégalité*.²²

Rousseau's fears about the corrupting influence of the theater are echoed nowadays by opponents of television, especially in its portrayal of violence. Rousseau thought, however, that in decadent societies such as ours, the time taken up attending vicious spectacles reduced the time available for indulging in vice. He did not argue, as critics do today, that these entertainments are a training ground for and an incitement to vice since he regarded modern society as already beyond redemption. His concern was to preserve only those communities for which there was hope, such as those of the Montagnons, of Geneva, Poland and Corsica. But the mountain dwellers were no longer to be found, and Geneva was an oligarchy as, only a few years later, Rousseau would discover to his cost.

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²²Eigeldinger, 89.