

Rousseau and the Ancients
Rousseau et les Anciens

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Rousseau and the Future of Democracy

In the strict sense of the term, a true democracy has never existed and never will exist. [...] If there were a people of Gods, it would govern itself democratically. [...] Such a perfect government is not suited to men.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau,
The Social Contract, IV

Rousseau's perfect government, democracy, still appears to many to be our best political hope, perhaps because men still secretly think themselves gods. The modern state is democratic, or aspires to work with the concept of majority rule in a political electoral context, participating in the economic and technological advances which also characterize the modern democratic (global) state. That is not, however, the state that Rousseau had envisaged as the best state for men; it is not the small, autonomous, Alpine community where men are sovereign. Rousseau's concept of popular democracy and self-rule have proved a remarkable export, as ideology and language. Democracy has resisted the depredations of time and the cynicism contemporary democracies inspire in their own citizens because it speaks to aspirations of political freedom, of civil and other liberties waiting to be actualized, freedoms yet to be conceived. The following is an exploration of Rousseau's particular contribution to that optimism, to the re-deployment of democracy as a future mode of address between wider constituencies and unpredictable communities, in the light of some contemporary theorists who have stretched the democratic beyond its boundaries, past the limitations that might relegate it to obscurity or irrelevance.

Whether re-writing the state of nature or invoking democracy as an impossible condition for men, Rousseau is interested in history only for the sake of alternative futures. He openly acknowledging the state of nature is a fiction to justify political encroachments, to justify injustice. He refuses the idea that the future is already given in the present by this or that other mythical construction. Instead he allows for what is not entirely visible: a democratic moment possible because "evolution" will allow new ways of thinking and living. Rousseau's reference to the past is not simply for the sake of contemporary disputes and of the present; it aims to anticipate a future to come.

Origin(s) and evolution

Rousseau imagines a future as theoretically distant from the present as he can possibly sustain it, based on an evolving notion of man's body and its capabilities and on his intuitive ability to morph in and out of the quotidian. Man's evolution is the result of "revolutions" for Rousseau, of accidents in our history, allowing us the hope that the future is not simply already present, already damaged and compromised. With Rousseau, democracy can *become*, can emerge as something other than the object of Platonic derision or Aristotelian moderation. This becoming cannot be predicted, compromised, or disavowed, democracy is capable of new beginnings.

Rousseau allows for different time frames in man's evolution, a conflicting logic regarding the continuity of events, a different emotional predisposition towards the future. He writes of "covering multitudes of centuries like a flash" but also allows for the "almost imperceptible progress of the beginnings" (3: 167). He conceives of a state of being which evolves from our origins and is thus radically different from them. Bergson, theorist of duration, refers to such an evolutionary understanding as an intuitive metaphysics "which [would] follow the undulations of the real" (35). This perspective addresses internal changes and transformations, and bears upon internal duration: "It grasps a succession which is not juxtaposition, a growth from within, the uninterrupted prolongation of the past into a present which is already blending into the future" (35). Rousseau's discussions of man's origins and its accident-driven evolution to a social contract are an eloquent refutation of Plato's grim disintegration/unraveling of the Republic into the anarchy that is the democratic city. The rule of the unruly mob is characterized by Plato as a state so depraved that animals walk undisturbed down the streets of Athens. Rousseau rehabilitates the ancient idea of democracy by allowing for duration — a different understanding of the unfolding of time — which Bergson conceives as primary to novelty and creative evolution.

Rousseau believes the subject requires a prior engagement with the self, a re-learning of self love (*amour de soi*) and self respect, before being able to meaningfully engage in political life. Kant's imperative falls on deaf ears if there is no prior engagement with the self, an engagement which makes possible the encounter with one's Other, with all the Others who comprise the political. Rousseau reconceptualizes the political problem as one of negotiating multiple engagements, successful only when "each one, being united with all, only obeys himself and remains as free as before" (3: 360).

Rather than stipulating a fictional equality as the groundwork of our political beginning Rousseau recognizes instead a struggle for self-respect, autonomy, and liberty against the claims of wealth as political power. Rousseau allows for surprising outcomes and imaginative reconfigurations of the democratic. Despite his failure to extend the protection of the state or of the social contract to women and children who really need it, Rousseau does open the way for an extension and reconfiguration of political liberty for *both* men and women by identifying the common origins of political abuses of power. He writes that there must be always be strict regulation of arbitrary power, “the laws are always useful to those who possess and harmful to those who have nothing: from which it follows that the social condition is only advantageous to men insofar as they all have something and that none among them has too much.” (3: 367) Rousseau recognizes the need for a state which acknowledges those particular differences and mediates for relations of parity. He refuses to leave men to the tender mercies of Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” and would not believe them safe under John Rawls’s “veil of ignorance”. Rousseau imagines new men who “capable of being unequal in strength or genius, [they] become equal by convention and right” (3: 367).

Seeking to uncover our true origins, Rousseau bypassed the Greeks and Romans for the figure of Glaucus the sea-god “who looked less like a god than a wild beast” (3:122) in order to show his colleagues and readers the difference between primitive and civilized man: the beast is our ancestor, our standpoint and our place of judgement. Rousseau neatly reversed Plato’s hierarchies, divine authority reduced to a spectral figure before the harsh recognition of our animal self. It is this innovative spirit which allow him to create a more flexible modern notion of democracy without fully understanding its permutations and resistance. With Rousseau we look to the beast in man for a sense of the future.

Time of/to change

Much political thought is grounded on notions of continuity which infer the evolutions of people and their constitutions from certain racial, or geographical or dynastic givens. Facts are gathered by official investigators, all can be predicted, or anticipated. Bergson recognizes that creative thought is not simply the re-arrangement of old forms through a logic of retrospection. Instead, he notices that “invention gives being to what did not exist; [what] might never have happened [...]. The effort of invention consists in raising the problem, in creating the terms in which it will be stated” (58–59). This is Rousseau’s particular genius in reconsidering democracy as the self government of gods, or of men who fantasize that they

are certain kinds of gods.

There have been shifts in political thought which clarify and complicate certain aspects of Rousseau's discussion of democracy. The first change is found in our understanding of power as multiple and varied, and finds meaning in the specifically political content of a treatise as well as in the position of the writer within a larger cultural context (Foucault 25–28). Writings from the margins speak different truths, allow for alternative interpretations of power as residing not in this or that place, king, state, or economy, but in multiple articulations and possibilities yet untheorized. For those who fear the totalitarian power of the state, Rousseau offers the possibility of citizens who (with the prescience of gods) can rule themselves and each other in relative peace and harmony without producing monstrous Leviathans to represent and subdue each other. This is possible because Rousseau has politicized the discussion of the self, provoking conversations between Jean-Jacques and Rousseau as a strategy to self-constitution and self-regulation. Re-conceptualizations of the subject are critical to the evolution to political maturity and freedom for Rousseau, just as they are to discussions of sexual difference, or clarification of the position of the subject in racist society. This allows the emergence and recognition of more than one site of power and knowledge. A more nuanced reading of history has allowed for the possibility beyond the universal subject of history, has allowed for two, rich and poor (or weak and strong), to matter for Rousseau's political theory.

The new imperative: the necessary recognition of the other as other

Another change in political thought has been the unfolding of feminist thought in multiple discourses and disciplines. Irigaray, the philosopher of sexual difference, points to the emergence of new paradigms, and to the transformation of existing ethical models of the political. Irigaray has written of the possibility, in the future, of two genders, two distinct viewpoints, genealogies, capabilities. She argues that sexual difference has yet to happen, that there is one sex, and its opposite, counterpart, reflection, supplement; that the unique human subject is man (*An Ethics of Sexual Difference*). She observes that "two different identities have to be defined in a way other than as artificially opposed poles of a single human model. [...] Even if the identity of each gender has yet to be exhaustively determined or accomplished, we must use as our basis two irreducible identities. For is there really such a thing as the neuter? What is it?" (*I Love to You* 128). She is not arguing that men have power and that women do not: she is saying we have no experience of two distinct realities. This is a methodological observation, rather than an attempt to mobilize women, and

concerns a challenge to explanatory modes and systems of representations, as Rousseau's critique of politics was intended to challenge natural law theorists as well as Platonic pessimism.

Irigaray writes of a "social contract" which would acknowledge sexual difference by granting distinct rights to men and women. She stretches the notion of contract to a future in which "citizenship is no longer characterized by the accumulation of possessions protected by civil law [...] instead its a function of being born actually and not abstractly." Irigaray writes that each man and woman is protected by the State by the simple virtue of being born — "such a right is the condition of a true democracy" [*I Love to You* 53]. The choice of investing in things, of property itself, is seen as by Irigaray as "secondary to the right to exist."

Rousseau's innovative contract which sought to bind men to self-made laws laid the groundwork for more nuanced understandings of democracy and for a more expansive idea of personal freedom. This social contract has also been shown to be resistant to women as well as to racial, ethnic and sexual differences of the political body. Irigaray suggests that an adaptation and evolution of this contract would allow it to minimally serve the function which justified it: protecting individuals from each other, and perhaps from themselves. In order for this to happen, individuals need recognition and address as distinct Others. Questions of property, as Rousseau feared, have been allowed to dominate the political discussion at the expense of other fundamental differences which are then subsumed but cannot be erased.

Irigaray provides us with another model for human relations, refers us to the placental economy in which two beings inhabit one body peacefully, as a useful image for social and political life. "The placental relation represents one of these openings with regard to determinism, to vital or cultural closure, an opening which stems from female corporeal identity". Another image of the social, another set of possibilities which perhaps exceed the democratic model. Whereas patriarchal relations depicts the state and its citizens in a curious state of fusion, a state which some critics believe demands/begs for totalitarian rule, Irigaray points to the possibility of another "democratic" model, one where the self and other(s) are "strangely organized and respectful of the life of both" (*Je, Tu, Nous* 38). This perspective transforms and alters our understanding of the traditional social contract which grants or imposes anonymity to sexually and racially neutral (which is to say white male) citizen. Irigaray clarifies another understanding of the organic reality of political citizenship which occurs at every birth: we are born, male and female, citizens of the body politic. This recognition might stretch the fabled tent under which we all

seek a home to the bursting point. It might also allow for creative movement to take us to a new political form, a different horizon with a new name.

Rousseau called into question the reasonable law-abiding citizen of the Lockean contract yet would not imagine the community beyond its homogeneity and unity, sovereignty requiring transparency and total adherence to the local laws. The emphasis on the citizen excises and sets adrift the stranger, the refugee, the "guest worker," the Other (a position which Rousseau himself occupies most of his adult life). Rousseau's scope is clear, it is about those who are citizens, about what constitutes the political for them. He only addresses women and other exotics as the backdrop rather than the pre-condition for concerns about the political community, Geneva, Corsica or Poland. Although Rousseau's political considerations speak to those who would be gods, it does not speak to them alone.

Writing of the encounter with the other which characterizes the political community, and "the community of those who have nothing in common" Lingis recognizes the need to go beyond the image of the rational community, the home of autonomous individuals obeying laws which they construct themselves. He writes that "to enter into conversation with another is to lay down one's arms and one's defenses; to throw open the gates of one's positions; to expose oneself to the other, the outsider; to lay oneself open to surprises, contestations, and inculcation. It is to risk what one found or produced in common [...]. One enters a conversation in order to become an other for the other" (87–88). The democratic as we have known it so far would certainly be superceded by a vision of politics which allowed host and guest to know each other as welcome strangers, respectful in their relation to a common planet.

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