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THE PARA-MACHIAVELLIAN DIMENSION OF ROUSSEAU'S DISCOURSE ON POLITICAL ECONOMY

In the *Discourse on Political Economy*,¹ Rousseau delineates a political education for actual or potential statesmen who themselves are to be public educators of republican citizens and warriors.² I will attempt to clarify what I suggest is a para-Machiavellian leitmotiv present in Rousseau's teaching in the *Political Economy*.³

Rousseau indirectly praises Machiavelli in the *Political Economy* for defending popular rule against tyranny in his "satires" (*O.C.*, III, 247). More specifically, Rousseau implicitly accepts Machiavelli's paradigm of popular leadership. According to Machiavelli, competent republican politics would have to be based on a dynamic symbiotic relationship between the needs and powers of the people and those of the leaders. As a result, the people would be given new or renewed modes and orders providing them with stability, economic prosperity, popular participation, and national independence. In return, the leaders would receive power, honor, and glory (*Dis.* I, 58; *Pr.* ch. 8-9). At the apex of such popular leaders Machiavelli places the type he calls "the armed prophet" — the wielder of creative force, who is also an institution-builder (*Pr.*, ch. 6; *Dis.* I, 9-11, 19).

Like Machiavelli, Rousseau argues that a division of labor between the virtuous few and the patriotic many can result in mutual satisfaction or happiness. Only by creating a

1. In *Œuvres complètes de J.-J. Rousseau*, ed. B. Gagnebin and M. Raymond, 4 vols. thus far. Translations of the *Political Economy* are taken, with some changes, from Roger D. Masters and Judith R. Masters, ed. and trans., *On the Social Contract with Political Economy*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978).

2. For the importance of education in Rousseau's political thought, see R. Derathé, *J.-J. Rousseau et la science politique de son temps* (Paris: Vrin, 1970), pp. 376-79; and Allan Bloom's introduction to his translation of the *Émile* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), pp. 3-29.

3. On Rousseau's relationship to Machiavelli, see the excellent survey of the works by Paolo M. Cucchi, "Rousseau, lecteur de Machiavel," in *Rousseau et son temps*, ed. M. Launay (Paris, 1968), pp. 17-35. In my paper, *Pr.* = *The Prince*; *Dis.* = *Discourses*.

republic consisting of free citizens whose rights and material needs are provided for can the leaders experience a mode of honorable recognition from the people, rather than mere grudging obedience from a frightened herd (O.C., III, 258). And though Rousseau does not put the armed prophet in first place in terms of virtue, he does recognize and accept the historical necessity of his role in the *Political Economy*:

If it is good to know how to use men as they are, it is worth much more still to make them what there is a need that they be; the most absolute authority is that which penetrates to the very interior of man, and is exercised no less on the will than on actions. It is certain that the people are in the long run what the government makes them be. Warriors, citizens, men when it wants; populace and *canaille* when it pleases it; and every prince who despises his subjects dishonors himself in showing that he did not know how to render them worthy of esteem. (III, 251)

Addressing himself to every potentially heroic leader, Rousseau advocates a break with the mercenary politics of the age that gave rise to disunited and selfish *canaille* and masses. In contrast, a comprehensive fashioning through military training and citizen education will result in a patriotic and law-abiding people (III, 252, 261). Written laws themselves cannot engender a public-spirited disposition (III, 249); rather the personal action of the heroic founder is called for.

Rousseau's call for this active heroic virtue as the basis for the rule of law in the course of time, put forth in the *Political Economy*, recapitulates his position in the *Discourse on the Hero*, an earlier work of inferior quality also devoted to the theme of political education.⁴

Les hommes ne se gouvernent pas ainsi par des vues abstraites; on ne les rend heureux qu'en les contraignant à l'être, et il faut faire éprouver le bonheur pour le leur faire aimer : voilà l'occupation et les talents du héros; c'est souvent la force à la main qu'il se met en état de recevoir

4. See David R. Cameron, "The Hero in Rousseau's Political Thought," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 45, no. 3 (July-September 1984), p. 401; and for an excellent study of the *Discourse on the Hero* that places it in its historical and literary contexts, see Diane Beelen Woody's unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, *Problématique du héros dans les écrits de J.-J. Rousseau* (University of Toronto, 1981).

les bénédictions des hommes qu'il contraint d'abord à porter le joug des lois pour les soumettre enfin à l'autorité de la raison. (II, 1263-64)

This passage makes clear that the heroic leader must be an expert wielder of force, though the context stresses that the hero's defining virtue of strength of soul cannot rightly be reduced to physical courage (II, 1263, 1268, 1272). Once the people experience the happiness or common good that results from everyone obeying the laws, they will learn to love and justify them with their reason. But the necessary, hard lessons are taught by way of creative violence. Though the *Political Economy* emphasizes the use of *mœurs* (morals and manners) to form good citizens, not force as does the *Discourse on the Hero*, nonetheless the *Political Economy* makes it clear citizens must be warriors first and last and come to the aid of their homeland when it needs their arms (III, 261). To fashion warriors, however, the leader must be an expert user of force, such as Romulus (III, 265) whom Machiavelli judged to have been a most virtuous armed prophet (*Pr.* ch. 6; *Dis.* I, 19).

Rousseau, then, is in fundamental agreement with Machiavelli's teaching that the art of the few is necessary to create the foundation for the life of citizens and warriors. Machiavelli, it is true, was concerned primarily with an issue of foreign policy — the obstacle posed to national unification and independence by the corrupt mercenary soldiers in Italy (*Pr.*, chs 12, 13, 26). In contrast, Rousseau's immediate concern was domestic corruption in France centered in the exploitative system of taxation (*O.C.*, III, 252-54, 268-69, 270-75). Still, despite their differing emphases both Rousseau and Machiavelli identify both sources of corruption, and espouse the heroic virtue of an armed prophet as the necessary first step towards a healthy political life.

The armed founder with strength of soul, however, is not Rousseau's primary model of imitation for actual or potential statesmen. Rather, the model of the heroic senatorial republican — as exemplified by Cato the Younger — is preeminent in Rousseau's teaching in the *Political Economy*. Yet even this second type of popular leader has a significant Machiavellian element.

Rousseau puts into relief Cato's political virtue by contrasting it with Socratic philosophical virtue. To be sure, the cosmopolitan Socrates proved his total dedication to the life devoted to the quest for truth by dying for the truth. But Cato, says Rousseau, was totally committed to his particular fatherland, Rome, and discovered his personal happiness in the happiness of his fellow citizens (III, 255).⁵ Protecting the individual rights to life, property, and liberty of all citizens, Cato (as well as others like him) was able to strengthen love of country and hence citizen virtue: the disposition to do what is in accordance with the general will (III, 254-55, 258-59). Thus, subordinating Socratic philosophizing to Cato's political acting, Rousseau asks us to become worthy emulators of Cato and attain the greatest glory possible for human beings by making the people happy.

Rousseau's portrait of Cato is somewhat mythical.⁶ According to Plutarch, Cato shared the perspective of the conservative senators and was fundamentally dedicated to senatorial ascendancy in the context of the rule of law, although he showed some humanity towards the common people.⁷ But in Rousseau's model of Cato we find a popular passion characteristic of Machiavelli's "effectualness" or realism. Machiavelli's popular republicanism (as well as his notion of its antithesis, military tyranny, which he also recommended under some circumstances) was based on what he viewed as "the effectual truth of the thing" rather than on "the imagination thereof" (*Pr.*, ch. 15). Opposing all versions of airy republican idealism, Machiavelli contended that a civil and patriotic order could only be firmly grounded on the successful satisfaction of the many's desires for life, property, and liberty from being oppressed by the great and powerful (*Pr.*, chs. 9-10, 16-17).

5. See Claude Pichois and René Pintard, *Jean-Jacques entre Socrate et Caton* (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1972), esp. pp. 48-64.

6. See Denise Leduc-Fayette, *J.-J. Rousseau et le mythe de l'antiquité* (Paris: Vrin, 1974), pp. 103-16; and Jean Cousin, "J.-J. Rousseau, interprète des institutions romaines dans le *Contrat social*," in *Études sur le Contrat social* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1964), pp. 13-34.

7. Plutarch, *Lives*, trans. Arthur Hugh Clough and John Dryden (Modern Library), pp. 933, 946-47, 936, 928.

Rousseau's reconstructed model of Cato, then, is his standard of the best popular leadership possible. The kind of integrity manifested by Cato in handling public funds, combined with parsimony and prudent planning, he stresses, can assure that public needs are satisfied. Such enlightened statesmanship can go far in controlling fortune:

in public administration where fortune has less of a part than in the fate of individuals, wisdom is so close to happiness that these two objects are intertwined. (*O.C.*, III, 262)

More specifically, as Machiavelli had done, Rousseau urges the construction of public warehouses to prevent famine (*Pr.*, ch. 10; *O.C.*, II, 267); and similarly argues against allowing the emergence of new governmental needs, rather than increasing revenues — to save the people from being "crushed" by excessive taxes (*Pr.*, ch. 16; *O.C.*, III, 266). Even Rousseau's extreme, indeed almost violent, denunciation of the "tyranny of the rich" echoes Machiavelli's uncompromisingly violent censure of the idle rich (*Dis.* I, 55; *O.C.*, III, 270-78).⁸ With all of this specific advice, as well as his opposition to mercenaries (*O.C.*, III, 268-69), Rousseau advocates the kind of political prudence that will free statesmen from the power of fortune. Fortune's conquest by political prudence and virtue is Machiavelli's quintessential theme. According to Machiavelli fortune is like a torrential river; if one is wise and industrious enough to build dykes and embankments in quiet times, then one will not be subject to fortune's power in chaotic times (*Pr.*, ch. 25). Clearly, Rousseau learned this lesson well.

However, Machiavelli also likens fortune to a fickle mistress. And he goes on to say that daring and physical strength are, in the final analysis, the most efficacious means to conquer fortune. Though Machiavelli is not certain that fortune can be wholly overcome by such daring heroic virtue, still the spirit of his political education is to clarify which political strategies based on creative violence will push back more and more the power of fortune (*Pr.*, ch. 25; *Dis.* II, 1). In this at-

8. As well, the introductory section of the *Political Economy* in which Rousseau first introduces his notion of the general will echoes or is parallel to *Discourses* I, 58.

tempt to conquer fortune, Machiavelli thought that resoluteness of mind or strength of soul was insufficient, unless combined with resoluteness of military conduct (*Dis. I, 9, 19, 55; III, 1, 31*).

Despite the strong "family resemblances" and parallels between Rousseau's and Machiavelli's doctrines of popular leadership, we must conclude that Rousseau's doctrine in the *Discourse on Political Economy* falls short of the full force of the Machiavellian perspective. In essence, while Machiavelli advocates a permanent and preeminent role for the armed prophet (or lesser imitations) for the sake of conquering fortune externally, Rousseau espouses the inner calmness and strength of soul of Cato, the senatorial statesman, meeting his tragic defeat at the hands of Caesar with his imperturbable suicide. Without adequately resolving the tension between the necessary role he saw for the armed prophet and the preeminent role he advocated for the senatorial leader, Rousseau was confident that defeat in one's external circumstances could not prevent one from attaining a greater, moral victory in the future — if one demonstrated exemplary strength of soul (*Discourse on the Hero, O.C., II, 1273-74*). Cato haunted the caesars for centuries with his self-sacrificial act, and aided the renaissance of republican philosophy and practice centuries after the physical defeat of his cause.

Rousseau learned much from Machiavelli's philosophy of republican leadership, and acknowledged the important role played by armed prophets in founding and reforming regimes. But Rousseau's para-Machiavellian phase was one of theoretical purgation of the notion that creative violence and conflict constituted the essence of republican politics. Abundantly purified, his theory clearly subordinated the model of the armed prophet to the model of the Catoic leader — statesmen, legislators, and tribunes of people. The virtue of the senatorial leader was to compel by example, not by force of arms. By the time Rousseau wrote the final version of the *Social Contract*, creative violence embodied in the founder and dictator was still an unmistakable Machiavellian element (*S.C. II, 8 and IV, 6*), though safely subordinate to the

preeminent roles of the Catoic legislator and tribune of the people (S.C. II, 7 and IV, 5).

Joseph Masciulli
St. Francis Xavier University