

**Jean-Jacques  
Rousseau  
et la  
Révolution**

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## TWO THEORIES OF REVOLUTIONARY GOVERNMENT

For more than two hundred years, revolutionaries have looked to Rousseau for many things—from a vision of collective moral rejuvenation to a model for personal integrity in an immoral world racked by social and political upheavals. Needless to say, they have also looked to Rousseau for a theory of revolutionary government. For the most part, they have looked in the wrong place. This mistake was serious enough when committed by anti-feudal revolutionaries like Robespierre and Saint-Just in the period preceding Thermidor. It has become an even more dangerous mistake since anti-capitalist revolutions have come onto the historical agenda.

Strictly speaking, Rousseau had no explicit theory of revolutionary government. Arguably, he had no notion of social revolution at all. But in *The Social Contract* (Book IV, Chapter 6), Rousseau does briefly discuss what he calls “dictatorship”; and from what he says about dictatorship a “Rousseauian” theory of revolutionary government can be imagined. I will assume what is widely believed: that revolutionary leaders in France drew on this text of Rousseau’s in their own reflections on governing revolutionary states. If I am wrong, it will not seriously impugn what I shall go on to claim. Their practice—and the practice of those who have continued the Jacobin style of politics—bears an evident affinity with the theory implicit in Rousseau’s account. I want to try to sketch this theory and to indicate its merits in certain circumstances. But I shall be mostly concerned with its shortcomings in real world revolutionary contexts. I shall suggest, however, that Rousseauian political philosophy contains resources for rectifying many of these shortcomings; that there is, in other words, a second theory of revolutionary government, implicit in Rousseau’s political writings, that is vastly more pertinent than the first.

In connecting Rousseau’s account of dictatorship with the Jacobin style of politics, I do not mean to suggest that Jacobin governance was exclusively “dictatorial,” nor even that the second theory I shall identify played no role in the régime the Jacobins established. History seldom

sorts itself out neatly into analytical categories, and this case is no exception. The positions I shall sketch are idealized reconstructions or "ideal types," not complete descriptions of empirical realities. Ideal-types are illuminating insofar as they capture what is salient in real world situations. It is in this sense only that I identify Jacobin practice with what I shall call "the Jacobin model" of revolutionary government, and will contrast it with the radical democratic model that I shall also impute to Rousseau.

### The First Theory<sup>1</sup>

Rousseau's account of "dictatorship" draws extensively on Roman political history or at least on Machiavelli's account of it.<sup>2</sup> In Rome, according to Rousseau, when exceptional circumstances arose that threatened the very existence of the political order, extraordinary measures were taken in response. Laws were suspended and the executive apparatus, concocted to execute the laws, was replaced by a dictatorship of one or more magistrates. These dictators then ruled by fiat. Their task was to do whatever was necessary to save the republic and its laws. The Roman dictatorship was not, therefore, a governmental form—like those discussed in Book III of *The Social Contract*. It was instead a suspension of government, a temporary and desperate expedient for saving the state.

Rousseau was remarkably unconcerned to reconcile what he says in defense of this expedient with his repeated insistence throughout *The Social Contract* that sovereignty can be neither alienated nor represented. But he was very concerned to ensure that dictatorship, once initiated, not degenerate into despotism. He praised the Romans for allowing dictatorships to exist for no longer than a period of six months; and insisted on terms of short and specified duration for (future) dictators. The dictatorship must not be allowed to consolidate its power, and thereby to supplant the institutions it has temporarily suspended. The suspension of the old order is for one purpose only: its protection and eventual restoration.

Arguably, the idea of a revolutionary politics was not even conceivable in ancient Rome or indeed anywhere else before the modern period. There were, of course, revolts and rebellions, but never, before the seventeenth century, dedicated attempts "to build a new world on the

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1. What follows draws on my *The End of the State* (London: Verso, 1987), pp. 53-57.

2. See *The Discourses*, Book I, Chapter 34.

ashes of the old." Nevertheless, allowing for the anachronism, it seems clear that the Roman dictatorships were, if anything, counter-revolutionary governments. The threats to which they responded were civil disorders—slave revolts, the uprisings of subjugated peoples and the Roman proletariat. The state of *The Social Contract*, in contrast, could hardly expect to encounter strife of this sort. It is, after all, a state that superintends a social order without class divisions; a yeoman society, with virtual equality of condition and universal simplicity of "manners and morals" (*mœurs*). What might necessitate a Rousseauian dictatorship would presumably come from outside the state: emergencies brought on, say, by wars or invasions or natural calamities. It is not clear why ordinary forms of government would be inadequate for dealing with such eventualities. Perhaps, in allowing for dictatorships, Rousseau is only acknowledging the possibility of a certain inflexibility in established institutions that may render them incapable of addressing the vicissitudes of a sometimes unfriendly world. Then dictatorship is introduced as an *ad hoc* remedy for this inflexibility if and when the need should arise. This is why Rousseau's account of dictatorship is not, strictly, a part of his theory of government, but a supplement to his theory of sovereignty. Dictatorship is an extra-ordinary institution of the state; a non-government, introduced in dire emergencies, to save the state by restoring the conditions that make "normal" government possible.

As remarked, Robespierre and his co-thinkers appear to have regarded the Terror, the period lasting from September 1793 to July 1794, as a Rousseauian dictatorship. Circumstances were certainly dire: France was at war with most of Europe, its provinces were in open revolt, its economy was in ruins. The Revolution itself was perceived to be in mortal danger. What choice but to suspend the constitution and invest its powers in a dictatorship—a "revolutionary government," as it were—capable of guiding revolutionary France through these perils?

The leaders of the Terror always maintained that with the end of the war and a diminution of internal strife, the 1793 Constitutions would be restored. They were unable to realize their promise. The Terror was overthrown on 9 Thermidor of the Year II (July 1794). Historians can debate whether the new order that succeeded it ended or in some sense continued the revolutionary process. What is clear is that no historical model of voluntary restoration was established. Thus, in retrospect, the régime Robespierre led looks more like a governmental form than a suspension of government. For all practical purposes, this has become its historical legacy. This understanding is neither accidental nor tenden-

tious. What the Jacobins created may resemble the Roman dictatorships Rousseau invoked enough to persuade some revolutionary Rousseauians. But the theory is too blatantly anachronistic to fit the reality. Rousseau's words, insofar as they helped shape Jacobin practice, served more as a rationalization than a rationale—with consequences that continue to plague revolutionary endeavours two centuries after Robespierre.

Jacobin rule continues, *after* the conquest of state power, a political mentality revolutionaries characteristically evince in their struggles *for* state power: an unflinching resolve, largely unconstrained by legal or moral considerations, to realize historical objectives by taking matters firmly in hand. There is always a problem, of course, in reconciling political exigencies with the requirements of private morality. As Weber maintained, whoever would choose politics as a vocation is bound to confront a sometimes insurmountable tension between an ethic of responsibility and an ethic of ultimate ends.<sup>3</sup> But this tension takes on a qualitatively different dimension for political actors who are intent not just on muddling through, but who have a definite end in mind—as the Jacobins did, in imagining a republic of virtue emerging from their struggles against the ancien régime. This conviction suggests a view of the relation between ends and means that justifies measures that can only be implemented by a coercive apparatus, a state, relatively unconstrained in the exercise of its power. As Engels remarked, “a revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is”: it is “the act whereby one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part by means of rifles, bayonets and cannon—authoritarian means if ever there were any, and if the victorious party does not want to have fought in vain, it must maintain its rule by means of the terror which its arms inspire in the reactionaries.”<sup>4</sup> The “Jacobin model” exemplifies this understanding. It institutionalizes the revolutionary point of view, according to which even the most extraordinary measures become perfectly “normal” as circumstances require. Despite Rousseau, Rousseauian Jacobins, in their practice, did therefore advance a theory of government. According to this theory, dictatorial institutions, in Rousseau's sense, ought to rule the state. Installed in permanence, legal norms are bound eventually to

3. Cf. Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation” in H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 78.
4. “On Authority” in Marx, Engels, *Selected Works*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962), p. 693.

constrain the operations of such régimes. But these constraints are internal to the dictatorial apparatus itself. In effect, there is no rule of law beyond the law the rulers themselves acknowledge.

This is the Jacobin legacy—evident, for instance, in the political structures established by Bolshevik revolutionaries after 1917, at first in response to the devastation wrought by the World War and later by outside intervention and Civil War, but then in virtual permanence. Arguably, this model of revolutionary government is driven more by the psychology of revolutionaries and by the circumstances they confront than by a systematic political theory. Certainly, its Rousseauian pedigree is, as indicated, marginal at best; and exists at all only as refracted through the practice of revolutionaries enchanted by Rousseau, but hardly aware of the subtleties of his political philosophy. However, there is a lesson to be learned about Rousseau and about revolutionary government by observing the transformation of Rousseau's thought into a rationale — or rationalization—for the Jacobin model.

The lesson is not just that there is a temptation, to which the Jacobins and their successors succumbed, to forget that part of Rousseau's (implicit) theory, according to which dictatorial institutions must remain temporary. Rousseau was aware of this temptation, and strenuously warned against it. The lesson is that his admonitions, however urgent, are utopian in the face of on-going historical exigencies. It is impossible to restore a régime of "normal" governance in a world in which governments are necessarily revolutionary or counter-revolutionary, though by no means necessarily dictatorial. I would venture that the Jacobins unwittingly arrived at this conclusion too<sup>5</sup>; and that their example and the examples of those who have followed in their wake attest to the need to embed the insistence that dictatorships be of short duration in a theory of a very different kind from the one the Jacobins found in Rousseau.

Rousseau's political vision—and therefore ultimately his politics—is ahistorical. For Rousseau, notionally, each individual has two wills: a particular or private will, which aims at what is best for the individual *qua* individual; and a general will which aims at what is best for the individual *qua* citizen, that is, as an indivisible part of the "moral and collective body" established by the social contract. Politics is a struggle in and over the will of each individual. The practical measures

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5. Cf. *The End of the State*, *ibid.*, Chapter 3, for a sustained argument supporting this claim.

Rousseau advanced in *The Social Contract*—from his economic prescriptions to his advocacy of civil religion—are essentially interventions in the battle for the preeminence in each individual of the general over the private will. But social revolutions are not “moments” in an eternal struggle. They are embedded in determinate historical contexts. The importation of this essentially ahistorical theory into a real historical drama was therefore bound to deform the theory, but also, more seriously, to affect history itself—adversely. Dictatorial measures of the sort Rousseau envisioned may sometimes be necessary, as the Jacobins and their successors believed, in defense of revolutionary endeavours. But dictatorial measures cannot be seen, without severe distortion, as temporary suspensions of “normal” executive operations. In an age of revolution and counter-revolution there can be no *de facto* states based on the social contract Rousseau described, no political communities organized around a general will; and therefore no proper governments of *de jure* states. Marx thought existing states are always institutionalized means of coercion through which an economically dominant class organizes and reproduces its own class power in the course of a determinate historical process, realized through class struggle. I would venture that Marxian views of history and politics help explain the world we still share with Robespierre and Saint-Just. But even without these theoretical commitments, it is plain that we live in an era in which states are deeply implicated in promoting or impeding revolutionary change, and therefore that the states we observe implement particular interests in Rousseau’s sense, not general interests. In the real world of revolutionary politics, governments necessarily represent one or another particular interest. No doubt, régimes modeled on the Roman dictatorship can serve particular interests consonant with revolutionary objectives in some circumstances. But usually, even when revolutionary leaders are virtuous in the Jacobin sense, the institutions they direct will work insidiously to promote the particular interests of those who rule. More importantly, an indefinite prolongation of revolutionary terror is bound to impede the realization of the objectives real world revolutionaries embrace. I would venture that Rousseauan political philosophy supports this conclusion, and that Rousseau even has something important to say about how revolutionary governments can further revolutionary aims. To this end, it is necessary to turn from his reflections on dictatorship to the valorization of democratic deliberation and collective choice that pervades Rousseauan political philosophy—from the Jacobin to the democratic model.

## The Second Theory

The Jacobins looked to Rousseau for a vision of the political arrangements they hoped to achieve by revolutionary means and, independently, for counsel on the administration of revolutionary states. Insofar as they sought to implement what I have called the Jacobin model, they erred in dissociating these issues. To advance a viable, normative theory of revolutionary government, it is crucial to keep the end for which revolutionary governments are installed more clearly in view than the Jacobins and their successors were wont.

I have already registered the conviction that Rousseau's political vision is utopian, unless it is joined with defensible Marxian views about history and the state.<sup>6</sup> But the second theory of revolutionary government implicit in Rousseau's political philosophy does not depend strictly on Marxian theoretical commitments. This theory is apt for any political vision, historically feasible or not, that requires the enhancement of individuals' autonomy for its realization. The republic of virtue imagined by Robespierre and his co-thinkers, insofar as it draws on the Rousseauian idea of a just state, plainly satisfies this description.

We can debate the extent to which Rousseau was a radical democrat. There is some reason to withhold the designation. Even casual readers of *The Social Contract* know that Rousseau was not well disposed towards democratic governments (in contrast to democratic states). Recent scholarship has suggested that Rousseau was not nearly so opposed to representative institutions as is widely supposed,<sup>7</sup> and that he assigned only a minimal role to popular assemblies. On the other hand, it is not for nothing that Rousseau has inspired modern theories of direct and participatory democracy. It is this side of his political philosophy that has appealed to revolutionaries historically, and that theorists of revolutionary government can profitably exploit.

The extent to which individuals' characters must be transformed in order to realize the end revolutionaries have in view and the nature of the required transformation must here remain sufficiently vague to encompass outcomes that arguably are historically feasible (as Marxian communism is, if the core claims of historical materialism can be sustained) and others, like the vision the Jacobins endorsed, that manifestly are not. The general idea however is clear enough. Through participation in

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6. Cf. *The End of the State*, *ibid.*

7. See Richard Fralin, *Rousseau and Representation*.

deliberative and decision-making institutions, individuals are transformed into the "human material" required for realizing a "republic" of autonomous agents. In Rousseau's terms, democratic participation creates citizens—individuals disposed to place general interests over particular interests, and to act as indivisible parts of the political communities they collectively comprise. Thus popular assemblies are, at once, institutions for the administration of civil affairs, but also "schools" through which individuals' characters—and ultimately their wills—are shaped.

Whether this process is embedded in an historical dynamic, as Marxists believe, or is only a moment in a timeless struggle, as Rousseau seems to have thought, what matters overwhelmingly in assessing forms of governance normatively is their educative effects. Since individuals controlled through terror can hardly be expected to grow into the role Rousseauan theory envisions for them, a régime modeled on Rousseau's account of dictatorship will almost certainly fail to bring about the requisite transformations. For that outcome, what is needed, above all, is a state that fosters autonomy; that encourages individuals to be the free agents they already ideally are. As Rousseau made plain, this objective requires the mutual and complementary interaction of a host of institutional arrangements, with pride of place accorded to direct democratic institutions themselves. Only a genuinely democratic régime can be expected to transform humankind to accord with the vision partisans of autonomy endorse.

As already remarked, it violates the letter of Rousseau's political philosophy to turn his account of transformative democracy into a theory of revolutionary government, if only because there is no place for a notion of revolutionary processes in his conception of politics. But if we extract the "rational kernel" of his theory of popular sovereignty from its ahistorical "outer shell," Rousseau's views provide a fresh purchase not just on the governance of revolutionary states, but also on the idea of revolution itself. The theory of revolutionary government the Jacobins found in Rousseau supports what most people since 1789 have believed: that social revolutions are events of relatively brief duration, transitional moments from one social, political and economic order to another. Perhaps it is useful to think of the French Revolution and other so-called "bourgeois" revolutions this way. However, it is plain that Jacobin aspirations for a republic of virtue cannot possibly be achieved so abruptly and, more generally, that revolutionary transformations that depend upon changing human nature in the ways radical democrats

envision cannot be brief events, but must be protracted processes—as it were, permanent revolutions, waged in and over the state, for its democratization. I have argued elsewhere that socialists, for whom Marxian communism is an ideal, ought to conceive the transition from socialism to communism in precisely these terms.<sup>8</sup> If I am right, revolutionary Marxists have erred grievously in adhering to the Jacobin model beyond any reasonable necessity. But the Jacobins too were in error in basing their own system of revolutionary governance on an historical model that, whatever its role in Rousseau's thought, only obscures the dynamics of revolutionary change.

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It is fair to observe that Rousseau's political philosophy is a nearly inexhaustible source of insight for virtually any project in social or political theory, even as Rousseau's own views, insofar as they can be ascertained uncontroversially, are hopelessly anachronistic in the face of real history. Rousseau's contributions to the theory of revolutionary government illustrate this observation perfectly. The challenge, for those who would use his work as a resource, is not to be misled by its anachronisms, but to look beyond them—to the deeper insights Rousseau's formulations express. Rousseau's admirers among the radical Jacobins only partially succeeded in this endeavour. In their practice, they inevitably confronted and, to some degree, overcame the shortcomings of the theory they found in Rousseau. But, in the end, lacking a proper historical understanding of their own revolutionary projects, their practice succumbed to the Rousseauian idea of a timeless struggle for the will of each citizen—in which they sought to prevail by *force majeure*. Insofar as we still live in the same world as these revolutionaries, in an age of revolution and counter-revolution, it is urgent that the lessons they failed to appreciate or appreciate fully be finally learned.

It is not my intention to pass final judgment on the Jacobins nor, by extension, on their successors in Russia and elsewhere. Perhaps in the circumstances these real world revolutionaries confronted, democratic initiatives could not have been undertaken without putting the revolutions they led in peril. What I would suggest, however, is that radical democracy is indispensable, in the long run, if revolutionary ventures are to have any chance of issuing in the outcomes revolutionaries intend.

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8. See *The End of the State*, *ibid.*

Needless to say, I cannot with assurance declare the historical possibility of social revolutions actually realizing the objectives their proponents desire—assuming, as Rousseau famously put it, “men as they are and laws as they might be made.” But I am confident that, in thinking this question through and, should the occasion again arise, in putting theory to the test of practice, Rousseau’s second theory of revolutionary government, unlike his first, has an important role to play—as a source of insight and guidance for those who realize that, despite the very ambivalent legacy of the Jacobin model, there is still a world to win.

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