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DEMOCRACY AND ANTI-DEMOCRACY

IN LA NOUVELLE HÉLOÏSE

One of the many ironies connected with Jean-Jacques Rousseau is the intimate association of his name and thought with democracy and the democratic spirit on the one hand and the use of his name and thought by anti-democratic, reactionary, and totalitarian ideologues and practitioners on the other hand. Rousseau's reputation as a revolutionary and a democrat rests on the belief of those (apparently the majority of critics) who see his thought inclined towards the advocacy of popular government; others (Robespierre being one of the first in date to come to mind) believe that Jean-Jacques's thought is inclined towards the justification of tyranny.¹ In Roger Barny's judgment, the contradictory interpretations of Rousseau's political thought are a direct result of contradictions in that thought itself.² Barny's analysis seems as valid today as it was when it was published in 1974. Both sides continue to cite the same texts to prove opposite theses, and — given the ambiguities in Rousseau's thought and expression — in a sense both sides are right.³

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1. See, *inter alia*, Julia Simon-Ingram, "Alienation, Individualism, and Enlightenment in Rousseau's Social Theory," *ECS* 24 (Spring 1991), 318, n. 4: "Many commentators have focused on what they have seen as the totalitarian implications of the *Social Contract*, in particular the subsumption of particular interests under the general will which results in the absolute sovereignty of the state. Many of these analyses argue for an 'individualist' reading of the *Second Discourse* in contrast to the 'collectivist' *Social Contract*. My own reading attempts to demonstrate the 'totalitarian' implications of 'individualist' theory, given the dialectical framework that Rousseau establishes in both the *Discourses*."
 2. Roger Barny, "Jean-Jacques Rousseau dans la Révolution," *Dix-Huitième Siècle*, VI (1974), 59-98. Simon-Ingram also sees Rousseau's own ambiguities as at least one source of contradictory interpretations of his thought (*passim*).
 3. The bibliography on this subject is so immense that I will indicate here only one recent work: *Études sur les Discours de Rousseau/Studies on Rousseau's Discourses*, ed. by Jean Terrasse (Ottawa: Association nord-américaine des études Jean-Jacques Rousseau/North American Association for the Study of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1988). Contrary and contradictory interpretations of Rousseau's thought continue to be expressed at virtually every meeting in which his works are discussed and in the many books and articles published about the man and his writings.

There are also those who, like W. T. Jones, boldly state that Rousseau did not work out his ideas analytically in the fashion of his commentators. "That is not the way his mind worked," avers Jones. "He did not reason things out; rather he simply 'saw a truth.' Granted that his truths were often muddled and sometimes not truths at all, it is still remarkable how often an *ex post [sic]* case can be made for one or another of his insights."⁴ Jones fails to note how often an *ex post facto* case can be made *against* one or another of Rousseau's insights, thus further muddling an already muddled mess.

In a recent essay I have explored the irony of Rousseau's reputation as a democrat and a revolutionary in the light of his appeal to anti-democrats and even despots, and concluded that an examination of his work might lead one to see Jean-Jacques as rather conservative and anti-democratic in fact.⁵ In this essay I intend to offer a reading of part of the message contained in Book IV, Letter 10, and Book V, Letters 2 and 7 of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. I hope to suggest that the Jean-Jacques who authored these letters in the name of the admiring Saint-Preux was possessed of a basic mistrust of the common people and of a desire to keep the ruling caste in place. But first, it will be necessary to provide a theoretical framework for my analysis, which will depend on a certain understanding of the meaning, the use and the abuse of the term *volonté générale*.

The problem of interpretation stems not so much from a misunderstanding of what the *volonté générale* is, but rather from separating out its meaning and its implementation. Rousseau himself distinguished the *volonté générale* from the *volonté de tous*: the former refers to the will of the people as it seeks the common good, whereas the latter is the will of the people as it seeks the individual good of each participant. While the *volonté de tous* may be thought of as the actual (not the theoretical) basis of representative party politics as they have evolved over the years, the *volonté générale* is a more abstract basis for the well-being of the community, according to which individual benefits are sacrificed for the common weal.⁶ The *volonté générale* has

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4. W. T. Jones, "Rousseau's General Will and the Problem of Consent," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, XXV (January 1987), 124, n. 20.
 5. Theodore E. D. Braun, "Diderot, Rousseau, and Democracy; or *Jacques and Julie*," to appear in *Transactions of the Northwest Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies*. Some of the ideas (and some of the expression of those ideas) found in that essay are repeated in the present essay.
 6. Peter Breiner clarifies this point admirably in his article "Democratic Autonomy, Political Ethics, and Moral Luck," *Political Theory* 17 (November 1989), 550-579; see especially pp. 560-562 on this issue.

nothing to do with form of government (although it does rely upon public assemblies and although, since the sovereign is the collectivity, the *volonté générale* denies the doctrine of the divine right of kings): monarchy, democracy, oligarchy, despotism — at least in theory, any kind of government can assure that the *volonté générale* is maintained.

Rousseau does not in fact preach democracy, but only the participation of all in the formulation and maintenance of the *volonté générale*. Perhaps in this respect his thought is close to Diderot's: like Rousseau, Diderot rejected the doctrine of the divine right of kings, and like Rousseau, he believed that sovereignty, or political authority, resided in the people. Let us listen to what he says in the article "Autorité politique" in the *Encyclopédie*:⁷

Aucun homme n'a reçu de la nature le droit de commander aux autres. La liberté est un présent du ciel, et chaque individu de la même espèce a le droit d'en jouir aussitôt qu'il jouit de la raison. (p. 898)

Le prince tient des sujets mêmes l'autorité qu'il a sur eux; et cette autorité est borné par les lois de la nature et de l'état. (p. 898)

. . . le gouvernement [de France], quoique héréditaire dans une famille, et mis entre les mains d'un seul, n'est pas un bien particulier, mais un bien public, qui par conséquent ne peut jamais être enlevé au peuple, à qui seul il appartient essentiellement et en pleine propriété. (p. 899)

Is it a coincidence that the *Contrat social* (and *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse*, which can be seen as a fictional illustration of the ideas in the *Contrat social* and *Émile*) followed the publication of vol. 1 of *L'Encyclopédie* by a scant decade — a decade in which Jean-Jacques could assimilate the essential message of his erstwhile friend Denis? We note that for Diderot as for Rousseau, the form of government adopted by a particular nation is unimportant: what matters is that the government must work for the common good (that is, it must put the *volonté générale* into effect) rather than for its own interests or those of the directors of the government; and political authority resides in all cases in the subjects themselves, who are thus simultaneously subjects and sovereign. Or, to put it in Peter Breiner's words, "It is therefore the business of the members of the sovereign to pass laws that at once express and maintain moral authority — that is, maintain the

7. *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (Paris: Briasson, David l'Ainé, Le Breton, and Durand, 1751), I, 898-900.

identity between citizen and sovereign. And this is accomplished only if the citizens are steadily at work asking what the general will (or the common good) demands" (p. 559). We will soon see how this principle applies to the estate at Clarens.

However, one final point needs to be made before we move to the shores of Lac Léman. Those who see in Rousseau a revolutionary or a democrat may well be blinded by the brilliance of some of his statements, and forget how far he moves away from the spirit of such lyrical outpourings in the development and elaboration of his thought further on or in other works, so that what it turns out that he really means is far removed from what he appeared to say at the outset. But we must forgive this temporary blindness, remembering La Rochefoucault's famous maxime 26: "Le soleil ni la mort ne se peuvent regarder fixement." One cannot with impunity stare at Rousseau's brilliant statements. But how spectacular they can be!

Le premier qui, ayant enclos un terrain, s'avisa de dire, *ceci est à moi*, et trouva des gens assez simples pour le croire, fut le vrai fondateur de la société civile. Que de crimes, que de guerres, de meurtres, que de misères et d'horreurs, n'eût épargné au genre humain celui qui, arrachant les pieux ou comblant le fossé, eût crié à ses semblables: Gardez-vous d'écouter cet imposteur; vous êtes perdus, si vous oubliez que les fruits sont à tous et que la Terre n'est à personne.⁸

Tout est beau, sortant des mains de l'auteur des choses: tout dégénère entre les mains de l'homme.⁹

The long lyrical passage introducing the *Confessions*¹⁰ is also in this category, but it is too long to be cited here, and is known to everyone interested in Rousseau studies.

Unfortunately, Rousseau prefers untested theory and speculation to hard facts, a methodology that adds to the problem of interpretation. In at least one case, he is very explicit on this score: "Commençons donc par écarter tous les faits, car ils ne touchent pas à la question" (*Œuvres complètes*, Pléiade edition, III, 132). Unlike Rousseau, we must stick to the facts; and a brief examination of the above-mentioned

8. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité*, beginning of the Seconde Partie, in the Pléiade edition of the *Œuvres complètes*, general editors Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), III, 164.
9. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile*, in the Pléiade edition of the *Œuvres complètes* (1969), IV, 245.
10. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*, in the Pléiade edition of the *Œuvres complètes* (1959), I, 5.

letters from *La Nouvelle Héloïse* will demonstrate, I think, Rousseau's basic distrust of the people and his desire to keep the ruling caste in place. I refer to Julie and Wolmar's administration of Clarens.¹¹ In these letters, Julie's former lover and current house-guest, Saint-Preux, enthuses over the particulars of the administration of the Wolmars' property at Clarens, on the eastern shore of the Lake of Geneva. He thrills in particular to their handling of the servant problem: how can one keep the servants happy, content with their lot, and attached to the family? It is significant to our thesis that the hero sees the servants not from the perspective of his own humble origin but rather from that of the upper class. Perhaps it is Rousseau's own experience as a servant that makes him distrust the male workers, whom he presents as basically lazy and prone to petty thievery, drunkenness and womanizing. The female workers are presented as people who, left to their own devices, would abet the men while adding their own dimension to the general immorality that characterizes Rousseau's depiction of the lower classes in this book. Whatever the cause, a system of paternalism, deception and manipulation is contrived to control their urges and channel their energies towards proper and productive ends.

The Wolmars hide their wealth from their employees, adopting during the harvest season a temporary spartan way of life and a false spirit of camaraderie with their workers with whom they only *appear* to be friendly. By various tricks and deceits, the workers are induced to greater efforts and greater productivity, while the real benefits of their labors are reaped by their employers. The workers' spare (one can hardly call it "free") time is planned for them. Only rarely do men and women socialize together, and then in tightly controlled circumstances. The penalty for those who defy orders to conform to a strict, military, authoritarian regimen is exile, that is, they are fired; the rewards for social conformity are ever-increasing wages and security until death.

The Legislator of the *Contrat social* could hardly have devised a better means of social control. Nor could Jean-Jacques, Emile's tutor, have manipulated his pupil any better than Julie and her husband manipulate their workers. One is reminded of the manner in which the wealthy in *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité* manipulate the others to create laws that essentially preserve the status quo (pp. 177-178).

11. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse*, in the Pléiade edition of the *Œuvres complètes* (1964), II, 441-470, 527-557, and 602-611.

And how can one ignore the disdain expressed by Rousseau almost everywhere in the *Confessions* for the common people, from the street boys in Geneva to the servants in Turin to the poor in Paris? Who can forget how Rousseau gravitated towards the rich and powerful, the famous and the influential?

Rousseau, in a word, defends not democracy, not government by the consent of the governed, not political authority arising from the people who possess it totally and inalienably, but government by the wealthy, and autocratic and hypocritical rule by despots — benign, in the case of Wolmar, it is true; but he is no less a despot for it. Power and authority do not reside in the people in Clarens, but in the upper classes. It is also noteworthy that women are distinctly subordinated to men for Rousseau, and that there seems little hope for equality between the sexes with him. In short, it is hard to understand how Rousseau can be considered a revolutionary, if by that we mean a person who seeks to overthrow or even to alter the status quo.

If we are to judge Rousseau's political thought by what he depicts at Clarens, we must conclude that he does not embrace popular democracy. Indeed, Jacques Proust sees in "La petite société de Clarens . . . un mixte du second état de nature décrit dans *L'Inégalité* et de la démocratie patriarcale que Rousseau prônera bientôt aux patriotes corses."¹² Rousseau seems driven by other needs than popular sovereignty; as Maurizio Viroli has pointed out,

For Rousseau, to live in a well-ordered community is the principal condition for happiness and personal dignity. When men feel themselves to be in their proper place and all around them to be in its proper place, then their existence becomes *douce*. By contrast it is better to live alone than to live in a disordered society, for there is no condition so onerous as the absence of liberty.¹³

"Liberty," as Viroli uses it in this context, is understood to mean conformity to the *volonté générale*.

But how can Clarens be seen as an illustration of Rousseau's ideal society as seen in the *Discours sur l'inégalité* and the *Contrat social*? How can the Wolmar household be considered in any way as a society

12. J. Proust, "Diderot, Rousseau, et la politique," *Revue européenne de sciences sociales*, 28 (1989), 68.

13. Maurizio Viroli, "The concept of *ordre* and the language of classical republicanism in Jean-Jacques Rousseau," in Anthony Pagden, ed., *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 178.

in which “the citizens are steadily at work asking what the general will (or the common good) demands,” as Breiner put the question in a passage already referred to? Surely, the house servants and the day laborers hired by the Wolmars do not consider these questions. These paid employees, whether they be full-time or seasonal employees, look only to their own advantage: if they obey the Wolmars’ rules, they will be well taken care of; if not, they will be dismissed peremptorily.

The answer to this question can be found in a final irony, with which I close this essay. Specifically, it can be found in the organization and the stratification of the society that Jean-Jacques grew up in, that is, in the kind of democracy practised in Geneva. We recall that Rousseau proudly referred to himself as a “citoyen de Genève.” Now not everyone, not even every adult male, who lived in Geneva was a citizen, even if the family resided there for some time.

There were perhaps as many as six social classes in the Geneva that Jean-Jacques knew: the Aristocrats of the Petit Conseil; the Citoyens; the Bourgeois (who, like the Citoyens had the right to vote but could not be elected to the principal magistratures; they could also, like the Citoyens, exercise the most lucrative professions: the *maîtres-artisans* were all Citoyens or Bourgeois); the Natifs; the Habitants (neither they nor the Natifs could vote, and both were prohibited from exercising the most lucrative professions); and the Sujets, who were peasants, mercenary soldiers, and other people of low estate.¹⁴

The Wolmar family can truly represent the *volonté générale*, and fully identify sovereign and subject in the person of the citizen, *only* if the community consists entirely of Julie and Wolmar. Milord Édouard, Claire, and Saint-Preux are excluded as outsiders; the Wolmar and d’Orbe children are not yet fully Citoyens, being minors; the servants and the day workers are at best Natifs or Habitants, even Sujets. Julie and Wolmar, perhaps emblematic of Genevan Aristocrats rather than mere Citoyens, are in fact the only full members of the community and Wolmar is the only voting member of the community, since women do not have the right to vote. In this sense the deception they wrought upon their employees can be justified as being the expression of the *volonté*

14. This schema is somewhat simplified in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*, ed. Jacques Voisine (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1964), p. 5, n. 2, where we read: “Pour être *citoyen* de Genève il fallait être fils ou fille de bourgeois et né dans la ville, à la différence des *natifs*, nés à Genève de parents n’ayant pas droit de bourgeoisie, et des *habitants*, qui ne justifient ni de l’une ni de l’autre de ces qualités.”

générale of the sovereign, that is, of the Wolmars themselves, and is an enactment of laws beneficial to all the Citoyens.

Those who find this irony cruel should remember that Julie tricked even Saint-Preux with her false-natural garden and her false-exotic wines, and that she tried to deceive herself that she had been cured of her passion for her former lover. Just as her world crashes down around her when the pressure to sustain the illusion becomes too much to bear, so too do the false democracy and the extremely limited expression of the general will at Clarens collapse under the pressure of analysis. Perhaps for Rousseau the implementation of the general will is as illusory as love. Or, as La Rochefoucault might have said, “La volonté générale ni l’amour ne se peuvent regarder fixement.”

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