

Rousseau Rousseau
and et la
Criticism Critique

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Regressing Towards Post-Modernity

My remarks for this session of our conference will correspond roughly with the title announced in our programme, except that in place of 'Marching Backwards Towards Modernity', I now propose, more accurately and perhaps also more fashionably, to address the theme of Rousseau's critique of modernism, and I have, accordingly, revised my title to read 'Regressing towards post-modernity'.

Let me begin with a few commonplace descriptions of what has come to be understood as a post-modernist perspective upon the age of Enlightenment. However few substantive principles or themes they might share, Richard Rorty, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard and other figures who have come to be associated with the post-modernist movement in recent philosophy all characteristically subscribe to the proposition that the Enlightenment, or, as it is so often termed, 'The Enlightenment Project', was committed to superficial notions of reason and truth, through which the underlying order of the universe might be perceived and its fundamental structure made transparent. Once the superstitious veil of ignorance was lifted, the human mind, leading seventeenth and eighteenth-century philosophers are said to have supposed, could become a 'mirror of nature'. But the world, or, rather, worlds, which we inhabit, are not reflected in our minds but manufactured by them in a variety of ways, post-modernists contend--there being no independent reality discoverable by objective thought or reason.

Associated with this false conception of reality were false notions of human nature; everywhere attributed with identical traits and uniform propensities and aversions, allegedly explicable in terms of natural rights or universal laws, assert the post-modernist critics of the Enlightenment Project, in holding the Great International Republic of Letters in contempt for seeking to act on behalf of mankind as a whole, as its collective spokesmen. Such pseudo-cosmopolitanism fails to note the central difference between persons, and between men and women, in their complex settings. It ignores sexuality, power and the mysterious promptings of the imagination. It adopts Procrustean criteria of normalcy and justice which so define human conduct as to render certain types of behaviour aberrant, classifying individuals who lie beyond the pale as insane or criminal. In addressing the moral autonomy of individuals it deracinates them, fragments their identity and estranges them from their communities. It renders the cosmopolitan society of humanity in general unfocused and atomistic.

Thirdly, it ascribes to all persons such qualities and dispositions as properly belong to just one type of social system--in

particular, that of commercial society, or capitalism or *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*, dominated by the pursuit of gain for the individual and the wealth of the nation for collectivity as a whole, held together by an overarching rule of law and lubricated by liberal values. According to post-modernist commentators, this picture of society denies the integrity of cultures which are shaped around alternative beliefs. It is Eurocentric and imperialist, portraying the whole of humanity as if it formed one world in the image of Mammon, inspired by a Protestant ethic of individual enterprise in identifying God's greater glory with the bustle of commerce.

I do not pretend that these ideas are shared in equal measure by all so-called post-modernist thinkers, and I have no doubt done them an individual and collective disservice by depicting their critiques of the Enlightenment Project so crudely. But my aim here is less to do each of them justice than to point out how much Rousseau's own perspectives upon the age of Enlightenment were similar to theirs. Throughout his writings, Rousseau also perceived human nature as deformed by universalist, cosmopolitan, commercial and Eurocentric definitions. He too objected to the depiction of the whole of mankind as if it formed an unspecific and general society, an undifferentiated race shorn of traditions and customs. More than any other major figure of the eighteenth century, he employed the personal pronoun, advertised his identity and located himself in a world which was not that of the whole of humanity. Surrounded by the false cosmopolitanism of philosophers in monarchical states, Rousseau addressed his readers as a 'Citoyen de Genève' until such time as the government of his native state effectively deprived him of his citizenship. It was with good reason that his Enlightenment critics so often struck back at his works with writings of their own which bore the signature 'Citoyen du monde.'

Of course Geneva, like all other states with such oligarchical tendencies as he described, came in due course to betray its constitution. Rousseau's identification with his native city, and with its republicanism and Calvinist faith, was eventually unsettled; and in his own fashion, for a long period more by necessity than choice, he was to prove as much a peripatetic philosopher as Voltaire. But even in his voyages, the forlorn citizen of Geneva kept apart from the international civic culture of his day. In an age of cosmopolitan sophistication, Rousseau's was an undomesticated, roaming, spirit, in botanical communion with Nature outside the urban centres of European civilization, a *promeneur solitaire* whose longest journeys

were made in reverie and the free flight of his imagination. No one who belongs to the age of Enlightenment felt himself so little at home in it. With respect to the domain he inhabited, as Hegel so clearly perceived, Rousseau was *an sich aber nicht für sich*. As he so demonstrably insisted himself in his epithet from Ovid--*Barbarus his ego sum quia non intelligor illis*--he stood for a world of savagery and barbarism which the Enlightenment had left behind.

Unlike Buffon, who in his *Histoire naturelle* had proclaimed the progenitors of the whole of humanity to be white, Rousseau identified himself as best he could with the black peoples of Africa and the red Amerindians of the New World. Courtesy to my hosts forbids my suggesting that in the eighteenth century he may have been Canada's greatest political thinker, but it would not be difficult to imagine Rousseau cleansing his mind of the contaminations of European culture in the waters, so much like *Lethe*, that at least once sprang from Lake Ontario, or communing even more closely with God in the vast wilderness of the Saskatchewan prairie or on the slopes of the Rocky Mountains than the Savoyard Vicar on the foothills of the Alps. If he had lived a few decades longer, I have no doubt that he would have joined the Lewis and Clarke expedition to the American Northwest, part of whose aim had been to overturn Buffon's contention that the New World was populated by diminutive animals which had degenerated from their nobler stock in the Old World. Not only on behalf of American savages, but also with respect to its grotesque misdescription of great apes in their wild state, he would have been outraged at Cornelius De Pauw's diatribe of Buffonist inspiration--in his *Recherches philosophiques sur les américains* of 1768-69--against the whole of the American continent, whose human inhabitants are portrayed as stupid, brutish, weak and debauched, thus confirming, to his satisfaction, that Americans formed a race of men scarcely above the level of that miserable animal, the orang-utan, depicted in the *Discours sur l'inégalité*, in its innocence of society and even language, as rather more attractive than civilized man. Although his speculations on the orang-utan are not one of them, there are striking similarities between Rousseau's social philosophy and that of Canada's greatest political thinker today, Charles Taylor, whose notions of conscience and community, most especially in so far as such ideas bear upon a richer understanding of the sources of the self

than can be distilled from the mainstream of Western liberalism¹--owe much to a perspective upon the formation of the human personality which Rousseau elaborated, even if for Taylor it was Hegel rather than Rousseau who developed that perspective most profoundly.

I take Rousseau to have adopted a now familiar post-modernist stance already in the eighteenth century, not only by way of his challenge to the naive presuppositions and universalist aspirations of Enlightenment thought, but also in his account of the fragmentation of the deracinated self when guided by a rudderless notion of instrumental reason. No post-modernist thinker today has shown himself more hostile than was Rousseau to the manifold trappings of culture in its predominantly Eurocentric forms, in which, through our pleasures and passions as well as our political institutions, we find ourselves running headlong into chains, always living outside ourselves, seeking self-esteem in the eyes of others, ceaselessly labouring under the illusion of our liberty. More than anyone else in the eighteenth century, Rousseau was hostile to the Enlightenment's central attachment to the promotion of virtue through the diffusion of knowledge, seeking instead the simplicity and tranquillity of a state he describes in the tenth promenade of his *Rêveries* as 'sans mélange et sans obstacle'. No one in modern society, and certainly no one who had himself contributed so much material to the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d'Alembert, was to prove so hostile to the false learning and spurious conventions of that whole enterprise, nor so attached to an uncouth world without dictionaries, encyclopaedias and libraries--indeed a world essentially without books, allowing only, by way of exception, so as to encourage the self-reliance of Emile, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Rousseau's advocacy of freedom through independence from society is nothing like the campaign on behalf of the utility of the arts and sciences waged by the philosophers of enlightenment who had once been his friends. Where he promotes the fraternal sentiments of civil engagement, as in his *Lettre à d'Alembert sur les spectacles* or in his *Gouvernement de Pologne*, he puts forward a political ideal which excludes the specious refinements of culture, so characteristic of the lust for learning excited by the sophisticated party of humanity which had made the *Encyclopédie* a monument to intellectual improvement and moral corruption at the same time. No

¹ I have in mind in particular Taylor's *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge 1989.

one in the eighteenth century outside the established churches so much regretted the lifting of man's veil of ignorance. No radical political thinker writing in France at the very heart of the Enlightenment Project was so zealously drawn to a love of God. In almost all the dimensions in which that Project was thought liberating and progressive, Rousseau's principles appeared to his critics as a retrograde folly. Several decades after the *Querelle des anciens et des modernes* had been won by the forces of reason and modernity, his fabricated reconstructions of ancient bliss seemed a spiritually vacuous backwater in the surging tide of Enlightenment.

In company with post-modernist writers today, Rousseau formulated his own challenge to the Enlightenment Project in different idioms, each of which elaborated a critique of the trappings of modernity by way of regression to a fanciful world erased of all its imperfections. Unlike the 'negation of the negation' of Hegelians, his regressive dialectic, however, gives rise to no synthesis. On the contrary, it is from its negative dimension alone that his images derive their force and appeal. The post-modern condition to which he aspired was not a better world which reconciled the fraught tensions of contemporary civilization. It was, rather, a domain of unrefined imagination, cleansed of the impurities of social reality and prejudice, constructed in a variety of different ways. His botany, psychology and philosophy of education in general, each formed around notions of immaculately conceived negativity--of unadorned nature, unprecocious children or self-instruction without teachers--comprise diverse expressions of Rousseau's post-modernist vision, but since lack of space prevents my pursuing all the manifold themes of that vision, I propose to address here not these specific areas of his work but three others--his philosophy of music and language, his anthropology and his political theory--in effect, his notions of unadorned and unprosaic speech, of human nature without society and of a state without rulers, respectively.

In his *Lettre sur la musique française*, his *Dictionnaire de musique* and, above all, his *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, Rousseau put forward an account of music and language in their originally ebullient and expressive forms, shorn of the accretions of their history. Our first languages, it will be recalled from the *Essai*, probably arose in the southern regions of the world where the climate was mild and the land fertile, he thought. They must have had a rhythmic and melodic character and would have been poetic rather than prose, sung rather than spoken, so that in their first articulations of impulsive

passions our ancestors must, in short, have been enchanting. But with the eventual conquest of the Mediterranean world by barbarians whose northern languages had expressed needs instead of passions, guttural and staccato speech would have taken precedence over the mellifluous intonations which had served for the expression of human sentiments before, with our melodic forms of diction progressively deprived of their initial charm. Humdrum prose would have taken precedence over poetic song, and our earliest languages accordingly would have become prosaic. On the other hand, music, once shorn of its original semantic component, could only have been developed further by the Gothic innovation of harmony, with chords and particularly their instrumental rendition gradually taking precedence over the melodic inflections of the human voice.

Speech made hollow by its lack of tone and rhythm would also have come eventually to make for hollow men, their faint mutterings lacking all vigour and clarity of purpose, their degraded languages of modernity rendered suitable for little more than covert conversation in the barrenness of contemporary political discourse. With the vitality of public assemblies lost in political diatribe, sermons and recitations from the pulpit, the vocal intonations which had expressed our pleasures would have been reconstituted as the terms that denote our trades. As Rousseau puts his philosophy of history in the context of the degeneration of music and language, the expression *aimez-moi* must in the past have been superseded by *aidez-moi*, which, in commercial society, has been transfigured once again to *donnez de l'argent*. In Book III, ch. 15 of the *Contrat social* he pursues much the same thesis about the corruption of language, there shorn of its musical but not its political dimension. Sung with conviction in inflected phrases, and freed of orchestral ornamentation and operatic recitative, a clear vocal line of music was in some respects the most populist and post-modernist of all Rousseau's fanciful images of mankind's archaic means of self-expression which had been lost, the primeval language of unsubjected speech.

By Rousseau's anthropology and his conception of human nature without society, I have in mind a number of arguments which he elaborates in his *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, his fragments on war connected with his critique of the work of the abbé de Saint-Pierre on perpetual peace, and of course his *Discours sur l'inégalité*. There are few passages throughout his writings more trenchant than his vitriolic condemnation of modernity in the first *Discours*, where he describes the trappings of civilization as comprised of garlands of

flowers round the iron chains by which men are weighed down.² But perhaps an equally powerful image of the terrors of civil society, couched in a political rather than cultural idiom, can be found in his 'L'Etat de guerre', where he describes virtually the whole of humanity as crushed by a handful of oppressors, 'une foule affamée, accablée de peine et de faim, dont le riche boit en paix le sang et les larmes, et partout le fort armé contre le foible du redoutable pouvoir des loix'.³ These portraits of our degradation and enslavement were conceived in response to uplifting images of society which, by contrast, praised our arts and sciences and the rule of law, so that, once again, Rousseau's post-modernist regression thus negates the fundamental negativity of the contemporary world by exposing those of its vices which masquerade as virtues, inverting that *camera obscura* which would later be described by Marxists as *false consciousness*. Most of the central themes of Rousseau's anthropology are, in effect, developed as regressions from such errors, committed by other political thinkers, philosophers and natural historians whose arguments he attempted to turn inside out.

On the one hand, nearly all previous commentators on the origins of civil society had wrongly supposed that the civilized attributes of men and women were rooted in human nature, their acquired characteristics allegedly prescribed by impulse or inherent in the stages of their natural metamorphosis, he claimed. Among jurisprudential writers, Hobbes, Locke and Pufendorf in particular had each wrongly transposed their perceptions of man's social nature to his original condition, conceiving mankind's initial state of nomadic isolation as populated by apprehensive enemies and envious neighbours, in effect offering portraits of human nature which had been too thickly drawn. Neither Hobbes's state of war, nor Locke's notions of private property and the family, nor Pufendorf's idea of *socialitas* or sociability bred from need and fear were truly natural to man, Rousseau contended. These attributes and institutions had arisen from the circumstances of our passage out of our original condition, the establishment of private property, for instance--itself a social invention--having given rise to the even more complex state of war.

² See the *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, in the *Oeuvres complètes de Rousseau*, Pléiade edition, III.7.

³ Rousseau 'L'Etat de guerre', *ibid.*, p. 608.

Condillac, in turn, had wrongly imagined that language was natural to man, forgetting that there could have been no shared meanings of words unless society had already been established, while Buffon had been in error to suppose the natural gulf between mankind and all other creatures was so great that even animals outwardly similar to ourselves, in particular great apes or orang-utans, lacked the uniquely human capacity for speech. But if language was not natural to man, then the case for supposing orang-utans sub-human was of itself no more convincing than the assumption that mankind must be aggressive because war was prevalent in society. Developing this thesis by way of yet another regression of human nature from its social manifestations, Rousseau put forward, both in his second *Discours* and his 'Lettre à Philopolis', a speculative account of the orang-utan which was to come closer than anyone else in the eighteenth century to the point of view that human history may have marked the course of mankind's descent from an ape.

On the other hand, jurisprudential writers in particular had assembled their theories of the state on the supposition that this institution had been designed to solve problems of instability in man's nature, thereby reversing the true relation between our original and manufactured worlds. They had imagined the establishment of the state natural and voluntary, thus traducing its subjects into supposing that their freedom had been won within it when in fact they had only run willingly into their own subjection. They had made the vices of society seem endogenous to mankind's nature and had conceived their political doctrines as if they were solutions to problems of which those very solutions were in fact the cause. No eighteenth-century political thinker, least of all one so proud of his own civic identity, held so dim a view of civil society as it had come to develop almost everywhere, thwarting rather than fulfilling the potentialities of human nature. In stripping civilization to its most remote savage origins, Rousseau's negation of the negation of the modern state offers a portrait of innocent simplicity as an antidote to the terrors of our political history.

Like Foucault and some other post-modernist commentators of the past decade, he was convinced that human knowledge was not just diffused as it expanded--indeed, that characteristically it did not expand at all but was manipulated in taxonomies of social control, an instrument not of virtue but power. In the political domain, he identified that concentration of power within the modern state mainly in terms of two slavish institutions, *finance* and *representation*, which in Book III, ch. xv of the *Contrat social* he claims had been unknown

to free men of antiquity. Through finance--that great scourge of commercial society--the subjects of modern states had come to pay taxes and thereby hire troops and deputies so that they might themselves stay at home, adopting a mediated political identity with their purses rather than directly with their persons. Through representation, first in the idea of feudal government which had underpinned the different orders of the Estates General, and then, more widely, through notions of voluntary subjection which Grotius and his contractarian followers had made the legitimate cornerstone of contemporary state power, citizens had authorized the passage of sovereignty from their own hands into the clutches of their political officers. While legislators of antiquity had sought to forge links that would attach a state's subjects to each other as its members, the laws of modern nations only command deference to authority, displacing our pursuit of freedom from the public to the private domain. Where today, asks Rousseau in his *Lettre à d'Alembert*, is public fraternity? In ch. 4 of the *Gouvernement de Pologne*, similarly, he calls upon Polish youth to rekindle the 'esprit des anciennes institutions' (the title of this work's second chapter) so as to become accustomed to 'égalité' and 'fraternité' as citizens of a truly free state. While liberty had once been linked with equality and fraternity, representation had destroyed fraternity and finance had laid waste to equality, he believed, so that in the modern world, shorn of its ancient associations, it had in effect come to mean nothing more than the pursuit of private gain.

By thus linking hand in hand the ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity, Rousseau rightly came to appear to his most radical admirers of the early 1790s to have been the chief herald of their French Revolution, even as he fixed his gaze upon a bygone world. Perhaps no feature of his philosophy in any other subject so demonstrably establishes the post-modernity of his ideals, conceived as regressions to a largely mythical world of ancient republican liberty by way of the deconstruction of modern tyranny. It was because *les engagés* of the French Revolution, inspired by his doctrines, seemed so quickly to become *les enragés* of the Jacobin Terror that modern liberalism (to which the communitarian dimension of post-modernism is itself a militant response) took shape after the French Revolution so much by way of opposition to Rousseauism, and to his putative confusion of popular sovereignty with true--that is, individual--liberty, now allegedly secured not by the public participation of citizens in managing the state but through various defences against it.

If Rousseau's philosophy seems in these and so many further

respects to have anticipated the post-modernist challenge to the Enlightenment Project, there are nevertheless crucial distinctions between his own doctrines and those of other leading critics of modernity today. To find passage into his alternative worlds it was necessary to be transported to reason's wilder side, in reverie and imagination bred of solitude and longing. Yet entertaining no hope for mankind's future salvation, Rousseau found release from both personal suffering and political turmoil in apparently endless regression, not least at the breast of his beloved Madame de Warens, in whose arms, he declares, he had enjoyed the only period of his life when he had been truly himself. If in pursuit of a language of pure sincerity and truly communicative action he appears to anticipate the political philosophy of Habermas, or if in his perception of the mutilating and dehumanizing tyrannies of modern society, prefiguring the horrors of Bentham's panopticon, he seems to point some of the way towards Foucault, he nevertheless differs as markedly from both men as each from the other. The most vivid eighteenth-century illustrator of the despair and discontent which the Enlightenment had engendered, he remained convinced, like Anne Frank at the darkest moment of modern history, that human nature was still fundamentally good at heart. By comparison with so much of the superficial relativism which constitutes the post-modern critique of contemporary politics, society and culture, Rousseau's own diagnosis of civilization's discontents plumbs more profound depths, but once there offers at least the prospect of still waters.

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