

Rousseau on Arts and Politics
Autour de la Lettre à d'Alembert

edited by
sous la direction de

Melissa Butler

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Theater as an Economic Institution: An Aspect of Rousseau's Rhetoric in the *Letter to d'Alembert*

I

In the *Letter to d'Alembert* Rousseau examines the effect of theater on social life. His central claim is that theater will distort Genevan society through its impact on public opinion. 'One of the inevitable effects of a theater established in a town [such as Geneva] will be to change our maxims, or, if you please, our prejudices and our public opinions' (74; V: 67-68). That is, he argues, theater can transform social life in virtue of its power to *lead* public opinion. But elsewhere in the *Letter* Rousseau explicitly repudiates the common wisdom that theater can change public opinion. 'Opinion does not depend on the theater, since, rather than giving the law to the public, the theater receives the law from it' (22; V: 21; also 19; V: 18). Here the situation is precisely reversed: theater does not lead public opinion but *follows* it.

How does Rousseau resolve the contradiction between the two positions he articulates? A sentence in the middle of the *Letter* provides the key. He distinguishes between 'effects of theater, which are relative to what is performed, [and] others no less necessary which relate directly to the stage and to the persons who perform' (57; V: 53). Let us say the former effects are due to the 'content' of theater, whereas the latter are effects of theater considered as a social institution. Theater thus has two distinct kinds of effects: those due to the stories it presents on stage, and those due to its brute institutional presence in society.

More precisely, then, Rousseau holds that it is the *content* of plays that follows rather than leads public opinion. He argues from the premise that theater is a form of entertainment; his concern is with what we might call popular culture, exemplified for us by television, rather than with theater as 'high art.' Entertainments are meant to give pleasure. Hence the theater will present plays which are pleasing to the audience, which would otherwise pay it no attention. It follows that the image of itself the audience sees in plays will be calculated to please; no play-

wright, Rousseau argues, will insult the audience. 'The stage is, in general, a painting of the human passions, the original of which is in every heart. But if the painter neglected to flatter these passions, the spectators would soon be repelled and would not want to see themselves in a light which made them despise themselves' (18; V: 17). This fact about the audience imposes a strict discipline on playwrights: 'An author who would brave the general taste would soon write for himself alone' (19; V: 17). Failure is the price a playwright pays for refusing to please.

In writing to please their audience, then, authors quite naturally take over the opinions of the public into their own works. Thus, for Rousseau, plays reflect the way people live—they do not confront the audience with an alien moral view. 'It is said that a good play never fails. Indeed, I believe it; this is because a good play never shocks the *moeurs* of its time' (19; V: 18). How, on this view, can the audience's way of life be affected by the theater it sees? 'Let no one then attribute to the theater the power to change sentiments or *moeurs*, which it can only follow and embellish' (19; V: 17-18). That is, when considered with respect to its content, the effect of theater is limited. Theater cannot divert fundamental cultural attitudes; at most it can reinforce and 'embellish' the attitudes that already exist. From the point of view of content, then, theater serves to amplify cultural traits. With respect to content, Rousseau concludes 'that the general effect of the theater is to strengthen the national character' (20; V: 19).

Now it follows that, if theater strengthens the national character, then while it will be a bad thing where that character is bad, it will be a good thing where that character is good. This is not a promising result for one who contends both that Geneva is a good place, and that a theater ought not to be built there. Rousseau must somehow avoid this conclusion. One tack he takes is to argue directly against the content of theater, suggesting that, in fact, it inflames the spectators' passions, and fosters a merely 'sterile interest in virtue' (57; V: 53). I have examined this line of argument elsewhere.¹ At this time let me explore another move Rousseau makes, in which he assumes the moral neutrality of content, but then looks at theater in a different way: as a social institution.

In contrast to the effects due to content, which are essentially conservative, the institutional effects of theater have the capacity to

¹See my 'Rousseau's Critique of Catharsis,' *Rousseau and Criticism / Rousseau et la critique*, (Ottawa: Pensée Libre, No. 5, 1995), and *Making Citizens: Rousseau's Political Theory of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 160-64.

radically alter a city's moral climate. For, Rousseau argues, the activity of attending the theater displaces other activities that had previously been part of the citizens' way of life. If those original activities were bad, as say in Paris, theater will improve the situation. But if those activities were good, as in Geneva, the situation will decline. Regarded as an institution, that is, theater can indeed make a bad city better or a good city worse.

But how do these two kinds of effects interact? Might they not, Rousseau asks, somehow cancel each other out, rendering theater morally neutral? (65; V: 59-60) To support his claim that theater is ultimately harmful, he must show that the institutional effects are systematically stronger than the effects due to content. He argues as follows:

The effect which reinforces the good and bad, since it is drawn from the spirit of the plays, is subject, as are they, to countless modifications which reduce it to practically nothing, while the effect which changes the good into the bad and the bad into the good, resulting from the very existence of a theater, is a real, constant one which returns every day and must finally prevail. (65; V: 60)

It is unclear what Rousseau believes 'modifies' the content effects; likely candidates are the vagaries of performance, differences in the strengths of individuals' imaginations, and countervailing influences, among others. But the source of the potency of theater as an institution is unambiguous. When we consider theater as an institution we consider the effect on the spectators of the actual events involved in the ongoing operation of a theatrical enterprise. As an institution theater becomes part of the daily round of activities within the culture—part of how the members of the society lead their lives. Hence, the decisive influence of theater is due to the mere fact of its presence. In virtue of that ongoing presence, institutional effects simply overwhelm the effects due to content, thus ruling out the conceptual possibility that theater might improve Geneva.

II

In sum, then, Rousseau's institutional considerations carry the burden of his view that Geneva should reject the introduction of a theater. Now Rousseau shifts back and forth between several styles of argument when considering theater as a social institution. He offers an

array of what we might call moralizing arguments: he discusses the moral dangers posed by actors (especially actresses), and he discusses the moral value of the activities (productive labor, and leisure time spent in the Genevans' 'circles') theater would supplant. He is particularly worried about the moral catastrophe that would result from the unregulated mixing of the sexes at the theater. But he also offers a series of *fiscal* arguments, to the effect that introducing theater would damage the Genevan political economy. In the remainder of this paper I would like to examine this economic mode of argumentation.

The economic approach to theater asks, simply, how this institution would be paid for. Rousseau considers this question with a thought experiment. He describes—explicitly as a 'chimera,' viewed through a distant and unreliable memory—the mountain community of Neufchâtel. The Mountaineers live what Rousseau depicts as an ideal (indeed utopian) life: the geography of their town affords them 'the tranquillity of a retreat and the sweetness of society' (60; V: 55). They are economically self-sufficient, are skilled at various crafts and sciences, and are proficient in music. The thought experiment Rousseau conducts involves imagining the economic consequences of the Mountaineers acquiring a taste for theater.

The financial logic of the situation dictates five adverse results. By spending time at the theater, and in thinking about it afterwards, people will work less. They will have to pay at the door, and dress themselves appropriately, hence their expenses will rise. But to sustain this increase they will have to charge more for their products, leading them to lose trade to their theater-less neighbors. Because the performers must support themselves even in the winter, the town must pay to make the theater accessible in all seasons, leading to the establishment of taxes. Finally, the women of the town will want to be better dressed than their friends when they attend performances, leading to the introduction of luxury (62-3; V: 57-58).

Rousseau's deductions seem somewhat quaint, but his lesson is clear: the mere activity of attending the theater will lead to a decline in the Mountaineers' economy. The fanciful description of Neufchâtel sets a pattern for Rousseau's treatment of Geneva. We can read succeeding sections of the *Letter* as another thought experiment: what would happen if a theater were introduced into Geneva? Rousseau estimates, on the basis of the proportion of Parisians who attend the theater, that the small population of Geneva would furnish an audience of only forty-eight people per performance. Thus a Genevan theater would require a

substantial subsidy, either from subscriptions by the rich, or directly from the state. The rich will not long bear that burden, leaving only the state. But the state could only provide a subsidy by cutting other more necessary expenses, or by raising taxes. Neither option is likely (93-98; V: 85-90). Thus, Rousseau concludes that establishing a theater is financially infeasible—at least without changing a political economy with which the Genevans are perfectly satisfied.

Nonetheless, Rousseau goes on to suppose that a theater is established, and concludes that it would disturb ‘the equilibrium which ought to prevail among the various parts of the state’ (113; V: 103). The equilibrium he has in mind is economic: it is the relationship between social classes. The disturbance results because, for Rousseau, theater would redistribute wealth upwards.

The theater might be considered, if it succeeds, as a sort of tax which, although voluntary, is nonetheless onerous for the people in that it provides a continual occasion for expenditure which it cannot resist. This tax is a bad one ... because its distribution, far from being proportional, burdens the poor beyond their strength and relieves the rich in taking the place of more costly amusements. (113; V: 103-104)

The poor cannot resist going to the theater; they succumb immediately to the temptation. But Rousseau does not blame them: ‘their very poverty, which condemns them to constant labor without hope of seeing it end, makes some relaxation necessary’ (114; V: 105). By allowing themselves this relaxation the poor in fact exacerbate their condition: they spend money they cannot spare, and lose their ‘zeal for work’ (115; V: 105). But this process does not just affect the poor as individuals; it combines with the fact that theater saves the rich money (because they do not have to pay for more expensive amusements) to have an impact on the economic structure of society as a whole. ‘The modern theater, which can only be attended for money, tends everywhere to promote and increase the inequality of fortunes’ (115; V: 105). That is, the institution of theater makes the poor poorer and the rich richer, thus widening the gap between them.

In the *Discourse on Political Economy*, Rousseau argues that ‘it is, therefore, one of the government’s most important tasks to prevent extreme inequality of wealth’ (3: 154; III: 258). This is necessary, Rousseau believes, to guarantee the state the love of its citizens: it is dangerous for any government to countenance inequality because it will thereby lose the support of the poor. The *Letter* furthers this line of thought with respect to the rich, suggesting their wealth might make them

contemptuous of the constitution. Thus, Rousseau argues that extreme inequality in wealth is particularly dangerous to a democracy. 'In a democracy ... as soon as the smaller number wins out in riches over the greater number, the state must perish or change its form' (115; V: 105). For, the concentration of wealth can make its possessors more powerful than the government, enabling them to usurp its authority. Rousseau concludes, in other words, that as an institution a Genevan theater would foster economic conditions which threaten the very survival of the city's democratic government.

III

What are we to make of these economic arguments? In my view, they help us reveal Rousseau's awareness of an unsettling discrepancy between the idealized political community he wishes Geneva were, and the actual city he recognizes it is. As Allan Bloom observes, the *Letter* is a work of rhetoric which deploys arguments directed to and appropriate for a particular audience.² Thus, in the Preface to the *Letter*, Rousseau announces that he 'do[es] not speak here to the few but to the public' (6; V: 6), i.e. the actual Genevan public—meaning, I suppose, the adult, middle class, male citizens. Rousseau reveals his assessment of his audience in a candid explanation of his use of economic reasoning. He chooses to attack theater for its redistributive effects because this mode of argument 'is most suitable for the greatest number, because it limits itself to considerations of self-interest and money, always more palpable to the vulgar than moral effects' (113; V: 103). That is, Rousseau understands his readers to be people motivated by 'considerations of self-interest and money,' hence he provides reasons that appeal to persons for whom economic considerations are paramount. Thus, note that when he performs the thought experiment regarding the Mountaineers of Neufchatel, he confines himself 'to arguments which have to do with work and gain' (64; V: 58). And, his analysis of the potential market for theater in Geneva is set in the context of a picturesque description of the city's bustling economic activity.

But in conceiving of his Genevan public as motivated by self-interest, Rousseau is conceding a gap between the city as he finds it and his own political ideal: he acknowledges, in effect, that his countrymen

²Allan Bloom, 'Introduction' to *Letter*, xvi.

may not be suited to the role he scripts for them. Thus, Rousseau regards d'Alembert's suggestion as a threat less because of the strength of Enlightenment influences than because of the weakness of the Genevans' ability to withstand them.

Rousseau's ambivalence emerges from the juxtaposition of his fulsome praise of the existing institutions of Genevan social life, especially the circles, with his conviction that they will be unable to withstand competition from a theater. Rousseau describes the circles as particularly well suited to the Genevan character, and as incubators of the virtues needed for ideal citizenship. Indeed, his account of the circles contributes to the sense that he uses his depiction of Geneva to represent the ideal state. Nonetheless, 'the moment there is drama, goodbye to the circles!' (100; V: 91) Ultimately, it seems that the even the circles, as apparently conducive to the realization of Rousseau's political ideal as they are, will not completely satisfy a certain element within the Genevan character, since the Genevans abandon the circles when presented with the theatrical alternative.

That certain element is precisely the 'commercial spirit' to which Rousseau addresses his economic arguments. Now Rousseau does not name this element as the problem directly. Indeed, as a matter of rhetoric, he would not explicitly criticize his audience for holding the very values to which he feels he must appeal in order to persuade them to become more as wishes them to be. Instead, he defers to his (adult, middle class, male) audience by deflecting his criticism, showing how *other* members of the Genevan community would be responsible for the damage he predicts theater would bring to the city.

On the one hand, we noted above how theater would upset the balance between rich and poor: the rich would seize the chance to spend less than otherwise necessary on entertainment, and the poor, to maintain their self-esteem, would spend more than they can afford to share in the amusements of the rich. This transfer of wealth, Rousseau argues, would ultimately enable the rich to seize control of the state.

Similarly, on the other hand, Rousseau points to the danger posed by the city's youth. In the Preface he identifies as the 'ill [he] would fend off' the prospect that the young of Geneva would exploit d'Alembert's reputation 'to promote the establishment of a theater, believing they are rendering a service to their country' (5; V: 5). Perhaps Rousseau might explain why the circles crumble by citing young people's inability to resist the temptation of attending the theater instead of following their parents' ways. For, youth is the age when people are

particularly vulnerable to the erotic power of theater. This vulnerability is not simply to the love stories presented on stage, nor even to the physical beauty of the performers. More, the auditorium itself is a venue for erotic display. The practice of attending the theater brings with it 'the exposition of the ladies and the maidens all tricked out in their very best and put on display in the boxes as though they were in the window of a shop waiting for buyers; [and] the affluence of the handsome young who will come to show themselves off' (111; V: 101).

Thus, Rousseau offers his audience an account of how theater would work on members of Genevan society other than themselves—the poor, the rich, the young.³ But he also hints, though he cannot declare this openly, that the members of his audience—adult, middle class, male citizens—are themselves part of the danger. For, finally, it is the commercial spirit itself that prevents Geneva from embodying Rousseau's political ideal.

Sparta, of course, is Rousseau's standard image of the perfect polity—not least because, as he explains in the *Letter*, in Sparta 'laws and *moeurs*, intimately united in the hearts of the citizens, made, as it were, only one single body' (67; V: 61). That is, their shared cultural life fully motivated Spartans to obey their laws, and their legal institutions reinforced the influence of their culture. But Genevans should not think that they are capable of fulfilling this Spartan ideal. 'Let us not flatter ourselves that we shall see Sparta reborn in the lap of commerce and the love of gain. If we had the same maxims, a theater could be established at Geneva without any risk; for never would citizen or townsman set foot in it' (67; V: 61).

But note that Rousseau offers his audience economic arguments precisely because Geneva is the 'lap of commerce'—implying that he believes that Geneva is not, after all, such a fertile womb for ancient civic virtue. Further, that the Genevans would forsake the circles for the theater is evidence that they do not share the Spartans' maxims. The maxims Rousseau has in mind enjoin a purely selfless civic-mindedness; if Genevans held them, a theater would fail. But theater would certainly succeed, easily destroying the circles by putting 'the agreeable life of Paris and the fine airs of France in the place of our old simplicity' (111; V: 102). Within each apparently upright Genevan, Rousseau fears, lurks a selfish Parisian who needs only the presence of a theater to burst forth

³A fuller development of my reading would include women in this list as well.

and seize control. This psychic and cultural metamorphosis would destroy Genevan democracy: 'I rather doubt,' Rousseau says, 'that Parisians in Geneva will long preserve the taste for our government' (111; V: 102)

Unlike in Sparta, then, in Geneva culture and constitution are *not* perfectly matched. It is not that the circles are the wrong cultural institution for Geneva; Rousseau holds that they are just the sort of cultural practice which is 'linked to the form of government and which help[s] to preserve it' (98; V: 90). Rather, the Genevans' commitment to their 'old simplicity' is incomplete, due to their decidedly un-Spartan commercial spirit. In the absence of a stimulus like theater, the danger inherent in the commercial spirit might be contained by cultural institutions like the circles. But once that spirit has been provoked, the container will be destroyed, and the transformed culture will dictate political change.

In conclusion, it seems clear why Rousseau would want to avoid telling his audience that they themselves are part of the problem the prospect of theater exposes. But his predicament is more profound than the risk that he might alienate the people he seeks to persuade. For, he argues, to the extent that his audience is motivated by self interest, they will be cognitively unable to grasp his argument that that motivation leads to the moral consequences he foresees. For, self-interestedness makes one 'unable to see either the connections [of moral effects] with their causes or their influence on the destiny of the state' (113; V: 103). Rousseau fears, that is, that his audience simply cannot comprehend its own culpability in the moral problem he describes—even if he spells it out for them.

Rousseau conceives of his audience, therefore, as being in the position he will later describe as that occupied by the 'blind multitude' in need of a great Legislator.⁴ The Legislator's most important work takes place in the realm of *moeurs*; it makes sense, then, that Rousseau ends the Letter with a proposal to reform Genevan culture, by extending to civil life the competitive spectacles that honor the military. He suggests races, competitions, and other public festivals which cast honor on the skills workmen use in daily life. And, the famous 'balls for young marriageable persons' allow parents (and the state) to manage the erotic

⁴See *Social Contract*, book II, chapter vi (4: 152-154; III: 378-380).

life of the young, in a way that reinforces the existing social structure.⁵ But since at them Genevans 'are no longer that steady people which never deviates from its economic rules' (127; V: 116), the public festivals Rousseau recommends would also work against his audience's self-interest, by implicitly encouraging citizens to think of themselves in terms of their membership in their community. Participating in festivals, Rousseau imagines, would have the effect of persuading his countrymen to realize his political ideal, without his having to convince them of the profound danger posed by their commercial spirit.

Zev Trachtenberg
University of Oklahoma

⁵See *Making Citizens*, 196-205.