Introduction

If the significance of a political treatise can be measured by the volume and vehemence of its commentators, then Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Social Contract* easily stands out as among the most important works of its kind. Within weeks of its publication in 1762, it was banned in France. Less than a month thereafter, Rousseau found himself effectively banished. He sought refuge in his boyhood home of Geneva, only to find his book being burned in the public squares. Perhaps his best-known literary contemporary and interlocutor, Voltaire, would call the *Social Contract* the "*Unsocial Contract*, by the not very sociable Jean-Jacques Rousseau." He subsequently endorsed Rousseau's banishment from Geneva, remarking, "Let the Council punish him with the full severity of the laws … as a blasphemous subversive who blasphemes Jesus Christ while calling himself a Christian, and who wants to overturn his country while calling himself a citizen." Time did not mellow critics of the *Social Contract*. A generation later, Benjamin Constant argued that "the subtle metaphysics of the *Social Contract* can only serve today to supply weapons and pretexts to all kinds of tyranny, that of one man, that of several and that of all, to oppression either organized under legal forms or exercised through popular violence." Shortly thereafter, the nineteenth-century socialist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon would comment, "It is this [social] contract of hatred, this monument of incurable misanthropy, this coalition of the barons of property, commerce and industry against the disinherited lower class, this oath of social war indeed, which Rousseau calls *Social Contract*, with a presumption which I should call that of a scoundrel."[1]

In the twentieth century, in the wake of two horrific world wars, Rousseau became a favorite target of liberal intellectuals. Isaiah Berlin labeled him "the most sinister and most formidable enemy of liberty in the whole history of modern thought." Bertrand Russell warned that the

[1] Voltaire, quoted in Leo Damrosch 2005, 390; Constant [1814] 1988, 106; Proudhon [1851] 2007, 118.

Social Contract's "doctrine of the general will … made possible the mystic identification of a leader with his people, which has no need of confirmation by so mundane an apparatus as the ballot-box." The philosopher of science, Karl Popper, would call Rousseau "one of the most pernicious influences in the history of social philosophy."[2]

Even today, Rousseau's doctrines articulated in the *Social Contract* continue to provoke hostility. Contemporary conservative commentators have identified Rousseau as laying the foundation for "all mob leaders, from Robespierre to Fidel Castro to the Democratic Party"; accused him of driving citizens away from God and family into the arms of "Beer, sports, television, movies, video games, iPods, the Internet, sex, [and] sleep"; found in him moral principles so flexible that they have produced "holocausts and gulags as easily as free dental plans and kindergartens"; and have even crowned him the "Dark Prince of the Enlightenment." At the same time he has remained threatening to the Left, having provoked Daniel Bell to remark, "The price of equality [in the *Social Contract*] is … that 'an individual can no longer claim anything'; he has no individual rights; 'his person and his whole power' are dissolved into the general will. Equality is only possible in community through the eclipse of the self."[3]

Yet not all responses have been so viscerally negative. Among his contemporaries, Adam Smith was deeply stirred by Rousseau's critiques of the newly emerging commercial economy.[4] The French appropriated his concept of the general will and its associated values for its Declaration of the Rights of Man. James Madison described Rousseau as the "most distinguished" of philanthropists. Immanuel Kant found in Rousseau the "Newton of the moral world," the philosopher who for the first time drew attention to the basic dignity attached to human nature. Nearly two centuries later, this sentiment continued to echo in the writings of John Rawls, who identified both Rousseau and Kant as representing the "high point of the contractarian tradition," and the writings of Jürgen Habermas, who celebrates Rousseau for his championing of the democratic principles of liberty and equality.[5] Right, left, early modern, late modern, postmodern, analytic, or Continental – the ideas of the *Social Contract* have never failed to provoke, instigate, disgust, and inspire.

Of course, the widely divergent reactions to Rousseau and the *Social Contract* raise the question of *why* one text has lent itself to various and

[2] Berlin 2002, 49; Russell [1945] 1972, 700; Popper [1945] 1971, 257n20.
[3] Coulter 2011, 142; Wiker 2008, 52; Koons 2011, 136; Williamson 2011, 161; Bell 1976, 436.
[4] See Rasmussen 2008; Hanley 2008a; and Lomonaco 2002.
[5] Madison 1999, 505; Rawls 1971, 252; Habermas 1997, 44.

viscerally opposed readings. To be sure, readers always bring their own set of experiences, temperaments, backgrounds, and preferences with them. But this alone is inadequate to explain the contested readings of the *Social Contract*. Rousseau litters the treatise with juxtapositions, apparent paradoxes, puzzles, and ambiguities. He appropriates the modern device of the social contract to secure ancient values; he places sovereignty in the hands of those whom he labels ignorant; he condemns figures like Thomas Hobbes for the central tenets of his politics and metaphysics, yet praises his genius; he demands that his republic be held to sometimes impractical or even utopian standards, while at the same time providing counsel on how to proceed absent those conditions; he elevates the people to the level of sovereign and yet dismisses democratic governance as entirely impracticable; and, most (in)famously, he demands that republican subjects be forced to be free. Some of these tensions are resolved or at least understood easily enough with sufficient attention. Some of them will likely remain contentious and troublesome as long as readers continue to be drawn to the *Social Contract*. This book aims to understand and explain those tensions where possible and offer readers at least some capacity to make informed judgments on those elements of his political philosophy that continue to spark debate.

In order to make sense of Rousseau's political philosophy, however, it is necessary first to understand the context in which he wrote. The *Social Contract* is, after all, a solution to a set of social and political problems. Without grasping the problems it is meant to solve, readers will find the treatise elusive in important respects. These problems can be understood through consideration of the issues dominating Rousseau's Geneva, and then of his formulation of those problems in his first two *Discourses*: the *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* (1751) and the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* (1755).

1. THE GENEVAN CONTEXT

As he does with his first two *Discourses*, Rousseau identifies himself on the title page of the *Social Contract* as a "Citizen of Geneva." He was born and raised in the city-state, and it would remain a part of his political consciousness throughout his career. Geneva rests at the far west end of scenic Lake Geneva and within sight of the Alps. The city had at one time been a part of the Holy Roman Empire, but by the fifteenth century political power was officially shared between the local bishop and the citizens. As such, Geneva proudly defined itself as operating under a mixed

constitution amidst a sea of monarchies. One of these monarchies, the House of Savoy, was a looming and persistent meddler – although Geneva had been generally successful in warding off its threats.

The Reformation introduced significant developments. The city embraced Luther's theology and officially rejected Catholicism in 1535, labeling the pope the Antichrist. To consolidate these changes Geneva invited the noted theologian, Jean Calvin, to establish a new code of civil and ecclesiastical laws. Calvin emphasized the importance of a religious education for children and established a consistory of pastors to ensure the conformity of civil laws to scripture. The overarching foundation of the law for Calvin was derived from his conception of God's moral law, which demands that citizens love one another "with unfeigned love," which he calls "the true and eternal rule of justice, laid down for all those in every age and of every nation who want to order their lives in accordance with the will of God."[6] In practice, his Genevan laws were stringent by today's standards and even those of the sixteenth century, including the regulation of drinking, dancing, sexuality, and swearing. And although these reforms would have their critics, Rousseau was at least partly an admirer, who expressed great appreciation for the "range of his [Calvin's] genius," especially in the "framing of our wise Edicts, in which he played a large part" (*SC*, 2.7.9n, 70n [III: 383n]).

In the years following Calvin, Geneva's deep religiosity and moralism slowly faded and more practical political dimensions took center stage. The city's constitution was officially mixed, with power shared between the citizens and a small group of elites. These two groups corresponded to the two "Councils" of the constitution. The General Council was an assembly of all citizens, who possessed in theory the power of legislation. On the one hand, placing legislative power in the hands of the citizens was a remarkably democratic device in the early eighteenth century, when monarchs still wielded enormous power in most neighboring lands. On the other hand, these democratic elements were moderated by somewhat predictable citizenship restrictions out of tune with our democratic standards. Of the nearly 25,000 inhabitants of Geneva, only approximately 1,500 qualified for citizenship by virtue of sex, moral uprightness, financial solvency, and residency status. The democratic dimensions of the constitution were further mitigated by the other major institution: the Small Council. The Small Council consisted of twenty members who were chosen by a committee of wealthy citizens – a committee itself selected by

[6] Calvin [1536] 1991, 67.

the Small Council. It is for this reason that James Miller has rejected the notion that Geneva was a democracy. It was rather, in his estimation, "a functioning oligarchy"[7] ruled by old money.

For many years, this division of power was accepted. But as the ruling elite became more ostentatious in displaying its wealth and wielding its power, the citizens demanded changes. In 1707, five years before Rousseau's birth, they found a sympathetic ear in Pierre Fatio, a member of the Small Council appointed to hear the grievances of the General Council. He accepted their complaints as largely valid and submitted a report to the Small Committee recommending several democratic reforms, including official recognition of the people as "sovereign." The Small Council responded by instituting ineffective and merely token reforms. After the citizens expressed their disappointment, the Small Council had Fatio arrested and shot. This silenced the movement for the short term, but the quest for a real popular sovereignty persisted and took on new life in the 1730s. Citizens raised the volume and frequency of their demands with a flurry of pamphlets asking, in the words of one, "To what will our freedom be reduced, if we cannot prescribe it for ourselves, if we cannot change the Laws and the Government as soon as a great number among us indicate the desire?"[8]

Two of the leading natural law theorists of the day, Jean Barbeyrac (1674–1744) and Jean-Jacques Burlamaqui (1698–1748), both with Genevan ties, lent their support to the Small Council.[9] Drawing largely from Thomas Hobbes's characterization of human nature as anti-social and violent, they argued that government's first responsibility is order and stability. Barbeyrac described the General Council as made up of "ignoramuses, trouble-makers, or people easily manipulated by the first demagogue who presents himself," and proceeded on those lines to conclude that popular sovereignty could only result in "a perpetual theater of disorder, sedition, trouble, and injustice." And although he admired liberty, he was an even greater believer in peace and tranquility, which requires that "a few things must be sacrificed for it."[10]

These political tensions came to a head in 1734–38 when armed militia members joined the popular movement and took to the streets. With Rousseau in town on August 21, 1737, the citizens overwhelmed a mercenary garrison, killed their captain, and seized control of Geneva. Realizing

[7] Miller 1984, 15.
[8] Anonymous pamphlet, quoted in Miller 1984, 16.
[9] See Rosenblatt 1997, 101–2.
[10] Barbeyrace, quoted in Rosenblatt 1997, 130.

it had no other choice, the Small Council agreed to a compromise acknowledging the General Council as "sovereign" and granting it the right to protest the abuses of the Small Council. While some members of the uprising were concerned that the compromise failed to secure greater rights for the citizens, the majority, weary of unrest and eager to restore some degree of normalcy, struck a truce.

Parallel to these explicitly political events in Geneva were economic and social developments. The slow shift from feudalism to capitalism was accompanied by significant growing pains. The emerging bourgeois class generated abundant wealth, to be sure. This included the manufacturing of luxury goods and a robust industry of international banking. Yet this wealth was not broadly shared. The bankers and merchants effectively controlled the government and hence public policy, which only exacerbated existing economic inequalities. As the well-to-do demanded the dismantling of free trade restrictions, workers' wages declined. The wealthy congregated in fashionable new sections of town and constructed opulent estates, which only fed the workers' envy. There were intellectuals of roughly this period, such as Bernard Mandeville, Jean-François Melon, Baron de Montesquieu, and David Hume, who had predicted in a new doctrine known as *doux commerce* that this increased commerce would result in greater social harmony.[11] Yet much of the Genevan citizenry remained unconvinced. Georges-Louis Le Sage (1676–1769), for example, condemned the "monstrous subordination that ambition, wealth, and luxury have introduced amongst" the merchants. In a similar spirit, Micheli du Crest lamented that the increased riches of the wealthy merely "cause them to *abandon themselves to arrogance* and to the ambition they have of *increasing their power* beyond the prescribed bounds."[12]

As scholars have previously noted, this Genevan background would manifest itself throughout Rousseau's works. His insistence that an austere yet virtuous people can hold off the threats of imposing neighbors reflects Geneva's own success in holding off the Savoy threat. His insistence that a people have strong morals reflects something of Calvin's rigorous moralism. The political instability flowing from economic inequalities between Genevan patricians and citizens is reflected in his frequent calls for more equitable distributions of wealth and explicit dismissals of *doux commerce*. His continual complaints about Hobbesianism reflect his rejection of Barbeyrac's and Burlamaqui's defense of the Small Council.

[11] See Rosenblatt 1997, 20–1, 53–60.
[12] Le Sage, quoted in Rosenblatt 1997, 63; Crest, quoted in Rosenblatt 1997, 64.

Most obviously, Rousseau would dedicate his *Second Discourse* to the "Magnificent, Most Honored, and Sovereign Lords" of the Genevan republic, namely, the General Council, and to express his desire to live in a land where the "People and the Sovereign are one and the same." But perhaps the greatest and most persistent legacy of the political debates in Geneva can be found in the requirement of his theory of the "general will" that the law emanate from the people themselves; this requirement echoes the repeated demands of the Genevans for popular sovereignty via their General Council.

2. FIRST DISCOURSE: DISCOURSE ON THE SCIENCES AND THE ARTS

As a relative youth, Rousseau did not set out to offer solutions to the great political problems of his day, much less those that have proved to be perennially vexing.[13] He had originally moved to Paris in 1741 at the age of twenty-nine with fifteen silver louis in his pocket, driven by the ambition to be a musical innovator and a man of letters.[14] It took him the better part of a decade, however, to arrive at the discipline on which the bulk of his reputation would ultimately rest: politics. Between 1742 and 1751, he found himself completely immersed in the inner circles of the most radical and original thinkers in Europe. Identified as an immense talent by the French literati, Rousseau was quickly ushered into Parisian salon culture, which was rapidly becoming host to the *Philosophes*, including figures such as Baron d'Holbach and Rousseau's close friend (and eventual enemy) Denis Diderot. While not a defined club or organization, the *Philosophes* were largely a group of tight-knit thinkers excited by the rapid pace of natural science to win over converts on the basis of its obvious capacity to improve human affairs. At the same time, however, they were frustrated by the inability of respectable society to get behind a similar revolution taking place in the realms of metaphysics, theology, politics, and morality.[15] Most notably and notoriously, an influential subset of them aspired to advance

[13] I do not offer here a biographical account of Rousseau's compelling life. This has been done effectively elsewhere by others – both in abbreviated and extended versions – so as to render yet another account superfluous here. Excellent brief biographies in English can be found in Wokler 2001, Bertram 2004, and Simpson 2007. The best recent one-volume biography in English is Leo Damrosch 2005. And the most comprehensive account of Rousseau's life is Maurice Cranston's three-volume study. While some discussion of Rousseau's life will on occasion be necessary in this volume, I direct readers to these other works for more systematic and detailed narratives.

[14] *Confessions*, 237 [I: 282].

[15] Israel 2011, 56–82.

the ideas of materialism, atheism, and a politics advancing a proto-utilitarianism. At their sessions – customarily held in the drawing rooms of sympathetic aristocrats – they would discuss developments in the natural sciences and humanities, share their own thoughts, and plot to bring what they viewed as greater enlightenment to the broader world.

Coming from a modest background by comparison, Rousseau was deeply flattered to be invited into the inner circles of Paris's most elite intellectual coterie. For their own part, the *Philosophes* were impressed by Rousseau's natural brilliance and perhaps a bit amused by his rustic manners.[16] The more time he spent in their presence, however, the more disgusted he became by the nature and implications of their doctrines. As he understood them, they sought to embrace privilege, and to advance precisely those elements of modernity that he viewed as a threat to civilization itself: the celebration of the individual above the community, praise above probity, talent and vanity above virtue, and money above modesty. Rousseau's task in the first two *Discourses* is to diagnose these maladies and to spell out their immanent dangers.

The core of the *Philosophes*' moral and political philosophy was a thoroughgoing embrace of egoism. As Mark Hulliung has observed, Holbach's motto for the Enlightenment might as well have been, "Dare to love Thyself." This underlying and fundamental egoism must be understood as a consciously chosen diversion from the path of the ancient and Medieval philosophers, who clung in vain, these *Philosophes* held, to the notion that one could reasonably expect citizens to privilege the community over the self. The long Christian experiment of promoting love of neighbor had peaked not so much in fraternal love as in the tyranny of the Church over its unwitting congregants. As Hulliung has summarized, "Their championing of self-love and justification of self-interest were natural outgrowths of a larger campaign to reclaim human nature" from the Church. Only "by accepting and relishing our [selfish] nature can we be at home, whole and complete."[17]

Rousseau would spell out his frustrations with this trending egoism and self-love late in his career. In his autobiographical *Dialogues*, he describes his contemporaries, such as the *Philosophes,* as aware

> only of the advantages relative to their own little selves, and letting no opportunity escape, they are constantly busy, with a success that is hardly surprising, disparaging their rivals, scattering their competitors, shining in society, excelling

[16] Cranston 1982, 161. See also McLendon 2009, 507–9.
[17] Hulliung 1994, 10.

in letters, and depreciating everything that is not connected to their wagon. It is no miracle that such men are wicked and evil-doing; but that they experience any passion other than the egoism that dominates them, that they have true sensitivity, that they are capable of attachment, of friendship, even of love, is what I deny. They don't even know how to love themselves; they only know how to hate what is not themselves.[18]

This autobiographical reflection, however, is really only a continuation of the thoughts he began formulating in the early 1750s, beginning with the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* (or *First Discourse*).

The *First Discourse* offers a multipronged attack on modernity. Rousseau's choice of targets – including the natural sciences, the arts, philosophy, and commerce – is, if anything, more perplexing to readers today than it was to his contemporary audience. The natural sciences represented the first – and in some obvious respects the greatest – success story of modernity. After some initial resistance from the Church, Europeans soon embraced the science of figures like Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, and Newton as a welcome departure from centuries of determined ignorance and an opportunity, in the words of Francis Bacon, to introduce "an improvement in man's estate, and an enlargement of his power over nature."[19] By the time Rousseau was writing in the mid-eighteenth century, it was virtually an article of faith in the intellectual class that the natural sciences were not only freeing humankind from obdurate ignorance, but also substantively improving the quality of life across the continent.

Similar enthusiasm for the arts and letters soon followed. Modernity brought an end to the hegemonic reign of the sacred in music. Composers were liberated from exclusively religious themes, as well as from the constraints of liturgical musical forms. They were free to explore the themes of everyday life – such as nature, love, eating, and drinking – and began rapidly exploiting new harmonic possibilities. In this context, early modernity gave birth to opera, among myriad other genres. Early modern literature likewise found itself liberated from earlier constraints – and was particularly empowered by the invention of the printing press. New literary forms, such as the novel, were born – and found their way into households. Further, philosophy was largely freed from the shackles imposed by centuries of strict adherence to the medieval dogma that it must be the "handmaiden" of theology. Soon enough, it gave rise to figures such as Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hobbes, and Locke.

[18] *Dialogues*, 157 [I: 863].
[19] Bacon [1620] 1999, 189.

Rousseau never disputes the brilliance, power, and appeal of these achievements. In his *Observations*, he notes, "Science in itself is very good, that is obvious; and one would have to have taken leave of good sense, to maintain the contrary." He comments on how science makes life more convenient, promotes a greater understanding of the divine creation, and in the abstract, "deserves all our admiration."[20]

Likewise, Rousseau admits a deep affection for philosophy and the arts. He reflects in his *Essay on the Origin of Languages* that "all men in the universe will take pleasure in listening to beautiful sounds." He writes on another occasion of Italian operas, "I devour them every day with a new eagerness and I do not believe that there is a man on earth so little sensitive to beautiful sounds as to be able to hear without pleasure those who make this admirable music heard."[21] And he would praise the achievements of the early modern philosophers, such as Descartes, Leibniz, and Malebranche.

Furthermore, Rousseau would not simply admire these developments – he would actively participate in them. Within the natural sciences, while he eschewed geology, since it offers "nothing lovely or attractive," and zoology as he had no use for "stinking corpses, slavering and livid flesh, blood, disgusting intestines, dreadful skeletons, [and] pestilential fumes,"[22] he was in his last years an enthusiastic and relatively sophisticated botanist.

He was even more renowned as an author, composer, and music theorist. He would devise an entirely novel mode of music notation that made his contemporaries take serious notice. His opera, *The Village Soothsayer*, was among the most popular of the eighteenth century. Likewise, he wrote a novel, *Julie, or the New Heloise*, that similarly attained status as one of the most popular and influential contributions to its literary genre. He would also try his hand at the theater, drafting several plays, and even having one, *Narcissus*, produced in 1752. And, of course, he would become arguably the most famous philosopher of the eighteenth century – writing on not only politics, but ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, linguistics, and economics.

Given his artistic and intellectual ambitions, Rousseau's *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* came as a great surprise. His *Discourse* represents his answer to a question, posed by the Academy of Dijon, he had encountered quite haphazardly: *Has the progress of the sciences and arts tended to corrupt*

[20] *Observations*, 32 [III: 36]; *Narcissus*, 97 [II: 965].
[21] *Origin of Languages*, 286 [V: 415]; "Letter on Italian and French Opera," 102 [V: 253].
[22] *Reveries* 96, 97 [I: 1067, 1068].