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978-0-521-03395-4 - Rousseau and Geneva: From the First Discourse to the Social Contract, 1749-1762

Helena Rosenblatt

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## INTRODUCTION

*Rousseau in a Genevan context*

Among all great French thinkers, the first and most essential originality of Rousseau is his being not French, but Genevan.<sup>1</sup>

Rousseau is widely regarded as one of the most important thinkers in the history of Western political thought. In fact, his thought has been characterized as “the lynch-pin of the political consciousness of the entire modern period.”<sup>2</sup> Strangely, however, there is little scholarly consensus on the meaning of his work. Few thinkers have elicited as many discordant and even incompatible interpretations. Hence, Rousseau has been located on all points of the political spectrum: he has been called a totalitarian, a democrat, a reactionary, a progressive, an individualist, a collectivist, a conservative, and an apostle of revolution. The question that invariably comes to mind is “why are there so many different Rousseaus?”

There are several possible answers to this question, but one is that Rousseau has had so many different readers, each one bringing to his reading of Rousseau’s text presumptions and premonitions about what Rousseau must have meant by what he said. Another problem is that scholars have tended to look at Rousseau’s meaning in the light of his relevance to later political theories and events, thus confusing Rousseau’s apparent significance, or influence, with his intended meaning. In short, Rousseau has been read out of his historical context.

Those scholars who have tried to situate him in the context of the French Enlightenment have been forced to recognize that, somehow, Rousseau did not “belong.”<sup>3</sup> It is generally felt that Rousseau’s character, outlook, and basic values were very different from those of his French counterparts. The tendency has then been to attribute this

<sup>1</sup> G. Vallette, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau Genevois* (Paris and Geneva, 1911), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> R. Berki, *The History of Political Thought* (London, 1977), p. 159.

<sup>3</sup> G. Sabine and T. Thorson, *A History of Political Theory* (Fort Worth, 1973), p. 529.

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difference to Rousseau's "peculiar" personality. According to one standard interpretation, for example, "all that Rousseau wrote on philosophy and politics grew in some devious way from his complex and unhappy personality."<sup>4</sup> It has been said that Rousseau "was one of the most self-absorbed and emotional of writers, and his political and social theories are deeply affected by his personal difficulties, by his eccentricities and hatreds."<sup>5</sup> Suffice it to say, however, that concentrating on Rousseau's "peculiar" personality has not led to a greater consensus on his political thought or a better understanding of his meaning.

Rather, the feeling persists among scholars that there is a lack of coherence or even a fundamental contradiction in Rousseau's political thought. It is said, for example, that in the *Second Discourse* Rousseau set himself up as the champion of individual rights, only then to annihilate these rights in the *Discourse on Political Economy* and the *Social Contract*. One moment he assumed the language and values of a thoroughgoing republican, and the next he adopted the concepts and reasoning of the school of natural law. Hence his thought is said to be "a strange and disturbing combination"<sup>6</sup> of conservative or even archaic ideas and radically subversive, modern ones. Rousseau is often described as a paradoxical, diffuse, and fragmentary writer whose thought is difficult, if not impossible, to grasp as a unitary whole.

This book is an attempt to rectify this problem. Its purpose is to illuminate the historical meaning of Rousseau's political works written between 1749 and 1762, using Geneva as an interpretive key. My aim is to show that Rousseau's relationship with his city of birth was integral to his development into an original political thinker and that a good way to make sense of the *Discourses*, the *Lettre à d'Alembert*, and the *Social Contract* is to analyze these texts with reference to a specific Genevan context. Lost or neglected historical information showing Rousseau's intimate ties with Geneva will be recovered, and the city's socio-economic and political environment will be fully elucidated. We shall see that Rousseau's most famous political works all engaged issues central to the Genevan political debate and that some of Rousseau's most original ideas were derived when he tried to work out problems he identified in his native city. In fact, Geneva is a unifying thread which, while illuminating the meaning of Rousseau's main political writings, allows us to see their coherence.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.<sup>5</sup> J. Plamenatz, *Man and Society*, revised by M. E. Plamenatz and R. Wokler (New York, 1992–3), vol. II, p. 123. <sup>6</sup> I. Hampsher-Monk, *A History of Modern Political Thought* (Oxford, 1992), p. 153.

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I am not the first person to argue for the importance of Geneva to Rousseau's political views. Rousseau himself called attention to his origins by signing his principal political works "citizen of Geneva." Since then, scholars have been obliged to acknowledge his Genevan, republican, and Calvinist background, while a debate has taken place over the extent to which this background influenced his thought. It is my opinion, however, that the Genevan context has not been properly explored and that the methodology used in relating Rousseau's thought to that context has been simplistic. For this reason, the question of Geneva's influence has been relegated to the periphery of Rousseau scholarship and the overwhelming majority of scholarly interpretations of Rousseau pay only passing lip-service to his Genevan origins. Typically, the *Dictionnaire des philosophes* refers to Rousseau as a "French writer, born in Geneva."<sup>7</sup>

A new treatment of Rousseau's relationship with Geneva is therefore needed, one which gives adequate place to the richness and contentiousness of the city's socio-political life, and which applies recent advances in the methodology of intellectual history. An overview of previous scholarship on Rousseau's relationship with Geneva will show what I mean.

## ROUSSEAU AND GENEVA IN PREVIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

Until 1934, Geneva's influence on Rousseau's political thought was generally acknowledged. Works written before that time, however, are marred by a shallow understanding of Genevan history and of Calvinism. They tend to lack analytical focus and make statements of a very general nature without delving into any sustained examination of Genevan texts. For example, according to Gaspard Vallette, whose work is one of the better examples of this genre, the "accent" and "spirit" of Rousseau's thought is Genevan.<sup>8</sup> The *Social Contract* is "a Genevan book,"<sup>9</sup> strongly influenced by both the Genevan constitution and the typically Genevan "tendency towards science and democracy." Other scholars have called the *Social Contract* a "panegyric," or eulogy, of the Genevan constitution. All these early appraisals are similar in that the Genevan context tends to be seen as a somewhat vague determinant of Rousseau's ideas. Their conceptual methodology principally involves locating "typically Genevan" ideas in Rousseau's texts.

<sup>7</sup> *Dictionnaire des philosophes*, ed. D. Huisman (Paris, 1984), my italics.<sup>8</sup> Vallette, *Rousseau Genevois*, p. 38. <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209.

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In his doctoral dissertation of 1934, J. Spink reacted against the reductionism of such approaches to Rousseau. To him the *Social Contract* was “a work of pure speculation,” in which “Rousseau thought rather of teaching than of learning the principles of public law.” Spink was horrified to think that the *Social Contract* might be seen simply as a eulogy of the Genevan constitution, or as a Genevan “brochure.” To refute such ideas, Spink claimed that the Genevan constitution could not have played a significant role in Rousseau’s thought prior to the condemnation of the *Social Contract*, because Rousseau knew very little about it prior to that time. In fact, according to Spink, throughout the 1740s and 1750s, and up until the time that Rousseau wrote the *Social Contract*, “he did not understand the constitution of his country.”<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, Spink did believe that “Geneva created Rousseau; it created the essence of his character.” Having devoted a chapter of his dissertation to the theology preached in Geneva during Rousseau’s lifetime, Spink concluded that the moral doctrine espoused in the *First Discourse* was “a laicized and exaggerated form of the moral doctrine taught by the Genevan pastors.” Having read some Genevan political pamphlets of the early eighteenth century, Spink was also forced to acknowledge that “fifty years before Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, the politicians of the lower town had already formulated some of his boldest principles on government and law.” Thus, in a thesis which intended to sever the connection between Rousseau’s political ideas and the Genevan constitution, Spink nevertheless conceded that the theories of the Genevan bourgeoisie may have exerted a considerable influence on Rousseau’s outlook. Spink admitted that “it was only in Geneva that Rousseau could have learned to become a ‘proud republican.’”<sup>11</sup>

In order to safeguard Rousseau’s originality *vis-à-vis* Geneva, Spink tried to separate Rousseau’s moral outlook, which he conceded was Genevan, from Rousseau’s politics.<sup>12</sup> He then exaggerated the undemocratic aspects of the Genevan constitution. In so doing, however, he deliberately avoided seeing it through the eyes of the Genevan bourgeoisie. Only thus could he say, for example, that Geneva’s constitution was “defective at birth.”<sup>13</sup> Finally, Spink’s argument rests on the claim that Rousseau did not *understand* the political situation in Geneva, and

<sup>10</sup> J. S. Spink, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et Genève* (Paris, 1934), pp. 90, 42, 87.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 44, 37, 13, 30.

<sup>12</sup> In the *Emile* (*OC* IV, p. 524), Rousseau warned against such an approach: “those who would like to treat politics and morals separately, will never understand anything about either subject.”

<sup>13</sup> Spink, *Rousseau et Genève*, p. 8.

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that he never discussed politics with his Genevan friends until after 1762, assumptions which, as we shall see, fly in the face of common sense.

Spink's thesis was thereafter reinforced and even superseded by R. Derathé's classic *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et la science politique de son temps*, which came out in 1950. Derathé accepted Spink's contention that prior to 1762 Geneva did not constitute a major source of Rousseau's political ideas, stating categorically that Rousseau's democratic ideas and the Genevan political system had "nothing in common."<sup>14</sup> Instead, Derathé carefully documented Rousseau's indebtedness to the natural law theorists. In Derathé's words, "Geneva undoubtedly occupied a large part of the *imagination* and life of Rousseau, but it is elsewhere that we must search for the sources of his political thought." To think that Geneva's constitution could have served as a model for Rousseau was a "simplistic idea hastily adopted by Rousseau's adversaries with the obvious intention of trying to thereby diminish the significance of his political work." The *Social Contract* was "a book for all time" and could therefore not be "a book of Genevan inspiration."<sup>15</sup> Again, the fear of reductionism led this eminent Rousseau scholar away from Geneva.

Claiming that Rousseau was ill-informed about Geneva has since become a general tendency in Rousseau scholarship. Surprisingly, even Rousseau's biographers have given support to the myth that Rousseau did not *understand* the Genevan constitution before 1762. Cranston contends, for example, that Rousseau had been falsely "taught to believe that Geneva was an ideal republic."<sup>16</sup> Likewise, Trousson states that Rousseau's view of Geneva was but a "myth."<sup>17</sup> According to Guehénno, by the time Rousseau had become a famous writer, Geneva existed for him only as a few childhood memories: "He *dreamed* of her much more than he had ever really known her."<sup>18</sup> It is therefore not surprising that Rousseau has recently been called a "dreamer of democracy," whose "strange new view of politics" grew out of "reveries" about his homeland.<sup>19</sup> Rousseau is claimed to have *fantasized* about Geneva, in the process confusing the city with the "Geneva of his dreams."<sup>20</sup> Relegating Geneva to the realm of Rousseau's imagination has of

<sup>14</sup> R. Derathé, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et la science politique de son temps* (Paris, 1988), pp. 10, 22, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Derathé cites Rousseau on p. 11. Derathé's own words are on p. 21, my italics.

<sup>16</sup> M. Cranston, *Jean-Jacques. The Early Life and Work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau 1712–1754* (Middlesex, 1987), p. 324.

<sup>17</sup> R. Trousson, *J.-J. Rousseau, la marche à la gloire* (Paris, 1988–9), p. 37.

<sup>18</sup> J. Guehénno, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Paris, 1962), p. 117, my italics. Guehénno goes on to postulate that "it is in France that he learned to think for all the world."

<sup>19</sup> J. Miller, *Rousseau. Dreamer of Democracy* (New Haven, 1984). This thesis is made repeatedly, but the specific quotations are from pages 3 and 8.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

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course had the unfortunate consequence of appearing to minimize the need for a serious and scholarly treatment of the Genevan context.

Nevertheless, in 1971 Michel Launay again brought up the question of Geneva's influence on Rousseau, this time from an essentially Marxist perspective. His *Jean-Jacques Rousseau écrivain politique* portrays Rousseau as a consistent spokesman for the Genevan *petit-bourgeois* dissidents in their battle against the Genevan patriciate. It contains valuable information about Geneva and for this reason is an important contribution to Rousseau scholarship. But it also underestimates the nature and importance of Geneva's intellectual tradition. Where Launay sees "contradiction" and "discordance" in Rousseau's writings, he attributes it to the fact that Rousseau's thought "remains prisoner of the feudal political vision from which it wishes to break loose." Rousseau's theories are "ambiguous," according to Launay, because "he refused all party or class consciousness." It is Geneva that explains or excuses this "feudal confusion" in Rousseau's thought. Launay thereby suggests that it is only when Rousseau breaks free from his Genevan context that he can become truly pertinent and original.<sup>21</sup>

Launay's book does not seek to explain or to analyze the sources of this so-called "feudal" or "pre-scientific" mentality. Moreover, it oversimplifies the structure and character of Geneva, for example dismissingly describing the pastors as the "monkeys and valets of the upper class."<sup>22</sup> Significantly, recent work by A. Gür<sup>23</sup> has shown that the author of one of the most important pro-bourgeois political tracts in Genevan history was a prominent pastor and that several ideas considered until now to be archetypically Rousseauian contributions to political theory were part of Genevan discourse long before Rousseau. Evidently, the Genevan political debate, and the role of the ministers there, merit further attention.

Finally, mention should be made of R. Fralin's *Rousseau and Representation*, which came out in 1978. According to Fralin, many of Rousseau's most distinctive ideas are also distinctively Genevan in origin and this is particularly true of the *Social Contract*. In Fralin's words, "Geneva was both the starting point and the finishing point, the inspiration and the goal of Rousseau's political thought at the time he wrote the *Contrat social*."<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, however, Fralin does not undertake any

<sup>21</sup> M. Launay, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau écrivain politique* (Cannes, 1971), pp. 231, 232, 103.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>23</sup> A. Gür, "Les lettres 'séditieuses' anonymes de 1718, étude et texte," in *BSHAG* 17 (1981).

<sup>24</sup> R. Fralin, *Rousseau and Representation* (New York, 1978), p. 144.

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kind of analysis of the Genevan political tracts of the period and, curiously, does not even mention Calvinism as part of Rousseau's Genevan background.<sup>25</sup>

Fralin concentrates on Rousseau's institutional thought, which he compares with Geneva's political system. He concludes that Rousseau's view of representation was ambiguous, and that this ambiguity was a "faithful reflection of the ambiguities inherent in the Genevan constitution." When Fralin refers to the influence of Geneva, he also sees it primarily as a source of ready-made ideas or attitudes for Rousseau to adopt. This approach limits Fralin's discussion of Geneva's influence to showing similarities between Geneva and the ideas of Rousseau. From such a conceptual framework, Rousseau's originality necessarily must come from another source. In fact, Fralin favors an explanation of Rousseau which lies somewhere between that of Vallette on the one hand and those of Spink and Derathé on the other. According to Fralin, when Rousseau "transcended both Genevan institutions and bourgeois theory . . . he did so with the help of the natural law theorists."<sup>26</sup>

## SOME METHODOLOGICAL AND CONCEPTUAL ASSUMPTIONS

Readers of the Cambridge Ideas in Context series know that a contextual approach need not be reductionist. To say that Rousseau was influenced by Geneva is not to say that he simply adopted Genevan ideas and practices and made them his own. On the contrary, it is clear that any author can extend, subvert, or alter accepted conventions.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the Genevan context should not be seen simply as the *determinant* of Rousseau's ideas, but rather as a framework for understanding his meaning. We will see that Geneva might better be seen not simply as a source of ideas for Rousseau, but as a source of problems that he sought to solve.

A mistake, repeatedly committed by historians until now, has been to paint a monolithic picture of Geneva. Most sources are content to deal with Genevan politics in a summary fashion: they describe Geneva's government as a paternalistic oligarchy, and leave it at that. Clichés and

<sup>25</sup> The neglect of religion causes Fralin to oversimplify notions such as, for example, the general will, which, as we shall see, was pivotal to Rousseau's philosophy and, as P. Riley in his *The General Will Before Rousseau* (Princeton, 1986) has more recently shown, has traceable theological origins.

<sup>26</sup> Fralin, *Rousseau and Representation*, pp. 137 and 142.

<sup>27</sup> Q Skinner, "Some Problems in the Analysis of Political Thought and Action," *Political Theory* (August 1974), p. 287.

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caricatures of Calvinism are common in secondary sources. But such a simplistic approach does justice neither to Geneva nor Rousseau, because no aspect of Genevan life, be it political, economic, religious, or other, is reducible to a simple and static formula. We shall see that in the eighteenth century Geneva was not only undergoing change, but was doing so at an accelerated pace, causing considerable stress to whole sectors of the population, to traditional institutions, and to ways of living and thinking. Numerous political pamphlets, journals, letters, and other texts testify to the fact that heated debates were taking place on a wide range of issues and many Genevans were ill at ease with the direction in which their city was evolving. Any worthwhile treatment of Genevan life in the eighteenth century must take these debates and discussions into account; and any study proposing to make valid statements about Rousseau's relationship with Geneva must take these debates seriously before analyzing the positions taken by Rousseau in his own texts.

The advantage of such a contextual approach is that it also allows us to consider Rousseau's relationship with other great thinkers who wrote before him. Because to say that Geneva was important to Rousseau is not, for example, to say that the school of natural law was not. Rather, an understanding of the Genevan context will help us to understand why Rousseau reacted in the way he did to certain previous thinkers and schools of thought. Likewise, to say that Geneva was important to Rousseau is not to say that the world of the French *philosophes* was not. Rather, Geneva can help us to understand some of the reasons for the deep "chasm"<sup>28</sup> separating Rousseau from his *philosophes* brethren, particularly with regard to politics.

Recent trends in intellectual history have stressed the role played by language in the development of political theory.<sup>29</sup> Thus it has become customary to speak of the "language of natural law" or "the language of classical republicanism." Great authors, like Rousseau, use such languages in their own distinct ways to create new meaning. It is now understood that intellectual historians must learn to read and recognize the diverse idioms of political discourse available in a thinker's culture in order to identify them as they appear in his texts, and in order to

<sup>28</sup> M. Hulliung, *The Autocritique of Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994), p. 135. Hulliung highlights the values Rousseau shared with the *philosophes*, but also indicates that there were some fundamental differences between them.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, the collection of essays, *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe*, (ed.) A. Pagden (Cambridge, 1987), in particular, J.G.A. Pocock's essay "The Concept of Language and the *métier d'historien*: Some Considerations on Practice."



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understand his distinct employment of them. This book will focus on several such languages as important to Rousseau's development as a political thinker: in particular the languages of *doux commerce* and natural law, but also the languages of classical republicanism and eighteenth-century Genevan Calvinism. We will see that an understanding of the Genevan context, and an appreciation of Rousseau's evolving relationship with that context, are instrumental to understanding Rousseau's own language and point of view as expressed in his texts.

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## CHAPTER I

*The formation of a “citizen of Geneva”*

## ROUSSEAU’S GENEVA

It is generally recognized that Rousseau was born and raised in Geneva. It is also well known that he was the son of a watchmaker. But what this means in terms of the kind of religious, social, and political climate Rousseau grew up in has received relatively little attention. Yet growing up in Geneva was very different from growing up in just any other French-speaking city in Europe. It meant being raised in the culture of an independent, republican, and Calvinist city-state.

Formerly an episcopal city under the dominance of the House of Savoy, Geneva had won its independence in the mid-sixteenth century through a double revolution: political emancipation had been shortly followed by the city’s conversion to Protestantism. On May 25, 1536, all Genevan citizens had assembled in a General Council to accept the Reformation. Three months later Calvin arrived in Geneva to help in the reconstruction of Geneva’s Church.

Calvin wanted Geneva to be the very model of a Christian commonwealth. His vision was predicated upon the fusion of belief and citizenship, illustrated by the oath he tried to impose upon the Genevan population in 1537. The people of Geneva were asked to accept the confession of faith at the same time as they swore their loyalty to the city.<sup>1</sup> Over the years, Genevans would take many such oaths, essentially to confirm their covenant. According to the *Serment des Bourgeois*, for example, each newly admitted member of the bourgeoisie was made to promise that he would “live according to the Reformation of the Holy Gospel” even before promising to be “good and loyal to this city of Geneva.” This explains why a Genevan citizen who changed his religion automatically lost his citizenship. Oaths were also taken yearly in the General Council, in which all citizens held a seat, before each election.

<sup>1</sup> On this covenant, see M. Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints* (Cambridge, 1965), pp. 55–57.