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978-0-521-31640-8 - Men and Citizens: A Study of Rousseau's Social Theory

Judith N. Shklar

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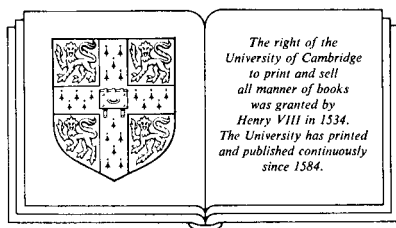
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MEN AND CITIZENS  
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ROUSSEAU'S SOCIAL THEORY

BY

JUDITH N. SHKLAR

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## PREFACE TO THE 1985 EDITION

It is not often that one gets a second chance in life. To be able to write a new introduction to a book written over fifteen years ago is therefore a very welcome opportunity to correct and improve one's original work. And, indeed, there is much that could and should have been said more clearly or even quite differently. Nevertheless, even though no one will probably ever get Rousseau down fully, and I certainly have not done so, I remain unrepentant. This brief essay is meant only to touch up and not to alter the account of Rousseau I gave so long ago. What I have come to accept is that he is one of those authors who says something personal to every reader, and that it is both vain and illiberal to insist that one's own reading is the only right one. At most it should be a guide to others to come to their own understanding of Rousseau's messages. That is not an easy task, and I hope to be of use to others, as the authors whom I mention in the text and some of whom I have read since then, have helped me.<sup>1</sup>

Having thought it over often, I still remain convinced that he was first and foremost a psychologist, 'the historian of the human heart'. If Plato was his ancestor, Freud was his heir, and like them he had a mordant sense of the distance between what we are and what we might be. I also believe, now as then, that he was a social critic, the most devastating of all, and not a designer of plans for political reform. His great aim was to disturb, awaken and to shake us into recognizing the actualities of our lives. We are to see the truth as he, and he alone, had found it by looking into himself and making his self-portrait a mirror for all of us. A wise man, as he often noted, does all he can to warn his fellow men against going from bad to worse. He tries to stop them from moving ever further away from the peace of nature or social simplicity. That is certainly a political act, even a policy, but Rousseau did not and could not expect it to be followed. For he had done all he could to show how,

<sup>1</sup> The following books appeared since I wrote the book and each has helped me to a better understanding of Rousseau: John Charvet, *The Social Problem in the Philosophy of Rousseau* (Cambridge, 1974); Victor Goldschmidt, *Anthropologie et Politique. Les principes du système de Rousseau* (Paris, 1974) and Nannerl O. Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France* (Princeton, 1980).

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at every turn, men had failed to stop their advance to their own misery, and why they were victims of their own devising. He certainly meant to raise his voice on behalf of the people, the victimized majority of mankind, but he spoke to audiences that were, as he knew, privileged in every way, and he told them that they too were constrained and disordered by the society they maintained. That is not to say that he was any less radical than, first his persecutors, and then his Jacobin admirers and later revolutionaries all thought him to be. They were quite right in recognizing the unconditional character of his rejection of the culture of the *ancien régime* in general and of its vast inequalities in particular. It is not surprising either that his indignation should have inspired them to actively rebel against an unjust world. Nevertheless, his own diagnosis of our social ills did not permit of so sanguine a resolution. Like all philosophers, he wanted to see things as they are, and what he saw would not inspire revolutionary or any other transforming hopes.

When Rousseau, as 'a watchman's son', addressed the Archbishop of Paris, he expressed in concentrated rage all the contempt he had long felt for the social order which that prelate represented. Rousseau was not surprised that he should be persecuted by this peer of France. And indeed just because he excoriated this man and his world so violently in this most unrestrained of letters, he dismissed the very idea that this society was capable of changing. *Emile*, the book that the Archbishop had banned, had shown how, with infinite care, one child might be saved from the destructive impact of the modern world. That is why *Emile* is given a 'negative' education, against society. Even this proposal for personal sanity might not be 'absolutely possible' here and now, and indeed in the end the pupil does not escape the corruptions of society. For himself Rousseau found moments of happiness, even though again only briefly, in retreats to the countryside far from the contaminations of not just towns, but from contact with any other people. There are possibilities of temporary respite, but as a species we begin to dig our grave the day we are born into society, in Rousseau's view.

The dynamics of individual disruption and social oppression are ultimately rooted in the tensions that every enduring relationship

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between people creates within each and between all of us. Our inborn faculties of imagination, memory and reason, as well as our freedom to adapt and alter as we choose, are such that as soon as we abandon our 'natural', mindless isolation, we begin to constrain and agitate each other. We cannot live with each other without speech, calculation and the desire to be loved. And so we compete, deceive and plan instead of passively enjoying the passing moment. We die without ever having lived. Association also brings inequality with it, for we are born with different physical and mental endowments. As soon as we measure ourselves against each other, which is what reason does, we discover our inequalities and their uses. The first fatal step toward enduring, and therefore fundamental, social alteration of our very being, comes when the sexes form permanent unions. That introduces the first division of labor, she within, he outside their shared hut. That cabin itself is an intimation of private property and its conflicts, but most important of all, love and jealousy, the sweetest and the most bitter emotions, are purposely induced in men by women, who artfully use their attractions to make men dependent upon them. That is also how 'amour-propre', that anxious awareness of oneself as a social object, begins to dominate our psychic economy. All is not lost at once, however. Village society among relatively isolated families has its cruelties, but on the whole it is happy, a balance between social and natural impulses. It is, however, unstable, because men are irresistibly inventive. There is a real technological motor at work in this theory of historical change. Metallurgy and agriculture, and the efficiency of dividing labor, and indeed of employing the labor of others in exchange for the use of resources, are all successive intellectual discoveries. They drive us out of our normal laziness and they tighten the bonds of mutual dependence.

All these changes precede the establishment of private property and make that fatal institution necessary and explicable. That is why I discuss them at such length in the book, but that does not mean that Rousseau did not think property the most important, the most destructive and the most ineradicable step that mankind takes in the course of its social development, or 'perfection' as he so ironically called it. Once there is property, the progress of inequality is



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haltless, and with it comes a desire to harm others, positive malevolence. The deprived want to injure those who have appropriated more than they need and left the weak to starve. The proprietors want ceaselessly, more and more, to dominate and above all to exclude all others from a share in their possessions. Yet with this fatal idea of 'mine' comes a great intellectual advance, the idea of injustice and justice. The first is aroused when one is deprived of the work of one's hands and it is spontaneous. The latter is the sum of rules we need to protect us against injury and that comes only with property, with the accepted notion of one's own. And now anything one can effectively fence in gives one a claim to rightful possession. It is a situation full of conflict and mutual war, until the rich can fool the poor into a false contract in which the legitimacy of private and unequal property is accepted and defended by the combined forces of society as a whole for the sake of peace. All governments exist only to enforce this unfair system which is bound to deteriorate until it reaches the corruption, misery and criminality of luxury and poverty that mark every modern city. If a great man, a Lycurgus or a Moses had intervened before the coercive contract was made, decline might have been averted or delayed but that is an exception, a veritable miracle, a rarity at best. In all this, there can be no doubt that property has the most devastating effect. Of all the wrong turns that unequally created men take, the one that reduces us to rich and poor is the worst. It kills everything kind and gentle in us. Pity and compassion, which are natural to us, evaporate.

All this, Rousseau wrote to Voltaire, is not the fault of Providence, but our own. We know nothing about the divine design, in any case, but we have no grounds for complaint against it. Voltaire ought not to have blamed anyone but mankind for the Lisbon disaster. Earthquakes are a danger only for people who have built cities and live in high buildings. Since we did this and worse to ourselves, it was not inevitable. It was not as if an external natural or divine agency has propelled us to our doom. It does not follow that we are capable, as members of permanent associations, of reversing the emotional, psychological and moral drives that now make us build crowded cities under unjust rules and in a condition of misery, dependence and inequality. We can travel the road to civilization quickly or

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slowly, some villages may remain underdeveloped, an occasional just city may be established by a supremely gifted leader, but on the whole, the path we have followed historically is the one that we are most likely to follow. For we are bound to live with each other even though it costs us our peace. And peace is lost even in so primary a union as that of men and women. History is a story of steady coercion and its victims, and once we understand that, we may, as individuals, protect ourselves against the moral contagion of society, as Rousseau tried to do. But societies must play out their false beginnings. The impact of private property is especially indelible. Neither it nor the sense of justice to which it gives rise can be eradicated. It can be controlled, its effects made less oppressive, but in the end it will tend to enhance inequality and oppression sooner or later.

Rousseau was clear, neither property nor the division of labor which precedes it and enhances it, can be abolished even in the most Spartan of cities. Once we are dependent upon each other and our inequality begins to matter to us, we will rapidly or slowly travel the road to Paris and to the rest of the modern world, with its artificial needs, intricate bonds among producers and consumers and its endless servile dependencies. Even without our systems of law, which are designed to favor the rich, we would not be free or happy. At most we might be just and learn, as little Emile does, that if we do not want our beans pulled up, we should not randomly destroy the vegetable plots of others. We are to recognize that what injures us would be experienced just as painfully by another. That is why compassion is needed for social understanding. But since kings do not expect to become subjects, or the rich to be poor, they have no incentives to develop any sort of empathy. In society pity itself is mixed with the mean pleasure of not being the sufferer. So the emotional springs of mutual forbearance are dried up by inequality while the insatiable urge for greater wealth, which property fuels, positively encourages domination. It daily gives new fetters to the poor and new powers to the rich. Yet no one forced mankind into a legal order that secures this state of affairs. They chose to do it to themselves, each in the silly hope that he might yet have something to gain. Moreover, once the idea of the justice of mine and thine has

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become a permanent part of our moral consciousness, there's no way in which we would ever agree to a return to a pre-legal state of society. At best, Rousseau thought one could lessen the degrees of inequality that prevail. The dynamics of property in conditions of scarcity, however, do not favor such a project, and the likely outcome is greater inequality, less political freedom and more war.

That we are both responsible for and driven to our condition is pure tragedy. And it is often most evident when Rousseau imagined a good or at least not evil society for us. To live either in a simple village or in a just and disciplined city is not beyond our natural powers, and it is precisely when we are made to recognize that, that we must also acknowledge the extent of our failures, including our moral and political inability to rise above the circumstances we have created for ourselves. These better societies are what I have called Rousseau's utopias. The people who live there are not like the Genevans or Parisians of the eighteenth century, but they are not more or less human in their capacities of feelings. One such vision of a better policy is Sparta. Here the tug of war between inclination and duty is resolved wholly in favor of the latter. Man is denatured and becomes an entirely civic being. Education is public and identical for all. The state is rich, the citizens are poor. Their mentality and ambitions are directed towards public objects, chiefly foreign war and domestic unity. The family disappears, while the city is everything. Public honor, status, instead of wealth, are the objects of ambition here. The second utopia is as natural as socialized people can ever be. In an imaginary Swiss village the weather is so bad that families remain at home for most of the year. In the summer they join in festivals and mating, only to disperse again. Contact is rare, in short, and so is conflict. The arts and sciences can be cultivated harmlessly, but within each family, not as competitive displays, but as leisurely pleasures. No one is organized for anything and the degree of dependence is as low here as it is complete in Sparta. Each, in its way, is perfect. In neither one is man divided against himself or at odds with other people. Both show how much Rousseau thought that to be free from hope and fear, and from the struggle between social and natural impulses were the greatest goods attainable for men in society. There is property in both societies as well as

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inequality, but both are rendered painless because they are limited, static and their social effects are controlled. State discipline does it in one case, dissociation in the other. Both stand as reproaches to actuality and both were, as Rousseau said over and over again, to make modern readers reflect upon the depravity of their own world, as well as philosophically, upon the practices of politics in general. The enormity of his condemnation was such that it was impossible to introduce any suggestion of possible political improvement or to find grounds for any turn for the better in the world in which he lived, and it was not Rousseau's purpose to do so. He wanted his contemporaries to recognize what society was like, or to be exact, how it looked when one saw it from the very bottom of the social pyramid, from the point of view of all the world's losers.

In neither one of Rousseau's utopias are there any intellectuals. That is no surprise, since he began his literary career with an attack upon them. I still think that Voltaire stood for everything that was wrong with men of letters and artists in his eyes, but I should have said more about Rousseau's struggle with skepticism and with the shadow of Montaigne that certainly haunted him throughout his life as a writer. He admired and learned much from Montaigne, but as he, step-by-step, put a greater distance between himself and all those other writers who decorated the chains of oppression with flowers, he also had to reject him. Doubt, he decided, was not for the people and he managed to convince himself that it was too violent a state for his spirit as well. It is far from clear, however, just what, if any, religious beliefs Rousseau managed to salvage, except the bare faith that God exists and that there was a better life hereafter. Without that hope he would be too miserable, but to say that one believes something because one would despair otherwise, is not what is usually meant by an affirmation of faith. Rousseau spoke of himself as if he were another person, and so he was, not his real, nature-mystical self, but 'the man of the people'.

The relation to Montaigne is so significant because he was Rousseau's only model of introspective thought. Moreover, many of Rousseau's classical references are drawn from Montaigne's *Essays*, so are many ideas for the education of a young boy and also the image of noble primitive men butchered by Europeans. In his *First*

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*Discourse*, Rousseau still found it difficult to cast him aside. While he spoke of a new dangerous Pyrrhonism he exempted Montaigne because he was not just showing off to the world. One must assume that in this case Rousseau was saying that Pyrrhonism was fine for wise men, but unsuitable for the public at large. By the time he wrote his article *Political Economy* for the *Encyclopédie*, he had moved on. Socrates was not as noble as Cato, now, the philosopher was inferior morally to the patriot, in suicide. Montaigne had also made that comparison, but he found Cato ostentatious, and admired Socrates without reserve. Then there was Montaigne's hatred of cruelty, clearly not compatible with Rousseau's idolization of the martial ethos. Have we become more humane, he asked? We have indeed, he replied, but at far too great a cost, since it has also made us petty and cowardly. But above all there was the matter of atheism, an excuse for immorality, convenient for the rich and fortunate. People need religious beliefs and Rousseau must present himself as one of the despised and rejected. Nevertheless, the Savoyard Vicar's faith was not Rousseau's. It was carefully noted that this was only what a young man approaching maturity ought to hear and accept. Rousseau's own opinions appear in the *Moral Letters*, written to a woman he loved. Many of its phrases reappear in the Vicar's 'Profession of Faith', but God is not mentioned in that earlier and more genuine account of Rousseau's own state of mind.

To Madame d'Houdetot, Rousseau wrote of his own bottomless doubts. To resolve them he followed Descartes into his own mind, and also found the *cogito*. Beyond that every doctrine of Descartes was refuted later by philosophers. His second guide into himself had been Montaigne, even more disturbing, for he left him with a burden of moral relativism, and that was intolerable. 'O Montaigne', he and later the Vicar cry out, 'you pride yourself on your truth and honesty; be sincere and truthful, if a philosopher can be so, and tell me if there is any country upon earth where... a good man is scorned, and a traitor is held in honor?' Montaigne was intolerable and only conscience, our one moral instinct, and remorse, the pain of having done ill, can reassure us. The answer lies in ourselves, and so he advises his friend to withdraw into herself, to become solitary and, finally, to devote herself to the poor, so that their gratitude and

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her own conscience will reward her. Having already questioned Montaigne's sincerity generally, Rousseau went on to mock his autobiographical essays. Unlike himself, Montaigne just pretended to be frank. He showed his readers only his amiable characteristics, and as such Rousseau owed him no moral debt at all. For Rousseau was going to display all his faults so that he could serve as a mirror to other men, and do what no one else had ever done, help them to really know themselves by showing them a perfectly accurate picture of another human being. It follows that if he now wanted a faith as did other men, if he had felt doubt too much to bear, skepticism must be insincere and malevolent. In fact, I think Rousseau never overcame his doubts, but he may well have come to suffer because of it. Uncertainty was not for him an endurable condition. Not for him tentative, exploratory essays such as Montaigne's, but affirmative declaratory prose, hammering his truth into the minds of his readers.

The function of civil religion, an idea Rousseau had first presented to Voltaire in a letter in which he joined the poet in deploring intolerance of every sort, but also affirming his belief in God, was to secure men against moral doubt. It was not just discipline, it was moral support against too much reflection. For Rousseau never suggested that most people were intelligent enough to cope with complex notions; they were not even able to pursue their own self-interest. For a democratic political theory these are not the most convenient assumptions. Nevertheless, the people are all that matters. If kings and philosophers disappeared it would make no difference at all. The people must be sovereign, if there is to be a just, free and beneficial political order. Their sovereignty has two aspects. First of all they must all join in the contract that sets up the rules under which they become citizens with legal rights and duties. Secondly, they must make the ultimate decisions about who is to govern and whether the government has remained legal. They have the last as well as the first word about legitimacy, which is why they must assemble annually. That is also why they need a transforming great legislator, a disciplined educative state and as little face-to-face political activity as possible. For too much sociability is bound to rouse their unquenchable desire for self-advancement and privilege.

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Men left to their own social devices seek inequality and closed party associations. Indeed, as members of such groups they are capable of immoralities they would never attempt alone. There is therefore a great need to act against inequality. For without equality, there is no freedom and men become again dependent on private persons, not on the state, which becomes morally enfeebled. No one may be so rich as to buy another and no one so poor as to sell himself.

There is private property as there is justice, but its validity is created by public law and limited by it as well. The great superiority of legal government over every personal rule is its impersonality and generality. The latter is really inherent in the former. Impartiality, the absence of exceptions and the rationality of rules prevent not only unfairness, they make everyone alike socially. All are citizens identical in their social personality. Each one is related directly to the rules, not to other people. It is neither a cozy nor a diverse society, but it is egalitarian and just and can remain so as long as a general will, a will to equality, is internalized by all citizens. The elective magistrates are the likeliest to stray, for not only do they govern society in all important respects, they are a corporate group, and will, therefore, be the first to develop a private group will. Government is therefore to be both obeyed and distrusted, loved and feared. This is the society of the *Social Contract* for men as they are, with good laws designed to prevent, or at least to put off, the historically known slide into luxury, inequality and oppression. It is a society that would not allow the rich to victimize the poor, the clever the stupid or the strong the weak. And as Rousseau spoke as a connoisseur of victimhood this was a sensible alternative city. It was not a project for action. Emile is told that he is to use it as a measuring rod when he travels to foreign countries. He and we learn to judge and to look for what is politically significant when we weigh the worth of the governments under which we live.

For himself, Rousseau preferred solitude and the happiness he momentarily found in nature. It was always fleeting, and indeed he never stayed in the country for long, nor was he genuinely solitary. In a fantasy of what he could do if he had everything, he dreamed of being surrounded by friends. He was in his own view bound to remain misunderstood and alone and so he wavered, all his life,

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between solitude and society. He could imagine men in a situation where such a choice would not even present itself, in perfectly denatured civic society and in the simplicity of a rural golden age. These were not, however, alternatives open to him or his readers. For them he wanted what philosophy has always tried to achieve, a greater honesty, an end to illusion and a better understanding of things as they are.

This is what I had to say in this book originally in some detail. I ought to have said more about the importance of private property and about Rousseau's difficulties with both doubt and faith. There is no doubt that he is the most egalitarian and democratic of political theorists, but scarcely the most ideological or programmatic. His radicalism is critical, not affirming. He could quite rightly be proud of the range of his social experiences, but they contributed not to confidence in any part of society, but to a sense of the oppressiveness of the whole. That is why the victim is universal man and why each one of us needs a tutor, a lawmaker or a father to guide us. For relations between equals have to be invented for us. We are not created equal. What the cost of such peace and equality would be is set out very carefully in the *Social Contract*, and the reader must decide whether the price is right. It is not to be expected that one will ever have an occasion to actually pay it.



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## PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

Since the title of this book announces its contents quite accurately, I shall not detain the reader with any further explanations. It is far more agreeable to tell everyone how much I owe to those of my friends who helped me write this book by reading it and talking to me about it or by just being good enough to listen to me, hour after hour, go on and on about Rousseau. Among them, George A. Kelly, because he disagrees with me so profoundly, has a special claim on my gratitude. I thank them all and hope they will like this book as much as I enjoyed writing it.

It is, however, to those Harvard and Radcliffe students, both undergraduate and graduate, with whom I have read and discussed Rousseau that I feel most thankful. Their response to Rousseau was an inspiration to me. I wrote this book for them, and it is to them that it is inscribed.

Chapters 1 and 4 appeared originally in somewhat different form as articles and are here reprinted with permission from the *Political Science Quarterly*, LXXXI (March, 1966) and the *American Political Science Review*, LVIII (December, 1964), respectively.

*July 1968*

J.N.S.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATED WORKS

C.G.	<i>Correspondance Générale de Jean-Jacques Rousseau.</i>
Hachette	<i>Œuvres Complètes</i> , Hachette, Paris, 1905.
<i>Inégalité</i>	<i>Discours sur l'Origine et les Fondements de l'Inégalité Parmi les Hommes.</i>
<i>Lettre à Voltaire</i>	Lettre à M. de Voltaire.
N.H.	<i>La Nouvelle Héloïse.</i>
O.C.	<i>Œuvres Complètes.</i>
<i>Poland</i>	<i>Considérations sur le Gouvernement de Pologne.</i>