

Engaging with Rousseau

Jean-Jacques Rousseau has been cast as a champion of Enlightenment and a beacon of Romanticism, a father figure of radical revolutionaries and totalitarian dictators alike, an inventor of the modern notion of the self and an advocate of stern ancient republicanism. *Engaging with Rousseau* treats his writings as an enduring topic of debate, examining the diverse responses they have attracted from the Enlightenment to the present. Such notions as the general will were, for example, refracted through very different prisms during the struggle for independence in Latin America and in social conflicts in Eastern Europe, or modified by thinkers from Kant to contemporary political theorists. Beyond Rousseau's ideas, his public image also travelled around the world. This book examines engagement with Rousseau's works as well as with his self-fashioning: especially in turbulent times, his defiant public identity and his call for regeneration were admired or despised by intellectuals and political agents.

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Engaging with Rousseau

*Reaction and Interpretation from the Eighteenth
Century to the Present*

Edited by

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University College London



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Preface

It has long been observed that Rousseau's works can inspire an extensive range of responses, often thoroughly contradicting one another. If for the German Romantics Rousseau was the ultimate individualist decrying an ever-corrupting social yoke, for authors from Hippolyte Taine to Jacob Talmon he represented the fundamental inspiration for a form of totalitarian democracy that crushes all forms of individuality. He has been cast as a champion of religion but also an enemy of Scripture; a promoter of Enlightenment and a beacon of Romanticism; an inventor of the modern, expanded notion of the self; and an advocate of ancient republican self-restraint. Indeed, it has been common ever since the publication of Rousseau's first works to view him as a paradoxical, inconsistent author whose different works were at odds with one another, lacking a core of unifying ideas.¹ The perplexing variety of the images and legacies of Jean-Jacques Rousseau has been attributed to the manifold character of his work itself, yet usually in an overwhelmingly negative manner. Conflicting interpretations were taken to reflect some fundamental problems and a lack of systematic rigour in Rousseau's original writings.

Throughout the twentieth century, new attempts were made – from Ernst Cassirer's to Nicholas Dent's – to view Rousseau's work as a (more or less) coherent whole. Cassirer saw the unifying idea underlying all of Rousseau's writings as the striving to make human beings self-legislating, autonomous agents – so as to ensure they did not lose their freedom by becoming wholly dependent on the law in the political realm.² Dent, on the other hand, saw the notion of self-love, or *amour propre*, as Rousseau's main preoccupation in his different works,

¹ On Rousseau scholarship in the twentieth century, see the contributions by Christopher Brooke (Chapter 8) and Céline Spector (Chapter 9) in this book. An overview of older accounts is available in Peter Gay's introduction and postscript to Ernst Cassirer, *The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, trans. Peter Gay (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 3–30 and 131–141.

² Cassirer, *The Question*, esp. 55–59.

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emphasising the positive as well as the notoriously negative forms it could assume.³

This book, by contrast, strays away from the controversies over unity in the diversity of Rousseau's writings. Most of its chapters do not propose a particular interpretation of the supposed core of these works or their author's life along specific ideological lines. Rather, they highlight the originality of Rousseau's *œuvre* by treating it as an enduring topic of intellectual controversy; the book investigates the resonance of Rousseau's work by examining the responses it has generated from the late eighteenth century to the present. The guiding assumption here is that a firm focus on subsequent engagement with Rousseau's work can highlight more resolutely its inherent tensions and ambiguities. The book therefore suggests that Rousseau's legacy does not constitute a set of immutable principles, arguments, and theories. Instead of asking who read Rousseau correctly or misunderstood the 'core' of his writings, contributors emphasise the variety of ways in which Rousseau could be, and still is, read and interpreted.

Although this book may correctly be regarded as a variation on the theme of German *Rezeptionsgeschichte*, or reception studies, it does differ substantially from accounts of intellectual influence, which we regard as a highly problematic term. Indeed, the title *Engaging with Rousseau* is deliberately chosen to highlight two main issues. First, in lieu of a study of disembodied influences based merely on textual echoes, this project is an account of reaction and interpretation by particular authors and political actors in well-defined geopolitical contexts and with specific intentions. Second, the term 'engagement' includes two subsets, as implied in the subtitle: 'interpretation' – the close reading of Rousseau's works, their analysis or elucidation, and an informed reply to them – and 'reaction' in the sense of a general response to Rousseau on various possible levels. These include images of his philosophy (what Rousseau's work came to represent) alongside his public persona, politics, and rhetoric.

Our emphasis on reception and subsequent engagement stems from the observation that the much-needed focus in recent decades on contextualised intellectual history has generated excellent work, yet largely on the circumstances and background of the *production* of renowned texts.

³ N. J. H. Dent, *Rousseau: An Introduction to His Psychological, Social and Political Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988): on self-love, see esp. 52–56, 143–145. Cf. Frederick Neuhouser, *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love: Evil, Rationality, and the Drive for Recognition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). On this issue, see also the contributions by Alexander Schmidt (Chapter 3), Axel Honneth (Chapter 11), and Avi Lifschitz (Chapter 2).

Indeed, the focus on the intended uptake of particular texts has mostly led to the investigation of how authors secured such an uptake (what they were performing by writing specific works) rather than how readers in subsequent generations and centuries engaged with their work.⁴ By way of emphasising our focus on the afterlife of texts and their authors' personae, we use the notion of 'engagement' with Rousseau by building on recent theories of cultural transfer through translation. In a series of works from the 1990s onwards, Michael Werner and Michel Espagne have pleaded for the substitution of 'transfer' for 'influence' or 'reception', since the latter terms implied a somewhat passive absorption of a static set of ideas.⁵ Their emphasis on the permeability of cultural borders, historical continuities, and the active appropriation involved in cultural transfer is embedded in our notion of engagement. This term signifies active agency on the part of authors and readers who responded to Rousseau by either reinterpreting his works or reacting to them publicly in other ways.

Our concentration on engagement with Rousseau's work emphasises yet another assumption: that the intellectual potential of an author's writings is not necessarily exhausted by reading them on their own or by situating them within the immediate context of their production. Subsequent engagement may reveal much about the original work, no less than about the authors and movements interacting with it. As recently suggested by László Kontler in relation to translations of eighteenth-century texts, 'the difference of meaning emerging through translation in the recipient environment can be turned to contributing to significant discussions and to sorting out disagreements about the character and status of authors, their texts, and their concepts as they exist in their "home" culture'.⁶ The chapters of this book, all dealing with different

⁴ Quentin Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', *History and Theory* 8 (1969), 3–53; revised and reprinted in Skinner's *Visions of Politics, I: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 57–89, as well as the other methodological essays in Skinner's volume. An excellent recent example is J. G. A. Pocock's serial exploration of the contemporary intellectual contexts of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* in his *Barbarism and Religion*, 6 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999–2015).

⁵ See, for example, Michel Espagne and Michael Werner, 'Deutsch-französischer Kulturtransfer im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert', *Francia* 13 (1985), 502–10; Michel Espagne, *Les transferts culturels franco-allemands* (Paris: PUF, 1999); idem., 'La notion de transfert culturel', *Revue Sciences/Lettres* (online) 1 (2013), accessed on 12 March 2015. (URL: <http://rsl.revues.org/219>; DOI: 10.4000/rsl.219) See also Stefanie Stockhorst (ed.), *Cultural Transfer through Translation: The Circulation of Enlightened Thought in Europe by Means of Translation* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010).

⁶ László Kontler, *Translations, Histories, Enlightenment: William Robertson in Germany, 1760–1795* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 14. A recent study that corroborates this point by re-reading Rousseau through Adam Smith's intensive engagement with his works is István Hont, *Politics in Commercial Society: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam*

engagements with Rousseau's works from the eighteenth century to the present and from Russia to Latin America, may serve as a demonstration of this claim.

In order to make these points, the present project necessarily had to be selective. It is extensive yet not fully comprehensive; the thematic choices were made with an eye to the overall methodological issues above, especially concerning engagement as the active agency of interpreters and respondents rather than passive reception on their part. In this respect, two particular notions guided the selection of essays published here: interdisciplinarity and an extended spatio-temporal range. Since readers may approach this book from very different disciplinary backgrounds, it includes contributions by specialists in political and cultural history, intellectual history, political theory, philosophy, and the history of political thought. Moreover, studies of Rousseau's legacy have so far mostly centred on France and Britain. The inclusion of various German themes, as well as essays on Eastern Europe and Latin America, is meant to extend this traditional focus geographically.⁷ While still largely focused on European intellectual spheres and legacies, this project is meant to raise an initial contribution to a more transnational overview of the engagement with Rousseau's work. At the same time, our points concerning engagement, reaction, and interpretation are refracted through a large temporal canvas extending from Rousseau's lifetime to the present day. Beyond their historical observations, the contributions by Axel Honneth (Chapter 11) and Philip Pettit (Chapter 10) are examples of current engagement with Rousseau by contemporary political theorists.

The malleability of Rousseau's *œuvre* and its multi-faceted nature are revealed here in a number of test cases, which will now be briefly outlined (not necessarily in the order of their appearance in the book). One of the most striking contrasts in past engagement with Rousseau may be perceived in the different manners in which such notions as the general will could be interpreted during the struggle for independence in Latin America and in social conflicts taking place at the same time in Central and Eastern Europe. Monika Baár (Chapter 6) argues that in the extensive territories of the Habsburg and Russian empires, the *Social Contract* was appropriated to defend the status quo just as eagerly as to advocate reform or even revolution: the sovereign nation was often identified with largely aristocratic diets instead of the entire people. However, Baár

Smith, ed. Béla Kapossy and Michael Sonenscher (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

⁷ On Germany, see also Jacques Mounier, *La Fortune des écrits de J.-J. Rousseau dans les pays de langue allemande de 1782 à 1813* (Paris: PUF, 1980); Herbert Jaumann (ed.), *Rousseau in Deutschland. Neue Beiträge zur Erforschung seiner Rezeption* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1994).

shows that the *Social Contract* did not only provide inspiration for numerous (unrealised) constitutional projects; it also became common practice to examine national history in the light of Rousseau's work, for example by using it as a standard for the reassessment of various medieval and early modern pacts. The myriad ways in which the *Social Contract* penetrated local discourses ranged from translations to cursory references and from political appeals to fiction and poetry.

Nicola Miller's contribution (Chapter 7) concerns a more politically assertive appropriation of Rousseau's work. Intellectual historians have long debated the role of Rousseau in the French Revolution, but have paid far less attention to the ways in which he was read in the area where republicanism next took root. The *Social Contract* was the most important political tract of the struggle for independence in the River Plate (and also in other parts of Latin America), yet it was not necessarily Rousseau's actual arguments that played the most significant role there. What mattered above all was his vision of social transformation, as interpreted locally and distinctively by Spanish American thinkers. This radical vision mobilised both supporters and opponents of independence and made Rousseau's name emblematic of social equality, whether desired or feared. It had consequences both at the time, particularly during the early stages of the struggles for independence, and subsequently in a Spanish American legacy of egalitarian political projects.

Nowhere was Rousseau's legacy more contested and polarised than in his hometown, Geneva, as argued in Richard Whatmore's account of changing local attitudes to Rousseau's political theory (Chapter 1). Local reformers considered the renowned *Citoyen de Genève* as insufficiently democratic and too obsessed with peace to serve as an inspiration for regeneration before and during the French Revolution. At the same time, Rousseau's writings could not be ignored by critics or reformers of any stamp. His cynical perspective on contemporary Europe ensured that those dissatisfied with the present would turn to Rousseau for support. Whatmore focuses on a point Rousseau repeatedly made concerning practical reform: modern states could usually not avoid a turbulent destiny because of the forces unleashed by commerce and egoism, yet this did not mean that revolutionary doctrines would solve their problems. Rousseau believed that radical politics in Geneva would only make things worse, partly because the politics of small states were altogether different to those of their larger neighbours. This stance rendered him a complicated figure for Genevan reformers, especially those who called themselves democrats.

Such tensions were also evident in the contrasting engagements of French liberals and socialists with Rousseau in the nineteenth century.

Jeremy Jennings explores the complex readings of Rousseau's writings by liberals in France from the Revolution of 1789 until the creation of the Third Republic. In the decades immediately following 1789, the focus of liberal readings of Rousseau fell upon an alleged connection between his ideas and the turning away from liberty that was associated above all with the rise of the Jacobins and the Terror. This theme is examined primarily through a discussion of the views of Jean-Joseph Mounier and Benjamin Constant. The chapter also looks at François Guizot's criticisms of Rousseau's notions of representation, and concludes by suggesting that the preoccupation with the damaging consequences of Rousseau's ideas declined after 1848. In fact, between 1848 and 1870 Rousseau re-emerged among liberal readers as a theorist of modern democracy.

Jean-Fabien Spitz (Chapter 5) examines the changing fortunes of Rousseau's work among nineteenth-century French authors who were particularly interested in his views on redistributive justice. Rousseau was convinced that it was impossible to restore the conditions of primordial freedom once inequality has gone beyond a critical point – mainly because such inequality could only be rectified by breaching the impartiality of the law and depriving some citizens of their legally sanctioned property. Hence, the tensions in his political thought enabled it to be used to legitimise both individual freedom under a general law and the redistribution of excessive wealth. Louis Blanc, who stands at the centre of Spitz's contribution, was inspired by Rousseau in his promotion of free credit for those who had no access to the means of production. Rousseau and Blanc shared the same notion of freedom but differed in their conceptualisation of the means to realise it (a general law for all or a special legislation aimed at the wealthy). Spitz seeks to explain this difference, exploring the peculiar ways in which Blanc and fellow socialists engaged with Rousseau's writings.

Beyond such accounts of engagement with Rousseau in particular geographical and political contexts, conflicting and changing attitudes to his thought could also be found in the work of a single author or political agent. Avi Lifschitz (Chapter 2) examines the intellectual relationship between Rousseau and Frederick II ('the Great') of Prussia, which has been overshadowed by the much-advertised collaboration between the self-styled 'philosopher-king' and Voltaire. Though in this case one cannot find a close alliance, Frederick's works and his correspondence betray a long-lasting preoccupation with the themes raised by Rousseau in his *Discourses* of the 1750s. Their mutual fascination reached its peak in 1762 when Rousseau sought refuge in the Prussian territory of Neuchâtel following the outcry prompted by *Emile* and the *Social Contract*. The chapter investigates the notion of self-love, or *amour propre*,

in letters exchanged between Frederick and Rousseau through George Keith, the governor of Neuchâtel, as well as in Frederick's poems and treatises. Both Rousseau and Frederick used amalgams of Stoic and Epicurean elements in their discussions of self-love, but the king identified Rousseau as a modern champion of virtue as self-denial. It is argued that despite their disagreements, there was much common ground between Frederick's notion of self-love and Rousseau's modified views, especially as elaborated in *Emile*.

Another case of uneasy personal wrestling with Rousseau's thought is described in Alexander Schmidt's account of how Immanuel Kant dealt with Rousseau's sharp distinction between nature and civilisation (Chapter 3). This distinction was expressed in Rousseau's differentiation between natural (mainly physical) needs and 'artificial' ones originating in human imagination through social interaction. Such artificial needs were repeatedly viewed in the eighteenth century as the driving engine of civilisation, yet Rousseau feared they could also spell political and moral disaster by increasing human interdependence and inequality. Rousseau's analysis of artificial needs, especially as manifested by the arts and the sciences, became a building block in Kant's rejection of eudaemonist moral philosophy and his call for moral action based on reason only. For Kant, in order to overcome the ills of unsociability in economic and political relations, the arts and the sciences had to be transformed into instruments of moral education and means of regulating human needs.

Two twentieth-century test cases reflect the growth of academic scholarship on Rousseau. Yet as demonstrated by Christopher Brooke (Chapter 8) and Céline Spector (Chapter 9), this mode of engagement was not too different from earlier, more political ways of reading and using Rousseau. The circumstances of two World Wars, followed by the Cold War, moulded academic engagement with Rousseau to a considerable extent. Brooke outlines the changing contours of mainstream interpretations of Rousseau in Britain from the First World War to the Cold War. This period was sometimes marked by overt hostility to Rousseau, as apparent in Isaiah Berlin's identification of the Genevan as one of the 'enemies of human liberty' and in Bertrand Russell's view of Hitler as 'an outcome of Rousseau'. Notwithstanding these hyperbolic judgments, significant contributions to Rousseau scholarship were made by their near-contemporaries working in British universities. The chapter surveys the arc of Rousseau scholarship in Britain from the appearance of C. E. Vaughan's edition of the *Political Writings* in 1915 until John Plamenatz's death in 1975. Brooke considers the fortunes of idealism in the interwar period, the emergence of historical scholarship on Rousseau

in the 1930s, the contribution of postwar experts on French literature, and the arguments of political theorists – especially Berlin, Oakeshott, and Plamenatz – in order to provide the intellectual background to the more recent renaissance in Anglophone Rousseau studies.

Céline Spector centres on a distinct and highly influential interpretation of Rousseau emerging in another academic context, that of Harvard University after the Second World War. John Rawls regarded Rousseau as a precursor of the Kantian concept of autonomy; as such, Rousseau provided major inspiration for Rawls's own books, *A Theory of Justice* and *Political Liberalism*. Explicitly wishing to round off the tradition of Locke, Rousseau, and Kant, Rawls cited the *Social Contract* as one of the sources for his theory of the 'well-ordered society'. Spector focuses on Rawls's *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy* given to Harvard students between the second half of the 1960s and the second half of the 1990s. In these synoptic courses, influenced to a large extent by Judith Shklar, Rawls ventures a bold interpretation of Rousseau in terms of 'realistic utopianism'. The result is a Kantian reading of the *Discourse on Inequality* combined with an ultra-rationalist exegesis of the *Social Contract*, which eventually laid the conceptual foundations for Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*.

Concluding the book are two essays by contemporary political thinkers who spell out the continuing relevance of Rousseau's ideas. Axel Honneth, a theorist of inter-subjective recognition in ethics and politics, traces in depth the roots of this discussion back to Rousseau's work (Chapter 11). Honneth zooms in on Rousseau's original insight that human beings are characterised not only by a drive for self-preservation, but also by a need for social esteem and recognition (*amour propre*). The chapter subsequently surveys the enormous impact Rousseau's bipolar conception of social recognition had on modern philosophical discourse – especially in Kant's philosophy of history and in Fichte's and Hegel's discussions of mutual respect among equals. However, Honneth does not neglect the scepticism that Rousseau always exhibited towards the dependence on others that is inherent in *amour propre*. According to Honneth, Rousseau's works exhibit two fundamental motifs that stand in constant conflict with each other and also feature in modern recognition theory: the Stoic idea of personal independence from all external attachments and the inter-subjective idea of a deep-seated dependence on others. Therefore, Honneth suggests that Rousseau's insights function as a Trojan horse in any modern account of the necessity of external recognition of our dignity.

Philip Pettit (Chapter 10), one of the foremost contributors to contemporary debates on republicanism, emphasises another 'unwelcome

dilemma', which he regards as an inescapable legacy of Rousseau's political thought. Rousseau defends the traditional republican idea that freedom requires not being subject to the will of another, yet argues in an innovative way that being subject to the will of the community – the public person – is no problem: 'each by giving himself to all, gives himself to no one'. He thinks it is no problem under two conditions: first, that each member consents to being subject to the majority rule of the community; and second, that the majority rule expresses the general will of members rather than a mere majoritarian will. But what if the second condition fails, as Rousseau clearly thinks possible, even likely? Either he must declare that society is dissolved and majority rule illegitimate, or he must hold that it is still legitimate and that freedom is no longer guaranteed for all. Responding to Rousseau's work in this mode, Pettit argues that his philosophy makes the dilemma virtually inescapable.

Taken together, all of the chapters in this collection make the case that engagement with Rousseau has never been straightforward, unproblematic, or consensual – even when this engagement was limited to the mind of a single thinker or political agent. As noted above, it is precisely these challenging and often conflicting aspects of engagement with Rousseau through the ages that the present book aims to highlight. Due to their interdisciplinary character, the chapters themselves reflect the manners in which engagement with Rousseau (as reaction and interpretation) might take shape. Concern with the logic of some of Rousseau's arguments and its role in current political theory is obviously different from a historical account of its echoes in nineteenth-century France, Latin America, or Eastern Europe. And this inevitable formal diversity of our own engagement with Rousseau points to another facet of his *œuvre*, perhaps its only aspect on which there has usually been widespread agreement: its rhetorical force and stylistic uniqueness. As argued by Jeremy Jennings and Nicola Miller in particular, it was not only Rousseau's ideas that travelled from context to context; so did his persona as one of the first celebrity writers. Indeed, Madame de Staël famously depicted Rousseau in her *De la littérature* (1800) as an author of a new style rather than of brand new ideas: in her words, 'he discovered nothing but he inflamed everything'.⁸ As argued below, the significant role of Rousseau's public image had already been perceived early on by contemporaries such as Frederick the Great. Rousseau's self-fashioning complemented his thinking on social recognition, the drive for

⁸ 'Il n'a rien découvert, mais il a tout enflammé', in Germaine de Staël, 'De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales', in *Œuvres complètes de la Baronne de Staël, publiées par son fils* (Paris: Treuttel and Würtz, 1820), IV, 373–374.

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distinction, and the interrelations between solitary existence and political life (or between ‘man’ and ‘citizen’). Especially in times of socio-political turbulence, Rousseau’s defiant public identity, as well as his call for individual and social regeneration, was admired by intellectuals from Russia, to France, to Latin America.⁹ His image as one of the first modern public intellectuals provided yet another channel of engagement with Rousseau parallel to the diverse readings and interpretations of his works.

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⁹ On this point, see the recent account by Antoine Lilti, *Figures publiques: l’invention de la célébrité, 1750–1850* (Paris: Fayard, 2014), esp. ch. 5; see also Lilti, ‘The Writing of Paranoia: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Paradoxes of Celebrity’, *Representations* 103 (Summer 2008), 53–83.

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Note on the texts and references

Citations from works by Rousseau and his interpreters have been translated into English in the chapters; the footnotes may contain particularly striking quotations in other languages.

Translations from French and other languages are the authors' where no published edition is referred to. The essays include abbreviated references to the following standard editions of Rousseau's works.

- OC* *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Bernard Gagnebin, Marcel Raymond, et al. (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), 5 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1959–1995)
- DI* *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997)
- SC* *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997)