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David Lay Williams , Matthew W. Maguire
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1 Introduction

Matthew W. Maguire and David Lay Williams

Reasoned and impassioned controversy have accompanied *The Social Contract* since its publication in 1762. Once the book entered conversations about the foundations and ends of modern politics, it never left them.

Immanuel Kant's debt to Rousseau, for example, was deep and multidimensional. He drew many of his own ethical and political arguments from contemplating Rousseau's philosophy, including the general will and other ideas that extended well beyond the portrait of Rousseau that famously adorned his otherwise sparsely decorated study.

Kant's engagement is the beginning of a long line of formidable thinkers coming to terms with *The Social Contract*. Madame de Staël and Benjamin Constant reflected at length and wrote about Rousseau's most famous work of political philosophy. G. W. F. Hegel drew upon a central concept of Rousseau's *Contract* – the general will – repeatedly, referring directly to Rousseau in order to give a critical if nuanced account of it.

A general fascination with *The Social Contract* soon travelled beyond Europe, and also beyond the boundaries of political philosophy strictly conceived; it inspired conversations about sovereignty and freedom around the world. In early nineteenth-century Latin America, for example, *The Social Contract* became one of the foremost books through which the generation that won independence thought about the possibilities available to their new nations.[1] In the early twentieth century, readers in China could choose among several recent translations of *The Social Contract*, and the book remained a flashpoint of political controversy – not least because of Mao Zedong's avowed interest in Rousseau's political thought – to the end of the century.[2]

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Rousseau's political philosophy thus remained a global phenomenon throughout the twentieth century, and reading it in no way safely settled into the role of a venerable classroom exercise. In the 1950s, Fidel Castro said that he carried a copy of *The Social Contrac*t with him while fighting against Batista's government.[3] In Europe, intellectuals such as Isaiah Berlin, seeking the roots of Europe's twentieth-century catastrophes, turned anxiously to *The Social Contract*, and Berlin in particular found it to be the product of a "lunatic" beset by an "insane inner vision."[4] In a very different way, John Rawls – whose work testifies to a serious engagement with Rousseau's thinking – acknowledged that *The Social Contract* stood very high as a supreme achievement in political philosophy, "definitive of the contract tradition," and in fact within that field was "the greatest work written in French."[5]

There was little in Rousseau's background that promised a continuous posterity of 250 years and counting, encompassing voluminous commentary, deep identification, and controversy. The son of a modestly comfortable watchmaker in early eighteenth-century Geneva, he long remained fascinated with his native city, and with it, its republican government and its history of distinctive communal institutions. Yet throughout his adolescence and beyond, he wandered far from home, in and out of various accommodations, religious communities, apprenticeships, trades, and professions, intensely ambitious for intellectual achievement but not altogether focused as to its form (his early efforts tended toward music theory and composition, and occasional drafts of plays). Without formal education, Rousseau embarked upon years of reading with a pronounced philosophical bent, from Plato and Augustine to Descartes, Hobbes, and Locke, and eventually found his way to Paris.

In 1750, then approaching his forties, Rousseau at last found his voice and philosophical sensibility, if not his fully developed ideas. They appeared in his first major work, the *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, which won him a prize from the Academy of Dijon. In it, he declared that progress in the sciences and the arts – in many ways

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the Enlightenment itself – did not herald a universal improvement in the happiness and moral caliber of human beings, but rather an ongoing decline, in which people were forced to pretend to be what they were not, in which the communal solidarity of cohesive communities was lost, and in which happiness and virtue alike were diminished by identifying a good life with the possession of extraordinary talents and remarkable worldly success, especially wealth – good fortune that would forever be unavailable to all but a small portion of people in any place or historical period.

With this *succès de scandale*, Rousseau quickly became one of the most original, celebrated, and controversial thinkers and writers of the eighteenth century. In the course of a dozen years, he wrote his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* and his philosophical-fictional exercise, *Emile*, as well as one of the best-selling novels of the eighteenth century, the epistolary romance (or antiromance) *Julie*. The same year, he published the fragment of a larger work of political philosophy that he had destroyed: *The Social Contract*. He would write further about political theory in distinctive nations or communities – in Poland and Corsica, not least in Geneva – but this "fragment" remained the most influential statement of Rousseau's political philosophy.

In the years following this period of furious writing and publication, Rousseau sunk into isolation and rejection. That turn had many sources: a personal disposition prone to extremes of trust and mistrust, the deepening resentment expressed by other prominent writers of the Enlightenment toward a writer who elicited fascination among readers, but was incorrigibly skeptical about much of the conventional wisdom circulating among his eminent contemporaries. That his five children had been abandoned to be raised as foundlings was increasingly known, and Rousseau himself wrote defensively (and with a palpable if rather inert guilt) about it.

For all that, it was *The Social Contract* itself that prompted a substantial portion of Rousseau's increasing alienation from contemporary life. In particular, its forceful, even incendiary claims

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about Christianity – among others, that "true Christians are made to be slaves" – incurred the condemnation of religious and political authorities in both Paris and Geneva.

The Social Contract was now officially designated as impious and immoral, and this in turn precluded its author residing in either his native or his adopted city. He soon returned to the peripatetic life he had led as a youth – but now well into middle age, that life had few of the appealingly picaresque qualities it had promised thirty or forty years earlier. He moved from place to place once more and turned increasingly to autobiographical writing, including his *Confessions*, the *Dialogues*, and the unfinished *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. He remained internationally celebrated and despised until his death in 1778.

Given the extraordinary impact of *The Social Contract*, this volume seeks to understand its arguments, language, context, and implications from different disciplines and in response to different kinds of questions. It intends to guide readers along diverse paths of enquiry, all of which can enrich our understanding of an exceptionally rich and controversial book.

Among those paths, some address with particular care the sources of Rousseau's thinking about politics, justice, sovereignty, and democracy. John T. Scott, for example, investigates Rousseau's connection to Montesquieu (Chapter 2). In his account, Rousseau creatively refines Montesquieu's account of republican democracy, opening a space in which "democratic sovereignty" can exist (and persist) as a good separate from "democratic government."

Christopher Kelly explores Rousseau's account of the legislator, an extraordinary figure who gives a stable character to a people by giving it shared assumptions and points of reference on questions of manners, morals, and religion (Chapter 3). The concept of the legislator in *The Social Contract* seems so extraordinary that many have wondered whether it functions in the text as an indicator that Rousseau's polity is primarily a theoretical exercise. Yet Kelly argues that in Rousseau's own *History of the Government of Geneva*,

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Rousseau traces the development of Genevan mores and institutions in which, without a legislator in the strict Rousseauian sense (and often before Calvin), Geneva became meaningfully free.

The Social Contract is also a work about political psychology and the nature of community. In his essay, Robin Douglass (Chapter 4) takes the status of *The Social Contract* as an incomplete work seriously, and argues that the distinctively Rousseauian "moral psychology" of citizenship that complements the *Social Contract* is best found not in Rousseau's famous work of education, *Emile*, but rather in Rousseau's other political writings, above all the *Discourse on Political Economy*. In it, Rousseau's account of virtue and *amour propre* (a kind of expansive self-love connected to how we are recognized and perceived by others) helps us to understand exactly what *The Social Contract*'s notion of citizenship demands, and what sort of psychology allows the general will to function.

Michael Locke McLendon thinks through Rousseau's account of freedom, with particular attention to critics – most notably Isaiah Berlin – who found in Rousseau a forerunner to twentieth-century totalitarianism (Chapter 5). McLendon argues that Rousseau is in fact far more interested in protecting "negative liberty" from diverse and often subtle forms of coercion. In his interpretation, far from offering some comprehensive and unitary account of the good, Rousseau seeks to protect a more autonomous freedom from the conditions that would compromise or destroy it; foremost among them is inequality.

Inequality is among the conditions that *The Social Contract* identifies as especially dangerous for the wise constitution of a free people, and for its ongoing flourishing – or disintegration. David Lay Williams' essay (Chapter 6) uncovers this argument as a neglected dimension of the *Contract*: that is, that Rousseau is acutely aware of the dangers that economic inequalities pose for a free community. Radically unequal communities are ill suited to receive a free constitution, and if inequality is subsequently introduced, republics are increasingly undone, since those constituting the sovereign people now have fundamentally different interests and no longer conceive

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themselves as equal citizens responsible for expressing the general will. Williams argues that *The Social Contract*'s arguments about the perils of inequality draw heavily from Rousseau's readings of Plutarch and Plato, and yet are not limited by them. Rousseau understands that modern notions of merit have changed the way that inequality is maintained and justified, as well as its effects upon those citizens it leaves behind.

Rafeeq Hasan presents a careful inquiry into *The Social Contract*'s arguments about property (Chapter 7). For Hasan, Rousseau works to reconcile conventionalist and natural-rights thinking about property, noting that the Genevan distinguishes carefully between what one *ought* to do, and what one has a *right* to do. These notions lead us to understand the particular demands of citizenship, as Rousseau understands them.

Melissa Schwartzberg's essay poses the question of how *The Social Contract* justifies its commitment to a specifically political equality, given the presence of various forms of inequality among citizens (Chapter 8). In Schwartzberg's account, Rousseau sees the people's exercise of sovereignty as itself a kind of education in political equality. The general will is expressed not through clever argument or other forms of political action that might reveal different forms of inequality, but rather through simple, direct processes of deliberation and voting that depend only on a basic "threshold" of political competence. Yet even at this threshold, Rousseau at times reveals "failures of imagination, compassion, and respect."

One question that attends many readings of *The Social Contract* is precisely how the origins and ongoing sources of cohesion within a political community come to be, and how they are best maintained. For Richard Boyd, Rousseau is neither a romantic, organic nationalist nor a partisan of individualist, contract-theory accounts of how political bodies conceive and sustain themselves (Chapter 9). Rousseau instead understands that certain unifying bonds are required before a government can be instituted, and before the appearance of a legislator. Yet he also recognizes that the very

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forces that bring a community closer together – including language and collective memories, as well as "national glory" and religion – are also the ones that can create fierce, internecine divisions within a given political body, and jeopardize its peaceful relations with other political communities.

While *The Social Contract* engages questions of history, property, and inequality, it is also addressed to questions of political ordering and electoral procedure. Alexandra Oprea explores Rousseau's thinking about voting (Chapter 10). She shows that Rousseau devoted careful thought to how procedures for suffrage and elections (including their order and timing) could forestall the decline of republican government and popular sovereignty. Rousseau's use of historical examples like Venice and Geneva – and above all ancient Rome – often move in this direction, and make *The Social Contract* sensitive both to how diverse historical and political conditions shape – and yet can also *be shaped by* – the manner, form, and sequence of elections and voting.

Geneviève Rousselière provides a careful reading of Rousseau's republican commitments, the kind of republicanism he supports, as well as its supporting conditions (Chapter 11). For Rousselière, Rousseau is not, as a recent scholar has argued, an "aristocratic" or "plutocratic" republican, but rather an advocate of true popular sovereignty, even if that sort of free society requires a certain sensitivity to circumstances and history in order to flourish. Furthermore, unlike many of his eighteenth-century contemporaries, Rousseau did not believe that small states were the natural home of republican government, and he relies heavily upon the example of Rome precisely to show how republicanism can exist in large states.

The question of Rousseauian popular sovereignty and its relation to government receives a new reading from Céline Spector (Chapter 12). She argues that a democratic government is not only less than ideal for Rousseau, but is in fact the worst form of government, even as popular sovereignty is unambiguously affirmed throughout the book. For Spector, Rousseau, far from being a sort of

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inchoate proto-Kant, is in fact more attentive than Kant to the multiplicity of forces and aspirations in actual politics. He is a thinker with which contemporary political theorists ought to work, operating with a dual commitment to the sovereignty of the people and a kind of aristocracy of merit.

Rousseau's thinking about religion engages several contributors to this volume. Steven Smith finds in Rousseau an account of civil religion– and the political necessity thereof– that is far from being "merely" theoretical; drawn from his readings of Montesquieu and especially Machiavelli, through analogy if not homology, Smith argues that it is a relatively gentle form of this civil religion that has been the presiding civic religion of the United States, finding perhaps its most powerful expression in the civil-religious thinking of Abraham Lincoln (Chapter 13).

Matthew W. Maguire explores *The Social Contract*'s anomalous presence in Rousseau's work (Chapter 14). After working through the book's political categories, the essay describes how Rousseau finds in Christianity an insuperable obstacle to political flourishing; it is this realization that leads Rousseau to abandon *The Social Contract*. But first, in an effort to escape what he takes to be the Christian enclosure and bifurcation of politics, Rousseau tried to bypass it through characteristically modern figurative economies and orders of metaphor that are only apparently secular.

In his essay, Ryan Patrick Hanley works with Rousseau's much-discussed chapter on Civil Religion and argues that it hopes to find in religion both a source of political justice and stability without intolerance and interminable conflict (Chapter 15). By analyzing Rousseau's account of "the religion of man" as opposed to the "religion of the citizen," Hanley shows how Rousseau's civil religion hopes to surmount the paradoxes in his account of different varieties of historical religion, in which questions of truth and political utility, of peace and justice, are both entwined and separated from one another in potentially positive and yet sometimes destructive ways.

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The fourteen essays in this volume move in diverse directions and traverse political philosophy, intellectual history, questions of political procedure, moral psychology, and political economy in order to better understand *The Social Contract* in full. As our own historical moment reopens so many political questions that not long ago seemed lastingly settled, this volume seeks to ask political questions with Rousseau in very different ways, to contribute to a constructive unsettling that helps us to understand some long-standing questions of political philosophy anew.

NOTES

1. See Miller 2016, 114–35.
2. See van Dongen and Chang 2017, 1–13.
3. O'Hagan 1978, 19.
4. Berlin 2002, 43.
5. See Rawls 1971, 11 n. 4; Rawls 2008, 191. The latter passage quoted in Simpson 2019, 186.

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