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ROUSSEAU AND MONARCHY

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Weird and wonderful things are said about the political ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in textbooks, in lectures, and in student examination books. The present paper is an attempt to dispel at least some of the confusion -- without adding to it -- by considering Rousseau's thinking on the particular and important subject of monarchy, as expressed in first his personal attitudes, second his political theory, and third his practical advice on the subject. Only after all three of these approaches have been considered should one attempt to answer the question: What was Rousseau's attitude toward monarchy?

We begin with Rousseau's personal attitudes, for he was a man of strong opinions and feelings. Some of them he shared with his contemporaries, the philosophes of the Enlightenment. Enlightened thinkers and writers in mid-eighteenth century France did not condemn monarchy per se. The tendency instead was to follow the English political theorist Locke in rejecting irresponsible and tyrannical absolute monarchy, while accepting quite readily enlightened, non-tyrannical monarchy, even if it was absolute. Enlightened despotism might be a welcome shortcut to the political promised land. A Frederick the Great or a Catherine the Great might be persuaded to institute by a stroke of the pen the most far reaching reforms. But the writers of the Enlightenment still voiced a cautious preference, for example in the Encyclopédie, for limited monarchy, English style, with definite restrictions on the arbitrary power of king. (1)

Rousseau had no enthusiasm for enlightened despotism or for limited monarchy. But he was nevertheless torn by conflicting feelings. His society was one in which men of letters relied on the patronage of the high born -- recall the story of Samuel Johnson -- so it is not unusual that he had high praise for enlightened rulers, and some not so enlightened, in his early writings. (2) Nor is it surprising that he accepted a pension from George

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III.(3) It is more surprising to Americans certainly that in his last years a picture of the decidedly undemocratic and illiberal monarch graced the wall of Rousseau's Paris apartment.(4) He might also have been the beneficiary of another pension from the thoroughly unenlightened Louis XV, as a reward for a very successful light opera he wrote, if he had not declined to appear at court. He recalled in his Confessions years later his pleasure in witnessing the enthusiastic reception of his work by the court, but he had a basic contempt for court society, for the courtier type, for royal favorites.(5)

Rousseau's enthusiasm was reserved for a simpler and, he always insisted, a more wholesome society. Rome and the other sturdy republics of ancient times he constantly praised in his writings. While the Corsicans struggled to win their independence, he undertook the project of writing a constitution for them which would provide that island with a republican and democratic form of government; and he was confident that these simple peasants had a wonderful political future ahead of them as long as they remained unspoiled.(6) Rousseau himself was a Genevan, and he was full of admiration and affection for this non-monarchical Swiss republic. He praised his native city extravagantly in the dedication of his second Discours, and in his mature years he proudly signed his works as "Citizen of Geneva," until he had been condemned by his government.

Such were Rousseau's personal attitudes and feelings. They reflect a man of high principle. But he was not only a man with opinions and personal predilections; he was also a theorist, and it was as a theorist that he parted company publicly from the rest of the philosophes most completely. In the eyes of posterity he has been exclusively a theorist, and a dogmatic, rigid one. This stereotype is one for which he must share responsibility, for he often wrote in uncompromising and unrealistic terms. "I am seeking Right and reason, I am not arguing about facts," he wrote in the original draft of the Contrat social.(7) Yet we should note at the outset that he was admittedly not a revolutionary. He had no confidence that a society which had declined from an earlier and better stage could

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he much improved, and he shrank from the idea of revolution. (8), p. 54. Considering the fact that the attack of eighteenth century liberalism was directed against absolute monarchy, it is surprising that Rousseau had really so little to say on the subject. Whether or not he would have spoken and written more freely and extensively under a less repressive government is not easily answered. One can assume that he would have done so, but it is an open question how much more he might have said. Yet he did write enough, primarily in his Contrat social, to enable us to summarize his theory concerning monarchy.

For Rousseau, a fundamental right, justified by reason, was sovereignty not of the monarch but of the people, which for him was a sovereignty which could not be alienated or transferred, not even by a Lockean social compact. Any exercise of the legislative or lawmaking function by any other than the sovereign people is illegitimate, he insisted. (9), pp. 250, 296.

Having determined that the legislative power belonged to the sovereign people, Rousseau next turned to the quite different executive power, the "government," as that term is used in parliamentary states today. As to whether or not the executive head of the government should be a monarch, rather than a group of men (aristocracy -- he never uses the term oligarchy), or the people (democracy), depended upon circumstances. Following Montesquieu, for whom he had high praise, Rousseau rejected the possibility of theoretically determining what was the best form of government, and believed that factors of size, climate, and level of advancement should determine whether the best form for a particular state was monarchy, aristocracy, or democracy. The last named, democracy, is obviously suitable only for very small political units such as a New England town. (He would have called our state or national government elective aristocracy.) Monarchy is appropriate for large and underdeveloped states, and provides a maximum of vigor and concentration of power. (9) pp. 279-82, 289, 293.

All of this is in accordance with the thinking of Montesquieu. But Rousseau went on to argue that the social contract is not between the people and their king, as Locke had said, but is an agreement

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between and among the people themselves, by which they have established an organized political society. Thus if there is a monarch, he is not the sovereign, he has no power to make laws, and he is not a party to the contract. Instead he is merely an appointee, without tenure, without a contract, and subject to dismissal, even if the monarchy is hereditary.(9), pp. 304-6. Rousseau further insisted that there were inevitable tendencies for a king either to be or to become narrow and malicious, to want to keep his people backward, for his appointees to be inferior men, and for the hereditary principle to bring to the throne infants and imbeciles.(9), pp. 284-7. He insisted that there was an inherent and inevitable tendency for the government, no matter its form, to encroach on the sovereign people.(9), pp. 294-5. In the case of monarchy, he bluntly asserted that if one accepts Aristotle's distinction between a tyrant and a king -- that only a king governs in the interests of his subjects -- that there has never existed a king in the true sense of the word since the beginning of the world.(9), p. 296.

With such an assertion there is no need to read between the lines. Here we have the revolutionary implications of Rousseau, the hardy author of the Contrat social, the uncompromising political theorist. But note that, as he said in his own defense later, he never held any particular government up to contempt,(10) and he wrote other political studies which present us with a more cautious, a more conservative, a decidedly anti-revolutionary Rousseau. He was quite aware of the difference between theory and practice, and he knew there was a time to "set aside the facts," as he proposed at the beginning of his second Discours,(2), p. 23 and also a time to be completely practical in the actual world of uncompromising facts. In the Emile he has the pupil refer to the Rousseauian political theory as quite artificial, and the tutor replies that one must begin by establishing first principles and then study things as they are.(11)

An occasion for studying things as they were, and our best example of point three (Rousseau's practical advice on the subject of monarchy) came when he was asked by a Polish patriot, Count Wielhorski, to recommend changes in the constitution

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of Poland. That country faced imminent dissolution and partition by greedy neighbors, as eventually took place, and Wielhorski hoped by reforms to forestall such a disaster. Rousseau made a thorough study of the problems involved, and drafted a series of recommendations in his not very well known but significant Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne.

The theme of this work of practical advice is caution. The proposals made for Poland call only for incidental changes in the government. Nowhere is there the radical theme of rebuilding the Polish state completely. He refers occasionally to the basic principles of the Contrat social, on which his proposals are based, but there appears none of the dogmatic harshness of the Contrat social. Poland was a monarchy and Rousseau proposed that it remain such. A large state could not manage, he wrote, without a king serving for life. (12), p. 372. But he was insistent that Poland keep its elective monarchy, and make it truly elective. The point is significant. Eighteenth century Poland has been criticized ever since for the weakness of having an elected king. Rousseau, however, saw this as a source of strength in checking what he saw in monarchy as the "habitual tendency in the direction of despotism." (12), p. 360. He pessimistically assumed that each king would take steps in the direction of arbitrary power. But a particular king's death and the election of his successor would undo what had been done during his reign, so that no permanent progress toward despotism developed. Hereditary monarchy would operate otherwise, and was therefore incompatible with liberty, Rousseau insisted. (12), p. 374. So he recommended that the son of a king be forever forbidden to rule. (12), p. 375. He further suggested that the king be chosen from among those who have risen to the highest rank in the government, three names to be drawn at random from the group and the diet then electing one of the three immediately, before there was any opportunity for bribery or corruption. (12), pp. 408-10.

In order to further guarantee that the liberties of the Poles would not be usurped by the monarch, Rousseau made specific suggestions for limiting the king's power, such as restricting his power of ap-

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pointment and setting fixed meeting times for the legislative authority so it need not wait for the royal call.(12), pp. 372-3, 376-6. The inevitable misfortune that a king is an enemy of liberty could be considerably lessened, he announced, if the changes he suggested were made.(12), p. 372.

This then was Rousseau's practical approach to monarchy. We could use more information than we have, and we should like to have his testimony on the subject taken under some sort of retroactive historical immunity law so that we could be sure he was speaking freely and frankly. If his Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne is of value, how much more revealing would be a frank and outspoken Considérations sur le gouvernement de France.

Rousseau has been charged with inconsistency in his discussions of government. What are the facts? It is the writer's opinion that there is no more inconsistency than one might expect under the circumstances between and among personal attitudes and feelings, theories, and practical advice. Let the completely consistent political theorist cast the first stone. Rousseau had no love for monarchy; he saved his affection for simple republics. But he could adjust to monarchy when it was necessary. When he wrote on the level of theory, he accepted monarchy for certain kinds of states, providing the sovereign lawmaking power remained in the hands of the people; but he insisted that there was a natural tendency for even the best monarchy to degenerate. Here we are close to the heart of Rousseau's thought. Society, he always maintained, has -- in spite of superficial advances in the arts and technology -- declined from its natural simplicity. Eighteenth century monarchy, he would have said, is a good illustration of what is wrong with a supposedly advanced society. He always insisted, however, that one cannot reverse the trend; one cannot return to an earlier simplicity and perfection.(8), p. 33. Thus, when he was called upon to suggest reforms in the Polish government, he rejected any idea of fundamental change. It is this writer's conclusion that such might have been his recommendation for France if he had lived until the Revolution, and credence is thus given to those anti-revolutionaries in 1789 who argued that if Rousseau

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were still alive he would have opposed the Revolution.(13) One can guess, on the basis of his Polish recommendations, that he would have had no enthusiasm for the fundamental changes of the Revolution. But at the same time he probably would have been very much interested in the many incidental reforms proposed. He would have been repelled by the violence, but at the same time his highly emotional and idealistic approach to life might have made him a ready or at least reluctant convert to the optimistic and emotional fervor of the first years of the revolution.

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