Rousseau's Legacy

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As Arthur Melzer observes at the outset of this brilliant and powerful new study of Rousseau, there is virtually no one today who would identify himself as a "Rousseauian." Yet more than 200 years after his death, the personality and the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau continue to exert an unparalleled fascination. For although his positive teachings no longer attract disciples, his analyses of the shortcomings of modern society and the dissatisfaction of modern man remain remarkably compelling. As historian François Furet has stated (in a passage quoted by Melzer), "Rousseau may well have been the most far-sighted genius ever to appear in intellectual history, for he invented, or sensed, so many of the problems that were to obsess the nineteenth and twentieth centuries."

Rousseau was the first great modern critic of bourgeois society. Indeed, he was the first thinker to give the term "bourgeois" the kind of negative connotation it so often carries today. Unlike those whose attacks on the emerging new order of the Age of Enlightenment harked back to older ways of thinking, Rousseau opposed bourgeois society in the name of the very principles to which it itself appealed—freedom and equality. As Melzer puts it:

Rousseau was [modernity's] first defector, its first "dialectical" opponent. His defection, moreover, turned out to be the founding event of a since unbroken tradition of modern self-hatred, of protest against modernity arising from within the modern camp, and the first clear indication of the theoretical instability and continuously self-devouring character of the modern revolution.

In other words, Rousseau became the prototype of the modern alienated intellectual: the thinker who agrees with the modern rejection of the principles that underlay the classical and Christian worlds, but who nevertheless loathes the new world that these modern ideas have created. Knowing the man-made character of this world, and blaming it for the unhealthy state of his own soul, he seeks the restoration of the world and his soul through a still more radical, progressive application of these modern ideas.

In one of his most insightful and original formulations, Melzer identifies the dialectical weapon that Rousseau wields against his
predecessors as “idealistic realism.” This approach begins with a thoroughgoing skepticism toward the exalted notions of human nature and morality that informed the classical and Christian traditions. It then takes this “realism” a step further by suggesting that these highflown notions are themselves the cause of the greatest human evils. But such debunking results not in cynicism or despair but in a new idealism. For at the same time that it undermines the “higher” side of human nature, it points to an innocence and hence potential in man’s “lower” or bodily nature that furnishes the basis for new hopes about what man may achieve. The deepest tendency of Rousseau’s thought indeed fits this description of idealistic realism.

The profundity of Rousseau’s critical insights and the rhetorical force of his writings are widely acknowledged. Yet he is rarely given credit for philosophical rigor, let alone for the coherence and the systematic character of his thought as a whole. The reasons for this are clear. First, Rousseau’s writings, for the most part, take the form not of systematic treatises but of novels, autobiographies, dialogues, reveries, and essays and letters tied to specific questions, addressees, or occasions. Second, Rousseau’s thought is marked by a number of apparent contradictions, most notably between the individualism that dominates the Discourse on Inequality and the autobiographical works, and the collectivism that suffuses the Social Contract and his other political works.

Although fully conscious of these difficulties, Melzer boldly sets out to demonstrate that Rousseau’s thought forms a rigorous and unified system, albeit one presented in an “exceptionally unsystematic” manner. In asserting and seeking to vindicate this claim, Melzer takes his cue from Rousseau himself, who stated that his works are “inseparable and form together a single whole” and that they “explain themselves each by the others.” Melzer again follows Rousseau’s own explicit claim in taking as the fulcrum of his system the “fundamental principle ... that man is a being that is naturally good.”

The idea of man’s natural goodness is sometimes regarded as the product of a naive sentimentalism, but this crude misunderstanding can hardly survive even a fleeting acquaintance with Rousseau’s actual writings. His unsurpassed denunciations of the viciousness of his contemporaries make it clear that he saw very little goodness in civilized men. Natural goodness is instead to be found in the primitive natural man described in the Discourse on
Inequality. But this solitary, subrational, animal-like creature is portrayed as good primarily because he is so simple, independent, and self-sufficient that he has no need or desire to harm his fellows: one may say that he is too stupid to be vicious.

From this disjunction between the goodness of natural man and the wickedness of civilized man, Rousseau draws the fateful conclusion that it is society that “depraves [man] and makes him miserable.” He thereby initiates, as Melzer notes, the tendency “to understand the human problem in terms of historical, social, or environmental causes rather than natural or divine ones.”

According to Rousseau, the chief cause of both civilized man’s evil and his unhappiness is the perpetual contradiction between his desires and his duties. The simple and easily satisfied needs of natural man expand enormously to embrace a whole range of artificial desires; driven by vanity, social man wishes to surpass all his fellows. Yet at the same time, to satisfy his socially acquired needs, he must constantly flatter and serve others and fulfill his social duties. Thus social man is always at war with himself, pretending to care for other men while secretly hoping to use them and get the better of them. Though he is selfish, he does not really live for himself; and though he is sociable, he does not really live for others. In short, he is what Rousseau calls a “bourgeois”—neither a truly independent individual nor a truly public-spirited citizen, and thus condemned to a life of contradiction and misery.

Melzer perceptively identifies “disunity of soul”—induced by the “personal dependence” fostered by society—as the root evil that Rousseau seeks to cure. But the contradiction between selfishness and sociability can be eliminated in one of two ways: by making men live wholly for themselves or wholly for others. In his various writings, Rousseau advances each of these solutions, extreme individualism and extreme collectivism.

The individualist solution, which finds its highest expression in the Reveries of a Solitary Walker, and a somewhat more popular development in Emile, requires that man live as independently as possible from the society around him. Melzer writes briefly but illuminatingly about this side of Rousseau’s teaching, which can be wholly followed by only “a few isolated and rare human beings.”

The primary focus of Melzer’s analysis, however, is the collectivist solution set forth in the Social Contract, which seeks to “restore a whole society to goodness and unity” by transforming men completely into citizens. He does a superb job of elucidating the essential features—most notably, the “general
will"—of Rousseau’s political teaching and of tracing the links that connect them to the other aspects of his thought. But it is not clear that Melzer ultimately achieves his aim of explaining "how ‘the natural goodness of man’ systematically produces the Social Contract." It is one thing to claim that Rousseau’s politics can only be properly understood in the light of his analysis of natural man and the ways in which society corrupts him; Melzer demonstrates this quite persuasively. It is a very different matter, however, to claim, as Melzer sometimes seems to do, that the teaching of the Social Contract is fully in harmony with the individualist premises that lie at the deepest level of Rousseau’s "system."

For Rousseau’s collectivist solution requires that men be thoroughly "denatured" so that they will prefer the common good to their own private good. But as Melzer at various points acknowledges, Rousseau recognized that in the final analysis such a thoroughgoing transformation cannot be achieved. Man is by nature a solitary individual, and nature cannot be wholly overcome. Thus, as the famous opening sentences of its first chapter indicate, the Social Contract aims not to show how the citizen can be truly free, but only to show how his "chains" can be made legitimate. Rousseau never lost sight of the fact that his collectivist political teaching offered a very imperfect solution to the human problem. In this sense, his thought is distinguished not by the unity of his system but by his unflinching exploration of the contradictions that he uncovered at the heart of social and political life.

Though Rousseau was ultimately an individualist, he was surely no liberal. To borrow Melzer’s useful phrase, he was a defector from the liberal camp. For he argued that a society founded on the liberal principles of individual freedom and self-interest would make men neither good nor happy, that it would produce neither genuine individualism nor genuine community. Rousseau’s thought represents an enduring and powerful challenge to modern liberalism, one that liberals must confront if they are to understand the deep discontents that continue to plague contemporary democracy even at the moment of its seemingly greatest triumphs. Moreover, those who wish to strengthen and ennoble liberal democracy can profit from Rousseau’s insights, as is demonstrated by the thought of one of Rousseau’s most profound students, Alexis de Tocqueville.

Paradoxically, the cause of liberalism may also benefit if its hostile critics turn with fresh eyes to the work of Rousseau. For Rousseau’s fierce clarity, his unwillingness to shy away from the radical consequences of his principles or to paper over contradictions for the sake of a superficial unity, can provide a potent
antidote to the facile utopianism that has been so prevalent on the modern left.

Like many of his successors, Rousseau attacked bourgeois society from the standpoint both of the authentic individual and of the tightly knit community. Indeed, he may be said to have initiated this peculiar dual line of attack. But unlike Marx, for example, Rousseau always remained fully aware of the irresolvable tension between these two very different standpoints. He recognized both the incompatibility of unfettered individualism with the requirements of any society and the extreme nature of the demands that a truly cohesive community must impose on the individuals who belong to it. A careful reading of Rousseau thus provides a splendid remedy for the view that, with the demise or reformation of bourgeois society, all good things will come together, and for the illusion that either genuine individualism or genuine community does not require enormous sacrifices.

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Are Bureaucrats to Blame?

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NOT TOO MANY years ago conservatives warned that increasing the federal government’s responsibilities would create a huge, arbitrary, and essentially autonomous national bureaucracy that could crush individual liberty. Max Weber’s predictions about the dominance of bureaucracy in modern life and Tocqueville’s warnings of a “soft” administrative despotism added substantial weight to these charges. Indeed, over the past twenty years the left has become at least as suspicious of bureaucratic power as the right. Few elements of American political culture are as well entrenched as fear and loathing of bureaucracy.