

**Rousseau and Representative  
Democracy Reconsidered:  
Rehabilitating the General Will**

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## **Rousseau and Representative Democracy Reconsidered: Rehabilitating the General Will**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this discussion paper is to promote a reconsideration of the political theory of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He has long been out of favour among responsible political philosophers, theorists and the very select politicians who know or care anything at all about traditional political philosophy and political theory. He has been accused of being the fountainhead of every evil ideology and dastardly deed from the eighteenth-century regicide in France to twentieth-century totalitarianisms of the left (e.g., Maoism and Stalinism) and the right (e.g., Fascism and Nazism). His phrase, the “General Will,” has come under special criticism as interpreted by scholars who see it as a kind of abstract Platonic idea which subsumes the individual in the state, eliminates personal liberty and choice, and sets the stage for imminent authoritarian dystopias. I hope that the comments set down here may lead to a more fruitful conversation among people who chose to see innovation as a process not about changes for the sake of efficiency and improved service quality (or, worse, merely for the sake of change), but as practical initiatives that are normatively infused with ideas of liberty, equality and solidarity among citizens and nations.

**Keywords:** Rousseau, representative democracy, General Will, political participation, democratic theory

### **An Introduction to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)**

The story may be apocryphal; but it is said that, when Richard Nixon made his historic trip to China in 1972, he asked the venerable Chinese Foreign Minister Chou En-Lai about his thoughts on the lasting impact of the French Revolution on Western society. Allegedly, Chou ruminated for a few moments and solemnly replied: “It’s too early to tell.”

Some say that either the question or the comment was misunderstood. Some say Chou had thought that Nixon was referring to the student uprising in Paris four years earlier, in which case the response was perhaps unduly cautious, but barely noteworthy. Many, however, took it to reflect an understanding of history that was not tethered to the daily newspaper headlines. It seemed to indicate an awareness of, and a concern for, the “big picture.”

Whatever the Chinese leader's intent, the question of the earlier and somewhat more memorable French Revolution of 1789 is still much debated by historians. For those with a large view of human events, it may well be "too early to tell"; for most of us, it is a matter of mainly antiquarian interest. It conjures up little more than the belief that Napoleon Bonaparte (whether deemed a hero or villain) was a "great man," that there was much blood at the guillotine, that Marie Antoinette made a fateful miscalculation when offering culinary advice to the poor, that it inspired one of the world's most recognized national anthems, and that Charles Dickens used the occasion to offer us one of the three most famous opening lines in English-speaking literary history: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times" (the others, of course, are "Call me Ishmael" and "It was a dark and stormy night"). Otherwise, except presumably for the citizens of France, it is an antique event and largely irrelevant to current affairs. This is a pity, for little describes intellectual history today as much as the public's indifference to it. As Santayana warned, we do not remember our history and seem thus condemned to repeat it. Think Afghanistan. Think Sarajevo. Think Sevastopol

Part of the reason that we dislike Rousseau is the fact that he defies clear, never mind consensual, interpretation.
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Equally distressing is our indifference to "thinkers" in general, and especially to those "dead white males" to whom prior generations turned for wisdom about the past, advice about the present and informed speculation about the future. Now, we not only neglect the lessons of history that might make the future salvageable, but, on those rare occasions when we do turn our attention to political and social philosophers of the past, we prefer those whose contributions to our civilization are, or are believed to be, positive or at least relatively unambiguous.

So, we may know that Hobbes thought human life in the state of nature was "nasty, brutish and short," but we also recognize that he at least introduced the notion of individual rights to our traditional discourse and, incidentally, believed that the rational among us would happily surrender our natural liberties to an absolute sovereign in exchange for the promise of security. We may also be aware not only that John Locke softened and liberalized Hobbes' escape from a "war of all against all" by agreeing that authority was necessary to maintain order, but also that he declared that some individual rights (especially the right to own property) should be maintained and that governments were obliged to function with the consent of the governed. Thus, Locke has come to be understood as the principal theorist whose ideas grounded the American Revolution.

We routinely, if superficially, go on to think of Edmund Burke as the father of modern conservatism, Karl Marx as the uncontested sire of modern communism, and John Stuart Mill as the foremost philosopher of liberal democracy. And, of course, though we might disagree mightily about the multiple meanings of their analyses of the past and their visions of the future, we can at least entertain a modest personal understanding of large and controversial figures such as Machiavelli and Martin Luther, Spinoza and Kant and, more disturbingly, Nietzsche and Freud. These are the beacons of

Western social and political thought, and we pride ourselves on the fact that we find their names to be familiar, whether or not we have actually read or understood anything that they had to say.

“Rousseau’s major works were intended to live beyond his century and were directed to the discovery of ‘truths which matter for the happiness of the human race.’” – Roger D. Masters

One such towering personality is Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Part of the reason that we dislike him is the fact that he defies clear, never mind consensual, interpretation. As well, these general statements apply:

- his work is substantial, but not voluminous;
- his ideas were reasonably clearly expressed—surely more so than Hegel’s or Heidegger’s;
- his books are still studied—certainly by people interested in ideas before nihilism, relativism and postmodernism;
- his ideas are no longer unique, but they were shocking in his time;
- his political views arose out of his deep sense of alienation from his own society and, no doubt, from his own cantankerous personality;
- he could easily be considered monstrous both as a man and as a political visionary.

As Sheldon Wolin put it:

Rousseau pitched his demands higher than the primitive Christian or modern sectarian, far higher than later theorists of socialist utopias. He demanded of society something that had never been demanded before, but that has been demanded since, something more than the conditions for a moral life, more than the opportunity for self-development, more than material necessities. The community must be designed to satisfy man’s feelings, to fulfill his emotional needs (Wolin, 1960: 371).

Strong stuff!

In his day, Rousseau was the object of adulation and equally of revulsion. His thought was both intellectually imaginative and practically revolutionary. His views left some smitten and others menaced. He could be inspirational to anyone dissatisfied with modernity and horrifying to anyone who did not share his views. Moreover, he did not lack confidence in his own brilliance. According to Masters (1968: ix), Rousseau’s major works were intended to “live beyond his century and were directed to the discovery of ‘truths which matter for the happiness of the human race.’” If you, like me, are a preternaturally cautious and tentative person, you will be leery of Rousseau. Like all of those who are convinced of their own

firm grasp of the truth, he can be immensely disturbing. Still, as discomfoting as he was in his day, it might do no irreparable harm to take a second or even a third look before finally and irretrievably flushing him down our vast collective memory hole. If such an excursion seems unnecessarily old-fashioned, of course, we can also appeal to the prurient within us by noting Masters' added comment that "Rousseau's philosophic insight [may have been] the product of his own psychological problems and defects, not to say insanity." If nothing else, Rousseau might provide a case study in political pathology which could help us diagnose and possibly treat similar mental disorders and diseases today.

### **Crossing the Bridge to the Eighteenth Century**

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) lived wholly in the eighteenth century. His *Confessions* is often regarded as the first truly modern autobiography. His *Emile* continues to warm the hearts of progressive educators. His *Julie* anticipates modern romanticism. His *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* and *On the Social Contract* are foundational to modern political thought. He was also an accomplished musical composer and, in many respects, a thoroughly horrible human being who wantonly blew up friendships and abandoned all five of his illegitimate children by unceremoniously dumping them on the steps of orphanages in their infancy. He was a rather hideous misogynist—even by the standards of his time—and he was pointedly criticized by early feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft as the inspiration for the modern "imprisonment of women in cages of domesticity." Indeed, as David A. Bell (2012) wrote in *The New Republic*: "Rousseau has been excoriated for undermining Christianity, for destroying traditional morality, for inventing xenophobic nationalism, and even for starting a quarter-millennium's worth of noxious child-rearing fads." He could probably be accused of worse.

"It is dangerous and unfair to judge Rousseau not by what he wrote, but by the light of history's nightmares." – Lester G. Crocker

It goes (or should go) without saying that great thinkers need not be judged entirely by their personalities and private deeds. Whatever we may think of the Spanish Inquisition, the Holocaust or Stalinism, neither Jesus Christ, Friedrich Nietzsche nor Karl Marx can be held personally accountable for what others have done "in their name." As Crocker defined the balance: "For a man who left so deep an imprint on intellectual and cultural history, it is unpersuasive and arbitrary to suggest that the fortunes of his ideas—what those who came after did with them—are irrelevant ... [but] it is dangerous and unfair to judge Rousseau not by what he wrote, but by the light of history's nightmares"(Crocker, 1968: 115).

So, we can look at what Rousseau had to say with a fluid combination of admiration, dispassionate scholarship, serious skepticism and well-deserved humility.

We, after all, talk incessantly about innovation and progress, yet as some of our more astute political scientists have noticed, “Rousseau was offering answers to questions that twentieth-century thinkers have not even had the insight to ask” (Wolfe & McCoy, 1972: 7) and, I would add, that twenty-first century thinkers either neglect to ask or actively suppress.

The General Will ... expresses the genuine interests of the people. [It] exists whether or not people perceive or endorse it.

Rousseau, however, doesn't make it easy. His provocative phrasing may have been part of his persistent internal dialogue or, in the alternative, either consciously or unconsciously intended to grab our attention. Still, it's hard to avoid being uncomfortably surprised upon reading Rousseau's most famous opening gambit; namely, that “man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains” (a standard liberal exhortation usually prefatory to a call for some assortment of human rights) followed, in Rousseau's case (1913: 1) by his response to the topic: “How did this change come about I do not know. What can make it legitimate? That question I think I can answer.”

It is also more than a trifle disquieting to read him as he discusses theory and practice in his preferred society. A few samples from *The Social Contract* (Rousseau, 1913) and *Considerations on the Government of Poland* (Rousseau, 2011) should make the point:

- Were there a people of gods, their government would be democratic. So perfect a government (i.e. democracy) is not for men (*Social Contract*: 56);
- It is the best and most natural arrangement that the wisest should govern the many, when it is assured that they will govern for its profit, and not for their own (*Social Contract*:57);
- As long as private citizens have the power to resist the force of the executive, they will think they have the right to do so; and as long as they wage petty wars against each other, how can the state live in peace?(*Considerations*, Ch. 9);
- The most inviolable law of nature is the law of the strongest. No laws, no constitution can be exempted from this law (*Considerations*, Ch. 12);
- There is therefore a purely civil profession of faith of which the Sovereign should fix the articles, not exactly as religious dogmas, but as social sentiments without which a man cannot be a good citizen or a faithful subject (*Social Contract*: 114).

And this is all without one of Rousseau's most infamous statements, namely that in his ideal society (*Social Contract*: 15):

in order then that the social compact may not be an empty formula, it tacitly includes the undertaking, which alone can give force to the rest, that whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be compelled to do so

by the whole body. This means nothing less than that he will be *forced to be free* ... [italics mine].

These affirmations and their meanings were cause for tremendous disagreements in Rousseau's own time and are no less controversial today. At the root of the matter is Rousseau's paradox. According to McManners (1968: 5) "his 'totalitarian' passages are so grim, and by contrast, his love of freedom was so intense" that no satisfactory resolution of the two has been achieved to date. That was close to half a century ago; little more clarity has been forthcoming since.

The classic attack on Rousseau by J. L. Talmon makes him out to be the precursor of Robespierre and the "reign of terror." Talmon (195: 41) associates Rousseau with the idealism of Plato and the belief in a "General Will", which expresses the genuine interests of the people and exists whether or not people perceive or endorse it. Moreover, it embodies a dynamic truth which is so powerful that, if and when it is discovered, "the human mind simply cannot honestly refuse to accept it." The link to Plato is well placed for, in both cases, there is an appeal to a level of reality higher than merely transient, mundane and representational conventions. This is evident in Plato's expressed desire to rid his ideal state of all music and poetry; it also comes about in the antipathy to the theatre that Rousseau (1968) displayed in his far-famed letter to M. D'Alembert. In either cases purity, whether in a transcendent metaphysical reality or in the extreme authenticity of personal experience, was a necessary element, if not the ultimate purpose of living the good life.

"Rousseau, more than any other man, made popular democracy into the ideology of our time." – Charles Sherover
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From the liberal-left Bertrand Russell agreed with Talmon's principal thesis. In his encyclopedic *History of Western Philosophy* (1961), Russell presents a forceful argument that there were two parallel democratic movements stemming from the European Enlightenment—one defensible and the other not. One came from clear-headed English-speaking thinkers such as John Locke with the support of some anglophile philosophers on the Continent. The other came from less meritorious French-speakers such as Rousseau. In Russell's view (1961: 660), Rousseau was the "father of the romantic movement, and the inventor of pseudo-democratic dictatorships as opposed to traditional absolute monarchies." It is possible to believe that Russell might have forgiven the romanticism, but Rousseau's political thinking was irredeemable: "at the present time," he comments, "Hitler is the outcome of Rousseau; Roosevelt and Churchill, of Locke."

Finally, from the far left, there is no absence of criticism from Marxists. Rousseau, they say, did an admirable job of pointing out the obvious; namely, that human history has been characterized by exploitation and social injustice since our species abandoned the subsistence economy of hunting, gathering and scavenging, arranged a stable division of labour and achieved surplus production at the cost of equity. Rousseau

might therefore be applauded for writing passionately about inequality. He might be forgiven for the romantic excess of condemning the structure of both ancient and modern civilizations for corrupting our otherwise innocent spirits. To the Marxist, however, Rousseau is an innocent himself. He understands inequality and knows almost instinctively that it is morally wrong; but, he has no sense of social class in the Marxian sense and no hint of understanding society and the scientific laws of social development (Della Volpe, 1970).

There is, however, another perspective. Charles Sherover confidently declares that “Rousseau, more than any other man, made popular democracy into the ideology of our time” (Sherover, 1974: 90).

### ***Preindustrial Democracy: Rousseau, Adam Smith and Thomas Jefferson***

To begin to give Rousseau something approaching his due, it is important to ignore for a time his odd abstractions—not least the General Will and other elements of his distinctively eighteenth-century mentality. Rousseau was witnessing, along with Adam Smith, the transition of late-feudal society into the beginning of early-bourgeois, but still mainly pre-industrial society. For Smith, the elements of what we call capitalism were already in place. His seminal treatise on the matter, *The Wealth of Nations*, did a masterful job of explaining how free enterprise, free markets and an increasingly rigid division of labour could ensure productivity, profits and progress. Yet, Smith was not the corporate apologist that contemporary capitalists pretend him to have been (if, that is, they have read him at all). Adam Smith was not just an economist, but he was a moral philosopher as well. He was interested in economic development, but he was also concerned with the pursuit of the good life. This, he believed, could not be achieved if, for example, merchants and manufacturers invested their money too far from their homes where they would not see and directly experience the consequences of their strategies for the accumulation of wealth. As well, he believed that the limited liability corporation—barely a whim in the mid-eighteenth century—would mark the corruption and collapse of the free economy. (He was right.)

“Rousseau’s position is clear. Private property is a sacred individual right. But only the moderate property of the small working proprietor is sacred.”

– C. B. Macpherson

Rousseau, Smith and, of course, Thomas Jefferson inhabited a largely pre-technological world in which the competent, self-sufficient yeoman farmer, artisan or small merchant could be idealized as the happiest of citizens ever to have lived or, as it happened, ever to live at all. Rousseau, however, was particularly acute in seeing that



urban society, hoarded wealth beside squalor and the relentless pursuit of technical, instrumental knowledge was the cause of a fundamental alienation that separated us from nature, work, civil society and ultimately from our very selves.

Rousseau's ideal social order was more akin (as was Jefferson's) to an ancient Greek polis than to a modern metropolis. Each man (and he *did* mean "man") was best served and could serve his community best if there was relative economic equality and if every citizen possessed sufficient private property (normally a plot of land) which would promote personal independence, ensure self-sufficiency and make every man "his own master" while, at the same time, guaranteeing mutual dependence in a society of reciprocity and mutual aid.

C. B. Macpherson (1979: 16) distinguishes Rousseau from those advocates of the "pursuit of happiness" who regard unregulated and unfettered property rights—the pachyderm in the plutocratic palace—as the most fundamental of human rights and the justifiable antithesis of the unhealthy ideologies of Levellers, income redistributors and overt or covert enemies of the ruling classes:

Rousseau's position is clear. Private property is a sacred individual right. But only the moderate property of the small working proprietor is sacred. An unlimited property right ... was the source and the continuing means of exploitation and unfreedom: only a limited right was morally justifiable.

It is plain that a planet with global enterprises, cities of millions of people and military capacities to destroy populations half a world away cannot be expected to replicate the social conditions that inspired Jefferson, Smith and Rousseau; but, it is also clear that Rousseau's ideal is anathema to the acolytes and admirers of Margaret Thatcher. As she so brutally put it, "there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families." For Thatcher, "society" was merely an abstraction and that any initiative to assist others must be utterly voluntary and premised on primary self-interest and family loyalty beyond which there are no entitlements or responsibilities. We may therefore be obligated to be "our *brother's* keepers," but additional duties cannot be expected to be automatic or coerced by the state.

Perhaps it was because Rousseau had rekindled some widespread and deeply felt need for a close community that we find succeeding writers returning again and again to the main elements of Rousseau's conception and stressing ... the high value of social solidarity. — Sheldon Wolin
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With such a notion as a basic element in neoliberalism, it is clear that "possessive individualism" (Macpherson, 1962) is held to be both normatively and empirically superior to a collective mentality that would make solidarity a viable foundational principle for social responsibilities and institutions. As a result, in light of the triumph of neoliberalism in the advanced Western societies and its growing dominance in developing nations and, in light of the increasing gap between rich and poor, it is difficult

to avoid the conclusion that wealth and power will continue to be inequitably distributed and that meaningful participation democratic processes will continue to decline—whether because of plutocratic control of elections and the mass media, citizen apathy and alienation, a coerced “democratic deficit” or a combination of all three.

It is also hard to escape the realization that loneliness will remain a systemic psychological condition that harms individual people and that social fragmentation and, *in extremis*, social collapse will be the logical outcome of our living arrangements and their sustaining ideologies. The great revolutions of the past quarter-millennium have managed, after a fashion, to achieve recognition for some important human rights and have reduced or ameliorated extreme poverty, at least in advanced industrial societies. What Rousseau did, however, was to emphasize the third element of the French Revolution’s slogan *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité*.

Sheldon Wolin expressed it well:

It is often said that Rousseau’s political ideas were archaic from the outset because they were meant to apply to the political life of a small society. This criticism has not, however, prevented Rousseau’s communitarian ideal from playing an influential role in nineteenth and twentieth century theories. Perhaps it was because Rousseau had rekindled some widespread and deeply felt need for a close community that we find succeeding writers returning again and again to the main elements of Rousseau’s conception and stressing once more the high value of social solidarity, the necessity of the subordination of the individual to the group, the importance of impersonal dependence, the redemptive vocation of membership, and the benefits accruing from a close identification between individuals and aggregates ... Rousseau’s conception of community has turned into a specter haunting the age of organization, a continuing critic of the sort of life lived within large-scale, depersonalized units, a reminder that human needs demanded more than rational relationships and efficient routines(Wolin, 1960: 375).

Today, the word *fraternité* no longer seems fashionable, but the need for solidarity could not be more obvious.

With these notions in mind, it might be easier to see the relevance of Rousseau to the needed priorities of a global society awash in pollution, corruption, latter-day imperialism and domestic economies that increasingly deny the dignity of the poor or even the working and middle classes as elites of various sorts embellish the already obscene lifestyles of the rich and infamous. So, Rousseau’s voice (2011) might not seem as odd and unsettling if heard in the contemporary context:

The prevailing spirit of your economic system, if I had my way, would be as follows: pay little attention to foreign countries, give little heed to

commerce; but multiply as far as possible your domestic production and consumption of foodstuffs. The inevitable and natural result of a free and

just government is increased population. The more you perfect your government, therefore, the more will you multiply your people even without intending to do so. You will thus have neither beggars nor millionaires. Luxury and indigence together will insensibly disappear; and the citizens, cured of the frivolous tastes created by opulence, and of the vices associated with poverty, will devote their best efforts to serving the country, and will find their glory and happiness in doing their duty.

This passage and Rousseau's overall message might resonate with organic farmers and the residual assets of the Occupy Movement more than with Monsanto, but it is worth discussing which offers the tonic and which the toxic vision of the future.

Mario Einaudi (1967) explains:

In the advice to achieve self-sufficiency and to fall back upon one's own resources, Rousseau saw the way to limit conflicts and national ambitions, and to slow down the preoccupation with economic growth, the source of competition among sovereign states. If Rousseau kept giving that advice, it was not only because he believed it was good, but because he was convinced there existed in practice a clear choice of policies and that it was therefore the duty of citizens to concern themselves about the choices to be made (Einaudi, 1967: 256).

Taking current ecological, economic and ethical considerations into account, it becomes possible to think of Jean-Jacques Rousseau as a forerunner of much dissenting thought today. The enduring value of some of Rousseau's philosophy was recognized a century ago by C. E. Vaughan (1915: 113) who regarded it as "a reversion from the cramped and narrowing view of Locke." Likewise, half a century ago Alfred Cobban (1934: 241) appreciated that Locke had "divorced politics from ethics [and that] Rousseau, by recognizing the necessity of the community to the individual's moral life, brought ethics and politics again into connection with one another."

What must also be taken into account, however, are the limits of representative democracy in societies with monstrous inequalities, not only of wealth but of political power and social status as well. These have been amply discussed by critics of neoliberalism and of the pluralist model of governance that seek to describe and justify political arrangements in contemporary representative democracies. Work by political theorists such as Sheldon Wolin and by public intellectuals like Chris Hedges and Henry A. Giroux have made clear how asymmetrical power structures repress what we might call an approximation of the contemporary General Will in the limited version allowed through electoral politics. The critics are not only able to demonstrate that power and wealth are inequitably distributed; they are also able to show that contemporary institutions allow for little or no improvement and, in fact, are much more likely to

exacerbate the inequities encouraged by the existing political economy. In such circumstances, community solidarity as understood by Rousseau might encourage both discussion and organization in the interest of devising remedies for the critical problems we face.

### ***The Great Conversation***

It is commonly said that those who speak truth to power and, perhaps more importantly, those who speak truth to the powerless, lack a connection with what's been called the great dialogue that is alleged to have taken place (until recently) across the ages. This dialogue, of course, may be an overstated fiction promulgated by political philosophers to give a certain *gravitas* to their course outlines. It was certainly a core component of the rationale for the longstanding commitment of venerable British scholars to teach "the Greats." It assumed a line of argument and counter-argument running from Plato to modern times, which was comprised of classic texts and represented as a coherent chain of ideas. It was imagined as stepwise and maybe inevitable progression toward our current beliefs and behaviours.

Rousseau ... was advocating a form of direct democracy in which almost all participants were ... not economically equal, but among whom there were not such great divisions between rich and poor that any citizen needed to be put in a condition of servitude to any other ...
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For some latter-day Whigs, the great tradition is a march of progress. For some curmudgeons it is a tale of dissolution in which the combined works of all post-antique thinkers constitute nothing more than an uninspired series of repetitive footnotes to Plato—adding nothing significant of their own. However it is construed, I remain sceptical. My skepticism regarding the "great conversation" is partly due to the fact that I am not sure that Plato is almost organically connected to Aristotle and that Aristotle is connected to ... every important thinker down to Hobbes who's connected to Locke and further down to the editorials in the major newspapers today. This, by the way, is an argument made persuasively by John Gunnell (1986: 21-24), who doubts whether there is a coherent "history of ideas" that can be arranged in a way that displays and illustrates the evolution of thought. It may, however, be beside the point, since it is difficult to find defenders of current political systems or advocates of authentic and benevolent social change who have even a cursory knowledge of political thought through the ages.

I do, however, think that a basic familiarity with at least some of the iconic works of the past is helpful for anyone trying to understand governance—regardless of whether or not they can be said to make up a coherent tradition or, more ambitiously, an evolutionary pattern. The canon of Western Civilization is especially useful for people seeking to develop genuinely innovative thinking that could be of real-life importance today. The contributions of the masters of political thought and the history of political philosophy are valuable if for no other reason than to help us think comprehensively and deeply about the practical goals we set for ourselves and the pragmatic methods we might

use to achieve them. Otherwise, we have a tendency to reinvent whorls of wheels spinning to no good purpose and slowing down or stopping only for an intellectual pit-

stop where they can be replaced by the next new big thing “going forward,” as they say on CNN. Confronted with zombie theories anyway, we could do worse than to exhume Rousseau’s body of work and, perhaps, find ideas of value and worthy of reevaluating, redeeming, revivifying and rehabilitating or, at the least, reexamining in the manner of pathologists endeavouring to discover what went wrong.

### ***The Limitations of Representative Government***

Perhaps the key to a review and reassessment of Rousseau’s General Will is not to be found not so much in his critique of the limitations of representative government, but in his eagerness to find an efficacious means of expressing popular hopes and a method by which to undermine modern incarnations of patricians’ attempts to gull the plebs with bread, circuses, professional sports franchises, “reality” television shows, noxious mixes of ethno-religious hatreds and xenophobia. There have, after all, been plenty of criticisms of the faults of parliamentary government and the “irrelevance of pluralist analysis” (Kariel, 1966: 99-113) that should have persuaded us of the problems of representative democracy decades ago. We should know by now that contemporary democracies give the illusion of popular participation while keeping the reins of power fairly firmly in the hands of the ruling class, the power elite or whatever term we may wish to apply to the rich and influential.

Rousseau’s theory provides the starting point and the basic material for any discussion of the participatory theory of democracy. – Carole Pateman
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So, we might look to the psychological importance of participation itself. Rousseau, we must remember, was advocating a form of direct democracy in which almost all participants were small peasant landowners who were not economically equal, but among whom there were not such great divisions between rich and poor that any citizen needed to be put in a condition of servitude to any other and no citizen could dominate another in either a master/slave or even a master/wage-slave relationship. Independent self-sufficiency and the political freedom that arises from it are central to Rousseau’s thought. So, too, is mutual dependency or reciprocity which comes when independent citizens gather as equal law-makers and all are bound by the rule of the laws they create. Individual rights are protected by the fact, as Pateman interprets it, that “the only policy that will be acceptable to all is the one where any benefits and burdens are equally shared” (Pateman, 1970: 23).

With such arrangements in place, participation becomes not only a political mechanism but an educative instrument as well. People learn by doing. “Rousseau’s ideal system,” Pateman continues, “is designed to develop responsible, individual social and political action through the effect of the participatory process” (Pateman, 1970: 25). The “force” that is applied to make us free can be construed, therefore, not as external coercion, but as the force of logic. Rousseau’s “progressive” educational philosophy

described in *Emile*, can thus be applied to politics. Pateman makes the point clear when she continues:

As a result of participating in decision making, the individual is educated to distinguish between his own impulses and desires, he learns to be a public as well as a private citizen ... [and] eventually comes to feel little or no conflict between the demands of the public and private spheres. Once the participatory system is established, and this is a point of major importance, it becomes self-sustaining because the very qualities that are required of individual citizens if the system is to work successfully are those that the process of participation itself develops and fosters ...” (Pateman, 1970: 25).

What’s more, Rousseau’s quest is echoed in some of the better parts of J. S. Mill:

The form of association, however, which if mankind continue to improve, must be expected in the end to predominate, is not that which can exist between a capitalist as chief, and work-people without a voice in the management, but the association of the labourers themselves on terms of equality, collectively owning the capital with which they carry on their operations, and working under managers elected and removable by themselves (Mill, 1852).

It is also present in the work of G. D. H. Cole. Despite universal education and the right to vote, we are “trained to subservience.” A century ago, Cole rhetorically asked “why are the many nominally supreme but actually powerless?” His answer was: “Largely because the circumstances of their lives do not accustom or fit them for power or responsibility” (Cole, 1918: 35). In all our institutional arrangements as students or teachers, consumers or distributors, employees or employers or (as the saying now goes) “taxpayers” or public sector workers, we acquiesce in the market mentality of neoliberalism, seeing ourselves and others mostly instrumentally as means to rather crass ends and we value ourselves and others mainly according to our market worth in what Marx once called the “callous cash nexus.”

The connection between politics and the social relations of production is, of course, very well known by those who dominate both political and economic institutions. As Chrysler CEO Sergio Marchionne recently said (Richardson, 2013):

There’s nothing worse for a leader than to see fear in people’s faces ...  
There’s nothing worse in life than to sit there and be the victim of a process you can’t control.

The resolution of the problem for the leaders, of course, is to remove the fear without yielding control. For the people, it becomes the problem of how to extend and intensify democratic governance. The conclusion that seems inevitable—even if the solution is not immediately at hand—is that, if we compare Rousseau’s ideal

arrangements to those of contemporary representative democracy-cum-plutocracy-cum-kleptocracy, compelling arguments are available that the former may be preferred. Today, the citizens of liberal democracies are content to approve of democracy in principle and only rarely express support either for some alternative authoritarian system or for dreaded anarchy. At the same time, they convey a sense of cynicism and disgust for their hard-won rights and freedoms in practice. The symbolic ritual of casting a ballot appeals to fewer and fewer, especially in municipal elections where Rousseau's ideal is most closely (and paradoxically) approximated. Yet, while decrying the impenetrability and inherent corruption of "the system," they are fatalistic about its capacity for meaningful reform. Or, if they are moved to seek change, they are more likely to do so through populist movements owned and controlled by the capitalist elites they purport to despise. The practical alliance between, for example, the ventriloquist financial or energy billionaires such as the American Koch brothers and their custom-designed puppets from Sarah Palin and Michele Bachmann to Ted Cruz and Rick Perry are never fully understood or appreciated by the electors whom they hold in thrall.

Representative democracies, particularly in North America, permit and, indeed, encourage a process wherein the votes of the people are won through advertising campaigns that "brand" parties and "market" candidates based on political platforms that are designed by "focus groups" and offered with a maximum of expediency and a minimum of complexity. Those who stand for office are urged to pay utmost attention to their "image" and are admonished to say nothing spontaneously, to keep "on message" and to restrict statements to "sound bites" of only a few seconds. Participatory democracy—whether on Rousseau's model or an alternative or equivalent—may seem utopian or, for some, dystopian. What "real life" offers, however, is a meagre and somewhat desiccated version of democracy, a crude simulacrum in which citizens are turned into uncritical customers who buy political illusions with their votes.

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