

over Europe.

Rousseau returned to Paris in 1767 from a visit to England. He was already what we would now call a 'seriously disturbed' person, and his last ten years were far from happy. He tried to justify himself to the world, but the more he excused himself, the more he accused himself. In the end, he thought that even God had deserted him, and stories long circulated that he died in 1778 mad and a suicide.

### THE ROUSSEAU PROBLEM

Rousseau has spawned a huge body of commentary on his political thought, and it is easy to see what all these often differing commentaries have in common: they all agree that Rousseau himself is different. Rousseau (with the partial exception of Machiavelli) is the first political theorist to be blamed for a great political event, the French Revolution, and some of Rousseau's critics have argued as if Rousseau caused the Revolution almost single-handed. Perhaps the best way of approaching the rich but difficult (and perhaps contradictory) political thought of Rousseau is through some of his critics, because it is only then that one can get some idea of the trouble which this man has caused.

The business of blaming Rousseau for the Revolution began very early with Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). As an intellectual, Burke assumed that the French Revolution had been caused by books and so could only be undone by other books. Critics of Burke, and of this kind of approach to the Revolution, have tended to underrate the seriousness of Burke's arguments, or arguments which follow Burke. When Burke singled out Rousseau as the chief culprit for the Revolution, he did so to point out what has become a very obvious truth since 1789, but which was not so obvious at the time, which is that the French Revolution was made in the name of an ideology, and, therefore, the counter-revolutionary position was incomplete without an ideology which was in its way as comprehensive as the revolutionary ideology which it was designed to oppose. 'Comprehensive' is the key word. The Revolution was made in the name of a view of the world whose origins lay in Rousseau's political thought and whose credo was the Rights of Man and Citizen.

Burke was extremely acute as a futurologist. He realised almost before anyone else that because the French Revolution was made in the name of a new view of the world it could not be contained within French national boundaries. Being new, this view of the world would appeal to the new men, looking round as they would be for a handbook of politics to supply their own lack of political experience when the Revolution brought them to the fore as revolutionary leaders. The works of Rousseau, in Burke's view of it, were the ideal source for revolutionary politicians in a hurry. Having been excluded from the old ruling class by definition, and needing to learn about politics much more quickly than long schooling in a ruling class would provide, the new men began to think like Rousseau, *a priori*, from a small number of fixed principles which they called the

'principles of human nature'. Men who have to learn quickly do not have the time to begin to think historically, because to think historically in politics requires a sophisticated political education gained in the only school of politics capable of giving it, which is a confident and politically skilful ruling class. Rousseau's great fault is that he convinced the new men that they only had to read him to be able to construct a political community from scratch and rule it. Find out what human nature in general is like and it is a matter of a moment to be able to construct a world of social, political and religious institutions to fit that nature.

For Burke, therefore, Rousseau is the most typical of the thinkers of the arch-rational Enlightenment, encouraging his disciples to reason deductively from political axioms. Others of Rousseau's critics, like the great historian of the French Revolution Hippolyte Taine, were not so sure, or rather they point to a contradiction in Rousseau which leads them to wonder whether there might not be one Rousseau but two: Rousseau the arch-rationalist, and another, much more sinister Rousseau. The first volume of Taine's *Origins of Contemporary France*, which contains his critique of Rousseau, appeared in 1875 after the great French national disasters of the Franco-Prussian War and the Paris Commune. *La gloire militaire* was temporarily out of fashion, and this affected the views of the French Revolution which it was possible to take, and with it went a view of the political thought which was supposed to have been the Revolution's inspiration. Laudatory accounts of the Revolution before Taine had emphasised the heroism of the revolutionary wars of liberation, but after the fiasco of the war against Prussia and the débâcle of the Commune, attention began to shift onto the less savoury episodes of the Revolution like the lynchings by revolutionary mobs, the Terror and the September Massacres. With the irrational mob and institutionalised terror at the centre of the revolutionary stage, Taine began to look for their origins and he found them in Rousseau. There was another, lunatic side to Rousseau's own character, the mad, paranoid dreamer of revenge upon his real and imagined enemies, as well as the supremely rationalist political thinker who could calculate arithmetically in *The Social Contract* the exact amount of state sovereignty possessed by each individual citizen.

Taine characterised the whole political thought of the Enlightenment as being dangerously infected by what he called the 'classical spirit'. By this Taine meant something like what Burke had meant when he said that the character of the enlightened mind was always inclined to reason *a priori*, from first principles. Eighteenth-century political theorising had always looked behind the appearances of human societies past and present to see the constant which lay behind them all, the just and immutable principles of human nature. This was one aspect of Rousseau's thought, the search for universal man, rational, innocent and benevolent. Eighteenth-century political and social thought tried to think away from men everything that they acquired as the result of living in a given moral, political and social order. What was left was natural man, man as he was intended to be. The political thought of the Enlightenment, therefore, lacked the authority of a real social science which seeks out the facts of social existence in order to show the differences between different national existences at particular moments of those lives' unfolding.

This is a view of enlightened political thought which enlightened political thinkers,

with their adulation of the Science of Man, would not have recognised. Taine thinks that the Enlightenment misunderstood what science really was. In effect, the political thinkers of the Enlightenment mistook geometry for science, affecting a kind of perverted Newtonianism and expecting to understand the human world from a small number of fixed principles analogous to Newton's laws of motion. Their method was deductive from axioms, not inductive from the real facts of social experience. The real facts of social experience, which had made man the ignoble creature he was, could safely be written off to reveal the noble savage underneath. From this flimsy theoretical basis enlightened thinkers jumped much too readily to the theory of necessary and inevitable progress. In a world in which human institutions bore the imprint of human reason and worked on a rational humanity, then, for the first time in human history, the ordinary relationship between men and their institutions would be reversed. The past had been the story of wicked institutions for wicked men. The future was to be the story of rational institutions for rational men, and just as wicked institutions made men more wicked, so rational institutions would make men more rational.

What worried Taine was that the rationalist, Rousseauist account of human nature did not square very well with what happened in the French Revolution, and by extension in any revolution, when the restraints of supposedly wicked institutions were removed. Taine is aware of the obvious defence of revolutionary violence, that the downtrodden have learned their lessons in violence from the social and political order which they seek to overthrow, but for him the argument about human barbarism and animalism goes deeper. While not being an orthodox Darwinian, Taine accepts the depressing message of evolutionism that man has a past which is unimaginably longer than conservatives like Burke could conceive of a century before. Nineteenth-century science has taught men used to thinking of themselves as civilised the humiliating lesson that they have an anthropological and a biological past compared with which the span of civilised life is like the flicker of an eyelid. What a conservative (though a liberal conservative) like Taine cannot get out of the past is any of that comfort and reassurance that was available to Burke in the pre-Darwinian age. When eighteenth-century conservatives looked at the past, they could see the comforting story of the development of socialising institutions which kept men in their place. A late nineteenth-century conservative like Taine saw something very different in the past. He saw an anthropological and animal inheritance which men, or large numbers of them, could not hope to overcome. The thrust of the barbarous and animal past was what human institutions are there to frustrate. Rousseauist natural man will come to the surface in revolutions but he shows a very ignoble face. Taine invites us to see in the sane aspect of Rousseau's personality the absurdly over-optimistic rationalism of the political and social thought of the Enlightenment, and in the less sane aspect of Rousseau's personality the insane regression to a state of nature which is red in tooth and claw.

Taine's critique of Rousseau is ambiguous. On the one hand he wants to see in Rousseau the classical spirit at its most typical, but on the other hand he wants to see in Rousseau something new and disturbing. Rousseau is at one and the same time what all the thinkers of the Enlightenment would have been if they could, and something entirely new. In a famous essay of 1922, *Romanticism and Revolution*, Charles Maurras argued

that Taine, for all his merits as a historian of the French Revolution, had simply failed to see that what was new in Rousseau was romantic egotism. Maurrasian conservatism based itself upon classical ideals of order, the order of a society, of classical architecture, of everything which affected the life of man, and so he had to deny Taine's thesis that there was something classical about Rousseau. All Maurras could see in Rousseau was a kind of pretend classicism in which a fantasised Sparta was made into Rousseau's own spiritual home. Rousseau's cast of mind was not classical at all, but romantic. Romanticism for Maurras consisted of judging the rest of the world according to one's own private values, finding the world wanting, and wanting to remake that world in the image of one's own inner image of oneself. Rousseau's is an unquiet spirit, and his values are intensely personal in contrast to the serenity of classical civilisation with its publicly made and publicly held values. The ideal of harmony in the soul of which classical philosophers speak, and that social harmony which was the ideal of classical political thought find no equivalent in Rousseau. Rousseau brought with him an alien spirit of turmoil when he came into Roman Catholic France from Protestant Geneva, a spirit reminiscent of the turbulence of the ancient Jewish prophets, in from the desert and daring to denounce the higher civilisation of the cities. The France in which he caused so much trouble did not need Rousseau's pretend classicism because it was already classical through its Church, which was the true means by which the classical values had been preserved in France ever since aristocratic Roman prelates had lain in wait to civilise the barbarian kings who were the political heirs to the Roman *imperium*.

Another important line of commentary on Rousseau is exemplified by Alfred Cobban's *Rousseau and the Modern State* (1934). Here, Rousseau is regarded as the progenitor of the modern nation-state characterised by homogeneity of culture and language, by a certain territorial integrity, and by a state which at least in principle treats all its citizens the same way by giving them all equal rights and duties. The modern nation-state is something like the Republic One and Indivisible, which is itself more than an echo of Rousseau's characterisation of the political community in *The Social Contract* as a 'new moral person' which, like a natural person, itself has rights and duties. The modern state is a jealous state. It will tend to be intolerant of other loyalties, especially when those other loyalties come between the individual and the supreme individual, the state. Loyalties to caste and class, to bosses and priests, to supra-national movements, especially when they involve a commitment to pacifism instead of patriotism, will all be suspect, and secret societies will be anathema. The only two legal persons which exist are the individual citizen and the state. What this effectively means is that the modern state will look askance at legally established corporations or estates as they existed under the *ancien régime*, those mediating institutions which come between individuals and the state. Legally incorporated estates of nobility, clergy, and the third estate are, from the strictly modern point of view, states within the state because they have an independent legal existence. The modern state's authority will rest on a very uncomplicated patriotism and a fairly complex notion of citizenship which itself is more than reminiscent of the idea of patriotism which was supposed to have existed in the ancient city republics (modern republicanism could never resist dressing up in the toga). Citizens will have a comprehensive list of rights and duties drawn up for them by the state. This requires

everybody to have a proper name, a fixed and known address, and it will be necessary for the state to know both of these. That implies lists, and lists have to be kept up to date by someone, which in its turn implies bureaucracy. Bureaucracy has become something of a pejorative term, but modern bureaucracy has its origins in the perfectly laudable intention of the state to treat everybody the same. The characteristic practice of the modern state will be something like compulsory military service, when everybody will be called upon, and would willingly go, to sacrifice their lives, provided others are willing also, for the nation-state from which they acquire such benefits. *Ubi patria, ibi bene*. How much of this is traceable to the Rousseau of *The Social Contract* and the proposed constitutions for Corsica and Poland is debatable, but certain it is that at least the outlines of the idea of the modern nation-state can be found in Rousseau.

The totalitarian state has also been attributed to Rousseau, in particular in J.L. Talmon's *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (1953). Talmon's argument is basically very simple, though it has very complex ramifications. Talmon thinks that the totalitarian state can demand unquestioning obedience and the right to interfere with what it pleases (so that the distinction between public and private practically disappears), because it does so in the name of a particular kind of legitimising ideology. Talmon thinks that ideology is a typically modern form of belief system, beginning towards the end of the eighteenth century, which answers the maximum number of questions with the minimum amount of answers. What characterises ideology, therefore, is not so much its particular content as its particular style, and the audience to which its persuasiveness is directed. Ideological thought will think in simple images and it will readily be reducible still further into slogans ('Enemies of the People', 'the traitors within'). Ideologies also work at a historical level. Ideologists typically find the world unattractive, and they find reasons, usually very simplistic ones, for why the world has got into such a mess, but they usually also promise to find ways in which the world can get out of the mess. To do this, ideologists point to groups as the agents of the world's degeneration and to a group which is going to act as the agent of the world's regeneration, and all this must be couched in a language comprehensible to the meanest human understanding. Above all, ideologies are circular; they contain sets of reasons, again simple, which explain why particular groups seem to be unable to grasp the truth of the ideology. The idea of 'false consciousness' arising out of a position of social dominance is never far below the surface of ideologies. *They can't see the truth because they are them*, the agents of the world's degeneration, by definition incapable of seeing what they are doing and certainly incapable of seeing that they are what separates the rest of humanity from the bright future implicit in the dismal present. Rousseau's insistence that the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of force and fraud is an ideological statement. What he seems to be saying is that there is not much point in looking into different national histories because they will all tell the same sad story of the death of natural liberty. 'Man was born free and is everywhere in chains' sums up in nine words the entire history of the human race. It must be somebody's fault, and it can only be the fault of the lords of the earth. According to Rousseau the ideologist, only a complete fool, or a member of the ruling class, could fail to understand that. Rousseau is the first of the 'terrifying simplifiers', the model and forerunner of all those modern ideologues who think that understanding the world is easy,

and who think that all that has to happen for the world to be made perfect is the implementation of an ideology.

These four kinds of Rousseau commentary show that Rousseau has been blamed for a lot of things. All the commentators on Rousseau scent out something peculiar about him, though there seems to be considerable disagreement about what it is. Perhaps Rousseau's critics divide over the question of the *theoretical* relationship between Rousseau's famous *Confessions* and his social and political theory. Rousseau is a man of the people. For the first time social and political theory is being written from the bottom up, not from the top down. Rousseau's *Confessions* is an account of what it is like to try to rise from the bottom in a highly stratified society dominated by an *ancien régime* aristocracy. In the *Confessions* Rousseau movingly describes the humiliations which are visited upon the parvenu, often quite unintentionally. Rousseau's own history of himself is also meant to be the story of how a naïve son of the people becomes worldly, and he does that by losing sight of the simple virtues. Simplicity, honesty, goodness of heart, straightforward religious faith even, turn out to be among life's disadvantages. Nobody who set out to live his life according to the 'official' Christian values of his society would last ten minutes in the real world. *The Confessions* is an account of the realisation that nobody takes the values he has been brought up in seriously. Society as it is currently constituted is a tissue of hypocrisy because its operating values are very different from its nominal values. Rousseau generalises from his own experiences to a whole theory of society. He assumes that everyone living in a society as it then existed, and perhaps as it has always existed, is forced to divide his individual personality against itself. Ordinary social existence is a constant battle between what one knows to be right and one's own self-interest. My self-interest tells me to lie, cheat, gouge, connive and steal, whereas if I consult my simple and affectionate heart it tells me to do the opposite. Rousseau thinks that everyone living in society suffers from the same self-division; principle drives them in one direction, and self-interest drives them in the opposite direction. Christianity says 'love your neighbour', but ordinary social living soon tells you that the man who loves his neighbour as himself is a fool. Even survival in a society which is nominally Christian would be a problem if anybody was actually fool enough to take Christianity literally and try to live a truly Christian life.

Rousseau's account in *The Confessions* of what it is like to try to live justly in an unjust society reminds us forcibly of the account of that same problem in Plato's *Republic*. Rousseau does not go quite as far as Plato, who argues that the perfectly just man living in the perfectly unjust society would soon meet his death at the hands of unjust men, but he is plainly heading in that direction. What makes any given society so rotten is that one's own self-respect is corrupted into self-interest. Rousseau is rather biblical about self-interest, where biblical means Old Testament. Rousseau seems to think that even if there were to be enough of the good things of life to satisfy every reasonable human desire there would still not be enough. The Old Testament doctrine of the irruption of desire is never very far below the surface of *The Confessions*. The brute fact of human scarcity is compounded by the fact that the desires themselves are not fixed. Human desires multiply as human societies become more sophisticated. This puts Rousseau outside the bounds of Enlightenment. One of Enlightenment's central claims

was that enlightened society, however governed, was differentiated in a way that barbarous society was not. This perception took many forms and came from a variety of different impulses, but all enlightened thinkers were liberals to the extent that they thought the increasing social division of labour argued well for human freedom. In the modern idiom, it came to be recognised that a free and progressive society was one in which there were a great number of social roles available to the members of that society. Rousseau sets his face against this kind of enlightened optimism. The more socially differentiated, the more sophisticated a society becomes, the more likely it is that the members of that society will lose sight of the simpler values which alone make a life worth living. What we choose to call progress is nothing more than getting stuck more deeply in the mire of unsatisfied desire.

Here Rousseau speaks the clear language of modernity, the language of alienated existence, where alienation means realising that even if you could have everything your society has to offer, you would still be unsatisfied. Rousseau's political thought is largely concerned with how we got ourselves into this mess and how we can get out of it.

### ***THE DISCOURSE ON THE ORIGINS OF INEQUALITY (1755)***

*The Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* contains Rousseau's explanation of how the world got into its mess, and he is very careful not to say that the world came to be as it is through social contract. Rousseau's State of Nature is very different from the State of Nature in Hobbes and in Locke. Nothing much happens in Rousseau's imagined picture of what life must have been like before the state and society arose. Human contact would have been fitful, and certainly not enough for men even to develop a language. Men would have been unequal in strength and cunning in the State of Nature, but that would not have led some men to dominate others because the motive for that domination would have been lacking. Naturally unequal men in the State of Nature would simply be unequal men with nothing much to quarrel about. It is only in society that inequality matters. How, then did society arise? Rousseau confesses in *The Social Contract* that he does not really know, but in the *Discourse* he makes a guess. The first man to claim a piece of land as his and to find others foolish enough to believe him was the true founder of civil society, because with the invention of property men suddenly found something worth associating and competing for. With property, everything changes, simply because inequality of property matters in a way that natural inequality does not. Naturally unequal men in the State of Nature become the rich and poor of civil society. Whatever the rich are, they are not stupid. They recognise that the cupidity of other men poses problems for their retention of their property. At first, each man protects his own with his own, but the wealthy soon realise that this is an extremely expensive way of doing something which can in fact be done on the cheap. Law is the next fraud perpetrated against the human race. The state and its law, it is said, is in everybody's interest, not just the interest of a few. The force of the whole community is used to protect what are in fact the ill-gotten gains of the few. By persuading everybody that the law applies equally to all, and by getting everybody to contribute their widow's mite to the upkeep of the state, the rich get

others to pay for what only really concerns them.

What is remarkable about Rousseau's account of the origins of human society is that, although he is a social contract thinker, he does not use the idea of social contract itself to explain the origins of human societies. It was suggested in the introductory chapter on social contract thinking that an important shift of emphasis happens in the hundred years which separate Hobbes's *Leviathan* from Rousseau's *Social Contract*. In that time a growing confidence in man's naturally social nature led to a certain absence of panic in the face of the question of whether human societies were likely to survive or not. Hobbes's fear-ridden message that we ought to put up with almost any government because of the horror of the possibility of returning to the State of Nature gives way to a rather sanguine appreciation of the toughness of human societies. Because human societies arise of their own accord, so to speak, there is no need for an elaborately formal account of their origins of the kind that social contract theorists had typically given. What use, then, was social contract theory if it did not explain the origins of civil society? Rousseau has the perfect answer. Social contract as a theory of the origins of civil society is in fact an account of the origins of a legitimate society because men agree to construct that society out of their own freely given consent. This is a laughable account of the origins of any actual society, because it is obvious to the most casual glance that no actual human society is originally so constituted that a majority of its members would consent to its legitimacy. Therefore, to attribute the origins of any contemporary society to social contract is to invest that society with a legitimacy which it does not possess. Nevertheless, most societies in Rousseau's own day look pretty solid. It therefore follows that legitimacy is not necessary for the survival of civil society, which is just another way of saying that societies have such an in-built capacity to survive that they can keep going in defiance of the most elementary rules of justice.

That perception of Rousseau's had enormous implications for the political theorising of the future. It could be said that it is the central insight of the next two hundred years because it quite literally makes a theory of revolution both necessary and possible. Paradoxical as it may seem, the fact of social stability is fundamentally important to any theory of revolution. The central argument against all revolutions is Hobbes's argument (which was surprisingly to become Burke's argument against the French Revolution) that tinkering with government leads to chaos, and chaos of the most general kind, not just political chaos but every other kind of chaos as well. Hobbes invites us to look upon the political and social orders as fragile and imperilled. Being a revolutionary means having enough confidence in the social fabric to believe that to repudiate how a society is governed does not mean the end of that society as a society. Obviously, such a new perception about the nature of societies can be seen to be beginning in Locke, and it is there in Rousseau with a vengeance. That is the final message of Rousseau's dismissive denial that he knows how societies came to be as they are in *The Social Contract*, and of his rather perfunctory sketch of universal human history in the *Discourse*. The fervid search for the origins of stable societies is only worth it for antiquarian reasons or for reasons of fear for the continued existence of society itself. Not for Rousseau, who simply asks us to accept that stable human societies are a given part of the human landscape. Therefore, the question for the political theorist is not: How can we account