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## Rousseau (1712–1778)

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### Introduction

Rousseau's political writings have earned him a reputation as one of the most important and influential of modern political theorists. Yet to describe Rousseau as a *modern* political theorist requires immediate qualification, for although Rousseau – in common with many other Enlightenment thinkers – rejected traditional forms of authority in favour of the individual capacity for self-determination and self-government, he nevertheless remained critical of much that is now associated with Enlightenment thought. For example, the Enlightenment is now usually associated with a belief in progress through the application of science and reason to social and political affairs. Rousseau, however, was sceptical of the idea that science and reason, if applied to social and political affairs, could deliver progress. Rousseau was often more interested in looking backwards to the ancient republics of Sparta and Rome than forwards, with many of his Enlightened contemporaries, to increasingly large-scale, industrialised societies underwritten by the principles of science and reason.

Yet Rousseau's writings were not mere nostalgia for a time long past. Rousseau spent much of his life living and working in monarchical France, and whilst it is true that he drew on ancient models in his critique of absolutist government, he also drew upon his knowledge and experience of an actually-existing republic, for he was, and proudly declared himself to be, a citizen of the republic of Geneva. Similarly, Rousseau's critique of progress was not born out of a nostalgic desire to return to the past, but rather out of a sense that the dogmas and prejudices of pre-modern times were being replaced by new dogmas and prejudices: science and reason. Where many of his contemporaries saw the development of large-scale

industrialised societies and the ensuing rise of the market economy as a means for liberating humanity, Rousseau saw instead a danger that such developments would result not in emancipation but in new and more profound forms of slavery. Rousseau may have felt uncomfortable in the face of the optimism of the modern age, but his critical voice nevertheless places him firmly in, and of, that age.

## Problems and Issues

In *The Social Contract* Rousseau sets out the ‘fundamental problem’ to which this work is addressed, and to which it supposedly provides a solution. That problem is

to find a form of association that will defend and protect the person and goods of each associate with the full common force, and by means of which each, while uniting himself with all, may nevertheless obey only himself alone and remain as free as before (Rousseau, 1997a, pp. 49–50, quotation modified).

It is clear from this statement of the problem that Rousseau places freedom, or independence, at the heart of his political project. Any form of political association for Rousseau must uphold the freedom of the individual, and it must do this by so arranging things that the individual would be enabled to govern himself (there is no doubt that, for Rousseau, self-governing individuals are *male*).

The importance for Rousseau of self-government is tied to his *perfectionist* account of human nature, developed primarily in his *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Amongst Men* (1755) commonly referred to as the *Second Discourse*. Here Rousseau provides a speculative history of the human race from the innocent egalitarian idyll of the state of nature, where human beings, in common with non-human animals, enjoyed independence and natural liberty, to (as Rousseau saw it) the vice-ridden society of his day in which dependence on others had become the norm. From the free and independent individuals of the state of nature, humanity had become enslaved ‘to a multitude of new needs, to the whole of Nature, and especially to those of his kind, whose slave he in a sense becomes even by becoming their master’ (Rousseau, 1997b, p. 170). In part, Rousseau attributes this loss of independence to the development and subsequent unequal distribution of private property – modern man, obsessed by status, constantly compares himself and his possessions against those of others. Because he is ‘capable of living only in the opinions of others’ he loses sight

of his real or authentic self (Rousseau, 1997b, p. 187). Rousseau maintains that society is a necessary condition of the development of one's moral faculties whether these take the form of vice or virtue. Unfortunately, Rousseau seeks to show, society has developed in such a way that there is a preponderance of vice over virtue. The task he sets himself in *The Social Contract* therefore is to discover a form of political association that will produce the opposite of this – a preponderance of virtue over vice. Thus the social contract and the participatory political association it creates not only enshrines civil freedom, but also allows for the development of *moral liberty* 'which alone makes man truly master of himself' (Rousseau, 1997a, p. 54).

It is at this point that there occurs what Patrick Riley has described as 'the greatest paradox' in all of Rousseau's work – a paradox around which a great deal of interpretative dispute has largely focused. The social contract is supposed to set in train a process of socialisation which will produce the virtuous society envisaged by Rousseau, yet in the pre-contractual condition the motives required by individuals if they are to relinquish the *status quo* are absent. These motives can only be the *result* of the process of socialisation that they are supposed to initiate (Riley, 1982, p. 110). This is a paradox that Rousseau himself acknowledged when he wrote, in *The Social Contract*, that

[f]or a nascent people to be capable of appreciating sound maxims of politics ... the effect would have to become the cause, the social spirit which is to be the work of the institution would have to preside over the institution itself, and men would have to be prior to laws what they ought to become by means of them (Rousseau, 1997a, p. 71).

This problem also emerges in Rousseau's discussion of the *general will*. According to Rousseau, the ideal state (which *The Social Contract* models) is one in which the entire citizen body participates in the process of governing, which is to say in the process of generating the laws by which the political community will be governed. Each citizen, in his capacity as citizen rather than private person, wills the laws by which he, and every other citizen, will be governed. The general will is therefore the will of the political community as a whole.

However, the *general will* is not to be conflated with the *actual will* of the people for, as Rousseau says, although '[b]y itself the people always wills the good, it does not always see it. The general will is always upright, but the judgement which guides it is not always enlightened' (Rousseau, 1997a, p. 68). Until the process of socialisation has made men virtuous the people are 'a blind multitude' (*ibid.*) and their particular or private interests will get in the way of their attempts to will the general good. It is at this point that

Rousseau introduces two proposals that have led to great controversy amongst his interpreters. The first of these proposals is that, in the act of deciding democratically which policy to adopt, it is the will of the majority that ought to prevail. This does not mean that the majority is necessarily correct in its interpretation of the general will – ‘[t]here is,’ says Rousseau, ‘often a considerable difference between the will of all and the general will’ (*ibid.*, p. 60) – but he believes that majority-rule is the best available guide to the general will. Rousseau’s subsequent assertion that ‘whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be constrained to do so by the entire body: which means nothing other than that he shall be forced to be free’ (*ibid.*, p. 53) has led to considerable debate amongst interpreters of his work. Some have seen this as merely a background assumption of any democratic community; others have seen in this the potential for a tyranny of the majority; and others have seen in this the roots of totalitarianism.

Rousseau’s second proposal is for the introduction of a ‘Lawgiver’ – a being of ‘superior intelligence’ whose task is that of ‘changing human nature’ to fit the requirements of society (*ibid.*, pp. 68–9). Because the citizens are not yet able to see the good, the Lawgiver must find ways to enable them to see it. This cannot be done via rational persuasion because where the multitude is ‘blind’ they will not see the virtue in rational argument: ‘The wise who would speak to the vulgar in their own rather than the vulgar language will not be understood by them’ (*ibid.*, p. 70). Therefore the Lawgiver must ‘persuade without convincing’ – in other words, by means *other* than rational argument. In particular, he must dress his proposals up in the language of divine authority, the better to lead the blind multitude to the truth. Once again, Rousseau the lover of liberty sits uneasily alongside an apparently authoritarian Rousseau – for what, critics ask, is to guarantee that the Lawgiver is not a fraud or – worse – a potential Hitler?

### **Why Conflicting Interpretations?**

Rousseau is a paradoxical figure in the history of political thought. He was a contributor to the central masterpiece of the European Enlightenment – Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* – yet he appeared to set himself against many of the key principles associated with the philosophers of the Enlightenment. His political writings are said to have directly influenced the French Revolution, setting in train the discourse of the Rights of Man; yet his political thought has also been held responsible for both the Jacobin Terror, into which the French Revolution ignominiously collapsed, and twentieth-century totalitarianism. He made liberty his central concern, yet in his most important

work of political philosophy – *The Social Contract* (1762) – he notoriously asserted that those who disagreed with the collective *general will* should be ‘forced to be free’. On the basis of arguments put forward in *The Social Contract* Rousseau is often credited with presenting a novel, even radical form of democracy – a direct participatory model that stands in a critical relation to the indirect, representative model associated with modern liberal democracy (Weale, 1999; Held, 1996; Macpherson, 1966, 1973). Yet Rousseau himself states that democratic government is an unattainable ideal – suitable for Gods but not for men (Rousseau, 1997a, p. 92). As we shall see, a great deal of Rousseau scholarship can be represented as an attempt to come to terms with the allegedly paradoxical character of his work. For his own part, Rousseau was aware of the paradoxical nature of his work remarking that ‘you cannot avoid paradox if you think for yourself’ and insisting that he ‘would rather fall into paradox than into prejudice’ (Rousseau, 1974, p. 57). For some writers, this use of paradox is deliberate: Rousseau’s ‘literary love of paradox’ (Cobban, 1964, p. 15) betrays a rhetorical style designed to ‘jolt the reader or listener into recognising something he might otherwise overlook’ (Plamenatz, 1972, p. 320).

However, for other writers the paradoxical character of Rousseau’s writing is the result, not of a conscious decision concerning style, but of a lack of rigour in argument. Rousseau’s work has variously been described as absurd, incoherent, inconsistent, unsystematic, and ‘a farrago of contradictions’ (Canovan, cited in Dent, 1988, p. 2). In spite of Rousseau’s own insistence that his work is systematic (for example, Rousseau, 1979) the attempt to demonstrate that it is not has been a dominant theme amongst his less sympathetic critics. One historically important example of the alleged contradictory nature of Rousseau’s work lies in the juxtaposition between the *Second Discourse*, which supposedly defends ‘a more extreme form of individualism than any previous writer had ventured to set forth’ and *The Social Contract* which, it is claimed, defends ‘a collectivism as absolute as the mind of man has ever conceived’ (Vaughan, 1915, Vol. I, p. 119, p. 39).

Conversely, there are those who insist upon, and seek to demonstrate, the consistency and rigour of Rousseau’s work. However, opinions differ as to where the key to the unity of Rousseau’s work lies. Some writers have sought to demonstrate the unity of Rousseau’s work through a close analysis of Rousseau’s texts – often informed by a knowledge of the *context* in which Rousseau lived and wrote (for example, Masters, 1968), or by emphasising the *moral* content of his work – often by seeking to show the close thematic connection between his educational treatise *Emile* and *The Social Contract*, published in the same year (for example, Cassirer, 1989; Dent, 1988; Levine, 1976; Miller, 1984). For others, Rousseau is to be understood primarily as a

*political* philosopher rather than a moral philosopher (for example, Crocker, 1968; Melzer, 1983) and *The Social Contract* should be read in conjunction with his practical proposals for constitutions for Corsica and Poland (Fralin, 1978). The alleged inconsistency between the *Second Discourse* and *The Social Contract* has been challenged by writers such as MacAdam who sees merely a division of labour between the two texts, with the former playing a diagnostic role and the latter providing the cure (MacAdam, 1989).

Other interpreters have looked not so much to the texts themselves in order to explain their inconsistencies as to aspects of Rousseau's personality. Rousseau wrote several works of self-analysis – most notably *The Confessions* (1782/1789) and *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* (1780) – and these, as Judith Shklar has argued, are 'of utmost significance' to our understanding of his work (Shklar, 1985, p. 219). Rousseau undoubtedly experienced psychological problems – his paranoia is, for example, evident in the *Reveries* – and for some writers, the paradoxical nature of Rousseau's work is directly traceable to his unstable psychology (for instance, Talmon, 1952; Crocker, 1968). Rousseau's *Social Contract* has been associated with what is surely one of the seismic political events of the modern era – the French Revolution – but this association further illustrates the problematic nature of his work. Rousseau was undoubtedly a critic of the *ancien régime* and of the way inequality had been sanctioned by tradition, stifling the development of moral liberty. His work was cited by the French Revolutionaries in defence of the Rights of Man against hierarchy, privilege and tradition, and liberals and socialists alike have subsequently interpreted the critical element of his work as a defence of individual liberty.

However, Rousseau was by inclination a *republican* and he was as much (perhaps *more*) concerned with republican ideas of duty, civic virtue and the common good (general will) as he was with the notion of rights. Where these republican ideas are interpreted as prioritising the collective – the *res publica* – over the individual, Rousseau's work can be represented as a threat to individual liberty. It is for these reasons that his work been associated with both the emancipatory aspects of the French Revolution and with the Jacobin Terror into which it descended.

## Conflicting Interpretations

### *Rousseau as Totalitarian*

As we noticed in the previous section, one of the most important, and contentious, strands of interpretation in the case of Rousseau is that which

identifies totalitarian tendencies in his thought. This interpretation has deep roots, stretching back to Rousseau's own time. One of the first to point up the totalitarian potential inherent in Rousseau's *Social Contract* was Edmund Burke. For Burke, it was in the abstract nature of Rousseau's argument that this potential lay; Burke believed that Rousseau's advocacy of the 'inalienable' Rights of Man undermined the concrete customs and traditions that were the source of the *actual* rights of citizens and the guarantee of their actual, as opposed to merely theoretical, freedom (Burke, 1968). The abstract character of Rousseau's writings was to continually trouble his critics throughout the nineteenth century, although by this time Rousseau's work had come to be associated with the spectre of socialist collectivism (Hampsher-Monk, 1995). As one nineteenth-century critic put it, '[t]he fundamental principle of the Rousseauite ... polity is the omnipotence of the State' (Huxley, 1898, p. 395; cf. Bosanquet, 1923; Vaughan, 1915, Vol. I). This latter interpretation was given new impetus by the rise and defeat of fascism and the onset of the Cold War. These events comprised the background against which Rousseau's *Social Contract* was reinterpreted as an incipiently totalitarian tract, and several works published during this period accord Rousseau a key position in the supposed genealogy of totalitarianism (Crocker, 1968; Popper, 1945; Russell, 1946; Talmon, 1952). For these interpreters of Rousseau the concept of 'the Lawgiver' is readily translated into a Hitler, a Stalin, a Robespierre or a Napoleon, bent on turning populist sentiment, dressed up as 'the will of the people' to their own ends. But it is the concept of the general will, as it appears in *The Social Contract*, that allegedly most qualifies Rousseau for his place in the totalitarian tradition.

Rousseau maintains that the citizens of a well-ordered society will have a particular will, which looks to their own interests as private individuals, and a general will, which looks to the interest of the society as a whole. In his role as citizen, the individual is expected to allow the general will to take priority over his particular will. As we saw above, the general will is not simply an aggregate of the particular wills of the individual citizens since it is conceivable that a people can be in unanimous agreement as to what the general will is, and yet be entirely mistaken. The general will is what is *objectively* in the interest of a people, and not what they *believe* to be in their interest. For some critics of Rousseau, it is in the gap between truth and belief that the seeds of totalitarianism lie. To see why, we can look briefly at Isaiah Berlin's influential essay *Two Concepts of Liberty*, originally published in 1958 against the background of the Cold War (Berlin, 1969). It is in this essay that Berlin sets out his important distinction between *negative* and *positive* liberty. Negative liberty consists in freedom from interference in the pursuit of one's goals, whatever these may be.

Positive liberty is much more problematic. Proponents of positive liberty, according to Berlin, posit a gap between the actual, empirical self – an inauthentic or false self – and a ‘higher’ more rational self which is more authentic, more ‘real’ than the empirical self. According to Berlin, those who characteristically hold this view believe also that those who have achieved the higher more rational state may legitimately strive to raise those who have not up to their level. ‘Once I take this view,’ Berlin says, ‘I am in a position to ignore the actual wishes of men or societies, to bully, oppress, torture them in the name, and on behalf, of their ‘real’ selves’ (*ibid.*, p. 133). Rousseau’s notion of the perfectibility of human beings, combined with his belief that, under present circumstances, they live false or inauthentic lives, may be employed in this way (*ibid.*, pp. 162–6). According to this view, when Rousseau writes that ‘whoever refuses to obey the general will ... shall be forced to be free’ (Rousseau, 1997a, p. 53) he can be interpreted as advocating the enforced conformity of allegedly misguided or misinformed individuals to a uniform and objective truth. As Talmon, anticipating Berlin, put it: the general will becomes ‘a pre-ordained goal, towards which [the citizens] are irresistibly driven’ by those who claim to know what this goal, or truth, is (Talmon, 1952, p. 48).

Berlin’s influence can also be seen in the work of one of the more persistent defenders of this view of Rousseau – Lester Crocker. ‘Liberty’, Crocker maintains ‘certainly includes the assurance of an unassailable private realm ... a personal sanctuary’ (Crocker, 1995, p. 245). This, of course, is Berlin’s negative liberty. Rousseau’s mistake is to make everything – including morality – subservient to politics, leaving no room for individual expression, and no room for personal morality or conscience since these would pose a threat to the unity of the political community (*ibid.*, pp. 247–8). The politicisation of private life, of which Rousseau thus stands accused, is allegedly a classic trait of totalitarian regimes. The effect of Rousseau’s ‘staggering, hallucinatory conception’ of political life is to eradicate pluralism in favour of ‘orthodoxy’ and ‘conformity’ (*ibid.*, pp. 247, 245). More recently still, Charles Taylor has described Rousseau as the ‘the origin point’ of the idea of ‘self-determining freedom’ – a central idea in the modern identity and one akin to Berlin’s positive liberty (Taylor, 1989, pp. 362–3). This idea, in its political form of ‘a social contract state founded on a general will ... has been one of the intellectual sources of modern totalitarianism’ (Taylor, 1991, p. 28).

These apparently illiberal aspects of Rousseau’s work seem to be supported by other elements of the political theory presented in *The Social Contract*. For example, Rousseau prescribes a civil religion, and proposes banishment for those who do not publicly accept its dogmas and death for

those who publicly flout them (Rousseau, 1997a, p. 150). He also argues (following Machiavelli) for the proscription of factions and hence is sometimes accused of advocating a one-party state on fascist or communist lines. He argues for the proscription of public debate in relation to the general will (*ibid.*, p. 60). Finally, he appears to threaten the institution of private property when he suggests that the social contract entails a 'total alienation' of citizens' rights to the State so that 'with regard to its members, the State is master of all their goods' (*ibid.*, p. 54). Critics who interpret Rousseau in this way need not believe that he intended his work to lend comfort to tyrants. Burke, for example, believed both that Rousseau's personality was morally reprehensible and that his work had provided the French Revolutionaries with a justification for their violent excesses, but he did not believe that Rousseau – at least were he in 'one of his lucid moments' – would have approved of the use made of his work (Burke, 1968, p. 284). Of course, Rousseau may not *consciously* have intended his work to be employed in this way, but for those who inhabit a post-Freudian world the idea of an *unconscious* drive for a totalitarian politics cannot be ruled out. For example, summarising his own earlier account of Rousseau's personality, Crocker points to 'alienation and distantiation, resentment, a private phantasy life, especially phantasies of uniqueness and power as the prophet and guide who will be revered in the future for having shown men the true path' as the driving forces behind his political thought (Crocker, 1995, pp. 247; 1968). Similarly, Talmon detects in Rousseau (amongst others) a 'totalitarian Messianic temperament' born of the tension created by a dual personality in which the 'disciplinarian' vied uneasily with the 'tormented paranoiac'. In a clear reference to Hitler, Talmon links Rousseau's psychology to the 'strange combination of psychological ill-adjustment and totalitarian ideology' of the Nazi *Führer* (Talmon, 1952, p. 39). The roots of this lie, inevitably, in Rousseau's troubled childhood as 'a motherless vagabond starved of warmth and affection' (*ibid.*, p. 38).

### *The Case against Rousseau as Totalitarian*

It seems reasonably clear from the previous discussion that all of the key interpreters to which we referred above attribute to Rousseau's ideas a continuing influence stretching well beyond the context in which Rousseau first developed them. In terms then of the 'text *versus* context' debate, this fact alone leaves these writers open to the straightforward criticism that their reading of Rousseau is anachronistic, for the context to which Rousseau's ideas are addressed is not the same as – and is on some accounts

*incommensurable* with – that of Hitler. Granting this point, it would seem to follow that placing Rousseau’s thought in its context could then have the effect of insulating it against this particular interpretation. One example of a contextual defence of Rousseau’s thought can be introduced through a critique of Popper’s reading of Rousseau. According to Popper, Rousseau is a proto-Hegelian who, allegedly like Hegel after him, endorses the idea of an organic state unified around a collective will. The state is thus a ‘moral person’ with a single will – the general will – which can brook no opposition from the particular, private wills of the individual subjects (Popper, 1945, p. 52). Popper has been widely criticised for his idiosyncratic readings of thinkers such as Plato, Hegel and Marx, and his account of the affinity between Rousseau and Hegel ignores the latter’s critical stance towards the former. But when Rousseau says, for example, that the State is ‘a moral person whose life consists in the union of its members’ and whose will – the general will – has ‘absolute power over all its members’ (Rousseau, 1997a, p. 61) he appears to bear out Popper’s (amongst others) worst fears. However, the actual phrase used by Rousseau, and translated here as ‘moral person’, is *personne morale* and this, as several commentators have pointed out, is better translated as ‘artificial person’ (Cobban, 1964; Jones, 1987). To Rousseau’s contemporaries, it is argued, this phrase would not have had the moral overtones ascribed to it by his post-Hegelian interpreters. Thus by placing Rousseau’s thought in its context, he can be insulated from at least one aspect of the accusation of totalitarianism. Going back to the context of Rousseau’s work may not conclusively establish that Rousseau’s thought does not have potentially totalitarian implications (and after all, even contemporaries of Rousseau such as Burke believed that his work had this potential) but at the very least it provides a counterweight to the claims made by subsequent interpreters.

Turning from *contextual* to *textual* concerns, writers have sought to defend Rousseau by pointing to constraints on the general will that are internal to the text. As we have already seen, although Rousseau believes that the will of the majority is the best guide to the general will, it remains the case that the will of the majority might be mistaken in its judgement. It has been suggested that those who seek to interpret Rousseau as a nascent totalitarian fail to take this distinction seriously. As one of Rousseau’s defenders has put it, the general will, understood as ‘the people’s will’ or ‘the will of society’, is ‘without moral authority’. This is because ‘the authority of the general will is the authority of *just* law and not of society as such’ (Chapman, 1956, p. 82, emphasis added; cf Reiss, 1991, p. 29). In other words, principles of *right* ought properly to circumscribe the will of the people, as is suggested by the full title of the work – *Of the Social Contract, or Principles of*

*Political Right.* In a similar vein, Robert Derathé has argued that Rousseau subordinates the actions of a sovereign people to a framework of divinely-inspired natural law which sets limits on what the sovereign may rightly do to any of its members (Derathé, 1970, pp. 151–71).

However, Patrick Riley has suggested that it is precisely on the issue of principle that the deepest tensions in Rousseau's *Social Contract* lie. Rousseau, he argues, is caught between the 'voluntarism' of the modern social contract tradition in which subjective will is the source of morality (as it is, for example, with Hobbes) and the 'essentially nonvoluntaristic' ancient tradition with its 'common good' morality (Riley, 1982, pp. 99–100). The general will is, Riley claims, an unsatisfactory notion in Rousseau's *Social Contract* precisely because it is an attempt to fuse these two incompatible traditions. Cohen, on the other hand, has suggested that there need be no necessary incompatibility between voluntarism and the common good morality. According to Cohen, Rousseau's citizens 'want more than an availability of alternatives within a system of laws and institutions that they view as a set of constraints imposed by others on their actions.' But where 'there is a widely shared general will to which the [political] institutions do on the whole conform' then reflective (i.e., autonomous) identification with those arrangements effectively unites autonomy with the common good (Cohen, 1986, p. 286).

There are then constraints of *principle* upon the general will, but there are also – as Cohen and others point out – *institutional* constraints too. Rousseau insists that legislative authority is inalienable and that representative government is a form of slavery. But if sovereignty is inalienable, executive power is not and this, Rousseau insists, ought to be ceded to the government. There is thus a division of responsibilities between the *sovereign* – which legislates in *general* terms – and the *government* – which applies that legislation in *particular* cases. Although this is not a full-blown theory of the separation of powers such as one finds in Locke or Montesquieu, nevertheless it does provide evidence that Rousseau understood the importance of institutional constraints in upholding the freedom of individual citizens. Whether or not these constraints are adequate in this respect is something we shall consider later. The idea of the Lawgiver as Hitlerian demagogue would also appear to be weakened by consideration of the limits Rousseau places upon the office. For example, the Lawgiver may propose legislation but – invoking religious authority apart – the Lawgiver has no power to implement legislation: 'he who drafts the laws... should have no legislative right' (Rousseau, 1997a, p. 70). Moreover, no matter how impressed they may be by his 'superior intelligence', the people may not legitimately cede their legislative right to the Lawgiver

even if, as a people, they decide to do so (*ibid.*, p. 70). Again, it is a matter of principle that sovereignty cannot be alienated. Finally, Chapman draws our attention to the fact that for Rousseau the tyrant is distinguished from the Lawgiver in that the former always chooses a moment of social upheaval in which to make his proposals, thus taking advantage of the people he is supposed to be assisting (Chapman, 1956, pp. 76–7; Rousseau, 1997a, p. 77). This suggests that Hitler, Stalin, Robespierre and Napoleon would all be ruled out as Lawgivers by no less an authority than Rousseau himself. There are other considerations that count against the totalitarian reading of Rousseau. In the next section we consider liberal interpretations of his work, which implicitly – and sometimes explicitly – undercut the totalitarian reading.

### *Rousseau as Liberal*

In spite of the totalitarian readings of Rousseau, liberty nevertheless remains central to his concerns, in *The Social Contract* and elsewhere. Emphasising Rousseau's comments on liberty, therefore, may lead one to interpret Rousseau as a liberal of one stripe or another. For his own part, Rousseau's preferred form of government was *republican* – he often identified himself as a citizen of the Genevan republic and explicitly says that 'every legitimate Government is republican' (Rousseau, 1997a, p. 67). His concern for civic virtue and duty (he was a great admirer of Sparta) places him in what Pocock has called the 'Atlantic Republican tradition' alongside writers such as Machiavelli (whom Rousseau greatly admired) and indeed Pocock describes him as 'the Machiavelli of the eighteenth century' (Pocock, 1975, p. 504). Republicanism is sometimes thought to be opposed to liberalism, though this opposition may be overstated, and much recent research into the republican tradition has pointed to the importance of republican ideas to modern liberalism (For an overview of recent debates, see Haakonsen, 1993).

One aspect of Rousseau's republicanism that contributes to his liberal credentials is his emphasis on the importance of the rule of law. According to Levine, the concept of law is the key 'ordering concept' in Rousseau's work, and Chapter 6 of Book II ('Of Law') is, he claims, the heart of the entire *Social Contract* 'for which all the rest is just commentary' (Levine, 1976, p. 46). Rousseau himself says – in the *Discourse on Political Economy* – that 'it is to law alone that men owe justice and freedom' (Rousseau, 1997a, p. 10). Moreover, Rousseau devised constitutions for Corsica and Poland, seemingly anticipating the modern constitutional state.

As Norman Barry has pointed out, Rousseau's insistence upon the 'generality, equality and impersonality' of law would find favour with liberals everywhere (Barry, 1995, p. 50).

However, Rousseau had argued in the *Second Discourse* that good laws contribute to the moralisation of citizens whilst bad laws corrupt them, and the idea that good laws can have this positive effect on citizens clearly grows out of Rousseau's perfectionist account of human nature. This sets Rousseau apart from those liberals, such as Hayek and Nozick, for whom the system of law ought not to be construed as a positive instrument for moralising the citizenry, but rather as a negative instrument for the maintenance of order and the regulation of conflict. The system of law for these writers is straightforwardly a means by which private interests can most efficiently be satisfied. For his part, Rousseau believes that a society based on private interest will always breed corruption rather than virtue. Rousseau may also be set apart from utilitarian liberals such as Bentham for whom laws are a means to maximising the greatest happiness of the greatest number. For Bentham, the greatest happiness of the greatest number is an aggregative concept, but as we have already noticed Rousseau insists that the general will is not the same as 'the will of all', which is 'a sum of particular wills' (Rousseau, 1997a, p. 60). Rousseau in fact has been read as a Benthamite utilitarian (Allen, 1962) but this, as Jones has pointed out, is anachronistic and says more about the interests of the interpreter than it does about Rousseau (Jones, 1987, p. 118). According to Jones, attentiveness to the problems with which Rousseau was concerned, and to the context within which they appeared as problems for him, avoids such anachronism.

If Rousseau is to be interpreted as a liberal, then in current post-Rawlsian terminology he is a *perfectionist* liberal or, as Richard Dagger has recently argued, a *republican* liberal (Dagger, 1997). His work is to be placed in the same tradition as communitarian liberals such as T. H. Green (though Green himself thought that Rousseau's general will was 'unprincipled' – see Harris and Morrow, 1986, p. 57), and Bosanquet (1923), or it is to be placed in the tradition of *developmental* liberalism alongside such liberals as J. S. Mill, rather than the classical or neo-liberal traditions with their static view of human nature. For example, Chapman argues that those who interpret Rousseau as a proto-totalitarian fail to see that the general will is a *dynamic* concept; it is a *process* of continual striving – not merely a *product* of that striving. Since the general will is, so to speak, always 'in question' it cannot readily be used as a stick with which to beat dissidents. After all, it is surely possible that they may be right in *their* interpretation of it and the majority wrong. Thus if it is accepted that the general will is a dynamic process, then the maintenance of civil liberties is required if it is not to

ossify. As Chapman puts it: ‘Freedom, both moral and political, is essential to the very existence of a general will’ (Chapman, 1956, p. 78). Levine – who offers a Kantian reading of Rousseau – also emphasises the dynamic aspects of his theory when he points out that the social contract is not an historically fixed moment located in the past but one that is constantly renewed in the ongoing act of legislation (Levine, 1976, p. 51). Whilst acknowledging that there are manifestly illiberal aspects of his political philosophy – most notably in its practical aspects – Levine nevertheless points out that in presenting the social contract as a dynamic rather than a static phenomenon Rousseau provides a ‘theoretical motivation for some of the central liberal doctrines: freedom of speech, freedom of inquiry, and the freedom – indeed, the obligation – to publish and disseminate information’ (*ibid.*, p. 79).

How can the idea of ‘forcing people to be free’ be given a liberal interpretation? One way in which this can be done is to argue, as many liberals have done, that freedom can only be achieved within a framework of law. Outside of such a framework, there is not liberty, but licence – a Hobbesian ‘state of nature’. There is then a *prima facie* reason for each individual to endorse a system of law. But a system of law requires also a system of coercive sanctions, and any individual who breaks a law can expect to have those sanctions applied in his or her case. When those sanctions are applied in any particular instance, they can in part be justified in the name of the larger freedom which the system of law guarantees to all, including the recalcitrant: ‘Since we benefit from the existence of laws in general, we should obey those laws we have opposed; if we break them, we should recognise the punishment as just’ (Hope Mason, 1995, p. 125; also Barry, 1965, p. 198). Such an idea ‘is not dangerous to liberty’ (Plamenatz, 1972, p. 318).

### *A Kantian Rousseau*

The affinity between Kant and Rousseau is widely acknowledged (not least by Kant himself) and reading Rousseau through Kantian spectacles can have the effect of rendering his thought more liberal. For Kant, rational individuals are morally autonomous when they will the rational moral law (the *categorical imperative*). Because willing is a *subjective* notion, Kantian moral agents are effectively self-legislating when they will the moral law, but the moral law itself is an *objective* notion, accessible to all rational agents. Thus Kantian moral agents can be said to achieve moral autonomy in much the same way that Rousseau’s citizens achieve moral liberty – by placing themselves under a system of general (strictly speaking,

for Kant, *universal*) law so that 'each obeys only himself'. Dagger, for example, has described Rousseau's general will as 'a principle akin to Kant's categorical imperative' (Dagger, 1997, p. 88). For Cassirer too, Rousseau is primarily a moral philosopher whose concern for the 'unconditional universal validity' of law 'runs through all of his political writings' (Cassirer, 1989, p. 58). Indeed, for Cassirer, the affinity between these two thinkers' work was such that Kant was the only eighteenth-century writer to fully understand Rousseau's political thought (*ibid.*, p. 70). For Cassirer (following Kant's judgement of Rousseau's moral theory) it is important to stress the foundational role of *reason* over that of feeling in Rousseau's moral theory (*ibid.*, p. 99). Rousseau is often held up as someone who disparages reason in favour of feeling – it is on this basis that Rousseau is often seen as the father of Romanticism and Nationalism – but this is too crude for Cassirer. Rousseau, he contends, was much more sophisticated in his realisation that feeling had to be tutored by reason.

Other Kantian readings of Rousseau's general will are more indirect. For example, Rawls has described elements of his influential theory of justice as 'Kantian' (Rawls, 1980; but cf. Rawls, 1993, pp. 99–107). Rousseau's general will has, in turn, been interpreted as performing a similar function to Rawls's 'veil of ignorance'. The purpose of this hypothetical device is to identify principles of justice for a constitutional regime that all citizens could endorse. It does this by excluding particularistic information – such as class, status, religion, and (more controversially) race and gender – the better to reveal the general interests which 'free and equal' citizens have in common. Rawls believes that if principles of justice are chosen on the basis of these general interests then they cannot be skewed in favour of the interests of one person, group, class, and so forth, against all others (Rawls, 1972, pp. 17–22). Since for Rousseau the general will 'must issue from all in order to apply to all' (Rousseau, 1997a, p. 62) attending to it 'leads the parties to promote their common interest as citizens rather than their private interests as men' (Dagger, 1981, p. 361). Rousseau's terms are different from Rawls's, 'but the point is much the same' (*ibid.*, p. 361).

### *Problems with the Liberal and Kantian Rousseau*

Clearly there are many liberal elements to Rousseau's political thought and even ideas such as the general will can be given an interpretation that is not obviously authoritarian. Yet there are problems with the attempt to read Rousseau as a liberal. As a child of the Enlightenment, liberalism has tended to view human beings as primarily rational creatures whose chief concern is

the satisfaction of their own individual interests. Moreover, the social contract tradition of which Locke is perhaps the exemplary liberal has tended to treat such individuals as logically prior to, and unencumbered by, any particular social, political or moral context. Custom and tradition, which for many conservative writers embody a notion of the common good, are undermined by the liberal prioritising of individualistic reason. For his own part – and anticipating Hegel’s later critique of Kant – Rousseau clearly understood the importance of custom and tradition to the political community. As Viroli has pointed out, Rousseau, like Kant, believes in ‘an objective moral order and the existence of an objective truth’ (Viroli, 1988, p. 23). As Rousseau himself put it: ‘What is good and conformable to order is so by the nature of things and independently of human conventions’ (Rousseau, 1997a, p. 66). But so abstract is this conception of justice that it can have no purchase on the hearts of men: ‘Reason alone is not a sufficient foundation for virtue’ (Rousseau, 1974, p. 255). Therefore: ‘Conventions and laws are necessary to combine rights with duties and to bring justice back to its object’ (Rousseau, 1997a, p. 66). It is for this reason that custom and tradition form ‘the State’s genuine constitution’ (*ibid.*, p. 81). Despite Burke’s strictures against Rousseau he is, in this respect at least, much closer to Burkean conservatism than to Enlightenment liberalism.

As Levine has argued, despite the liberal inclination of Rousseau’s theory of sovereignty and law, it is (*contra* Cassirer) in his insistence that custom and opinion are fundamental that his illiberalism ultimately occurs (Levine, 1976, p. 79). Liberalism generally is disinclined to grant such pre-rational, even irrational, elements a foundational role in its political and moral theory, though as one commentator points out it is a failing of liberalism that it cannot adequately account for what binds a people together as a people: ‘Liberalism is perpetually embarrassed by the often non-rational preconditions that make the appeal to reason in public affairs possible, and sometimes effective. Rousseau is not so shame-faced’ (Dent, 1992, p. 147). It is Rousseau’s emphasis on the fundamental importance of custom and opinion that makes some Kantian readings so problematic. Whereas for Kant the moral law which is willed by autonomous moral agents is properly speaking *universal* in that it applies to the entire universe of rational beings – it is, as Hans Reiss has pointed out, the ‘will of reason’ as such (Reiss, 1991, p. 28) – the general will is the will of a *particular* people. The general will does not therefore apply to the entire universe of rational beings, but only to the members of the discrete political community. The political community will have customs and traditions – in short, a history – that is unique to it and that will have shaped its members in a way that marks them off from other political communities.

*The Case for Rousseau as Radical*

Rousseau's appeal to radicals and revolutionaries is long-standing – we have, for example, already remarked upon the impact of his writing on the French Revolutionaries, and the Cuban revolutionary leader Fidel Castro is reported to have said that 'Jean-Jacques had been his teacher and that he had fought Batista with the *Social Contract* in his pocket' (cited in Colletti, 1972, pp. 143–4). Liberal critics of Rousseau such as Plamenatz have recognised the affinity between Rousseau's ideal state as it is set out in *The Social Contract* and the revolutionary Paris Commune of 1871, much admired by Marx (Plamenatz, 1952, p. xi). Marx himself, it must be said, had little time for Rousseau, dismissing him as an unhistorical, *petit bourgeois* social contract theorist (Marx, 1973b, p. 83). Marx apart, radicals have often found much to admire in Rousseau, both in his account of the corrupting effects of the unequal distribution of property, and in his support for direct participatory democracy as a means to the development of a collective moral consciousness exemplified by the general will. According to Pateman, for example, it is a mistake to read Rousseau's *Social Contract* through 'liberal democratic spectacles' for Rousseau is critical of the liberal contractual tradition exemplified by Hobbes, Locke and, more recently, Rawls (Pateman, 1985, p. 142). Ironically, Pateman's Rousseau is presented as a fierce critic of the kind of abstract, unhistorical, and individualistic thinking of which Marx accused Rousseau. Whereas the liberal social contract is concerned with the most efficient means of satisfying the self-interest of the parties to the contract, Rousseau's social contract is concerned with the transformation of self-interest in a more communal direction. For Pateman, Rousseau is a thoroughgoing egalitarian for whom social, political and economic equality is a 'central' concern (*ibid.*, p. 155). Pateman's Rousseau has no truck with the liberal belief that the political sphere can be understood independently of the sphere of civil society, and that formal political equality alone is therefore adequate. For Rousseau 'the private and political spheres of life cannot be separated' in the way that liberal contract theorists assume (*ibid.*, p. 149). If liberals fear that collapsing the private and political spheres opens the way to totalitarianism (see, for example, the discussion of Crocker above) Pateman pins her hopes to the moralising effects of participation. For example, whereas liberals see the potential for tyranny in Rousseau's claim that those who disagree with the general will must be 'forced to be free', Pateman (following Ellenburg, 1976) argues that the actual phrase used by Rousseau – '*forcer d'être libre*' – can be translated as '*strengthened to be free*' rather than the more controversial '*forced to be free*' (Pateman, 1985, p. 156). Here, it is the educative effects

of participation that are brought to the fore. Moreover, as a fellow ‘New Left’ writer pointed out, if we take the context in which Rousseau was writing into account then the idea of ‘forcing people to be free’ is mitigated by the consideration that ‘before he wrote men were already being forced to be free’ and Rousseau’s proposals, for all their problems, were ‘offered as an antidote’ to this (Macpherson, 1966, p. 7).

Despite Marx’s dismissal of Rousseau as a bourgeois theorist, many Marxists have sought to point up the affinity between the two theorists. For example, Engels, Marx’s close collaborator and political ally, described the *Second Discourse* as a ‘masterpiece of dialectic’ in which Rousseau’s account of the rise of bourgeois society and the place of property in this story anticipates Hegel by twenty years and whose sequence of ideas ‘corresponds exactly with the sequence developed in Marx’s *Capital*’ but without ‘the Hegelian jargon’ (Engels, 1935, p. 26, pp. 156–7). Nevertheless, even for Engels Rousseau was primarily a theorist of bourgeois democracy who, in common with many other eighteenth-century philosophers, could not pass beyond the limits of his own time. However, for the Italian Marxist, Galvano della Volpa, Rousseau’s ‘anti-levelling egalitarianism’ especially as it is set out in the *Second Discourse* ‘should be numbered among the essential historical and intellectual premisses’ of Marxism (della Volpa, 1978, p. 150). It is, claims della Volpa, ‘embarrassing’ to later Marxists that Marx and Engels failed to recognise the radical implications of Rousseau’s work (*ibid.*, p. 147).

Colletti, for his part, argues that whilst Rousseau was indeed constrained by the ‘objective historical limitation inevitable in his time’ he nevertheless ‘sketched the first and basic chapters of “a critique of bourgeois society”’ (Colletti, 1972, p. 174). Indeed, whilst acknowledging ‘the backwardness of [Rousseau’s] economic thought’ Colletti nevertheless argues that ‘[i]n an age in which all the most advanced thinkers were interpreters of the rights and reasons of rising bourgeois society, its prosperity and industry’, the critique of that society mounted by Rousseau in the *Second Discourse* ‘made his thought appear absurd and paradoxical’ to his contemporaries (*ibid.*, pp. 169–70). Reading Rousseau as critical thinker thus removes the illusion of paradox from his work. His critique of the emerging bourgeois order – civil society, driven by competitiveness and private interest – set him apart from Enlightenment thinkers such as Adam Smith and David Hume, as did his claim, in the *Second Discourse*, that private property – ‘the real foundation of civil society’ – was the source of corruption and vice (Rousseau, 1997b, p. 161). But it also set him apart from Kant in whom ‘we find praise of competition, of mutual unsociability and the resulting desire for “honour, power and wealth”’ (Colletti, 1972, p. 161). Whereas for Levine ‘Kant is the link between Rousseau and the early Marx’, (Levine, 1976, p. vii; but see

Levine, 1993 in which the link between Marx and Rousseau is made more directly) for Colletti, Marx makes a direct if ‘unconscious’ return to Rousseau in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844 (Colletti, 1972, p. 161). Colletti’s thesis, explicitly stated, is that ‘so far as “political” theory in the strict sense is concerned, Marx and Lenin have added nothing to Rousseau, except for the analysis (which is of course rather important) of the “economic bases” for the withering away of the state’ (*ibid.*, p. 185). The key to this reading of Rousseau, Colletti argues, lies in *The Social Contract*’s insistence that ‘popular sovereignty is inalienable and indivisible’ which amounts to a radical critique of parliamentary or representative government. Thus ‘the ultimate development to which all the theory of *The Social Contract* tends’ is nothing less than ‘the abolition or “withering away of the State”’, where ‘the State’ is understood as an instrument of sectional (that is, class) interests (*ibid.*, p. 184).

### *Problems with Rousseau as Radical*

The attempt to interpret Rousseau as a radical runs up against a number of criticisms. For example, Rousseau’s model of participatory democracy is presented as progressive – even revolutionary – in its implications, but it is well known that Rousseau was deeply sceptical about the idea of progress (for example, Rousseau, 1997a, p. 106, pp. 109–10, p. 269; Dent, 1992, pp. 197–8) and was no lover of revolution (Rousseau, 1997b, pp. 185–6; 1997a, pp. 244–7). It is true, of course, that Rousseau endorses direct participation in legislative matters and this is undoubtedly an idea with radical potential. But it is also true that Rousseau’s model state is small-scale – a Geneva or a Sparta – and he is aware of the difficulties in applying his theory to modern, mass societies (Rousseau, 1997a, p. 4). Moreover, even in the small-scale, face-to-face polity favoured by Rousseau, not everyone qualifies as a citizen. Women, for example, are excluded and in this regard Pateman is a scathing *critic* of Rousseau (Pateman, 1988, pp. 96–102).

It has also been suggested that Rousseau’s principled commitment in *The Social Contract* to direct participatory democracy is not as strong as it might appear to be. Fralin (1978) has pointed out that despite Rousseau’s strictures against representative democracy in that work, he elsewhere – notably in his *Considerations on the Government of Poland* – proposes a representative system (Rousseau, 1997a, pp. 200–1) whilst in the *Discourse on Political Economy* Rousseau appears to argue *against* direct democracy (Rousseau, 1997a, pp. 24–5). Fralin’s argument has been criticised in some detail (Miller, 1984; Cohen, 1986) but at the very least these aspects of

Rousseau's work might suggest a realism concerning practical politics that more utopian interpretations miss (Melzer, 1983). Concerning Pateman's point that Rousseau undermines the liberal distinction between the political realm and the realm of civil society, we have already noticed that the scope of the general will is restricted to those areas that all citizens have in common. Rousseau seeks to keep private interests *out* of politics because he associates their entry into the political sphere with the tyranny of one class (the rich) over another. Finally, for those who seek to make Rousseau into a Marxist of sorts it remains the case that Rousseau defends the institution of private property, even if he does acknowledge the pernicious effects of too wide a disparity in its distribution.

### **Evaluation**

What are we to make of these various interpretations of Rousseau? There is no doubt some merit in all of these interpretations since they all, in various ways, draw attention to aspects of Rousseau's thought. I think, however, there are reasons for finding some accounts of Rousseau more plausible than others. As we saw above, Rousseau's work has since his own time been thought to provide a philosophical justification for tyranny, including twentieth-century totalitarianism. Is this a credible interpretation of Rousseau's work? There are undoubtedly elements of Rousseau's political theory that can have authoritarian implications and even writers who are generally sympathetic to Rousseau's concerns recognise that, on the whole, Rousseau's political proposals provide inadequate safeguards for the individual against the collective (for instance, Masters, 1968, pp. 421–5). For example, even if the 'will of all' is constrained by *right* it remains the case that what is right is determined for all intents and purposes by the will of all, or at least of the majority.

Rousseau may therefore justifiably be criticised for failing to provide adequate constraints on the exercise of sovereignty, yet he is not alone in this failing and there are authoritarian elements to be found even in the work of some of the greatest of liberal thinkers. What then is it that leads a generally measured philosopher such as Bertrand Russell to claim that 'Hitler is an outcome of Rousseau' (Russell, 1946, p. 660)? Here the explanation probably lies less in Rousseau than in his critics and the needs of their time. As we noticed earlier, the totalitarian interpretation of Rousseau came to the fore against the background of the rise of fascism and against the ideologically-driven Cold War. The desire to construct a tradition of thought in which to locate and explain these phenomena is perhaps understandable as part of the effort to ensure their containment. This is laudable

and it reminds us that the activity of interpreting political theory is not merely an 'ivory tower' exercise, but can be a matter of directly *political* importance (though, of course, much remains to be said about exactly *how* ideas impact upon the world).

The problem is that writers such as Rousseau only fit the supposed tradition of thought if their work is suitably edited, and much that would mitigate their inclusion must be left on the cutting-room floor. Thus Rousseau's totalitarian interpreters largely dismiss the principled and institutional constraints devised by Rousseau in their efforts to represent him as a philosopher of tyranny. Such a practice may certainly perform the useful function of alerting us to the danger inherent in certain of the ideas presented by Rousseau, but as an approach to the interpretation of his work it simply does not do justice to its complexity or indeed to Rousseau's own awareness concerning the problems which he identified and which he sought to resolve. In this respect the attempt to read Rousseau as a liberal fares much better – not least because the totalitarian reading has for a long time achieved such dominance that any attempt to emphasise the liberal aspects of Rousseau's thought must inevitably address the concerns raised by the totalitarian interpretation. The problem for liberals who seek to enlist Rousseau as a fellow liberal, is that Rousseau is himself critical of the dominant liberal paradigm, characterised by subjectivism and the insistence upon private interest as the foundation of the political order. As we saw earlier, Rousseau was a self-declared *republican* and liberalism has not always found it easy to accommodate itself to republican notions of duty, civic virtue and the common good since these often seem to cut across the liberal insistence upon the primacy of *rights*.

Yet as the recent history of political theory shows, many liberals are themselves now concerned that the exclusive focus on rights leaves out much that is of value in civic and political life. Liberals such as Stephen Macedo – who emphasises the important role that virtue plays in a liberal polity – and Joseph Raz – who defends a non-individualist perfectionist liberalism – do not explicitly draw upon Rousseau in support of their positions, but they do show that liberalism itself is not necessarily to be associated solely with the defence of individual rights and private interest (Macedo, 1990; Raz, 1986).

We should probably not ask 'was Rousseau a liberal?' but rather 'what kind of liberal was he?' Was he a *Kantian* liberal? What Rousseau's Kantian interpreters are surely right to insist upon is the important role that the faculty of reason plays in grasping the requirements of justice. As with Kant, Rousseau believes that there is an objective moral order to which rational people can gain access – the equivalent of Kant's moral law. Rousseau may, of course, be wrong concerning the existence of an objective moral order,

but nevertheless, the important point about this moral order for Rousseau is its *generality*. The good man, says Rousseau ‘orders his life with regard to all men: the wicked orders it for self alone’ (Rousseau, 1974, p. 255). The problem with reading Rousseau through Kantian spectacles is that it leads interpreters to *over-emphasise* the role of reason in his work whereas, as we noticed earlier, Rousseau was clearly aware that any viable political society could not be based on an appeal to reason alone.

It remains the case, however, that reason is instrumental in moving the individual away from the absorption with self (*amour propre*) and towards generality. ‘Reason alone is not a *sufficient* foundation for virtue’ (*ibid.*, p. 255, emphasis added), but neither can virtue be attained *without* reason. Rousseau can clearly be criticised for failing to give an adequate account of the relationship between reason and sentiment – who has? – but it seems clear that he does not make reason merely the slave of the passions. To accuse Rousseau of irrationalism, as the totalitarian critique tends to do, is once again to overlook Rousseau’s many attempts to think through these complex issues.

If the totalitarian critique plays down liberal and radical elements of Rousseau’s work, the radical interpretation tends to ignore the conservative elements of his political theory. As we saw earlier, Rousseau defends convention in a way that is reminiscent of Burke. He does not seek to eradicate the institution of private property – indeed his ideal state would consist of self-sufficient property-holding peasants – and he blames many of the ills of modern society on advances in technology. Rousseau looks backward, rather than forward. Yet he also realises the impossibility of going back in time so that he does not even, on the whole, share the optimism of his radical interpreters. The undoubtedly radical elements of Rousseau’s work – his critique of the assumptions of natural law liberalism (or, as Colletti puts it, his ‘critique of civil society’); his insistence on direct participation – are radical only *in spite* of Rousseau, when the conservative elements of his thought have been trimmed away. Once these elements are brought back in, Rousseau loses much of his radical edge. The Rousseau that finally emerges from the plethora of interpretations is ultimately a complex thinker, both personally and politically. He cannot easily be co-opted into any ideological tradition – elements of his work are at home in all such traditions whilst other elements are ill at ease. At a time when the easy construal of political matters into a ‘left *versus* right’ dichotomy has been challenged, Rousseau’s work is likely to continue to provide a fertile ground both for those who wish to understand and defend these traditional categories, and also for those who seek to think beyond them.