

ROUSSEAU'S COUNTER- ENLIGHTENMENT

A Republican Critique of the *Philosophes*



Graeme Garrard

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SUNY series in Social and Political Thought
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To
Jeanette Shannon

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Preface

In his posthumously published notes *The Will to Power*, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) traces what he calls the still-unresolved “problem of civilization” back to the conflict between Rousseau (1712–1778) and Voltaire (1694–1778) that began in the middle of the eighteenth century.¹ For Nietzsche, the “aristocratic” *homme civilisé* Voltaire defended civilization as a great triumph over the barbarism of nature, whereas the vulgar plebeian Rousseau—“beyond a doubt mentally disturbed”—inspired the revolutionary overthrow of all social orders in the name of the natural goodness of man.² Voltaire felt “the mitigation, the subtleties, the spiritual joys of the civilized state,” unlike Rousseau, whose idealized conception of nature led him to cast a “curse upon society and civilization.”³ Nietzsche believed that this clash was decisive not only for Voltaire personally, but for European civilization as a whole. With it, Voltaire ceased to be a mere “bel esprit” and man of letters and became “the man of his century” whose intense envy and hatred of Rousseau spurred him on to the heights of greatness.⁴ Nietzsche thought that Rousseau simultaneously provoked Voltaire into effectively creating the Enlightenment as we now know it and banished the spirit of the Enlightenment by conjuring its nemesis, the French Revolution.⁵

Nietzsche’s antisocial Rousseau, like Voltaire’s (on which it is obviously based), is a crude caricature.⁶ The clash between Voltaire and Rousseau was never really over the abstract question of which is preferable: society or the state of nature? (Even if that is how Voltaire viewed it.) Rousseau was very far from believing that it is either possible or desirable to return to a presocial “state of nature.” But Nietzsche was definitely on to something important in presenting Rousseau’s confrontation with Voltaire as a decisive moment in the debate over the nature of civilization that emerged in France in the second half of the eighteenth century.⁷ He correctly identified the moment when “the problem of civilization” first emerged as a major theme in eighteenth-century French

thought. It was in mid-eighteenth-century Paris that the modern concept of civilization was first formulated, as part of a more general surge of interest in the bonds that hold societies together.⁸ Nietzsche is also basically correct in claiming that, to a very considerable extent, Rousseau and Voltaire set the terms of this debate, and are the most eloquent and important representatives of its opposing sides. Finally, he is right to identify the Enlightenment with the cause of “civilization,” at least as that term came to be understood in eighteenth-century France, against which Rousseau devoted the better part of his energies after the late 1740s.

From the mid-eighteenth century, Rousseau openly and repeatedly attacked “the fatal enlightenment of Civil man” (*DI*, 48 [OC III, 170]), and denounced eighteenth-century civilization for its artificiality, immorality, luxuriousness, effeminacy, inequality, hypocrisy, and social atomism. Fundamental to his critique of the Enlightenment is a belief that it results in a dangerous loosening of already fragile and artificial social bonds.⁹ His deeply pessimistic social assumptions—based on a rejection of the Enlightenment belief in natural human sociability, a devaluation of the power of reason, and the conviction that “enlightenment” only inflames the divisive power of *amour-propre*—led him to propose a Counter-Enlightenment “republic of virtue” in which a “healthy” ignorance prevails over enlightenment as the only acceptable alternative to the *philosophes*’ civilized “republic of letters.” Rousseau contrasted what he took to be the social fragmentation and moral degradation of the enlightened civilization of eighteenth-century Europe—epitomized by Paris and personified in the *philosophes*—with an idealized image of the cohesive, city-states of the ancient world where virtue was sovereign and all aspects of life were tightly integrated. This is apparent in his often-expressed admiration for premodern cultures, above all Sparta and republican Rome, and in his praise for the great legislators of antiquity, who embody the union of religion, politics, and morality that he so much admired.

In the pages that follow I develop this rough sketch of Rousseau into the first detailed, book-length portrait of him as the father of Counter-Enlightenment thought, the man who fired the first major shot in a war that has raged between the Enlightenment and its opponents for over two and a half centuries and shows little sign of abating.

Acknowledgments

This book began as a doctoral thesis at Oxford University, where it benefited from the comments and criticisms of my supervisor, Dr. L. A. Siedentop. During these years I was the grateful and very fortunate beneficiary of many discussions with Sir Isaiah Berlin, who also supervised my thesis for a time. While we agreed on almost nothing about Rousseau beyond the spelling of his name, this mattered much less to me than the experience of being Berlin's student. His intellectual curiosity was highly infectious and his seemingly inexhaustible knowledge was a constant source of amazement and inspiration to me. Balliol College was my home during the years that the first version of this work was written, and I am grateful to the Fellows of the College for admitting me to the ideal scholarly community in which to live and study. I spent countless hours in the Voltaire Room of Oxford's Taylor Institution Library reading and writing about Rousseau and the Enlightenment. The task of completing this study would have been a great deal more difficult, and certainly much less pleasant, without access to this wonderful collection. My thesis was scrutinized by two examiners, Professors Jack Hayward and Jack Lively, to whom I am grateful for their civility and their many constructive comments.

The thesis on which this book is based was intermittently revised over the course of several years, which I spent at Cardiff University, Boston University, Harvard University, Dartmouth College, and Williams College. I made many friends at all of these institutions, and a few enemies at some. In the spirit of Rousseau's esteemed Plutarch (author of *De capi-enda ex inimicis utilitate*), I am grateful to friend and foe alike for their constant stimulation.

Over the years I have amassed a great many scholarly debts, the most substantial and important of which are to Ronald Beiner, David Hanley, and Richard Lebrun. I am glad to have this opportunity publicly to express my gratitude to them for their extraordinary kindness and unflagging support over many years.

My interest in the history of political thought was first aroused while I was an undergraduate at the University of Toronto. Professors Alkis Kontos and Thomas Pangle stand out in my memory of my undergraduate education for their passion and enthusiasm for the subject, which stimulated my budding interest.

The friendship and intellectual companionship of Blair McDonald, Gunnar Beck, James Schmidt, James Murphy, Sung-Ho Kim, and Mark Colby made the years during which this study was written and revised both memorable and enjoyable. The sharp wit of Chris Ealham has done much over the years to blunt the countless shocks to which British academic life is heir these days. To Nora Temple and Roy Jones I owe my appreciation for many things, not least for regularly reminding me of the merits of the Enlightenment values that Rousseau deprecated. Darrin McMahon was helpful in ways both intellectual and practical, for which I am grateful. My editors, Michael Rinella of SUNY Press, Cathleen Collins and Laura Glenn, all acted with consummate skill and professionalism, and I thank them.

Finally, I owe a word of thanks to the following for generously providing me with the funds to research this study: the UK Overseas Research Student Awards Scheme, the University of Oxford, the Voltaire Foundation, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and the Leverhulme Trust.

Abbreviations

I have used a dual system of notes. All quotations from Rousseau are followed in the text by the appropriate reference to the English edition listed below, as well as to the corresponding reference to the *Oeuvres complètes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, edited by B. Gagnebin and M. Raymond, 5 vols. (Paris: Pléiade, 1959–1995). Where good English translations of other French texts exist, I have used them. Otherwise, I have translated from French editions.

Rousseau

- C *Confessions*. In *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*. Vol. 5. Edited by C. Kelly, R. D. Masters, and P. Stillman. Translated by C. Kelly. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1995.
- CC *Correspondance complètes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. Edited by R. A. Leigh. Geneva, Banbury, Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1965–1998.
- CPC *Constitutional Project for Corsica*. In *Rousseau: Political Writings*. Translated by F. Watkins. New York: Thomas Nelson, 1953.
- DSA *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*. In *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*. Vol. 2. Edited by C. Kelly and R. D. Masters. Translated by J. Bush, R. D. Masters, and C. Kelly. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1992.
- DI *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality*. In *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*. Vol. 3. Edited by C. Kelly and R. D. Masters. Translated by J. Bush, R. D. Masters, and C. Kelly. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1992.

- DPE *Discourse on Political Economy*. In *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*. Vol. 3. Edited by C. Kelly and R. D. Masters. Translated by J. Bush, R. D. Masters, and C. Kelly. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1992.
- E *Emile, or On Education*. Translated by A. Bloom. New York: Basic Books, 1979.
- EOL *Essay on the Origin of Languages*. In *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*. Vol. 7. Edited and translated by J. T. Scott. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1998.
- Final *Final Reply to Critics of the Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*. In *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*. Vol. 2. Edited by C. Kelly and R. D. Masters. Translated by J. Bush, R. D. Masters, and C. Kelly. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1992.
- GMS *Geneva Manuscript*. In *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*. Vol. 4. Edited by R. D. Masters and C. Kelly. Translated by J. Bush, R. D. Masters and C. Kelly. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1994.
- GP *Considerations on the Government of Poland and on Its Projected Reformation*. In *Rousseau: The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*. Translated by V. Gourevitch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- JNH *Julie, or the New Heloise*. In *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*. Vol. 6. Edited by R. D. Masters and C. Kelly. Translated by P. Stewart and J. Vaché. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1997.
- LA *Letter to d'Alembert on the Theater*. In *Politics and the Arts: Letter to M. d'Alembert on the Theater*. Translated by A. Bloom. Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1960.
- LB *Letter to Beaumont*. In *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*. Vol. 9. Edited by C. Kelly and E. Grace. Translated by C. Kelly and J. Bush. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2001.
- LF *Letter to Franquières*. In *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*. Vol. 8. Edited by C. Kelly. Translated by C. E. Butterworth, A. Book, T. Marshall. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2000.
- LV *Letter to Voltaire* (18 August 1756). In *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*. Translated by V. Gourevitch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

- LWM *Letters Written From the Mountain*. In *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*. Vol. 9. Edited by C. Kelly and E. Grace. Translated by C. Kelly and J. Bush. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2001.
- PF *Political Fragments*. In *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*. Vol. 4. Edited by R. D. Masters and C. Kelly. Translated by J. Bush, R. D. Masters, and C. Kelly. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1994.
- PN *Preface to Narcissus*. In *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*. Vol. 2. Edited by C. Kelly and R. D. Masters. Translated by J. Bush, R. D. Masters, and C. Kelly. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1992.
- RJJ *Rousseau Judge of Jean-Jacques: Dialogues*. In *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*. Vol. 1. Edited by R. D. Masters and C. Kelly. Translated by J. Bush, C. Kelly, and R. D. Masters. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1990.
- RSW *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*. In *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*. Vol. 8. Edited by C. Kelly. Translated by C. E. Butterworth, A. Book, T. Marshall. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2000.
- SC *The Social Contract*. In *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*. Vol. 4. Edited by R. D. Masters and C. Kelly. Translated by J. Bush, R. D. Masters, and C. Kelly. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1994.
- SW *The State of War*. In *Rousseau on International Relations*. Edited by S. Hoffmann and D. P. Fidler. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991.
- Traité* *Traité élémentaire de sphère*. In *Oeuvres et correspondance inédites de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. Edited by M. G. Streckeinsen-Moultou. Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1861.

Other works frequently cited

- CWV *Complete Works of Voltaire*. Edited by T. Besterman. Banbury, Oxfordshire: Voltaire Foundation, 1968–1977.
- OC *Oeuvres complètes*.
- OCD *Oeuvres complètes de Diderot*. Edited by J. Assézat and M. Tourneux. Paris: Garnier, 1875–1877.

- OCV *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*. Edited by Louis Moland. Paris: Garnier, 1877–1886.
- SVEC *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*. Edited by T. Besterman, et al. Geneva, Oxford: Voltaire Foundation.
- VC *Voltaire's Correspondence*. Edited by T. Besterman. Geneva: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1953–1977.
- VN *Voltaire's Notebooks*. Edited by T. Besterman. Geneva: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1952.

Introduction

During the period from around the middle of the eighteenth century, when Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* (1750) first appeared, to his death in 1778, a movement gradually emerged against the French Enlightenment, eventually giving rise to a complete rejection of its central ideas and assumptions by many writers in the early nineteenth century, particularly, although by no means exclusively, those associated with Romanticism. Rousseau is a pivotal figure in the emergence of this movement. Although, as Isaiah Berlin claims, the German writer Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788) may have been the "most passionate, consistent, extreme and implacable enemy of the Enlightenment" of his time, Rousseau was its first serious, systematic opponent.¹ By the time that Hamann had taken up arms in his personal crusade against the "cold northern light" of the Enlightenment in the late 1750s, Rousseau's own public campaign against it was already well under way.²

At first glance this claim seems to belie the facts. Rousseau was, after all, an *homme de salon* while in Paris in the 1740s associating with the leading *philosophes* of the day. The editor of the *Encyclopédie* was one of his closest friends at the time; he owed the circulation of many of his works in France to Malesherbes (1721-1794), the *Directeur de la librairie* responsible for overseeing the book trade, who was sympathetic to the *philosophes* and their ideas; he corresponded with Voltaire, whose opinion he eagerly sought on his own works; and he contributed a number of articles to the *Encyclopédie*, the so-called bible of the Enlightenment in France.³ Even after his "reform," which took Rousseau back to his native city in 1754 to be readmitted to the Calvinist Church and to have his Genevan citizenship restored, he returned to the salons of Paris and the company of Diderot (1713-1784), Duclos (1704-1772), Condillac (1714-1780), Grimm (1723-1809), and d'Alembert (1717-1783). He even continued to frequent the home of one of the most notorious of the

philosophes, the atheist Baron d'Holbach (1723–1789). Also, the appearance of *Emile* (1762) and *The Social Contract* (1762) a few years later brought censure from authorities in Catholic Paris and Calvinist Geneva. Charles Palissot's popular satirical comedy *Les Philosophes* (1760) parodied Rousseau along with other leading *lumières* without distinguishing between them. Thus, to the wider public, as Samuel Taylor has written of eighteenth-century France, "the differences between Rousseau and *philosophie* appeared superficial."⁴

Yet the evidence to support the view that Rousseau was basically opposed to the Enlightenment seems no less compelling. He eventually became bitterly hostile towards much of his former friends' outlook on the world, and he did not hesitate to attack them and their ideas openly. The essay that first established his intellectual reputation at the very height of the Enlightenment, which Diderot helped him to publish, makes it unmistakably clear that he had fundamental misgivings about it from the very beginning of his public career as a writer. Many of Rousseau's erstwhile colleagues among the *philosophes* were further outraged by what they took to be the apostasy of his subsequent writings as well. For Voltaire, Rousseau became "[t]hat arch-fool"⁵ and the "Judas" of the "party of humanity."⁶ For his part, Rousseau blamed "that buffoon" Voltaire for ruining his homeland by corrupting its morals through the introduction of "enlightened" Parisian values via the theater. He also alienated Diderot, who referred to the relationship between Rousseau and the Enlightenment as a "vast chasm between heaven and hell" and described him—not unreasonably—as an "anti-philosophe" in his *Essay on the Reigns of Claudius and Nero* (1782).⁷ Eventually, as Peter Gay notes, Rousseau "was treated as a madman by other philosophes long before his clinical symptoms became obtrusive," no doubt because of his seemingly inexplicable (to them) betrayal of the Enlightenment.⁸

Given these apparently contradictory facts, it is little wonder that the question of the relationship between the ideas of Rousseau and the French Enlightenment has vexed his readers ever since the appearance in 1750 of his first significant political work. His more recent interpreters have been no less perplexed by this question than his contemporaries were.⁹ "It may be argued with equal plausibility," Norman Hampson writes in his study of the Enlightenment, "that Rousseau was either one of the greatest writers of the Enlightenment or its most eloquent and effective opponent."¹⁰ Ernst Cassirer's conclusion is no more helpful: "Rousseau is a true son of the Enlightenment, even when he attacks it and triumphs over it."¹¹ Robert Wokler has recently written of Rousseau that "he at once belonged to the Enlightenment and opposed it."¹² R. G. Saisselin's entry on the *philosophes* in *The Blackwell Companion to the Enlightenment* claims that "Rousseau, though a philosophe, was anti-philosophe."¹³ According

to Arthur Melzer, Rousseau's criticisms of the Enlightenment are "intend[ed] to be less a rejection of the Enlightenment than a more self-consistent expression of it."¹⁴ Raymond Tallis believes that "it is arguable that, in the person of Rousseau, Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment were born twins."¹⁵ For Frederick Artz, Rousseau was simultaneously "the last of the great writers of the French Enlightenment" and "the first of a new and different dispensation."¹⁶ Maurice Cranston declares that it is "impossible to say that he [Rousseau] was only a man of the Enlightenment, but equally difficult to say that he was not a man of the Enlightenment."¹⁷ His biography of Rousseau describes him as "a man of the Enlightenment at war with the Enlightenment,"¹⁸ a view endorsed and systematically developed in Mark Hulliung's *The Autocritique of Enlightenment: Rousseau and the Philosophes* (1994). Amazingly, the last of these is the only book-length study devoted exclusively to Rousseau's relationship to the Enlightenment. As such, it is worth pausing here briefly to consider in greater depth Hulliung's basic finding: "that as Rousseau evolved from philosophe to exphilosophe to antiphilosophe he never for a moment left the Enlightenment."¹⁹

Hulliung's book is at least as much about the Enlightenment in general as it is about Rousseau, although his interchangeable use of the terms "enlightenment," "Enlightenment," and "the Enlightenment" does much to obscure his main point. For example, he refers to both an "alternative Enlightenment" (2, 40) and an "alternative enlightenment" (4). He also uses "the Enlightenment" (35), "the French Enlightenment" (4, 9), "the original, standard version of Enlightenment thought" (108), the *philosophes'* "version of enlightenment" (112), and the struggle over "the leadership and definition of the Enlightenment" (111) without clarifying the essential differences between all of these usages. As a consequence, it is never entirely clear whether Rousseau's criticisms are meant to be of "enlightenment," "the Enlightenment" or merely "the French Enlightenment," a fatal confusion given that this is a matter of decisive importance to Hulliung's entire argument. His lack of clarity on this point must be considered a major shortcoming in an otherwise impressively learned and insightful study conspicuous for the extent of its knowledge of the work of both Rousseau and the *philosophes*.

In fact, as I shall be arguing, Rousseau was an opponent of that particular conception of enlightenment prevalent among the *philosophes* in France during the second half of the eighteenth century, a conception that has since come to be known in English as "*the* Enlightenment." In his *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, for example, he writes that "[s]uspensions, offenses, fears, coldness, reserve, hate, betrayal will hide constantly under that uniform and false veil of politeness, under that much vaunted urbanity which we owe to the enlightenment of our century

[aux lumières de notre siècle]" (DSA, 6 [OC III, 8–9]). A bit later, he remarks that all "that is most shameful in debauchery and corruption, most heinous in betrayals, assassinations and poisons, most atrocious in the combinations of all crimes, forms the fabric of the History of Constantinople. Such is the pure source from which we received the Enlightenment [*les Lumières*] of which our century boasts" (DSA, 8 [OC III, 10–11]). The same pejorative use of "enlightenment" occurs throughout Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality* (1755). "[N]othing is so gentle," he tells us, "as man in his primitive state when, placed by nature at equal distances from the stupidity of brutes and the fatal enlightenment of civil man [*des lumières funestes de l'homme civil*], and limited equally by instinct and reason to protecting himself from the harm that threatens him, he is restrained by natural pity from harming anyone himself . . ." (DI, 48 [OC III, 170]). In a political fragment written some time later, Rousseau's hostility to "enlightenment" is made abundantly clear:

The first philosophers [*philosophes*] all preached virtue, and it is lucky for them that they did, for they would have gotten themselves stoned to death if they had spoken otherwise. But when peoples began to be enlightened [*éclairés*] and to believe themselves to be philosophers also, they imperceptibly accustomed themselves to the most peculiar propositions, and there was no paradox so monstrous that the desire to distinguish oneself did not cause to be maintained. Even virtue and divinity were put into question, and since one must always think differently from the people, philosophers were not needed to cast ridicule on the things they venerated. (PF, 72–3 [OC III, 557])

It was to a particular conception of enlightenment—"the enlightenment of our century"—that Rousseau objected, not to enlightenment per se. Indeed, he often used "enlightened" (*éclairée*), "enlightenment" (*lumières*), and "to enlighten" (*éclairer*) in a positive way, as, for example, in the preface to his second *Discourse*, where he remarks that Geneva stands above other states by virtue of its "enlightenment [*par ses lumières*]" (DI, 8 [OC III, 117]). As we shall see, Rousseau favored an "enlightenment" of the spirit achieved through the cultivation of virtue with the aid of conscience, rather than an "enlightenment" of knowledge and reason.

One of the principal objectives of Hulliung's study is to broaden our understanding of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment so that it encompasses Rousseau's "immanent critique" of it, thereby showing that the Enlightenment was much more internally diverse, complex, dialectical, and self-critical than has commonly been assumed. By situating Rousseau's criticisms of the Enlightenment *within* the bounds of the Enlightenment, Hulliung hopes to establish the latter's self-correcting