

Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

On Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Considered as One of the First Authors of the Revolution

Review Number:

158

Publish date:

Friday, 1 December, 2000

Author:

James Swenson

Date of Publication:

2000

Publisher:

Stanford University Press

Place of Publication:

Stanford, CA

Reviewer:

Dave Andress

The average historian steps with some trepidation into the murky territory that lies on the borderlands of philosophy and literary criticism. There is often a feeling here that at any moment a gang of deconstructive brigands will leap from the intellectual undergrowth, strip you of your disciplinary garb, and leave you exposed as a naked empiricist in a wilderness of thorny questions. There were moments, as I read this book, that it felt like that had indeed happened. One passage in particular from this work, where Swenson cites an anecdote from the *Confessions*, left me feeling distinctly bare. The young Jean-Jacques constructs a machine to poke through the window of his master's storeroom, cut up apples inside, and withdraw them through the small aperture available. He splits an apple, but it falls to the floor, and the authorial voice interjects 'Compassionate reader, share my suffering.' As Swenson notes, the verb 'partager' is used for both the splitting and the sharing. And from here come some five pages which take us back to Ovid, the Hesperides, St. Augustine and the Fall, and include such statements as 'The two senses are not compatible and the word cannot be simultaneously understood in both ways; a choice is necessary. More precisely, to choose or not to choose is already a choice... To read partager as an act of reading would seem to exclude the purely sentimental reaction, whereas to read the story in an emotive fashion requires a totalisation rather than a division, an identification rather than an understanding. Rousseau's story separates the two senses or two kinds of reading and narrates a movement from the one to the other, mediated by the loss of the apple.' [p. 130]

However, struggling past the occasional literary thicket of this type, there is much in this text which is worth the attention of historians. The author is at pains to make his central theme an historical one - he uses the word three times in his first paragraph. Swenson takes his title from a 1791 work by Louis-Sébastien Mercier, which he reads as establishing a claim for Rousseau to have been an 'author' of the Revolution in

the widest possible sense, not only as cause of the Revolution, but as 'the ground and guarantee of the intelligibility of the Revolution.' [p. 15] As Swenson goes on to elaborate, there are serious reasons to take this claim seriously. The ultimate argument made here is that the thought of Rousseau had penetrated political debate by the early months of the National Assembly so profoundly that the revolutionaries could only think in terms laid down by that thought. However, that thought was radically discontinuous, contradictory even, and the Revolution found itself forced to live with the enormous tension this provoked: 'Not any one discourse but what they share in their division, indeed, the combination of a passionate longing for unity and a rigorous experience of division, represent the Revolution's greatest fidelity to Rousseau.' [p. 226]

Before getting to the heart of his argument, Swenson elaborates a history of histories of the French Revolution, showing the extent to which all significant interpretations have necessarily taken a view on the relationship of Enlightenment to Revolution. Such interpretations began with the revolutionaries themselves - Mercier was far from alone in focussing on Rousseau, and the view of the Revolution as the 'offspring of philosophie' seems to have been taken for granted in the 1790s. The view was sometimes paradoxically reversed, as Jean-Joseph Mounier noted from a survivor's perspective in 1801, that it was the Revolution itself that produced the influence of Enlightenment, and especially Rousseauist, principles. Roger Chartier has more recently expressed this in terms which might seem to encapsulate a double paradox - the Revolution retrospectively created the corpus of works from which it sought to take its legitimacy, while it was such works, in Chartier's words, that made the Revolution 'possible because it was conceivable.' [p. 15]

Swenson reads further into the historiography of the Revolution's 'intellectual, cultural and ideological origins', and charts a sophisticated critical analysis of the emergence of a range of contradictions. Both Chartier and Robert Darnton are shown to have problematic approaches to the relationship between text and reader, while Jurgen Habermas's well-known observations on the public sphere are explored through their deployment, implicit and explicit, in relation to the work of Dena Goodman and Keith Michael Baker. There is perhaps nothing startlingly groundbreaking in this analysis, but it does neatly illustrate that each of these positions generates conceptual gaps, and sometimes large holes, in its efforts to equate 'sociological' and 'ideological' versions of the late Old-Regime public. For Swenson, the work which comes closest to filling such gaps is that which focuses explicitly on sentiment and virtue in the minds of this public - the work of Sarah Maza on the causes célèbres is highlighted, and that of Thomas Crow on the salons de peinture mentioned in passing. And to invoke sentiment, for the readers and actors of late eighteenth-century France, was, as a great deal of evidence makes clear, to invoke the author of *Émile*, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, and, latterly, the *Confessions*.

None the less, Swenson's contention is that all such readings are efforts to cover the 'break' between Enlightenment and Revolution, between critical thought under an absolute monarchy and the political construction of a new order, with the emphasis on 'new'. Here is where Rousseau is the key, and why he is so valuable to revolutionary thought, though ultimately he will be the cause of a catastrophic aporia. Rousseau generates the illusion of intelligibility through sentimental identification, and will generate, in the Revolution, the illusion of an intelligible politics.

Elements of this reading of Rousseau are drawn from a wide range of his texts. For example, his *Discourses on the Arts and Sciences and on the Origins of Inequality* are read against the more general trend of universal or speculative Enlightenment histories of humanity. Where others relied on gradualistic notions of the accumulation of abilities, technologies and ways of life to explain the emergence of civilisation from the state of nature, Rousseau refused to be drawn on that subject - the end of the state of nature 'is continually displaced in the text' [p. 112], to use Swenson's deconstructive language. By so doing, Rousseau retains a gap between human nature and human history, and thus the latter remains a matter not of steady, inevitable progress, but of sudden shocks and upheavals - revolutions.

More painfully, perhaps, for the sensitive reader, Swenson also delves into that abyss of cloying sentiment that is *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, in search of 'the author of nature'. As has been observed quite frequently, we are

rarely further from the inhabitants of the late eighteenth century than when confronting their favourite reading-matter. The story of Julie and Saint-Preux is so dreadfully overdone that a truly post-modern sense of irony is necessary to restrain one from throwing it across the room, and on this score alone, Swenson deserves commendation for revisiting it. Within it he finds Rousseau offering up the idea of an 'author of nature' as a necessary fiction to account for the intelligibility of creation. And thus the Revolution, too, can be read as having needed to create Rousseau as its author, 'in order to assure its intelligibility by providing a figurative representation of it.' [p. 158] To the literal-, as opposed to literary-minded, there is somewhat of a leap here from what Jean-Jacques constructed in a single text to what the revolutionaries made of him as an author of their politics, but it is a stimulating idea, none the less.

Having encountered Rousseau through his earlier philosophical writings, and his literary effusions, Swenson finally comes to the tangled knot that is the relationship of the Social Contract to the Revolution. One point that he makes particularly well is the refutation of the charge that the Social Contract was unread before 1789. More detailed scrutiny of publishing records indicates that it was widely reproduced, quite frequently in editions of Rousseau's collected works, but also as a free-standing volume. Swenson suggests that we should see readers' interest in this text before 1789 as a measure of their interest in Rousseau as the author of *Émile* and *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. Reading the Social Contract, or at least possessing a copy, was a sign of a desire to own all that this 'author' had produced, obtuse and irrelevant as some of it may have seemed to pre-Revolutionary readers. Once this point has been established, we are led admirably through the convoluted historiography of Rousseau's revolutionary influence, and through close and persuasive readings of key debates in 1789 and 1793. The key term here is popular sovereignty, which is, or becomes, associated with the 'indivisible, inalienable, infallible' [p. 174] General Will. As Swenson shows, Rousseau had established this list of absolute features for the General Will, and then said very little about what this was supposed to mean in practice. The General Will, being general, is supposed to operate only in matters of legislation, which affect the whole citizen-body equally, and where therefore there is the least possible chance of factious division arising. Rousseau had further complicated matters by suggesting two different readings of whether or not particular wills and interests intervened in the voting process. Regardless of this, he had also blithely suggested that issues of government were almost entirely technical ones, hence his famous suggestion, much noted by critics of republicanism in the Revolution, that a large state was better ruled by a monarch.

However, of course, the Revolution would swiftly develop a growing aversion to monarchy, and would also prove increasingly unable to separate matters of legislation from matters of government. It would remain, nonetheless, bound by the conceptions of sovereignty it had absorbed, and by their contradictions. As Swenson pointedly observes, an orator like Vergniaud could at one point defend the sovereignty of the legislature, and at another call for an appeal to the people, using precisely the same language: both sides in such debates took from Rousseau what they needed at the time, but could not step outside his paradigm. 'Indivisibility and inalienability are two terms that cannot appear without the other, but can no longer appear in the same place.' [p. 220] Ultimately, then, we are left with a Revolution hopelessly entangled in its own discourse, in the things which it is possible for it to think, an entanglement deriving largely from the abrupt discontinuities present within the discourse produced by Rousseau, upon which the revolutionaries had come to rely under the impression that it made their situation intelligible.

At the end of what is, eventually, a thoroughly persuasive and well-written book, the historian is brought back, nonetheless, to certain disciplinary questions. It is one thing, after all, to reproduce letters that show the besotted devotion of readers to the author of the *Nouvelle Héloïse*, or to cite speeches which clearly rely on a Rousseauist vocabulary of political possibilities. This has all been done before. It is quite another to establish a decisively new view of the influence of Rousseau upon the broader political culture of the revolutionary decade. It is almost a commonplace of historical writing on the subject that revolutionaries could find grounds in Rousseau's writings for believing almost anything they chose. At the same time, it has also long been evident that, in choosing to define national sovereignty in a unitary fashion, the National Assembly was storing up ideological trouble for the future. But to attribute that decision to the centrality of Rousseau's thought is to neglect the wider belief in the unity of reason and 'public opinion' which pervaded

the later eighteenth century (that Swenson has himself noted through Habermas and Baker), the equally strong sense that sovereignty was inconceivable other than as unitary, and the concrete political reasons for the belief that the 'balance' of a 'balanced' constitution, if one were attempted, would be forever tipped in favour of interest groups which, since the Night of 4 August, no longer seemed to have a place in the new polity.

However, Swenson himself would probably be the first to say that this book does not set out to address such historical issues - his model of the relationship between the Revolution and Rousseau is not 'a logic of linear causality but rather... a shared constitutive instability' [p. 225]. Thus he posits that the Revolution and Jean-Jacques share 'their practice of "deconstruction"', and that together they all illustrate the 'radically fragile' nature of political systems [p. 226]. This radical fragility is, in Swenson's parting shot, defined as 'revolutionary'. To a humble historian, there seems rather an inverted logic to this proposition. Rousseau's authorial wiles aside, this reviewer strongly doubts whether the abbé Sieyès, let alone the many less philosophically inclined architects of revolutionary political thought, was capable of 'deconstruction'. Certainly, they produced texts which are amenable to being deconstructed, but then don't we all? And quite certainly, they did not set out to demonstrate how fragile political systems were, but rather to set a new one on what they thought were firm bases. If, on the other hand, what Swenson means when he labels the Revolution as deconstructive is that events undermine theories, then that is a rather trite point on which to end such an interesting book.

Ultimately, Swenson is to be congratulated for confronting head-on what is undoubtedly the central and still-unanswered (perhaps unanswerable) question of eighteenth-century historiography - how do ideas make revolutions? He illustrates the intensity with which this issue is debated, and one might add that it continues on an even wider canvas than he paints: the contributions to H.T. Mason (ed.) the *Darnton Debate: Books and Revolution in the Eighteenth Century*, (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1998) demonstrate fundamental disagreement over the particular contribution to this question of the works of one eminent researcher. Overall, perhaps, this issue is an object lesson in the problem of historical categories. 'The Enlightenment' (or 'Rousseau') and 'The Revolution' have to be reified in order to be placed into a question of this type, how did x cause y? But neither label really attaches to a thing. The harder one studies the Enlightenment, the more it goes away: towards oppositions between rationalising state reform and claims of constitutionality, sentimentalised morality and materialistic anticlericalism, liberal economics and the rights of corporations, salon sociability and the literary marketplace, and so on. The cult of Rousseau in the 1780s was no doubt in part due to his apparent 'authenticity', but the response to this, as W.M. Reddy has recently suggested (*Sentimentalism and its Erasure: The role of emotions in the era of the French Revolution*, *Journal of Modern History*, 72, 2000, pp. 109-52), may have been simply an expression of a wider learnt language of emotion that would end by clouding the ability of revolutionary actors to tell the sincere from the mendacious.

Even beyond such considerations, we must recall that 'the Revolution' was not, in practice, one thing. The arena of political thought is almost the only one in which it is possible to show filiation from Old Regime to revolutionary era. The context of that thought was, however, changed out of all recognition. Revolutionary events emerged out of a crisis that precipitated popular involvement in politics on a scale and of a kind which were inconceivable, even to the most ardent Rousseauist - Jean-Jacques himself had spoken of 'beggars' as the 'friends of tyranny': between that class and the 'rich', 'the public liberty is always put up to auction'. (Social Contract, Book II, chapter 11, note to second paragraph.) Tens of thousands of the poor and uneducated, in city and countryside, would transform the political landscape in 1789, while being repeatedly labelled as beggars, vagrants and brigands by Old Regime and revolutionary authorities alike. Meanwhile, to give just one other central example, the issue of privilege would shift from being the accepted underpinning of all social advancement to the definition of a fundamental rupture in the body-politic. Unprecedented political circumstances, generated out of a multi-faceted social and economic crisis, would render any straightforward linkage between political thought before and after 1789 impossible - things had happened which no-one had thought thinkable, and the history of ideas had to yield to the history of events.

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/158>

Links:

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/801>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>