Jean-Jacques Rousseau et la Révolution

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JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU

AND *LA FRANCHE PAROLE RÉPUBLICAINE*

Since Jean Roy kindly invited me to discuss my work on Rousseau in the Revolution, I would like at this time to attempt a synthesis of several different studies of his uses of language and the political consequences derived from them. I am bringing together material from *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue*, and several recent articles and talks relating to Rousseauian elements in Revolutionary discourse.[1]

Rousseau's contribution to the linguistic pool from which Revolutionaries drew their discursive resources may, I believe, be divided into three main categories: (1) his conclusion and metamorphosis of the process of redefining fundamental political vocabulary stimulated by Locke and developed by the philosophes; (2) the model of an idealized virtuous self with which many revolutionaries reported a gratifying, energizing, and reciprocally binding identification linked to a politically valuable eloquence, and (3) the deliberate introduction of frank, vulgar language into serious discourse. It should be noted that all three of these major Rousseauian revisions of old regime verbal conventions were bolstered by moral rationales and that all three incorporated aggressive assaults, on respectively the monarchy, the aristocracy, and the dominant intellectual culture of the Enlightenment. That Rousseau's language was more hostile than he represented himself as realizing has been commented on not only recently but also by his contemporaries. Antoine Servan categorized him in 1783 as an *aufklarer* but one given to inflammatory excess: "la fatalité de cet homme excessif était de mettre le feu

1. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986; "Rousseau and the Democratization of Language in the French Revolution," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 17 (1987), 309-317. Portions of this paper were presented in somewhat different forms in a Clark lecture on "Virtue and Terror: the Dynamics of Identification in the French Revolution," to be published in a volume edited by Sheldon Wolin; at a Harvard University Centre for European Studies colloquium on "Republican Patriotism and the French Revolution" forthcoming in a volume on Revolutionary justice, edited by Ferenc Fehér and Stephen Marks (Columbia University Press); in "Representing the Body Politic: Fictions of the State," to appear in a volume on "The Revolutionary Moment," edited by James Heffernan. My thanks to these editors and organizers of conferences for permission to use some of these materials for this article.

partout où il voulait porter la lumière."[2] Jean Guéhenno commented on his unconscious exacerbation of tension in Geneva: "Telle était la candeur violente de Jean-Jacques: il ne voyait pas lui-même la portée de ses écrits. Le vrai est que *l'Émile* et *Le Contrat social*. . . devaient déchainer à Geneve une sorte de révolution."[3] Although Rousseau denied aggressivity in himself, he analyzed the hostile virtualities of language most perceptively. The Spartans, for example, were as dangerous verbally as they were physically: "Toujours faits pour vaincre, ils écrasoient leurs ennemies en toute espece de guerre, et les babillards Athéniens craignoient autant leurs mots que leurs corps" (*Émile*, *Œuvres complètes*, 4, 362).

It was from a vantage point of moral superiority that Rousseau announced the real meanings of such words as "sovereign" and "state"; that he described a "republic of virtue"; and that he valorized the plebeian tongue. All three antithetical innovations were generated against existing structures of the old regime and contained destructive energies the Revolution was to harness but only imperfectly to control.

The first category of linguistic innovation derived from Enlightenment efforts to dismantle the arguments propounded by apologists of the absolute monarchy. They defined the hereditary rule of a single sovereign within a vocabulary coercive, authoritarian, and sentimental. The ambitious propaganda campaigns mounted by Richelieu and his successors yielded a great number of texts tending to validate the sacerdotal Bourbon monarchy: "Sur tous les Rois qui commandent dans l'univers," ran the reasoning of Jacques Cassan in 1632, "Dieu a choisi par prérogative les Rois de France, pour graver en leurs Majestés des traits et linéaments plus auguste de sa divinité. . . ."[4] The philosophes generated vast quantities of discourse at various levels aimed at undermining the sacred prestige so diligently attached to the French monarchy by its public relations specialists. In the *Encyclopédie*, for example, *Kingdom* was defined as follows: *Royaume* "Ce mot signifie (je ne dirais pas ce que disent ces républicains outrés, qui firent anciennement tant de bruit dans le monde par leurs victoires et leurs vertus) un tyran et des esclaves; disons mieux qu'eux, un roi et ses sujets." This preteritive pleasantry—it was hardly more than that—was one of innumerable entries attributing

2. *Réflexions sur les confessions de Jean-Jacques Rousseau....[Journal encyclopédique]* (Paris: n.p., 1783), p. 27.
3. *Jean-Jacques: Roman et vérité, 1750-1758* (Paris: Grasset, 1948-50), 2, 98.
4. *La Recherche des droits du Roy*, Paris: s.l., 1632, p. 2.

virtue (moral value) to republics ancient and modern while denying it to monarchy. This typical playful needling of the official word has been aptly described by Starobinski as "le non-recevoir que l'on oppose par le rire ou le mépris aux formes aberrantes ou fallacieuses du discours."[5] It was the monarchical claim to moral value that the Encyclopedists wished to oppose as both aberrant and fallacious. *Royalty* was defined thus in the *Encyclopédie*: "Les républicains Grecs et Romains autrefois, aujourd'hui les peuples républicains sont ennemis de la royauté." Whatever one's political opinions, that this should be the *definition* of royalty in a reference work published with tacit government approval in a kingdom marks a lethal level of disengagement between official ideology and high culture opinion. It took Rousseau, however, to organize and energize this transvaluation of values in a systematic (although not necessarily consistent) fashion in the political works, especially the *Contrat social*. Where the philosophes had conducted a kind of linguistic guerrilla warfare, out of sporadic sarcasms against the monarchical fortifications, Rousseau erected a whole new city which by its very existence challenged the old order's right to be. That Revolutionaries did not all know or understand the contents of the *Contrat social* has been widely accepted; however, as Roger Barny has shown, they *were* aware of the work's existence and of its fundamental revolutionary premise: namely, that sovereignty resided in the people.[6] Edmund Burke held that the French Revolution was as much an assault upon what he called "the old European language" as the institutions. He claimed that the great words of Western civilization were being emptied of their traditional, accrued meaning and filled up with new, false meanings. It was to Rousseau above all that he attributed this operation.[7] The Encyclopedists had defined the word "sovereign" in the accepted way, as the human being to whom the state relegated authority. While defining him thus, they used every opportunity to cast doubt on the institution of kingship and to press royal reform on crowned heads. Sovereigns were those "à qui la volonté des peuples a conféré le pouvoir néessaire pour gouverner la société. L'homme, dans la nature, ne conaît point de souverain; . . . il

5. "La Chaire, la tribune, le barreau," Pierre Nora, ed., *Les Lieux de mémoire: la Nation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), p. 430.
6. *Rousseau dans la Révolution: le personnage de Jean-Jacques et les débuts du culte révolutionnaire* (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1986).
7. Stephen Blakemore analyzes Burke's denunciation of Revolutionary violence through language in "Burke and the Fall of Language: The French Revolution as Linguistic Event," *ECS* 17 (1984): 284-307.

n'est pas dans cet état d'autre subordination que celle des enfants à leurs pères. Un souverain, quelque absolu qu'il soit, n'est point en droit de toucher aux lois constitutives." In the *Contrat social* Rousseau demolished this hobbled monarchy of Encyclopedic prescription, dismissing altogether the idea of natural parental authority and royal obligations, and made the conceptual leap into political modernity: the sovereign was not a person at all, it was the whole body politic. Or, alternatively, the nation itself now constituted a moral person, sovereign over itself. In the famous formulation, as each individual surrendered to the group, there resulted "un corps moral et collectif composé d'autant de membres que l'assemblée a de voix, lequel reçoit de ce même acte son unité, son *moi* commun, sa vie et sa volonté." Having thus identified the state as a collective fusion of identity, a modern mystery, he went on to reveal that the ancient European vocabulary differentiating one political term from another was fallacious. Understood correctly, all the old political words referred to the same thing, the body politic, seen under different lights. It is interesting to note the protests of counter-Revolutionaries: Pierre Gin (1791) objected to the new language: "J'ai cru appercevoir que la source de tous nos malheurs provenait de l'abus des mots que quelques ministres, et après eux nos clubs patriotiques et nos législateurs eux-mêmes, se sont permis depuis quelques années."[8] The Abbé du Voisin expressed dismay in 1795 at the collapse of linguistic political categories, the *Gleichschaltung* eliminating difference. "Dans la langue de la Révolution, la multitude, le peuple, la nation sont la même chose. C'est une équivoque et un abus visibles des mots."[9]

Not only did Rousseau go farther in semantic annihilation than the philosophes had done, he turned these very weapons to their destruction as well: for the *bel esprit*, according to Rousseau in a typical passage from *Narcisse*, was also less than human: "La famille, la patrie deviennent pour lui des mots vuides de sens: il n'est ni parent, ni citoyen, ni homme, il est philosophe" (*Narcisse*, *OC*, II, 967). From the high ground of an imagined state of virtue, Rousseau spelled out moral condemnation of monarchy and philosophy in language that was utilized by Revolutionaries to unseat the King and to discredit the so-called "philosophic party" in 1792-93.

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8. *Des Causes de nos maux, de leur progrès et des moyens d'y remédier* (Paris: Barois, 1791), p. I.
9. *Examen des principes de la Révolution française* (Wolfenbuttel: s.l., 1795), p. 3.

At the trial of Louis XVI, it was Rousseau's vocabulary that was used to condemn the King. Laclos, for example, to support regicide, pointed out that "Jean-Jacques Rousseau nous a dit, dans son *Contrat social*, qu'en présence de l'assemblée le prince n'existait point,"[10] but his was only one of many texts arguing the semantic destruction of Louis in advance of his corporal execution. Saint-Just borrowed Rousseau's definition of "sovereign" to render the King non-existent: since "sovereign" signified the state and the state was synonymous with the "people," Saint-Just demonstrated the necessity for executing Louis. "Depuis que le peuple français a montré sa volonté [August 10], tout ce qui l'oppose est hors le souverain est l'ennemi... entre le peuple et ses ennemis il n'y a rien de commun que le glaive" (2: 76). Louis was defined out of existence before being guillotined.

The second avenue of attack traced by Revolutionaries targeted the self-aggrandizement of the ascendent orders, the aristocracy's claim less to pecuniary privilege than to the right to humiliate. Lamoignon de Malesherbes, who was to defend Louis XVI at his trial, in his *Remonstrances* to Louis XV in 1775, after denouncing the financial despotism of the *ferme*, underlined the other, equally egregious affront: consisting "en ce que chaque homme de peuple est obligé de souffrir journellement les caprices, les auteurs, les insultes mêmes des Suppots de la Ferme... Comment veut-on qu'un laboureur, un Artisan, ne tremble pas, ne s'humilie pas sans cesse devant un ennemi qui a contre lui de si terribles armes?"[11] This humiliation was visited upon Malesherbes himself and his family, by the people he had wished to protect, at his execution in April, 1794. Rousseau offered the generation coming of age in the 1780s, the generation that to a large extent made the Revolution, a means of achieving self-esteem in the teeth of the culture's four dominant, contradictory value systems:

The *aristocratic* model of moral value based on blood, family, the esprit de corps of a so-called conquering race, military and hunting skills, the point of honour, in other words, superbly trained aggressivity, constituted an ethos where submission, service to the crown and agriculture alone were acceptable occupations.

Christianity, on the other hand, professed values that in turn had often little connection with actual *social* values. Poverty, chastity, obe-

10. *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), p. 617.
11. *Les "Remontrances" de Malesherbes: 1771-1775*, ed. Elisabeth Badinter (Paris: Union gén. d'éditions, 1978), p. 176.

dience, turning the other cheek were, except for obedience, not only alien to the aristocratic mode but also antithetical to the brilliant *vie mondaine*, life at court or in Paris, where wit, charm, brilliance, money and influence commanded respect.

To this discordant list of prized attributes one must add the *philosophic enterprise* and the Encyclopedists' efforts to establish the moral prestige of work, industry, efficiency, demographic expansion, rationality and science over the Baroque intricacies of the monarchy, making *four* major moral systems that were largely incompatible vying for the hearts and minds of France. Not only could these disparate moralities not produce a meaningful synthesis, by the middle of the eighteenth century they had lost their power to inspire most, but by no means all, thoughtful, intelligent, ambitious people. The "modern" Encyclopedic synthesis, with its emphasis on the rights of individuals, the importance of work, results rather than intentions, the primacy of efficiency, and the dismissal of religious convictions in favour of lucidity, this "esprit philosophic," never moved the majority of young people coming of age in the 1780s and was utterly discredited and reviled during the period of Jacobin hegemony.

What did sway the young people, according to their own accounts in self-representational texts from Robespierre, Saint-Just, Mme Roland, Billaud-Varennes, Buzot, Barère, Marat, Babeuf, and others, was the tremendous sense of moral superiority in emotional fusion with the personage of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. They describe states of alienation, depression, and depersonalization being dramatically lifted when reading Rousseau and discovering the goodness of themselves through accepting his. Self-love, extended on to the whole body politic in imagination, was the political manifestation of *virtue*. Rousseau offered a complete intellectual, moral, and political unity in a philosophy of *virtue* including the following referents:

- an euphoria, an exhilarated "high," *l'ivresse de la virtu.*
- a sense of boldness, invincibility, superiority over one's fellows.
- a recognition that the self was good and evil existed outside, not inside.
- a certitude that the self possessed knowledge that would benefit all men.
- a conviction that self-love expanded was the meaning of patriotism.

- an energizing belief that "le moi commun," the self inflated, where individuals lose boundaries, was the exalted state, the good body politic.

In the vast outpouring of competitive languages that structured the Revolution, the abilities to command attention, capture assent, and thunder anathema were the necessities of survival and success in the assemblies up through the crisis of thermidor, in the clubs, and among journalists. In the beginning of the Revolution, when deputies rose to speak as voices of the body politic, the older traditions of formulaic discourse, the church, the courtroom, the parlements, "la chaire, la tribune, le barreau" (prédicateurs, avocats, parlementaires) rang hollow. Deputies wrote of their unease at the podium. A new voice was needed to dominate the floor of the assemblies and the clubs, not the "slow, patient voice of reason" that Condorcet urged, but a fast, hot, fluid torrent of moving language to mobilize the raw emotions of the audience and the restless crowds. To dominate verbally those assemblies was to wrench supreme authorship from the royalist and then the aristocratic factions, and to become the ultimate author whose word was law. Revolutionaries were explicit in ascribing to Rousseau the new language that was needed: according to Mirabeau, "Ce ne sont pas les grands talents de cet homme extraordinaire que j'envierais, ce que j'envierais c'est sa vertu qui était la source de son eloquence." Delacroix called Robespierre, Rousseau's most faithful Revolutionary disciple, "L'homme le plus eloquent de la Révolution, parce qu'il est le plus vertueux. La vertu seule est vraiment eloquente. . . ."[12] Possessing Rousseau's virtue, in the sense of having internalized its forms, its logic, and its language, gave these Revolutionary leaders tremendous leverage in dealing with assemblies of men in the absence of any organized political parties. Rousseauism served the elite as a bonding mechanism in shared moral superiority.

As Michel Vovelle noted: "These actors in the Revolution, even though sacrificing themselves to the collective interest, remain Rousseau's children. Reference to that virtue . . . forms the keystone of heroic character and furnishes its ultimate justification. It is the axis of the Revolutionary's conduct, the driving force behind his action, and that which permits him to confront posterity's judgement without fear."[13] In

12. Jacques-Vincent Delacroix, *Robespierre vu par ses contemporains...* (Paris: Colin, 1938) p. 108.
13. *La Mentalité révolutionnaire* (Paris: Éditions sociales, 1985).

agreement with Vovelle, one might only observe that Rousseau's spiritual children were capable of the greatest sacrifices to the collectivity, provided it could be experienced as an enlarged idealized self.

Rousseau had provided the Revolution with a new abstract political vocabulary, co-opting the highest level of discourse for the lowest estate, and with a new definition of virtue valorizing the humble and accusing the elite of the old regime. But when Mme de Staël, the politically aware daughter of Jacques Necker and an ardent Rousseau enthusiast, came to describe his influence on her generation, she signalled yet a different aspect: this time his introduction of low French into the language of high culture. "Il a le tort de se servir souvent d'expressions de mauvais goût... il se pique de forcer ses lecteurs à les approuver; et peut-être aussi que par une sorte d'esprit républicain, il ne veut point reconnaître qu'il existe des termes bas ou relevés."[14] She was mainly referring to the *Confessions*, a work of high seriousness, in which the body and its effluences were openly and even provocatively committed to print. To a century perversely gratified by tears, Rousseau contributed descriptions of the body's other secretions and eruptions, expressing fascination with not only urination, but ingestion, digestion, lactation and ejaculation. These functions, ubiquitous in human life and vulgar language, now found representation in an elevated personal discourse that Rousseau demanded be read with respect. Many persons' privates went public in the *Confessions*, along with Rousseau's, their names attached: Mme de Warens' regurgitations, Mme de Vercelli's dying fart, Zulietta's inverted nipple, to mention only a few. Rousseau had broken through linguistic taboos, for which he was castigated by some, but applauded and imitated by many.

Three Revolutionary journalists most openly devoted to Rousseau were Jacques-René Hébert (Le Père Duchesne), Marat, and Camille Desmoulins. Le Père Duchesne was not the only journalist to employ "expressions de mauvais goût" as appropriate to a new era where the words from below had rights to the city, but he was by far the most successful and influential because he was subsidized by the government. As Hébert he served as prosecutor at Marie-Antoinette's trial; as Père Duchesne his systematic attacks on her marshalled the most explicitly physical language of degradation in the effort to destroy her prestige as queen of France: he referred to her as "la guenon d'Autriche," and "la

14. *Lettres sur les écrits et le caractère de J.-J. Rousseau* (s.l., 1788), pp. 11-12.

louve Autrichienne," before finally announcing her character, in a curiously infelicitous metaphor, as prostituted tigress.

> La tigresse autrichienne était regardée dans tous les cours comme la plus misérable prostituée de France. On l'accusait hautement de se vautrer dans la fange avec ses valets, et on était embarassé de distinguer quel était le goujat qui avait fabriqué les avortons éclopés, bossus, gangrenés, sortis de son ventre à triple étage.[15]

Camille aped Saint-Just's use of Rousseauian definitions at the time of Louis's trial, deliberately vulgarizing Saint-Just's chilly and chillingly trenchant argument separating the royal head of state from the body politic. "Vous savez bien, devant le républicain, tous les hommes sont égaux. Je me trompe: vous savez bien qu'il n'y a qu'un seul homme que le véritable républicain ne saurait regarder comme un homme. . . un bipède anthropophage, que cette bête est un roi." Rousseau had condemned Molière's *Misanthrope* in the *Lettre à d'Alembert* because "après avoir joué tant d'autres ridicules, il lui restait à jouer celui que le monde pardonne le moins: le ridicule de la vertu: c'est ce qu'il a fait dans *Le Misanthrope*." Camille, shortly before he himself was accused and executed, took Rousseau's argument into the Revolution, claiming that Molière had depicted the republican and the royalist in his play.

> Alceste est un Jacobin, Philinthe un feuillant achevé. Combien nous sommes loin de cette apreté de critique, de cette rudesse sauvage des harangues et des mœurs . . . à laquelle on reconnaît une âme républicaine dans Jean-Jacques Rousseau, comme dans un paysan du Danube, dans un Scythe, comme dans Marat! On trouvera parmi nous cette effroyable haine d'Alceste. J'aime mieux encore qu'on dénonce à tort et à travers, j'ai presque dit qu'on calomnie même, comme le Père Duchesne, mais avec cette énergie, qui caractérise les âmes fortes et républicaines, que de voir que nous avons retenu cette politesse bourgeoise, cette civilité puérile et honnête, ces ménagements pusillanimes de la monarchie, cette circonspection, ce b....e, en un mot, pour les plus forts hommes en crédit ou en place.[16]

Thus Rousseau's repeated denunciation of the empty discourse of the court and the city as the effeminate prattle of a corrupt society, and his preference for a blunt tongue, a "masculine eloquence," were adopted as conscious ideals by many Revolutionaries who found this language extraordinarily effective in focusing rage and hate on their enemies. In Camille's words, "Nous avons appris chez Jean-Jacques que ce qui

15. *Le Père Duchesne*, 2nd series, vol. 4, no. 296 (Oct., 1793).
16. *Le Vieux Cordelier*, an II, 133-39.

caracterise le républicain, ce n'est point le siècle dans lequel il vit, c'est la franchise du langage."

Rousseau had left a legacy of words to the generation that made the Revolution. In his works they found a new abstract political lexicon with which to counter the monarchical arguments, a new vision of the superior self that enabled some to dominate verbally, and the example of a powerful, angry rhetoric suitable for denouncing the evil "other," whoever he or she should turn out to be. That these new forms of expression served many Revolutionaries effectively during certain periods is incontestable: it is also certain, however, that these aggressive languages structured the mentalities of those who used them, with results that polarized the nation and sundered the solidarity necessary to realize fully the French Revolution.

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