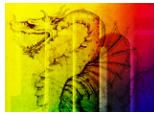


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From Literature to Politics

How Rousseau Has Come to Symbolize Totalitarianism

by
Christophe Salvat



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From Literature to Politics

How Rousseau Has Come to Symbolize Totalitarianism

Christophe Salvat *

It was widely believed after WW2 that totalitarianism could be traced back to Rousseau's rationalistic utopia. This idea conveyed, in particular, by Berlin's Two Concepts of Liberty and Hayek's Road to Serfdom, is still popular in some political circles. This article intends, however, to demonstrate that rather than originating from Kantian readings of the Social Contract, the totalitarian interpretations of Rousseau's work essentially arose from his literary and autobiographical writings. It is Romanticism, and its alleged political and moral deviances, that is indeed targeted through Rousseau. Ironically, this prompted some intellectuals—including Cassirer—to revisit and to reappraise his political thought.

1. Introduction

In this article I propose to uncover some of the now forgotten and mainly adverse readings of which Rousseau was the object during the first half of the 20th century. There are, I believe, good reasons to rescue these works from oblivion, whatever their academic standard. It is first always worth remembering that we do not read Rousseau today as he has always been (or will be) read, and that there is no *a priori* reason to think that our interpretation is intrinsically better than past ones. Each publication on Rousseau, moreover, is a testimony of the intellectual and political context in which it has been written. In this respect, all readings of a classical author—however eccentric they might appear today—should be treated as intellectual archives. There is more, therefore, in studying Rousseau's historiography, than just comparing interpretations of his work. In the present case, it is not in order to defend a Romantic or totalitarian interpretation of Rousseau that I embark in this review of literature of the interwar

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period. I shall argue, on the contrary, that Rousseau had often been a pretext to take a stand on totalitarianism because he then embodied a declining political Romanticism. Unlike Hayek, Berlin or Popper, who notoriously identified totalitarianism with rationalism, the great majority of political commentators interwar indeed considered Romanticism—and its ‘passive’ individualism—as the main threat to freedom.

Before endeavouring to unravel the intricate relations between Rousseau’s historiography and interwar politics, I present Romanticism (or ‘Rousseauism’, as they called it) as it was regarded at the beginning of the century (section 2). The following section specifically deals with the political arguments raised against Rousseau’s Romanticism in the 1930s and 1940s (section 3). A politically and morally conservative audience then accuses Rousseau of destroying society’s traditional bonds in favour of a democratic and liberal individualism that—they believe—is but the other face of the new phenomenon called totalitarianism (section 4). While a group of commentators strive to reassess Rousseau’s political thought around the *Social Contract*, a new generation of liberal thinkers (including Hayek, Popper and Berlin) move away from Rousseau and his ‘socialistic’ politics they believe will lead to a new kind of totalitarianism (section 5).



2. Romanticism and Rousseauism

The notion of Romanticism is very difficult to define. It can either refer to a literary movement, a political doctrine, or an ideology. It can be “simultaneously (or alternately) revolutionary and counterrevolutionary, individualistic and communitarian, cosmopolitan and nationalistic, realist and fantastic, retrograde and utopian, rebellious and melancholic, democratic and aristocratic, activist and contemplative, republican and monarchist, red and white, mystical and sensual” (Löwy and Sayre 2001, 1). Etymologically speaking, the adjective

‘romantic’ describes behaviours, feelings or values—such as chivalry or exalted sentiments— that are better suited to character of novels (or *romans*) than to real persons. The term ‘Romanticism’ is usually attributed to Friedrich Schlegel who used it in the beginning of the 19th-century to describe the German literary movement now known as German Romanticism. It has then been applied to literary and philosophical movements in France and England (Löwy and Sayre 2001, 42-43). The ambivalence of the notion is such that a number of authors prefer avoiding it altogether. Despite its polysemy, Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre argue that all meanings of Romanticism share a common opposition to modernity. In this paper, I want to argue that—with Rousseau—such is not always the case.

Although Rousseau lived and published a couple of decades before the emergence of the movement, he is considered by its disciples and opponents alike as one of its main figures. The present paper essentially deals with early 20th-century and adverse readings of Rousseau. The movement declined at the end of the century under the philosophical and literary influences of positivism and naturalism. The 1870 war between France and Germany also contributed to the disrepute of Romanticism, then widely perceived as a Germanic movement. In France, at the beginning of the 20th century, Rousseauism was but another name for contemporary Romanticism or ‘mystical naturalism’ (Seillière 1934, Dominique 1923, Seillière 1921, 1908, 1918). The first and probably the most important charge against Romanticism and Rousseau (both of which are to become inseparable) was launched by the Frenchman Pierre Lasserre in 1907. In his landmark study on Romanticism, Lasserre started by establishing an identity between Romanticism and Rousseauism:

Rousseau is not a precursor of Romanticism. He is full Romanticism. No theory, no system, no kind of sensibility will claim or receive the Romantic status had they not been recommended or authorized by his work. I do not see anything either in the conceptions, the passions and the imaginations that are subject to his eloquence that could be denied by the Romantic character. There is nothing in Romanticism that is not in Rousseau. There is nothing in Rousseau that is not Romantic. (Lasserre 1907, 14-15)

Amongst prominent early 20th century writers, who have loosely been termed ‘Romantic’, one finds D.H. Lawrence, André Gide, Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann

or James Joyce, some of whom have been directly compared to Rousseau¹. For Lecigne, for instance, who writes in 1909, the best proof that Romanticism is not dead yet is that “we are still Romantic to the core. Romanticism dominates in life and in French politics” (Lecigne 1909, 10). The topicality of Rousseau, during the interwar period, is confirmed by the Nobel Laureate, François Mauriac: “Did he [Rousseau] suspect that with [his birth] he started to poison the world? It took a century and a half for the poison to take effect: only today can one observe its final effects” (Mauriac 1930, 75); Rousseau is not dead, “he is one of us”, continues Mauriac, “he is called Romain Rolland, Marcel Proust, André Gide” (Mauriac 1930, 93).

Bertrand Russell sees the revival of Romanticism as a desperate attempt to return to medieval obscurantism and to escape from modernity, technology and rationalism. But, if the opposition to rationalism has arguably been a characteristic feature of Romanticism in its early stages, then it can hardly be generalised to Romanticism as a whole. Of German inspiration, the anti-rationalist version of Romanticism, the so-called *Sturm und Drang*, bears almost no similarity with its latest developments. Anti-rationalism is thus not the defining feature of Romanticism².

The Frenchman Ernest Seillière and the American Irving Babbitt strongly contest the political (as well as the moral) influence of romanticism on modern societies. They contest Romanticism as an extreme reaction to positivism, but, unlike Russell, are equally defiant of positivism. Babbitt and Seillière are the main representatives of a small movement inspired by humanism, and sometimes called New Humanism, which considers imagination as the only way to truth. For Babbitt, positivism and Romanticism haven fallen into the same trap, naturalism, and are consequently both responsible for the society’s current predicament³. By overstating the power of reason and experience, posi-

¹ D.H. Lawrence, for instance, had been referred to on several occasions, as a ‘modern Rousseau’ (Aynard 1936, Seillière 1936, Soames 1932) He did not particularly appreciate the comparison between himself and Rousseau (Ulmer 1977).

² Lovejoy argues that Romanticism opposes rationalism when it contravenes to what he calls *diversitarianism*, the Romantic ideal of diversity (*Eigentümlichkeit*) (Lovejoy 1941).

³ The New Humanists’ criticisms are not, however, symmetrically channelled between positivists and Romanticists. They actually are almost exclusively devoted to Romanticism, which constituted the current threat in their eyes, and towards what they consider to be its main representative,

tivism pushed imagination into the background and hence prompted a fierce and overpowering reaction of (neo)-Romanticism. Romanticism, in its turn, totally dismissed reason in favour of emotions, and therefore lost touch with reality. This has had terrible political consequences:

Rousseau says that he founded “an indomitable spirit of liberty” on an “indolence that is beyond belief”. True liberty, it is hardly necessary to say, cannot be founded on indolence; it is something that must be won by high-handed struggle, a struggle that takes place primarily in oneself and not in the outer world. Possibly the ultimate distinction between the true and the false liberal, as I have suggested elsewhere, is that between the spiritual athlete and the cosmic loafer. If true liberty is to survive, it is important that ethical idling should not usurp the credit due only to ethical effort. This usurpation takes place if we accept the programme of those who would substitute expansive emotion for the activity of the higher will. In the real world, as I have tried to show, the results of an expansion of this kind are not fraternal but imperialistic. (Babbitt 1924, 222-23)

Neither positivism nor Romanticism, for Babbitt, adequately dealt with the role of imagination, which when rightly used, considerably improves our insight on the world. Neo-romanticism is, according to the New Humanists, the principal factor in the moral and political decline of modern societies. Because they trusted entirely human nature (see, for instance, Rousseau’s idea of the good savage), Romanticists have sanctified instinct and spontaneity to the detriment of morality. Men, say the humanists, need moral rules to exercise a control over themselves, and those rules are not to be invented or discovered through reason alone. Romanticists were right to reassess the status of reason and experience in ethics, but—and this is arguably the reason for which the New Humanists are so openly critical against them—they misled people by suggesting that they would incarnate a sound alternative to positivism. Instead of this, argue Lasserre, Seillière and Babbitt, they merely took the place of it.

The stark opposition introduced by the New Humanists between Romanticism and rationalism is, however, somewhat overestimated. Romanticism cannot be entirely appraised on the basis of the *Sturm and Drang* movement. Carl Schmitt already pointed out in his 1919 *Politische Romantik* (translated in 1928

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Babbitt 1919, Seillière 1921, Babbitt 1924, More 1913, Babbitt 1910, Lasserre 1907)

into French) that the Romantics do not exclude reason and rationalism from their discourse. On the contrary, the discourse of reason often has the purpose of concealing the Romantic essence of their thought. The didactic style and the rational method of the *Social Contract*, in particular, are a good illustration of this. The less a system is founded in rationality, the more it tends to claim to follow reason, in order to ground its legitimacy. Isaiah Berlin says little else when, in 1952, he criticizes Rousseau for the rationalist tricks he uses to deceive and to cast a spell over his readers:

In theory Rousseau speaks like any other eighteenth-century philosophe, and says: “We must employ our reason”. He uses deductive reasoning, sometimes very cogent, very lucid and extremely well-expressed, for reaching his conclusions. But in reality what happens is that this deductive reasoning is like a strait-jacket of logic which he claps upon the inner, burning, almost lunatic vision within; it is this extraordinary combination of the insane inner vision with the cold rigorous strait-jacket of a kind of Calvinist logic which really gives his prose its powerful enchantment and its hypnotic effect. You appear to be reading logical argument which distinguishes between concepts and draws conclusions in a valid manner from premises, when all the time something violent is being said to you. A vision is being imposed on you; somebody is trying to dominate you by means of a very coherent, although a very deranged, vision of life, to bind a spell, not to argue, despite the cool and collected way in which he appears to be talking. (Berlin 2003a, 43).

3. Political Romanticism

Romanticism is not *per se* a political movement. It is essentially an aesthetic movement. Most of the Romantics came to Romanticism by aesthetic rather than ideological choice. As noticed by Cassirer “in this field [politics] the Romantic writers never developed a clear and coherent theory; nor were they consistent in their practice” (Cassirer 1946, 180). The movement is composed of a variety of intellectual and artists coming from different backgrounds and of different political persuasions (if they have any), from fascism to liberalism

and conservatism¹. “They never meant to politicize” continues Cassirer, “but to ‘poeticize’ the world” (Cassirer 1946, 184).

Not being politically committed does not, however, necessarily lessen the political significance of the movement. Despite its aesthetic perspective of the world, Romanticism never ceased to be political. Firstly, Romanticism is not political in the sense that it is a politically identifiable doctrine but, in the sense that it profoundly affects the political structure of the society. For Russell, behind the apparent aloofness of the Romantics looms a genuine and most dangerous thirst for power:

The irrationalists of our time aim, not at salvation, but at power. They thus develop an ethic which is opposed to that of Christianity and of Buddhism; and through their lust of dominion they are of necessity involved in politics. Their genealogy among writers is Fichte, Carlyle, Mazzini, Nietzsche—with supporters such as Treitschke, Rudyard Kipling, Houston Chamberlain, and Bergson. [...] The founders of the school of thought out of which Fascism has grown all have certain common characteristics. They seek the good in will rather in feeling or cognition; they value power more than happiness; they prefer force to argument, war to peace, aristocracy to democracy, propaganda to scientific impartiality. (Russell 2004, 59)



Secondly, political indifference is not paramount to political neutrality. When totalitarianism is looming, indifference is often conflated with passive consent to it (Orwell 2002, 415). The Romantic attitude is widely seen as dismissing the present, giving up hope for the future and sinking into pessimism (Lowy and Sayre 2001). Although difficult to define, or even to set as a homogenous group,

¹ Löwy and Sayre count six types of romanticism: the restitutionist, the conservative, the fascistic, the resigned, the reformist and the revolutionary/utopian which can be subdivided into five tendencies (the Jacobin/democratic, the populist, the utopian/humanist/socialist, the libertarian and the Marxist). The authors admit, however, that this typology is not exhaustive. Maistre and Bonald, for instance, “seem to be located in a transitional zone” (Lowy and Sayre 2001, 64).

the Romanticists seem to converge—or at least are considered to converge—on one particular point: their negative attitude towards modernity and progress.

They [Orwell mentions Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Huxley, Lawrence, Wyndham Lewis] don't any longer believe that progress happens or that it ought to happen, they don't any longer believe that men are getting better by having lower mortality rates, more effective birth control, better plumbing, more aeroplanes and faster motorcars. Nearly of all them are homesick for the remote past, or some period of the past, from D.H. Lawrence's ancient Etruscans onwards. (Orwell 2002, 415)

Although often resented for jeopardizing the classical and Cartesian culture of Europe (and especially France), the philosophical or aesthetic stance of Romanticism is rather secondary in its popular rejection. Romanticism essentially represents, for its detractors, an intellectual and moral decline of modern societies. Romanticism is “originally a disease”, asserts Lasserre as if echoing Goethe (Lasserre 1907, 18). For the Baron Seillière, supported by the scientific publications of Dr. Pierre Janet, then Professor at the illustrious Collège de France, Romanticism is the symptom of a “morbid psychological depression” which itself expresses the frustration of the will to power, to which he also refers to as “the essential and primordial *imperialism* of being” (Seillière 1921, 152).

The populist campaign against Romanticism essentially relies on attacks against the character of Rousseau, rather than against his theoretical work. It is easy indeed to criticise Rousseau. In the *Confessions*, he “reviewed his life with infinite detail and infinite care, starting it anew with the keenest pleasure” (Charpentier 1931, 273). Even those who most admire him as a writer cannot but condemn his immorality: “The personality of Rousseau”, writes, for instance, his biographer Count Morley, “has most equivocal and repulsive sides. It has deservedly fared ill in the esteem of the saner and more rational of those who have judged him, and there is none in the history of famous men and our spiritual fathers that begat us, who makes more constant demands on the patience or pity of those who study his life” (Morley 1923, 4). Wyndham Lewis even compares Hitler's character favourably to Rousseau's:

Hitler is the same class of man as Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *Mein Kampf* even has some points of resemblance to Rousseau's *Confessions*: in tone here and there, in the loneliness

that seems to dog the narrator, or to be natural to him. Also the squalor is the same. There the resemblance ends. For Hitler's reticence upon his sexual experiences is as great as Rousseau's absence of reticence is exemplary. And then Hitler was never a rogue. If he borrowed half a crown he would pay it back. Which is more than can be said for Jean-Jacques. (Wyndham 1939, 77)

These biographical gossips, sometimes supported by self-styled psychological studies, are not just anecdotal. They are part of a large political campaign led against the process of individualisation and secularisation in modern societies for which Romanticism is held responsible. The insanity of Romanticism, and by extension of the modern society, is rooted in the insanity of its founder. "Up to the citizen of Geneva", declares Mauriac, "murderers recognized themselves as criminals, libertines did not set an example, sodomites did not teach morality [...]. Jean-Jacques Rousseau can borrow the words of *Le Médecin malgré lui*: 'We changed all that'. The heart is on the right, the liver on the left" (Mauriac 1930, 64-67). George Duhamel, member of the Académie Française, confirms Rousseau's lasting and devastating influence: "He is most certainly insane and it is amazing to think that this sick man is to dictate to minds for a century or more" (Duhamel 1941, 24).

Now Rousseau is being described as *physically* and *mentally* insane. He is insanity incarnate. He is said to have prostate issues, to be an insomniac, impotent (some suggest he actually never had any children), as well as hyper sensitive, paranoid, and a storyteller. But, at the time, the most serious and offending charges were those relating to his sexuality. Rousseau is accused of having had a pathological taste for masturbation and other sexual perversions, including masochism, incest (with Mme de Warens) and homosexuality (Laforgue 1939). In addition to being classed, at the time, as unnatural, those practices illustrate for his critics the corrupting effects of the romantic effeminacy¹, an effeminacy

¹ Did not Proudhon write a series of portraits of romantic figures (starting with Rousseau's) which he unambiguously entitled *Les Femmelins* [The Weaklings]? Coincidentally enough, the book was published in 1912, fifty years after the death of its author. In the same vein, Wyndham Lewis, in a curious chapter of his *Hitler's Cult* (1939) in which he compares *Mein Kampf* to Rousseau's *Confessions*, notes that "The present Chancellor is in the habit of threatening suicide; he weeps with considerable facility, his perorations are shaken with sobs; he storms and raves like a hysterical *prima donna*; he is very alive to flattery. Yet he is not homosexual, like so many Germans. It is that that makes him a puzzle of a man" (Wyndham 1939, 78).

Europe had now to pay the price for. Romantic writings, novels and poems in particular, are considered to primarily address women and young adults. ‘Real’ men are not supposed to enjoy love stories or reveries of solitary walkers, they prefer international politics and, as it happens, war.



4. Rousseau and Totalitarianism

The campaign led by Babbitt, Lasserre, Mauriac and Seillière immediately before and after WWI against Romanticism essentially relies, as demonstrated above, on Rousseau’s personal disrepute. Rousseau then symbolizes the moral corruption they believed they were witnessing in modern societies: extreme individualism, immorality, and shallow sentimentalism. These constitute the first wave of criticisms against neo-Romanticism. At the end of the 1920s, the economic and political situations of many countries dramatically deteriorate. The welfare policies that had been implemented during and after the war are contested by a new generation of liberals opposed to State intervention. Democracy is increasingly contested in Europe. Italy, Germany and Spain turn to dictatorships, whilst England and France are tempted by it. It is on those last two countries that I would like now to focus my analysis. I shall argue that, in addition to its morally corruptive effects, Romanticism is then accused of being politically hazardous, in view of the international situation. Its ‘socialistic’ individualism, in particular, is viewed by the conservatives (as well as the new generation of liberals), as a major cause of totalitarianism.

In spite of the critical attitude adopted by many Romantic intellectuals—including nationals such as Thomas Mann or Stefan Zweig—towards the German and Italian totalitarian regimes, Romanticism has often been accused of promoting totalitarian movements. It is true that, either out of political naivety or personal belief, some Romantics ventured too far in their support for fascism

or Nazism (Hamilton 1971). In England, Evelyn Waugh has never been forgiven for his early support of Mussolini's campaign in Abyssinia (Sykes 1975, 166). In France, intellectuals such as Romain Rolland or Bertrand de Jouvenel (both of whom, incidentally, reedited Rousseau's *Social Contract*) have been suspected of collaborating for defending pacifism or reconciliation between France and Germany. Romantic intellectuals, although not politically involved—and very possibly because they were not politically involved—have often been considered as passive supports of totalitarianism. They paid dearly for preferring the comfort of an imaginary escape into an idealised past, rather than facing the atrocities of the real one¹.

During the interwar period, the influence of Romanticism on politics is essentially construed as liberal. Romanticism can first be described as an individualistic theory. Romanticism is indeed an individualistic movement, even if it is for metaphysical rather than ideological reasons: for the Romantics, there is no aesthetic judgment without individual perspective. Individualism is the ultimate Romantic standard: the existence of all things (including political society) is justified by the satisfaction of individual feelings. For Carl Schmitt, who had a relatively better coverage in France than anywhere else², bourgeois Romanticism merely consists of 'subjectified occasionalism', i.e. the activity of making every event into an occasion, for expressing and satisfying one's ego³ (Schmitt 1986, 17; Balakrishnan 2000). Romantic individualism is not, however, liberal in the Hayekian sense of the word. It actually stands for what Hayek referred to as 'false individualism' which "must probably be regarded as a source of mod-

¹ As Zweig eventually admitted in his memoirs, escape (even imaginary escape) was impossible in a world where information is permanent and omnipresent: "there was no possible evasion, no retreat [...]. There was no country in which to take refuge, no silent solitude to buy; always and everywhere the hand of fate gripped us to carry us away in its insatiable game" (Zweig 1993, 12). Zweig did not have any choice other than the ultimate escape, the ultimate withdrawal, the one he chose to take with his wife one day in February 1942, when they ended their lives.

² Influenced by the work of Pierre Lasserre he approvingly quotes, *Political Romanticism* is Schmitt's only work to be translated into French in the 1920s "having attracted the admiring attention of those who thought that the Bergsonian *élan vital* was corrupting the rigorous classical style of the French mind" (Balakrishnan 2000, 27).

³ Michelet's personal and subjective approach to history is thus characteristic of Romanticism (Lecigne 1909) Romantic politics, for Schmitt, is "an aesthetically satisfying conversation, a source of escape, amusement, or even emotional elevation" (Schmitt 1986, xxvii).

ern socialism as important as the properly collectivist theories” (Hayek 1949, 4). Romantic individualism is characterized by two features that the new generation of liberals will starkly reject: its commitment to political community and social equality (Gamble 1996, 28)¹.

In spite of being entrenched in individualism, the political ideal of Romanticism is the community (*Gemeinschaft*)—in opposition to society (*Gesellschaft*)—, and more specifically, a community turned towards the past (the Middle Ages, Ancient Greece or the Etruscans), and characterised by a natural, social or political *unity* (family, tribe, city). Rousseau’s social contract is not designed to annihilate individuality but to mediate individual interactions through the political community. Romantic individualism is thus not opposed to nationalism², rather they go hand in hand. In his Romantic interpretation of Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, Bertrand de Jouvenel referred to this mediation as an “emotive contract” (Jouvenel 1947).

Within these ‘natural’ communities, there is a complete identification between the individual and the collective self, or to borrow Rousseau’s terminology between the particular and the general will. The closed domestic economy of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* is hence considered as a model for all totalitarian utopias³.

¹ This form of liberalism, ironically called ‘New Toryism’ by Spencer, and which is perhaps best theorized by T.H. Green and L.T. Hobhouse, had fallen out of favour since the end of WWI. In his “Present State of the Social Question in England” (1922), Elie Halévy notes how much liberalism has conceded to war in France like in England. “When peace came”, he explains, “the state was monopolizing the nation’s commerce; it decided what exports and imports could be allowed; it restricted civil consumption; it operated all the coal mines; it ran all the railways and the entire merchant fleet; it manufactured and controlled all the industries that affected the conduct of the war in any degree” (Halévy 1967, 141). The economic crisis of 1929 and a second war accelerated the trend. Romantic ideas of liberty and individualism were being subjected to scrutiny by a new generation of liberals.

² The emotional structure of political communities contributes to what is sometimes thought to be a political feature of Romanticism: nationalism. Unlike patriotism, nationalism expresses a personal and unrestrained emotion for one’s country. Alfred Cobban refers to it as a ‘political emotion’, which he believes to be a modern political outcome of Romanticism: “The second peculiarity of modern war”, he contends, “is that it does not normally arise out of a conflict of interests, but from the violent eruption of emotional forces—particularly the strongest political emotion known to the modern world, that of nationalism” (Cobban 1941, 31).

³ See, for instance, Lester Crocker who publishes in the 1960s a series of studies of the *Nouvelle Héloïse* that he strikingly compares to three ‘other’ totalitarian utopias, Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), Skinner’s *Walden Two* (1948), and Orwell’s *1984* (1949) (Crocker 1963-65, 1965, 1968).

For the American sociologist Robert Nisbet, author of an important article in 1943, entitled *Rousseau and Totalitarianism*, this destruction of the traditional bonds of society in favour of a one-to-one relationship between individuals and the State is at the very heart of totalitarianism. “The totalitarian order”, explains Nisbet, “is unique in modern history in that it first blurs, then obliterates the distinction between society and state; it is the state of the undifferentiated mass; undifferentiated, that is, in any except the political sense” (Nisbet 1943, 96). According to Nisbet, Rousseau’s Romantic philosophy is encapsulated in the opposition between the State and the society: all his works help to undermine the traditional structures of society, including and “perhaps above all” the *Confessions*. “The splendour of isolation from society”, explains Nisbet, “is a *leitmotiv* which recurs again and again in the passages of that work. [...] It is not the political state which inspires Rousseau’s hostility, but the harshness, inequalities, and dissensions of civil society” (Nisbet 1943, 98).

The association between Rousseau and totalitarianism was first drawn by the nationalist (often royalist) partisans of the French extreme right. Perhaps because it was easier than explicitly accusing living thinkers, they primarily targeted Rousseau¹, and encouraged their readers to speculate who his followers were. The first reference to Rousseau as a totalitarian seemingly dates from 1934 and is to be found in a book entitled *L’Europe Tragique* written by the nationalist, catholic author Gonzague de Reynold (Pellerin 2009, 129). During the following decades, a number of abusive articles regularly flooded the daily newspaper *L’Action Française* bearing the signatures of Charles Maurras, Léon Daudet or François Regel: Rousseau and his ‘descendants’ are accused of being an outgrowth of the German culture, of being responsible for the German

¹ Rousseau has not been the only past political thinker to be held responsible for totalitarianism at the time. Thomas Carlyle has also been subject to similar attacks. See Grierson 1933, Seillière 1939. Cassirer strongly contested this view: “The modern defenders of fascism did not fail to see their opportunity here and they could easily turn Carlyle’s words into political weapons. But to charge Carlyle with all the consequences that have been drawn from his theory would be against all the rules of historical objectivity. In this regard I cannot accept the judgment that I find in recent literature on the subject. What Carlyle meant by ‘heroism’ or ‘leadership’ was by no means the same as what we find in our modern theories of fascism” (Cassirer 1946, 216). Isaiah Berlin also suggested Maistre as one of the main intellectual influence of totalitarianism in “Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism”, an article he sent to *Journal of the History of Ideas*, which was, at the time, rejected and only published in 1990 (Berlin 2003b, Armenteros and Lebrun 2011).

invasion, and of having spawned national-socialism (Pellerin 2009, L'Aminot 1986).

The Citizen of Geneva—L'Aminot comments—fulfilled Maurras's theory of the four states hostile to France. He was a foreigner, a franc-maçon, a protestant and a Jew; he was above all the father of this democracy that led to anarchy and to the country's weakening. Since the beginning of the century, there was hardly a week in which an article in *L'Action Française* or a book by a sympathizer did not denounce the father of the Jacobine madness. (L'Aminot 1986, 473)

In addition to that, Rousseau—and this point is crucial—is still widely considered to be the spiritual father of the French Revolution. His liberalism is characterized by democracy, egalitarianism and—above all—State intervention. His political philosophy spans, according to Lasserre, everything from “sheer anarchy to destructive egalitarianism” (Lasserre 1907, 67). “In the social order”, writes Lecigne, “Romanticism is the rehabilitation of rogues, pipe dreams replace common sense, literature reeks of anarchy and revolutionary sentimentalism, and to find the formula of this new gospel, one need only go back to Rousseau's *Social Contract*” (Lecigne 1909, 67). Strategically, Vichy had thus a certain interest in acknowledging Rousseau's spiritual authority and to place its ideology—then called the National Revolution—under the aegis of the French Revolution. On January 21st 1942, a socialist and Nazi collaborator named Marcel Déat published on the first page of the newspaper *L'Oeuvre* an article entitled “J.-J. Rousseau totalitaire”—republished in 1944 (Déat 1944)—in which he endeavoured to restore Rousseau's image by turning him into a high priest of the ‘National Revolution’ and a precursor of national-socialism. But there is more to their praise of Rousseau than just a political strategy. The domestic policies of the Vichy government did not entirely misrepresent Rousseau's idea of a national solidarity—in fact, parts of the modern French social security and pensions system were actually drafted and initiated by the government of Vichy.



5. Redeeming the Social Contract

In the previous sections, I have endeavoured to show the effects of the political context of the 1930s in France and England on the perception of Rousseau. It then appeared that Rousseau's predicament was due not to the *Social Contract*, which was then completely overshadowed by his literary accomplishment, but to his Romantic profile. Emile Faguet, considered at the turn of the century as a leading authority on the French eighteenth-century, thus dismissed the *Social Contract* as a "youth work, unrelated to his others writings" (Faguet 1910, 333). Jules Lemaître, whose monograph first published in 1907 and reaches its 38th edition in 1921 (Schinz 1941), went even further: "In my opinion the *Social Contract* is, with the first *Discourse*, Rousseau's most mediocre book. A sententious one, it is the most chaotic and the most obscure of his works. And it eventually proved to be the most fatal. This is also the work that least fits his biography, the work one can best see him not writing" (Lemaître 1939, 249). Discarding the *Social Contract* is still a defining feature of the historiography of Rousseau during the 1940s. François Mauriac, who wrote in *Figaro* on May 19th 1942, hence remarks that "Rousseau's misfortune is that, while the *Confessions* and the *Rêveries* are familiar to us, this is not true for the rest of his work. Would we read the *Social Contract* or *Emile*, we would see that he opposed himself to the very arguments that were later opposed to him [...]. But because we only read the everlasting work in which he strips himself naked, in which he truly confides, our assessment of him is tinged with bad temper" (Mauriac 1942). Similarly, Robert Derathé regrets six years later that "In France, Rousseau has been the father of romanticism, hence our propensity to assess his work through Romantic writers and sensibility. This explains why it is now standard to speak of Rousseau's sentimentalism. On that point, custom is so fixed that one despairs to get back on one's feet" (Derathé 1948, 181).

The *Social Contract* nevertheless enjoyed a certain revival in the 1930s and is reedited in France three times between 1930 and 1945: twice by Beaulavon (in 1931 and 1938, respectively the 4th and 5th editions) and once by Halbwachs in 1943 (Rousseau 1943, 1938, 1931). In parallel with these re-editions, the 1930s and 1940s are marked by significant attempts to redeem Rousseau's political thought from the accusations of totalitarianism. Ironically, it is the *Social Contract* which is deemed to save Rousseau from these accusations. Amongst the

intellectuals who most contributed to the re-evaluation of the *Social Contract*, Ernst Cassirer definitely stands out¹. In 1932, Ernest Cassirer published what was to become one of the most important essays in Rousseauian literature, *Das Problem Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Cassirer 1932). The essay is part of a larger reflection about the unity of Rousseau's thought, that had been initiated in 1912 by Gustave Lanson (Lanson 1912). Whilst discussing the relations between Rousseau's concepts, Cassirer sketches out a groundbreaking pre-Kantian reading of Rousseau's philosophy, and shifts Rousseau's moral theory to a new plane².

What makes Rousseau a precursor of Kant for Cassirer is his stance on the absoluteness of the moral obligation. Though immanent to human nature, morality is not 'natural' or spontaneous to human beings. Cassirer denies the naturalism that is usually associated with Romantic ethics. In Rousseau's case, in particular, human nature ought to be construed as an ideal to be achieved rather than an empirical reality to be surrendered to. The moral standard of human nature is not knowable to men through pure reason but it is accessible to them through the inner voice of conscience. Cassirer maintains that:

The circle of Rousseau's theory of feelings is completed only at this point: feeling is now raised far above passive "impression" and mere sense perception; it has taken into itself the pure activities of judging, evaluating, and taking a position. And only now has it achieved its central position in the constellation of psychological capacities. It no longer appears as a special faculty of the self but rather as its proper source—as the original power of the self, from which all other powers grow and from which they must continually take nourishment lest they wither and die. (Cassirer 1954, 112)

¹ Rousseau's historical influence on Kant was known to Kantian scholars, but it was not yet used to theoretically reappraise Rousseau's philosophy (Delbos 1905, 1912). Cassirer also comment on the relationship in his own intellectual biography of Kant *Immanuel Kants Leben und Lehre* published in 1918.

² The Kantian approach adopted by Cassirer should not be misunderstood and conflated with Cartesian and Malebranchian interpretations of Rousseau (Bréhier 1938, Derathé 1948, Beaulavon 1937). For Cassirer, Rousseau is unquestionably a Romantic. He is actually the father of Romanticism (Cassirer 1954, 85), and it is essentially from the *Nouvelle Héloïse* that Cassirer draws the core principles of Rousseau's philosophy. Unlike the interpretation of the New Humanists, however, the *Nouvelle Héloïse*—far from being a mere sentimentalist novel—is seen as a model of willpower over one's passions.

Because Rousseau's moral philosophy is ultimately an ethics of freedom and choice, Cassirer reckons that it is absolutely incompatible with totalitarianism. Few other intellectuals choose—along with Cassirer—to defend Rousseau's moral and political within the Romantic paradigm. The English historian Alfred Cobban is one of them. In *Rousseau and the Modern State* (published in 1934, re-published in 1964), Cobban is one the very few to defend Rousseau's political thought from a Romantic point of view. Comparing him to Burke (to whom he also devotes a monograph), Cobban contends that "Rousseau carries into politics the fundamental ideas of the Romantic movement" (Cobban 1934, 239). Unlike many, however, Cobban does not link Rousseau to totalitarianism. If anything, Romanticism exculpates him. In his 1941 study on totalitarianism, *The Crisis of Civilisation*, Cobban argues that, because he was Romantic, Rousseau could not be read as a political reformer, and certainly not as a totalitarian thinker. According to him, the *Social Contract* cannot have any practical applications since "by itself it is no more than an abstract ideal" (Cobban 1941, 64).

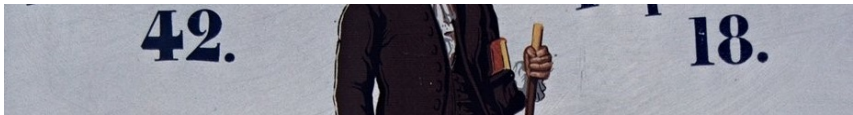
The French liberal thinker, Bertrand de Jouvenel, adopts a similar approach in his *Essai sur la politique de Rousseau* published in the 1947 edition of the *Social Contract* (Jouvenel 1947). For Jouvenel, Rousseau is not a political reformer:

he is too pessimistic about the present perspectives to even consider a political reform. It is only as an individual that man can be rescued from his social predicament. And for this, there is no need to reform institutions. It is rather man's relationship to the institutions that need to be changed. Everything, in politics like in ethics, comes down to human feelings. (Jouvenel 1947, 101)

This includes the *Social Contract* that Jouvenel characterizes as a 'romantic' arrangement. Jouvenel is probably the only founding member of the Mont Pèlerin Society¹ to still consider Rousseau as a Romantic and one of the vey few, if not the only one, to dismiss his totalitarianism. Jouvenel, however, is somewhat at odds amongst the new liberals, first because he embodies a welfare liberalism that is no more fashionable after WWII, and secondly because he himself had to face accusation of sympathy towards the Nazi regime. With him, I believe,

¹ New foundations to liberalism were set, first in 1938 at the occasion of the Lippmann Conference, and then in 1947 with the inauguration of Hayek's Mont Pèlerin Society. Liberalism, it was thought, should return to its basics in order not to convert into socialism.

ends the 20th-century Romantic readings of Rousseau. Robert Derathé heralds a profound change in the way Rousseau was to be read over the next decades. In his *Rationalisme de J.-J. Rousseau*, he proposes a Malebranchian interpretation of Rousseau, that he elaborates upon two years later (Derathé 1950). The book immediately became a landmark in Rousseau's historiography and played a role similar to the one played by Lasserre forty years earlier: it ensured the transition between paradigms¹.



6. Conclusion

Due to his iconic revolutionary image, his Romantic individualism and his 'socialist' sympathizers, Rousseau represents a reference best avoided after the war. The new generation of liberals gathered in Mont Pèlerin had just set their new objectives to liberalism. The danger, as most people then saw it, was no longer Nazism, but Stalinism. Enlarging totalitarianism to communist regimes has, naturally, not been without consequences to political theory. It not only implied a thorough redefinition of the concept of totalitarianism, but also symmetrically, of the idea of liberty itself. This, by way of consequence, affected the history of political ideas: new theoretical concepts always need the comforting support of intellectual precursors. In the decades that follow the end of WWII,

¹ Derathé is not, however, the first to have filed Rousseau among the rationalist thinkers. In 1945, Hayek already claims that Rousseau belongs to the French Cartesian tradition and its "rationalist individualism [which] always tends to develop into the opposite of individualism, namely, socialism or collectivism" (Hayek 1949, 4). Harrod (1946) criticizes Hayek on this point. Before Hayek, Peter Drucker (1942, 137-38) claims that totalitarianism arises out of a misleadingly rational liberalism that can be traced back to Rousseau.

Rousseau generally appeared as one of the main theoretician of totalitarianism¹. The spirit of the time is probably best summed up by Peter Gay, who states in his introduction to the English edition of Cassirer's classical study that "the fashion in fact is to consider Rousseau a totalitarian—a 'democratic totalitarian' perhaps, but a totalitarian nevertheless" (Cassirer 1954, 8). Few, however, went so far as Berlin, who, in his BBC broadcast on the enemies of liberty at the beginning of the 1950s, declared that Rousseau "is more responsible than any thinker who ever lived...,[he] was one of the most sinister and most formidable enemies of liberty in the whole history of modern thought" (Berlin 2003a, 49)². The paradigm reversal undertaken by Derathé concealed the ideological evolution of the liberals behind the continuity in their attacks against Rousseau.

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¹ In his *History of Western Philosophy*, published continuously since 1945, Bertrand Russell records, for generations of students, that political reformers belong to two different ideological schools: "At the present time, says Russell, Hitler is an outcome of Rousseau; Roosevelt and Churchill of Locke" (Russell 1946, 660). Talmon spared no arguments against Rousseau's political Messianism (Talmon 1952). Even Ernest Barker, in the introduction of his 1948 edition of the *Social Contract*, resigns himself to this idea: "In effect, and in the last resort, Rousseau is a totalitarian..." (Barker 1948, xxxviii).

² Whilst reading Berlin's published and unpublished writings at the time, one is, however, struck by the growing intellectual dissatisfaction he is feeling about his own prior positions towards Romanticism. A preparatory work to his "Two Concepts of Liberty", written between 1950 and 1952, and entitled "Two Concepts of Freedom: Romantic and Liberal", vouches for his intellectual evolution. The Romantic idea of freedom—that is also sometimes referred as the 'positive' idea of freedom—is already construed by Berlin as being grounded on the distinction between an empirical and an ideal self. Never, however, is the ideal self designed as a rational self. A letter addressed in 1952 from Isaiah Berlin to Jacob Talmon, also shows his doubt. "What do we complain of? Simply, (a) that Rousseau thinks that an absolutely true answer can be reached about political questions; that there is a guaranteed method of doing so; that his method is the right one; and that to act against such truth is to be wrong, at worst mad, and therefore properly ignored, and that all these propositions are false? (b) the mystique of the *soi commun* and the organic metaphor which runs away with him and leads to mythology, whether of the State, the Church, or whatever. Is this all? Or is there more to complain of? I don't feel sure. The muddle is so great" (Berlin 2009, 354-55).

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