Roger Scruton: Rousseau and the Origins of Liberalism: Study Guide

Steven Alan Samson
Liberty University, ssamson@liberty.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/gov_fac_pubs

Part of the Other Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons, Political Science Commons, and the Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/gov_fac_pubs/175

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Helms School of Government at Scholars Crossing. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of Scholars Crossing. For more information, please contact scholarlycommunications@liberty.edu.
Outline

A. THESIS (19-24)
   1. It Is Easier to Destroy Institutions Than to Create Them
      a. Labour’s constitutional reforms
      b. Liturgical changes
      c. Revision of inherited institutions
      d. No long-term cost/benefit analysis
   2. This Process of Revision Is Reasonable
      a. Who can stand in the way of the liberal idea?
      b. Rousseau
      c. What is at stake is the inherited store of social knowledge
      d. Rousseau made liberalism possible
   3. Rousseau Made Liberalism Possible
      a. His view of life was also a form of life
         1) Julie
      b. Music
      c. Confessions
         1) Noble lie in its quintessentially modern form
      d. Anticipation of class struggle, views on language and education
   4. Modern Liberalism
      a. Classical liberalism
      b. Interplay of liberty and equality
         1) Libertarians v. American liberals
      c. Both types are hostile to vested authority
      d. Rousseau’s disgust
   5. Moral Liberty
      a. Freedom to bind oneself
         1) Submission to law
      b. Society founded in a contract of self-imposed obligations
      c. Agenda of Rousseau’s writings
      d. Critique

B. VALUE OF TRADITION (24-27)
   1. Querelle des Bouffons
      a. Rousseau: no French music
      b. Rameau vs. Rousseau
      c. Fight against established practice
   2. Fight Against Established Practice
      a. A collective effort
      b. Emancipation from the rule of monody
      c. Concept of the permanent and repeatable work
   3. Modern Liberals Scoff at the Idea of Tradition
      a. A real tradition is not an invention
         1) Unintended byproduct
      b. The process
      c. Rameau’s Treatise on Harmony
   4. Rousseau’s Antipathy to Tradition
      a. Authority
      b. Attack on graphic notation
c. *Auteur* [Fr., originator or innovator] as re-inventor

d. A rehearsal for the forthcoming drama
   1) Rousseau’s against prejudice
   2) Self against others

5. Rousseau’s Failure
   a. His concession in *Confessions*
   b. Attack on harmony and counterpoint
   c. Romantic hero

6. *Le Devin du Village*

7. Rousseau Knew Where Authority Resides, Seeking It Out in Order to Dismiss It as a Sham

C. LIBERALISM’S ROOT ERROR (27-31)

1. Inability to Accept *Inherited Forms of Social Knowledge*
   a. Such knowledge arises “by an invisible hand”

2. Edmund Burke’s Attack on *A Priori* Thinking [Deductive; Based on Logic Rather than Experience]
   a. Insufficiency of one’s private stock of reason
   b. Social knowledge exists through exercise
     1) Best understood through the failures of the planned economy

3. Ludwig von Mises on Socialism: An Illustration from Austrian Economics
   a. Information about the real pressure of human needs exists only in a free exchange [cf. Thomas Sowell’s *Knowledge and Decisions*]
   b. Socialism with centralized price controls destroys information
   c. Rationalism [*a priorism*; cf. Benedict XVI’s Platonism] in economics is irrational

4. Oakeshott’s Attack on Rationalism in Politics
   a. Note F. A. Hayek’s commendation of the *common law* system
   b. Rousseau’s legislation: abstract [*a priori*] code

5. Example of Implied Social Knowledge: Tradition of Western Music

6. Social Knowledge Arises From the Search Over Time For Agreement
   a. Common law
     1) Clear outcome of cases
     2) *Ratio Decidendi* emerges later
   b. Freely engaged transactions
   c. How to live in harmony with our fellows

7. Context of Rousseau’s Rejection of Society
   a. Institutions must be the direct object of consent
   b. We must stand outside our institutions and ask if we would have chosen them [cf. John Rawls’s “veil of ignorance,” which seeks to remove the “mote” of personal interest as an impediment to admiring the “log” of Rousseau’s general will]
   c. Institutions must reflect our own autonomous submission
   d. Authority is then bestowed on the government by the governed

8. Contract Does Not Amount to Much
   a. Submission to a *general will* that brooks no opposition
   b. Robespierre’s “despotism of liberty”
   c. Danger of Rousseau’s paradoxes

9. Dangerous Assumption That We Can Jettison All Institutions [Contrast Francis Lieber’s *Institutional Liberty*]
   a. Root assumption of liberalism: we can make rational choices without benefit of social knowledge

10. How We Know What to Do: When We Have a Sense of *Right and Wrong*
    a. Scruton: Without tradition we have “no conception of the good” (a concern of John Rawls)
       1) “A social contract between creatures with no conception of the good is a parody of rational choice.”

11. Starobinski: Rousseau Had an Emotional Need to Reject All Mediation between the Self
And Its Desire
a. His goal: To remove the veil of society
b. **Society**: A realm of otherness, alienation
c. Immediate unity that is *amour de soi* (original self-love) = naturally good and free
d. **Evil**: The sundering of this primal unity
e. Fall to *amour-propre* [This is a proprietary sort of love; self-interest]
f. Social contract is redemptive

12. Later Versions: **Fichte, Hegel, Marx, Sartre**
a. Rousseau began a bad habit of blaming society for the evil deeds of people

D. **ANOTHER WAY OF SEEING ROUSSEAU’S SOCIAL CONTRACT** (31-32)
1. Rousseau’s Social Contract Is Best Seen as a Rejection of Society Is an Obstacle to Choice; It Is Not a Redemption of Society through a Sacrament of Choice
2. **Edmund Burke’s** Critiqued of the Official Doctrines of Revolutionary France Confirms This Conclusion
   a. “To dishonor the dead is to reject the relation on which society is built – the relation of obligation between the generations.”
   1) Loss of trusteeship
   b. Web of obligations shrinks to the present tense
3. Pillaging of All Resources
   a. Standard of choice
   b. Depletion of social knowledge

E. **EMILE AS AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE LOSS OF KNOWLEDGE** (32-37)
1. Ironic Bow to an Aristocratic View of Life
2. Ideas Prompted By Self-Love and Pity
   a. **Task of the educator**: To open the mind rather than fill it
3. Problem of Logistics
   a. Emile’s “discovery” of magnetism
4. Consequence: Diminishing Bequest of Knowledge
   a. Halting of knowledge accumulation
   b. Destruction of all intellectual authority
   c. Freedom confined to the present tense
5. Sex Education and the Virtue of Chastity
   a. Chastity requires discipline and preserving a sense of mystery
   b. Modern *sex education* is conceived as “liberation” and as a “how to” manual (and is thus a vicarious form of pedophilia for the teachers)
6. **Child-centered Teaching**
   a. Idea that the purpose of teaching is to benefit the child
   b. Social point of view is contrasted: Purpose of education is to perpetuate an inheritance of learning [cf. Rosenstock-Huessy below]
7. **Knowledge-centered Teacher**
   a. First duty is to find the pupil with the ability to learn what he has to teach
8. Authority of a Teacher
   a. Child as authority
9. Rousseau’s Objection to Obedience to Others
   a. Child becomes fit for civil society by learning to obey his true nature
   b. Rousseau’s proprietary right over the child Emile [cf. “best interests of the child” doctrine, a form of *parens patriae*]
   c. Compulsory school attendance [cf. earlier compulsory church attendance]
   d. Purpose of modern education: The removal of advantages [cf. John Dewey’s emphasis on socialization; see Comparisons below]
10. Modern Educational Theory
    a. Individualized learning process
    b. Hostility toward memorization
11. Goal of “Relevance”
12. “Life Skills”
a. Relevance revolution  
b. Victory for ignorance  
c. Emile: A treatise against education [Authenticity requires that we learn for ourselves]

cult of “Sensibility”  
a. Misreading of Rousseau: Emotion and reason are inextricable  
b. Apartness from nature defines our condition: we must overcome it  
c. Emotions should be focused  

13. We Overcome Alienation through Rational Choice  
a. We must remake the world in the image of freedom  
b. Why a social contract is necessary: so that society can become an expression of or inner freedom rather than remaining an external force [general will idea]  
c. Redemption: Everything made new, sovereignty of the self conserved  
d. But what if the self and its freedom are myths?

F. THE HEART OF ROUSSEAU’S VISION: A CULPABLE A PRIORISM (37-42)  
[The old question of Nature (Rousseau’s Good) vs. Nurture (the corrupting influence of society)]

1. Scruton’s Riposte: The Human Being Is a Product of History  
a. Historical contingency carries us along; we must make the best of circumstances  
b. Legitimacy should be sought in procedures rather than origins [auctoritas]  
c. Quest for origins asks no answerable questions: It is an attempt of anchor society outside history [cf. the German Philosophical School as opposed to the Historical School]

2. Custom  
a. Hume’s benefit of the doubt and the subsequent benefit of doubting  
b. Social constraints we are free to defy  
c. Customs cannot be chosen  
d. Irreplaceable source of social and moral knowledge  
e. Limits of questioning customs

3. Belief in the Natural Innocence of Human Beings

4. Pietas: Underlying acceptance that we are not the producers but the products of our World  
a. Social knowledge or custom: We must strive to be worthy of an inheritance we did not create, and amend our it only when we have first understood it

5. Rousseau’s Deistic God: A “Real Absence”  
a. Divinized Self as God’s Vicar on Earth  
b. Destruction of tradition [iconoclasm]  
c. Holy war: Rousseau’s Supreme Being is not God but “a God-shaped hole in he heart of things” [A deliberate reference to Augustine’s description of fallen man]

a. Self-existing in solitude  
b. Two sources of authority: God and self  
c. The world is created by “society”: the real presence of the Devil [This is Manicheanism, one form of which was the Albigensian heresy]

7. Rousseau as an Iconoclastic Religious Thinker Bent on Destroying the “Old Gods”  
a. Scruton’s riposte: “Society” is not the instrument of our fall; it is the fertile topsoil of culture  
b. By clearing custom away, the knowledge of evil is also taken away

8. Lesson to be Drawn from Rousseau  
a. Lenin: Who? Whom?  
b. Deep conflicts concern knowledge, not power  
c. Liberal attack on the traditional curriculum  
d. Substitution of mock subjects  
d. Depriving all of us of social knowledge

Review
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Terms</th>
<th>Authors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>social knowledge</td>
<td>Edmund Burke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a priori thinking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ludwig von Mises</td>
<td>F. A. Hayek</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Rawls</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>amour proper</td>
<td>social contract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>general will</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>child-centered teaching</td>
<td>knowledge-centered teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>purpose of modern education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rousseau as a religious thinker</td>
<td>why liberals attack the traditional curriculum</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>