NECESSITY AND EQUALITY:
AN EXAMINATION OF JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU’S EGALITARIAN PHILOSOPHY

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### Table of Contents

**Introduction**  
2

**Chapter 1 – Will and Inequality: The Primary Texts**  
5

**Chapter 2 – Critics and Interpreters: Academic Responses to Rousseau**  
19

**Chapter 3 – Thought and History: Rousseau’s Politics in Practice**  
31

**Chapter 4 – Tension and Cohesion: Constructing a Rousseanian Theory**  
46

**Chapter 5 – Resurgence and Reimagining: Rousseau in Contemporary Politics**  
58

**Conclusion**  
69

**Bibliography**  
71
Introduction

Writing about Jean-Jacques Rousseau, I have learned, is an exercise in negotiation. This undergraduate thesis project was originally intended to be a survey of Rousseau’s assessment of political equality, equity, and inequality, capped by a brief analysis of this assessment’s relevance to contemporary politics. While these core elements – the survey and the analysis of relevance – both remain, the relatively simple nature of the planned project does not.

Rousseau’s corpus is defined not only by its historical context, but also by the considerable body of vocal critique that it has generated over the past two and a half centuries. As I made my way through the writing process, I found that the most prominent academic perceptions of Rousseau continue to define the timbre of discourse surrounding his ideas, and it soon became evident that this thesis would be incomplete without a political and ideological history of the reaction to Rousseauian critiques of inequality. So, then, despite my original intentions, the problem of grappling with Rousseau’s complicated legacy parleyed its way into the thesis. Rousseau the philosopher, Rousseau the rascal, Rousseau the renegade – all of these Rousseaus have been bandied about as rhetorical tools by politicians, theorists, and historians for over two centuries, in support of or in opposition to one theory or another. If I wanted to discuss Rousseau and equality, I quickly realized, I needed to first discuss Rousseau as we have made him, to inspect all of the masks he has been forced to wear in order to interrogate what may lie beneath them.

As a result, the main problem of this thesis transformed over time. Throughout the writing process for this thesis, I have remained convinced that Rousseau is a unique and inventive philosopher of equality: a theorist for whom equality is the first and only road towards political right and a strategist who recognized the potent social, psychological, and economic harms caused by inequality. As I investigated Rousseau’s works with this conviction in mind, I realized that supporting my belief would not be as simple as arguing a positive claim; I would have to argue
against many other claims made about Rousseau in the past. A complete argument in favor of any pointed political perspective towards Rousseau requires a frank accounting of the many approaches previously utilized by other philosophers and a look back at echoes of Rousseau throughout material history.

With the inclusion of both my original arguments and the added sections on Rousseau’s influence and place in philosophical “canon,” this thesis consists of five chapters, which can be divided into two main sections. The first three chapters serve to outline Rousseauian equality, both in primary texts, secondary critiques, and related historical moments and movements. The last two chapters contain my own critical argumentation, both on the philosophical inconsistencies and merits in Rousseau’s thought and on the value of Rousseau’s project in contemporary politics.

I believe that, in its full form, this work performs multiple practical and philosophical functions. Firstly, it provides a relatively cohesive and jargon-free introduction to Rousseau’s discussions of political equality and some of his other major political concepts. I intend for it to operate additionally as a brief look into the historical and theoretical notoriety of Rousseau; there are no attempts here to obscure Rousseau’s somewhat infamous place in philosophical history, and it is very much my intention to ground the reader in some basic critique of Rousseau before presenting argumentation.

Secondly, I make a number of my own arguments in this thesis, the most prominent of these being my main, overarching assertion on the specific role of equality in Rousseau’s work. This assertion (in summary) states that Rousseau views equality, both cultural and economic, as a necessary predicate to a just political state, a predicate which has both important functional value and intrinsic value as a political virtue. I also argue that critics who view Rousseauian philosophy as contradictory to the point of incoherence are incorrect, and that despite pronounced contradictions in his work, Rousseau overall lays out a coherent ideological and political system that can be broadly
understood as non-paradoxical. This additional argument is subordinate to my main arguments regarding equality and demands further exploration in future work; in this thesis I have simply laid out the basics of such an idea.

Thirdly, this work makes a number of practical political arguments about Rousseauian ideas in contemporary politics. Some of these arguments aim simply to draw parallels between contemporary movements – specifically those that trend towards social-democracy – and Rousseauian thought. However, I also discuss Rousseau’s egalitarianism as a potential philosophical guide during our current moment of political change. To clarify: this piece does not argue that Rousseau is the philosopher of our moment, nor that his work explicitly influences current movements. Rather, the main argument is that Rousseau’s work mirrors some presently popular ideas and rhetoric, and that his work may offer some helpful insights for growing progressive movements.

As I later outline in detail, Rousseau was a philosopher unusually affected both intellectually and emotionally by the pain wealth disparity and cultural division cause. His passionate denunciations of unequal societies lack the razor-sharp rationality of other Enlightenment-era texts, but they contain something far more rare and perhaps, at times, more valuable: an earnest and unflinching recognition of real human suffering and a clear identification of its political causes.

I would ask readers to approach Rousseau with a philosophical generosity and an openness to understanding his work as legitimate and valuable, to dispel their most severe doubts regarding Rousseau while keeping hold of their moderate ones, and to share a sentiment I found most helpful during the writing of this project: the conviction that even internally disparate and occasionally tendentious philosophies may contain elements of truth.
Chapter 1

Will and Inequality: The Primary Texts

Any discussion of inequality should be frankly prefaced by an acknowledgement that even minor inequalities have the potential to impact the whole of society. In a profoundly unequal nation-state, every citizen is defined by inequality – that is to say, every citizen relates to their fellowpersons in a manner directly affected by the concrete differences between them. There are schisms, great and small, between the rich and poor, between members of different cultures, and between those who hold positions of power and those who do not. These relations of inequality can (and often do) compound the intensity of divisions between people, divisions that cause marked and lasting effects within communities of all kinds.

This notion – that perpetuated inequalities relate directly to political division – lies at the heart of the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In his considerable body of political writing, the Genevan thinker engaged with a number of serious and still relevant social issues, all in service of an ambitious attempt to construct both ideal and practical formulations for a just political state. Rousseau’s pursuit of this end resulted in a series of works addressing a number of social and political institutions, including government, economy, pedagogy, and the arts. Within all of these institutions, Rousseau frequently uncovered problems flowing directly from unequal relations; consequently, much of his work interrogates issues of, and solutions to, the pernicious implications of inequality.

In this first chapter, I will explain some core Rousseauian concepts and will elaborate in detail Rousseau’s arguments against both economic and cultural inequality. Additionally, I will review the areas of society which Rousseau argued need not be made equal or even less unequal – these exceptions to the rule of division-via-inequality cause some problems for Rousseau which will be addressed in later chapters. In this discussion of Rousseau’s direct philosophical relationship with
equality and inequality, I intend to provide groundwork for later arguments, which will contain critiques of the Genevan’s work as well as analyses of his relationship with contemporary problems of inequality and difference.

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Rousseau’s basic aim – the pursuit of a state that benefits all citizens – does not, perhaps, *prima facie* differ from the goals of other liberal political philosophers writing in the 17th and 18th centuries, from Locke to Spinoza to Montesquieu. However, Rousseau’s political aims (despite the claims of many of his detractors) are not, ultimately, to simply hypothesize on the abstract nature of a perfectly constituted government. On the contrary, Rousseau is very concerned with the practical problems of governance that arise from what he sees as major flaws in political organization, culture, and the societally-constructed human psyche. While some of Rousseau’s works primarily address the political dilemmas of his day (*Government of Poland, Constitutional Project for Corscia, Letter to M. d’Alembert on the Theatre*) and others explore hypothetical, idealized pasts and futures (*Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men, Émile*), his most complex and fruitful works do both – *On the Social Contract*, for example, is not simply concerned with what a state should be, but with what it can be.

It is because of his dedication to discussing both political *possibility* and political *probability* that Rousseau so often engages with contradictions in his work. The tensions between grand idealism and political realism in Rousseau’s work reveal the difficult philosophical problems that arise when human behavior confronts human potential – for Rousseau, who refuses to take a reductionist approach, it is necessary to fully detail these seemingly irreconcilable logistical problems and their effects on state-building.

In his quest for the just state, some of the most serious practical barriers to the ideal society that Rousseau uncovered were directly related to inequality and equality. His struggles to
pragmatically reconcile the tensions among liberty, equality, and collective action left a legacy that has echoed across modernity with every uttered cry of “Liberté, égalité, fraternité!” But perhaps even more importantly, Rousseau’s mission to meld ambitious ideology with life’s bitter truth left us with a vast body of work directly interrogating the material place of equality in society.

Beginning with his first philosophical work (*Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences*), Rousseau consistently argues that multiple manifestations of inequality are directly opposed to liberty and to the common good. Two of these manifestations of inequality are of special interest to Rousseau: economic inequality and cultural inequality. The Genevan asserts that a movement away from drastic inequalities towards a relative cultural and economic homogeneity is a necessary predicate for just governance. To understand Rousseau’s arguments in favor of this homogeneity, it is essential to note the specific importance of two key ideas to Rousseau’s thought: *self-interest* and the *general will*.

In the original French texts, Rousseau uses two words to discuss human self-interest: *amour de soi* and *amour-propre*, which both allude to a sort of “self-love.” For Rousseau, *amour de soi* is the natural self-interest that humans once pursued in the pre-civilization state of nature; it is a simple, animalistic desire to procure the necessities of life. *Amour de soi*, according to Rousseau, was a self-interest so far removed from societally-constructed ideas of domination and hierarchy that it actually kept humans quite isolated – unless a person saw another human in danger or was driven by sexual urges to socialize, they would keep to themselves, hunting and gathering on their own. Rousseau’s view of this stage of human social evolution is positive – it led him to go so far as declaring that “man is naturally good” – and this high appraisal of primitive *amour de soi* led to a long-standing and

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2 Ibid, 66.
3 Ibid, 100.
largely unfounded⁴ academic association between Rousseau and the racist idea of the “noble savage.” However, *amour de soi* as Rousseau presents it is not particularly noble, and is instead simply admirable for its ability to maintain a relative peace between individuals – while Rousseau finds the humble pleasure humans enjoyed in this theoretical state enviable, he is plainly aware that little practical good can come from an undying adulation for the long lost *amour de soi*.

*Amour-propre* is quite a different sort of self-interest from *amour de soi*, and in Rousseau’s view, the two types of self-interest do not coexist within a society, but rather correspond to different historical epochs. In Rousseau’s theory of human development, human self-interest was fundamentally affected by the gradual institution of property, government, and the family. As human society developed, *amour de soi* became *amour-propre*; the benign, survivalist self-interest turned into an emotional self-interest inextricably tied to the inner workings of society. Rousseau is deeply critical of *amour-propre* and its codependent, civil society; he argues that in civil society, human beings are not concerned with their well-being in terms of health, but in terms of self-esteem:

> I would note how much that universal desire for reputation, honors, and privileges [...] devours us all, develops and compares our talents and strengths; how much it excites and multiplies the passions; and, by making all men competitors, rivals, or rather enemies, how many setbacks, successes, and catastrophes of every sort it causes every day, by making so many contenders run the same race.⁵

In Rousseau’s view, it is this radical reconstitution of self-interest that led to the birth of humanity’s worst tendencies: greed, vanity, sloth, etc.

Rousseau, writing in the late 18th century, believed that civil society had developed to such a point that *amour-propre* was the prime psychological motivator for European citizens, especially the citizens of Paris; many, if not all, of his critiques of *amour-propre* in society still apply to our

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⁵ Rousseau, *On Inequality*, 88.
contemporary world. The problems of *amour-propre* go beyond the general issues of human vice and selfishness, however, especially in the context of Rousseau’s political project. The relationship between self-interest and Rousseau’s concept of the *general will* specifically causes a major series of dilemmas for his work, a series of dilemmas which force him to reckon with pressing issues of inequality.

In Rousseau’s texts, especially *On the Social Contract*, the general will is both the keystone concept for the ideal state and a characteristic that Rousseau seems to think is inherently present in *all* states, regardless of their merits. Rousseau offers multiple descriptions of the general will in different works; in *Discourse on Political Economy* he offers one of his more concise definitions, describing the general will as the will of the body politic (state) which “always tends toward the conservation and well-being of the whole and of each part and which is the source of the laws, is for all the members of the state, in their relations both to one another and to the state, the rule of what is just and what is unjust.”

The general will neatly represents the tension between the ideal and the realistic in Rousseau’s thought: it contains both normative and descriptive elements, it is connected to both the present and the future, and it suggests both great democratic promise and devastating practical problems. For Rousseau, the general will is ever-present, but this does not mean that citizens always advocate for the pursuit of the general will – and this issue, the problem of individual members of a sovereign working against the general will, is incredibly urgent in Rousseau’s work. If too many citizens are consumed by *amour-propre* to such a degree that they are incapable of working for the realization of the general will – which, in the long run, is most beneficial for them and all society –

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7 In all of Rousseau’s works where the term is mentioned, the term *sovereign* refers to the people of a nation in its entirety. The *sovereign* is distinct from the government (*magistrate*) and the state as a whole (*body politic*).
then, Rousseau fears, the state will collapse entirely. Interestingly, Rousseau sees this eventual moral decay and collapse as inevitable yet still often emphasizes the paramount importance of preventing the domination of *amour-propre* and extending the life of the state through adherence to the general will.

How, then, can we ensure that citizens will suspend their devotion to *amour-propre* and engage with the general will? This question forces us into issues of equality and inequality, for Rousseau argues that great disparities between members of a sovereign cause partisanship, which in turn causes a retreat to private interests or factional interests directly opposed to the general will. Reducing these disparities is, then, necessary for extending the life of a just government, and a reduction of disparity requires something akin to social equality. As I have stated, Rousseau criticizes social disparities in both culture and economy; I will first address the former.

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Although the term “cultural criticism” carries a number of colloquial connotations associated with issues of art, Rousseau’s critiques of culture address essentially every aspect of 18th century society that had any ostensible connection to mores and customs. Rousseau’s argument for cultural homogeneity focuses not on any specific cultural practice, but on every practice that shapes a nation’s citizens, for better or worse; in the words of Rousseau scholar Geraint Parry, for the Genevan “[a] fundamental objective is to create a virtuous circle in which transformed human beings could live in a transformed society in which all could equally enjoy a sense both of self-fulfillment and community with others.”

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To restate Parry’s point in the context of our discussion, Rousseau was centrally concerned with uncovering the numerous manifestations of existing cultural structures so that he could first critique them and then devise new cultural structures to implement the cultural homogeneity necessary for a just society. This ambitious endeavor led him to make a number of pointed critiques of cultural touchstones such as the theater (in the *Discourse on Political Economy* and the *Letter to d’Alembert*), education (in several works, but primarily in *Émile*), and religion (in *On the Social Contract*).

Notably, Rousseau had personal experience in all of these areas – he worked as a musical composer, a tutor, and went through multiple religious conversions – and in his autobiographical *Confessions* he noted the societal effects of each on his life and on French society *en masse*. In his contemporary culture, Rousseau found that many cultural practices encouraged *amour-propre* and tended to worsen existing economic inequalities. His critique of the theater in *Letter to d’Alembert* famously states that plays provide the populace with an alternative to empathetic action by serving as a palatable outlet for their excess pity:

> In giving our tears to these fictions, we have satisfied all the right of humanity without having to give anything more of ourselves; whereas unfortunate people in person would require attention from us, relief, consolation, and work, which would involve us in their pains, and would require at least the sacrifice of our indolence from all of which we are quite content to be exempt.\(^{10}\)

Additionally, the monetary cost of the theater widens the divide between the poor and rich, as the “one who works” is forced to either forgo the theatrical “recreations of the idle” that make working life tolerable, or pay the various expenses of theatergoing and worsen their lot; as Rousseau notes, the “very amusement which provides a means of economy for the rich, doubly weakens the poor…”\(^{11}\) – the rich only grow richer as the theater collects admissions fees and the poor struggle to pay them.


\(^{11}\) Ibid, 115.
Existing cultural institutions do not simply worsen economic gaps, however. In Rousseau’s view, existing social norms (particularly in education) also weaken national resolve and promote the values of wisdom and cosmopolitanism over those of community and patriotism. For Rousseau’s project this is a serious problem, as the self-interested divisions that encourage rampant amour-propre can also stem from a lack of camaraderie among the citizenry. In *Discourse on Political Economy*, Rousseau discusses the need for a civic education that focuses primarily on cultivating a love of country and only cursorily on the pursuit of truth, explaining that “…a people consisting of wise men has never been produced; however, it is not impossible to make a people happy.”12 He repeatedly emphasizes that political flourishing is not a matter of national wisdom, but of national unity.

Rousseau’s suggestions for amending these cultural inequalities focus on the dissolution of existing cultural institutions and the creation of new ones. For instance, Rousseau recommends against instituting a theater in Geneva in the *Letter to d’Alembert* and supports implementing state-run games, parades, and sporting events in the *Government of Poland*. He encourages the introduction of public, patriotic education in the *Discourse on Political Economy*. Perhaps most boldly, he advocates establishing a mandatory civil religion exalting the values of patriotism and civil service, in lieu of Christianity, which he argues pulls the citizenry away from their civic duty by drawing their attention to the afterlife13.

It is crucial to emphasize that Rousseau did not consider the divisive elements of his contemporary culture to be only trifling or secondary obstructions to his political projects. He believed that humankind had, in the act of forming society, corrupted itself, and that this corruption

12 Rousseau, *On Political Economy*, 134. (Somewhat infamously, this argument from *Discourse on Political Economy* contradicts some of the educational propositions outlined in *Émile*. Gérant Parry has argued that these two works offer different pedagogical recommendations for different societal contexts; I will address some of these tensions head-on in later chapters.)

only begat further corruption as self-interest turned from a simple animal instinct to a perverse self-obsession. In Parisian ballrooms, theaters, and lecture halls, Rousseau could see only a culture of vanity and misplaced goodwill fracturing a society that ought be, in his view, near-indivisible. The act of reinventing such a world would require the radical formation of a new type of citizen, one whose patriotism and adherence to the general will would be unrecognizable to the self-serving sophisticates of Enlightenment France. Rousseau recognized the difficulty of such a reinvention and advocated it all the same.

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Rousseau’s critiques of economic inequalities are in many ways inseparable from his attacks on cultural inequalities. Like his cultural critiques, the Genevan’s economic analyses function as a preliminary step towards dissolving socio-political divisions. Unlike the cultural critiques, however, the economic critiques offer a sanguine view on the value of life and happiness that injects a distinctly hopeful, humanitarian element into Rousseau’s otherwise rather bleak outlook.

There are two major strains of economic criticism that permeate Rousseau’s work, one practical and one ethical. The practical objections to economic inequality address wealth disparity primarily as a phenomenon that both inflames and is inflamed by *amour-propre*. These types of objections tend to highlight the animosities between rich and poor, which only become more intense as “[luxury] simultaneously corrupts the rich and the poor, the one by possession, the other by covetousness.”

When writing in this “practical mode,” Rousseau seems less interested in siding with the rich or poor than in outlining the dangerous social rifts that arise from wealth inequality and make the state impossible to govern smoothly. Even when writing in this pragmatic voice he does perhaps

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direct his vitriol primarily towards the opulent and his sympathies primarily towards the have-nots, but his main practical qualm is with the division itself rather than the parties on either side of it. The pressing class rift in the sovereign that renders the state ineffectual is certainly what led Rousseau to implore:

Tolerate neither rich men nor beggars. These two estates, which are naturally inseparable, are equally fatal to the common good. From one come the supporters of tyranny, from the other the tyrants. It is always between them that public liberty becomes a matter of commerce.\textsuperscript{15}

Statements like this make it obvious that economic inequality is not simply dangerous for the less equal; it is a phenomenon that existentially threatens the very possibility of a nation that is prosperous for all.

Much of Rousseau’s writing on economic equality interrogates this idea of inequality as a threat to the common good, but the Genevan’s second strain of economic criticism shifts away from his larger political ideas and confronts inequality as a question of obligation. I have already explained that Rousseau, like other liberal philosophers, wants to establish a just state. It is in Rousseau’s fierce political and ethical condemnations of economic inequality that we can find what justice actually means to Rousseau: liberty by means of equality.

Rousseau’s most moving pleas for egalitarian governance come in \textit{Discourse on Political Economy}, in which he adamantly claims that a citizen rightfully will not love their country if “they did not enjoy even civil welfare, and if their goods, their life, or their liberty were at the discretion of powerful men, without it being possible or permitted for them to dare to invoke the laws.”\textsuperscript{16} He continues, saying “Individual welfare is so closely linked to the public confederation that, were it not

\textsuperscript{15} Rousseau, \textit{Social Contract}, 189.
\textsuperscript{16} Rousseau, \textit{On Political Economy}, 134.
for the fact that one must take account of human frailty, this convention would be dissolved by right if just one citizen were to perish who could have been saved…”¹⁷

These impassioned contentions are somewhat general, and do not refer explicitly to economic inequality. Yet, the idea that every citizen is entitled to certain securities underpins many of Rousseau’s other polemics written in this same voice: his cutting argument that the rich are unjustly exempt from laws that punish the poor,¹⁸ his excoriations of property consolidation by the rich,¹⁹ his claim that “no citizen should be so rich as to be capable of buying another citizen, and none so poor that he is forced to sell himself.”²⁰

This indignant tone is one of humanitarian concern, and it gives us a glimpse into the principal argument that grounds much of Rousseau’s work. The notion that the existence of equality is necessary for the existence of liberty, perhaps Rousseau’s most radical claim, acts as an anchor for these ardent attacks on wealth disparity. As Rousseau himself puts it in On the Social Contract:

If one enquires into precisely wherein the greatest good of all consists […] one will find that it boils down to these two principal objects, liberty and equality. Liberty, because all personal dependence is that much force taken from the body of the state; equality, because liberty cannot subsist without it.²¹

Amid Rousseau’s practical and ethical objections to wealth disparity are peppered myriad proposals for obtaining economic equality or reducing economic inequality. His ideas vary greatly from work to work: in Discourse on Political Economy, he advocates tax relief for the poor and taxes on luxury goods; in his Social Contract he lightly endorses reallocation of property when unequal distribution of property directly interferes with the public good; even in Government of Poland, usually regarded as his most conservative work, he repeatedly supports tax relief for the indigent and instead

¹⁷ Rousseau, On Political Economy, 135.
¹⁸ Ibid, 140-141.
¹⁹ Rousseau, On Inequality, 77-78.
²⁰ Rousseau, Social Contract, 189.
²¹ Ibid, 188-189.
advocates taxes on produced goods and property, in proportion to production yields and property size.

Even though many of Rousseau’s proposals here seem to resemble the foundations of contemporary social democracy, it is crucial to conclude our preliminary conversation on economic inequality by noting a distinguishing feature of Rousseau’s thought that separates it from most egalitarian traditions: an aversion to mechanical development. The Genevan’s plans for wealth redistribution all rely on a principled regression in the means of production – that is to say, a return to the agrarian state. This pseudo-Luddite notion of “equality through technological relapse” has been subject to severe criticism from thinkers of various political tendencies; I will examine some of these critiques later on in this work.

For now, it is most important to be familiar with Rousseau’s ethical and practical objections to wealth inequality and to acknowledge that Rousseauian thought is manifestly concerned with reducing this inequality. As with his cultural proposals, the Genevan’s economic proposals are ambitious – but it is markedly clear that for Rousseau, achieving some level of equality or reduced inequality is a necessary prerequisite for liberty, which is in turn a prerequisite for social justice.

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It would be improper to discuss Rousseau and equality even in a preliminary way without briefly recognizing that the Genevan willfully chooses to overlook some forms of inequality and actively promotes others. To readers possessing even a vague familiarity with Rousseau, this selective egalitarianism should come as little surprise – Voltaire’s witty rebukes of the Genevan’s overt sexism are notorious – but these shortcomings need to be addressed if this work is to be a truly critical appraisal of inequality in the Genevan’s work.

Rousseau’s degrading position on gender fundamentally refuses to acknowledge that women are entitled to liberty in equal measure to men. In texts spanning his entire working life, from the
Discourse on Inequality to the Government of Poland, Rousseau stubbornly puts forth arguments favoring traditional gender roles which may sound tired and intellectually bankrupt to a 21st century reader; he repeatedly insists that the feminine “sex that ought to obey”22 is naturally predisposed to subject herself to her husband, and lacks the same rights over him that he has over her23. Echoes of these same arguments still resurface in arguments against feminism and gender equality to this day, but they are not unique to our time nor to Rousseau’s, and have roots in patriarchal ideas that predate his work by millennia.

There is a dismissive approach towards Rousseau’s view of gender that some scholars choose to embrace; they regard Rousseau’s biases as products of their time and give their attention only to his ideas which have retained some palatability. However, feminist critics of Rousseau – whom I will discuss later on in this paper – have offered valuable insights as to how Rousseau’s sexism was a major part of his political system, a system that seems to rely heavily on ideals of equality. While Rousseau’s attitudes towards gender were undoubtedly conditioned by his historical surroundings, it is important to investigate how these attitudes were able to find a comfortable place within the Genevan’s otherwise egalitarian works. For now, perhaps it is enough to say that a significant portion of this paper is reserved for an analysis of Rousseau’s gender biases, and that this analysis will substantively confront these biases from a feminist position.

Rousseau’s gender bias is not the only element of his work that treats glaring inequalities with relative indifference. His assertion that nobility is at least nominally compatible with just government is present both in his practical political works like Government of Poland, which was written at the behest of a noble, and in the more radical On the Social Contract, which so enraged the French nobility that it was banned in Paris. Rousseau’s treatment of the nobility is not uniformly

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22 Rousseau, On Inequality, 65.
23 Rousseau, On Political Economy, 124.
gentle, and in fact is somewhat critical for its day, but ultimately the Genevan’s discussions of
equality rarely assert that nobility and rank present a serious threat to the just state.

The rationale behind this hands-off approach to criticizing noble and royal institutions may
have been a cautionary measure on Rousseau’s part, designed to protect him from persecution that
he would inevitably face anyway. Regardless of motive, however, Rousseau distinctly avoids taking
on the obvious privileges of nobility, and in doing so creates apparent contradictions within his
larger arguments. It is worth noting that Rousseau argued in multiple texts that reducing economic
and cultural inequalities could reduce the political power of noble stations, essentially turning them
into state-awarded perks for skilled members of government (not unlike contemporary knighthood
in the United Kingdom); but these arguments hardly discount the glaring absence of criticism of the
nobility throughout the Rousseauian corpus.

These apparent contradictions are merely the greatest few among many buried in Rousseau’s
work. In ensuing chapters, we will engage with these contradictions, determine their implications for
the Rousseauian project, and see how the Genevan’s thought – with all of its shortcomings and
complexities – mirrors both the world we live in and the better world many contemporary
movements are still striving to achieve.
Chapter 2
Critics and Interpreters: Academic Responses to Rousseau

Rousseau is a notable figure in the pantheon of major 18th and 19th century philosophers in that his work, while historically influential, did not blossom into a noteworthy academic “school”: the 19th and 20th centuries contain rich lineages of Kantian, Marxian, and Hegelian philosophers, but few self-identified Rousseauians. I do not mean that Rousseau has had no loyal adherents – Maximilien Robespierre and other radical republicans during the French Revolutionary period were influenced by Rousseau, as were Kant and Hegel – but rather that Rousseau has not spawned a definite, cohesive group of academic followers.

Additionally, to say that there is not a sizeable Rousseauian school is not to say that there is a dearth of academic interest in Rousseau. On the contrary, Rousseau’s major works have long been objects of interest for many historians and theorists. What distinguishes the academic attitude of “Kantians” and “Marxians” from that of “scholars studying Rousseau” is that the former seek to further analyze and explore the works of Kant or Marx within a self-contained historical “Kantian” or “Marxian” tradition, while Rousseau scholars generally (although not universally) approach Rousseau from a starting point of removed critique or selective interpretation. These approaches are, of course, quite diverse in their manifestations; some writings on Rousseau simply argue directly against his work while others seek to preserve the more palatable elements of Rousseauian thought even as they set aside or reframe the Genevan’s more radical ideas.

There are a number of possible explanations for this hesitant attitude: Rousseau’s controversial influence on the French Revolution, his now easily-disproved speculative anthropology in the Discourse on Inequality, a lack of metaphysical and epistemological writing – but regardless of the cause (or causes) of this pervasive academic attitude, it is valuable both to acknowledge common readings of Rousseau and to explore specific critiques of his texts.
In this chapter, I will discuss a number of critical interpretations of Rousseau, primarily regarding his views of equality and secondarily regarding the general will and his relationship to antiquity. Incorporating writings of philosophers and theorists from a wide range of political backgrounds, from liberalism to conservatism to Marxism, I will use critique to broaden our understanding of Rousseau’s ideas and to provide foundation for my own forthcoming criticisms and historical analyses of the Genevan’s work.

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Although many of Rousseau’s critics make a point of addressing the apparent illiberalism of his more authoritarian practical suggestions, a considerable portion of thinkers examining the Genevan’s work tend to analyze it first and foremost as a theory of liberal political ideas. As this is the case, we will spend the first and largest portion of this chapter discussing a few analyses of Rousseau rooted in liberal or liberal-adjacent theory. We will primarily focus on critical and interpretive work on Rousseau by Judith Shklar, Frederick Neuhouser, and Hannah Arendt. Each of these thinkers engages Rousseau from a distinct ideological position, and each finds value, detriment, or both in unique areas of Rousseauian thought.

Shklar and Neuhouser present the most recent and contemporarily-liberal analyses we will examine in this chapter. Their approaches to Rousseauian equality contrast quite strikingly, and characterize two common strains of approach to Rousseau in contemporary writing.

In her piece “Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Equality” Shklar presents a principally unsympathetic view of Rousseau’s confrontation with inequality, discussing it chiefly as a psychological response from Rousseau rather than a persuasive or even coherent political argument. She claims, for instance, that what makes Rousseau’s “account of the majestic progress of inequality

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24 While the term “liberalism” has a number of colloquial and academic political connotations, we will use it here to loosely refer to a modern political philosophy grounded in rights theory, republicanism, and liberty.
and oppression so complete and compelling is his refusal to abandon the source of his energy, his unquenchable sense of personal injury” and that his eloquent writing on the oppressed makes him a kind of “Homer of the losers.” Much of her analysis contains biting rhetoric, which seems to be aimed as much at dissecting Rousseau the man as it is at challenging Rousseau the thinker.

With that said, psychological discussions of Rousseau can and do yield insightful academic results – Shklar’s investigation of the Genevan’s personal attitudes of cynicism towards “the rich and powerful” paints Rousseau as a forerunner of populism, stating even that he is “surely its original voice.” Shklar devotes much of her piece to criticisms of the infamously temperamental Rousseau, who viewed his decline in both affluence and reputation as the result of betrayals by colleagues; this personal approach to Rousseau offers an entry point not only into the thinker’s mental state, but into his ideology. A life of changing fortunes, Shklar claims, left Rousseau with a poignant distaste for both wealth and poverty – “[h]e alone had lived in every class of society without belonging to a single one of them.” Even if Rousseau is, as Shklar says, “ahistorical” and “only wanted to escape from, not to transform, the new world that was coming into being” his life at least contains some of the Romantic ideals that he himself helped pioneer. For thinkers like Shklar, who disdain Rousseau’s agrarian predilections, crude anti-feminism, and radical ideas on inequality, a psychological approach acts as both a means of explanation and a way to discuss the Genevan without vilifying him entirely.

In his essay “Rousseau’s Critique of Economic Inequality” Neuhouser adopts a more favorable position towards Rousseau, distilling his ideas on inequality into a more concrete set of

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27 Ibid, 22.
28 See Rousseau’s Confessions for the numerous sordid details.
30 Ibid, 22.
practical political suggestions via a notably pointed interpretation. For Neuhouser, Rousseau’s equality is purely instrumental; it is “a means for promoting citizens’ freedom and for securing the social conditions that make satisfactory recognition, an essential component of human well-being, available to all.”

Neuhouser’s approach here is dynamic and ambitious – while his explicit goal is to redefine Rousseau as a philosopher of freedom above all, his implicit goal seems to be a historical one, an attempt to place the Genevan squarely within the liberal tradition by separating him from his occasional authoritarian tendencies. By interpreting Rousseau’s famous statement that equality is necessary for liberty as an argument that “we should seek economic equality because (and only when) [inequality] threatens social members’ freedom” Neuhouser not only elects to bypass the pragmatic, freedom-blurring recommendations of Rousseau’s later work but also deliberately ignores Rousseau’s humanitarian arguments for equality in the Discourse on Political Economy. This attempt at refashioning Rousseau neatly into the role of a liberty-focused philosopher, while maybe admirable from a certain liberal perspective, is ultimately a sort of selective reading, the sort of selective reading many Rousseau scholars turn to when the Genevan’s unnerving contradictions seem impossible to fully explain.

The specifics of Shklar and Neuhouser’s arguments mirror those of many critics and interpreters of Rousseau; Shklar’s psychological analyses and Neuhouser’s attempts at damage control are representative of academic tendencies either to justify Rousseau’s seemingly erratic ideas by referring to his autobiographical works or to mitigate the severity of his proposals via a slanted interpretation that favors traditional liberal ideas.

32 Ibid, 208.
Hannah Arendt’s approach to Rousseau, while not strictly liberal, contrasts fascinatingly with more traditional, adjacently-liberal approaches to Rousseau, and thus fits well into the liberal category for the purposes of this thesis. For Arendt, Rousseau is neither a psychologically-driven philosopher of inconsistency nor a leading liberal thinker whose work contains unfortunate inconsistencies – instead, he is a forefather of historical authoritarianism and even totalitarianism.

In her seminal text *On Revolution*, Arendt pairs Rousseau with Maximilien Robespierre, the Jacobin leader popularly regarded as the party responsible for most of the French Revolution’s violent excesses. Questions of historical veracity aside (for now), Arendt’s aim is clear: she argues that the worst atrocities of the Revolutionary Terror in the hands of Robespierre stemmed from his adherence to Rousseauian ideas, specifically cultural homogeneity and the general will. For Rousseau, the general will is both the will of the people in summation and a tendency towards the common good; for Robespierre, Arendt argues, the general will was a “highly ingenious means to put a multitude into the place of a single person,” a despotic consolidation of a collective voice which provided the Jacobins with a philosophical justification to rule on the people’s behalf.

Expanding her argument, Arendt further states that the patently Rousseauian notion of a general will which supersedes particular interests provides a virtue justification for all revolutionary philosophies prioritizing the good of the whole over the interest of the individual: “the theory of terror from Robespierre to Lenin and Stalin presupposes that the interest of the whole must automatically, and indeed permanently, be hostile to the particular interest of the citizen.” To Arendt, the seemingly egalitarian notion of the general will actually contains the rhetorical potential to divide society and empower authoritarian and totalitarian regimes; an apparent philosophy of freedom is in reality a philosophy of oppression.

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34 Ibid, 77.
It is perhaps unsurprising that liberal reactions to Rousseau are distinct and often contradictory; there is much in the Genevan’s corpus that revolts against more traditionally liberal Lockean sentiments, and also much that reaffirms and expands liberal ideals of freedom and equality. Even more so than conservative and Marxist analyses, liberal approaches to Rousseauian thought are given an abundance of ideas to dissect, coopt, and condemn. A major dilemma for the liberal scholar is not to determine whether Rousseau deserves a place in the liberal canon, but rather to determine exactly what that place is: Antagonist, protagonist, both, or neither.

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Conservative thought confronts Rousseau from the extremes; his robust egalitarianism is, as one might expect, subject to intense right-wing scrutiny, as is his historical role as the philosophical progenitor of Jacobin ideology. However, his calls for nationalism and cultural unity have appealed to conservative theorists, including influential 20th century thinker Leo Strauss. Strauss’ ambitious book *Natural Right and History* and essay “On the Intention of Rousseau” both examine the Genevan’s dedication to ancient philosophical tradition and his calls for cultural homogeneity in the face of scientific development.

Strauss sees Rousseau’s critiques of the Enlightenment and modern philosophy both as an attempt to return philosophy to its classical (ancient) roots and as an effort to reassert the centrality of natural intellectual inequalities in democratic formations:

[I]t is preferable to understand Rousseau’s thesis as a restatement of the view underlying classical political philosophy, and his attack on the thesis of the Enlightenment as a part, although the most important part, of his attack on modern politics in the name of classical politics.37

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36 For the purposes of this piece, “conservativism” refers to a modern political philosophy anchored by nationalism, tradition, and some degree of tolerance for social and economic inequalities.

Strauss argues that Rousseau’s democratic concerns are an attempt to redeem the best of modernity while returning to essentially classical ideas; in Strauss’ words, “…[Rousseau] tried to preserve the classical idea of philosophy on the basis of modern science.”

In some regards, Strauss’ understanding of Rousseau’s modern-classical fusion is not concretely conservative; on the contrary, he writes of the Rousseauiian project as being robustly egalitarian. However, Strauss’ insistence that the Genevan’s project rests on an acceptance of “the natural inequality of men with regard to intellectual gifts” and a claim that Rousseau contends “without hesitation that, while the emergence of civil society was bad for the human species or for the common good, it was good for the individual” hint at the conservative nature of the interpretation. While Strauss’ reading applauds the liberal democratic project, it also frames Rousseau as a philosopher whose overtures to limit inequality are underpinned by an unwavering philosophical recognition that certain inequalities are permanent and, to the benefit of some if not all, are perpetuated by society.

National Review founding writer Willmoore Kendall, a onetime student of Strauss, furthered his teacher’s arguments for a conservative reading of Rousseau from a more authoritarian perspective. In the introduction to his translation of Rousseau’s The Government of Poland, Kendall illustrates the importance of appeals to nationalism and philosophical traditions of cultural conservatism in the work. Importantly, Kendall argues that the later works of Rousseau, specifically the Poland, “should be read both as a clarification and a criticism of the political teaching of The Social Contract” and that these later works (which are widely considered to be among Rousseau’s most

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39 Ibid, 486.
40 Ibid, 486.
41 Leo Strauss, Natural Right and History, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1953) 292.
conservative) represent the mature stage of the Genevan’s political writing – both were completed during the ten years before Rousseau’s death in 1778.

Like Strauss, Kendall regards Rousseau’s regular references to ancient cultures (specifically Sparta) as a fundamental component of his plan for the ideal political society. While the influence of Rome and Sparta on Rousseau’s political project is undeniable, Kendall’s choice to emphasize Spartan discipline in practically the same breath as his own original claim that Rousseau’s liberty “can only be attained as the result of a prior act of establishing rather harsh and extensive restraints” clearly indicates a barely-subtle support for the notion that the Rousseauian state can only be properly realized and sustained by force. In fact, Kendall’s choice to claim that the Poland is Rousseau’s most realized political work further indicates a predisposition towards an authoritarian interpretation, as most of the Genevan’s works advocate a national cultural homogeneity by means of education and institutional reform; by comparison, the Poland contains the most draconian suggestions for cultural levelling.

The strong nationalist currents throughout Rousseau’s texts offer ample opportunity for interpretations from both democratic (Strauss) and non-democratic (Kendall) conservative perspectives. What all conservative readings of Rousseau inevitably reject or outright avoid, however, are his constant, undeniable references to economic equality. For the right-leaning scholar of Rousseau, the attacks on property and wealth disparity in the Second Discourse, Political Economy, and Social Contract bar the way to a comprehensive conservative reading.

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Socialist appraisals of Rousseau have historically been mixed. Early French utopian socialists like Charles Fourier and Henri de Saint-Simon developed plans for collectivist communities that

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44 In the Poland, we see some of Rousseau’s few suggestions for radically cutting customs and the arts, rather than merely reforming them. He urges Poland to resort to strict, simple, and pastoral living.
utilized Rousseauian principles, but the utopians rarely discussed Rousseau’s most complex ideas and referenced him sparingly (and even then not always with approval). Marx and Engels handled Rousseau with a light touch, acknowledging his work’s influence on their own while emphasizing the vast ideological separation between Rousseauian property critique and scientific socialism. Of the political schools we are examining in this chapter, the reader might expect Marxism to be the one least likely to raise objections over Rousseau’s revolutionary impact and his critiques of inequality. However, the Marxist thinkers who have seen fit to engage with Rousseau have in some cases criticized the Genevan for not extending his theories of history far enough.

20th century structuralist philosopher Louis Althusser examines Rousseau from a Marxist perspective in his essay “Rousseau: The Social Contract,” first published in 1959. In the work, Althusser runs through key fundamental contradictions in Rousseau’s Social Contract as if they are a linear, related chain; he utilizes a dialectical Marxist approach to dissect each contradiction and to critique the syntheses each creates. He concludes the work by claiming that Rousseau left the final resultant contradiction unsolved. Althusser’s work is unique in that, unlike most liberal and conservative approaches, it treats Rousseau’s writing as if it is incomplete rather than overloaded; to Althusser, Rousseau’s ideas (specifically The Social Contract) are not unnecessarily contradictory and filled with extraneous argumentation, but are instead necessarily contradictory and are consequently necessarily difficult to interpret and implement.

Althusser’s “chain of contradictions” treats the discrepancies in Rousseau not as unrelated occurrences, but as attempts to address other discrepancies. For example, the first problem in the social contract (“How does a people constitute itself as a people?”) is solved by a further

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contradiction: the alienating state of pre-Social Contract state of war is remedied by a voluntary total alienation, or, in Althusser’s terms,

[T]he total alienation of the Social Contract is the solution to the problem posed by the state of universal alienation that defines the state of war, culminating in the crisis resolved by the Social Contract. Total alienation is the solution to the state of total alienation.47

We need not go through the entirety of Althusser’s chain of contradictions; it is sufficient to describe the fundamentally dialectical process by which Althusser points out a problem in Rousseau, describes how Rousseau solves it, and then highlights the new problem that has arisen as a result.

Althusser argues that the final contradiction for Rousseau is the only one that appears to be fundamentally impossible to solve in a practical manner. This contradiction, between what Althusser calls “[f]light forward in ideology and (or) regression in reality,” or occasionally “regression in economy,” is the problem of Rousseauian equality put in Marxist terms: a cultural homogeneity through education and shaping of mores in conflict with an economic levelling brought about through reductions in the means of production. For Althusser, the fact that such a cultural homogeneity would require economically advanced means to be properly disseminated constitutes the core contradiction.

This tension between a need for ceaseless education and ideological shaping of the people and an equality forced by an impossible return to a semi-feudal production method is immensely troubling for Althusser, especially as a Marxist. Althusser views the stringent requirements of a constant civil education as dogmatically utopian, and as he states, “Nothing is as fragile as Heaven.”49 From a Marxist perspective, a post-feudal regression into agrarian equality is even more ludicrous, as it denies the technologically progressive nature of capitalist development in a similarly

48 Ibid, 155.
utopian manner: “to what saint should one entrust oneself for the realization of this impossible regressive reform?” Clearly, Althusser thinks no “saint” can reconcile this final contradiction; for him, only Marx’s developments of Rousseau’s initial ideas provide a genuine answer.

Althusser’s framing helps us to draw clear distinctions between Rousseau’s economic proposals and Marxist political economy. While there is something undeniably communitarian and perhaps even social-democratic in the Rousseauian idea of economic levelling, its reliance on reductions in production and unremitting ideological unity clashes clearly with Marxist formulations of history, which focus heavily on the necessity of advances in production and acute awareness of ideological structures. Although Rousseau’s thought is in many ways radical, it seemingly does not have a comfortable place on the Marxist left much more than it does on the conservative right.

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This chapter has made it evident that scholars of various political persuasions recognize both valuable insights and disagreeable ideas in Rousseau’s work. Thinkers have been able to extract fragments of egalitarianism, totalitarianism, nationalism, and republicanism from the intertwined strands of Rousseauian thought. Perhaps it is little wonder that Rousseau has of yet been unable to garner a proper academic following when his work contains within itself so many divergent paths.

I will conclude this section with a clarification: It is not the purpose of this chapter or of this work to argue that Rousseau’s philosophy is subject to boundless interpretation nor that Rousseau is a political mirror in which philosophers and theorists of various schools see only their own beliefs and ideas reflected back to them. Additionally, the presentation of these varied approaches should not be taken in sum as a statement that Rousseau is inherently vague or unclear simply because his work contains tensions and contradictions.

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50 Althusser, Politics and History, 159.
My actual, positive purpose in introducing a plurality of perspectives is twofold: firstly, this *theoretical* plurality will later on lend itself to an investigation of the *historical* plurality of past and present political movements influenced by Rousseau’s thought; secondly, it provides me with a diversity of understandings of Rousseauian thought which I can draw upon when making my own arguments regarding the role of equality and inequality in the Genevan’s work. One of this work’s primary aims is to assess the role of Rousseauian equality in the contemporary world – and any understanding of Rousseau’s place in our contemporary world must be based upon an understanding of Rousseau’s place in the past of theory and politics.
Chapter 3

Thought and History: Rousseau’s Politics in Practice

Discussing a thinker’s body of work without at least implicitly acknowledging its historical context, especially the history of its influence over time, is an unfeasible task; with Rousseau, it is near impossible. Whatever reputation the Genevan’s thought may have held in the Western consciousness in the few short years between his death in 1778 and the start of the French Revolution in 1789 is now irretrievable. It cannot be accurately recreated in our time. The events of the Révolution française may have occurred without Rousseau’s participation, but in the public (and much of the academic) mind, he is the philosophical authority behind both the triumphs of the French First Republic and the barbarism of la Terreur – the architect of both liberty and slaughter.

Of course, Rousseau’s political influence did not die with the Revolution. He casts a long shadow over the history of modernity. Movements have emerged, cultures have transformed, and governments have risen under that shadow. As we have established in Chapter 2, theorists of many tendencies have found both value and defect in Rousseauian thought; so, too, have the political movements of the past two centuries. Rousseau’s work pervades the philosophies of liberalism, conservatism, and socialism, but it also pervades the material political realizations of these theories. Traces of his ideas can be detected in all manners of government and political organization, from fascism to anti-imperialism to liberal democracy.

In this chapter, we will move away from a strictly theoretical approach to Rousseau and will instead examine how his work on equality and inequality has influenced historical movements. Additionally, we will draw parallels between Rousseauian ideas and movements that, while not directly influenced by Rousseau, clearly mirror his ideas, at least in part. As might be expected, the French Revolution will receive the majority of our attention in this section. However, significant notice will also be given to the presence of Rousseauian ideas in more recent political history.
Examining Rousseau’s theories of inequality in a historical context offers manifold benefits for our project. On a practical level, even a cursory study of this kind has great potential to contribute to an analysis of Rousseau’s place in contemporary politics. On a philosophical level, an examination of Rousseauian ideas in action provides us with a new lens through which we can view the tensions in Rousseau’s work on equality and inequality; that is to say, challenges resulting from the material implementation of political ideas give us new insights on how to approach textual difficulties.

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Though the French Revolution is subject to intense historical debate regarding its causes, effects, and merits, it may be nigh impossible to find a historian who would argue that the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau did not hold a widespread philosophical influence during the revolutionary period. To this day, Rousseau dominates the public mind as the philosophical face of the Revolution; with the exceptions of Robespierre, Marat, and the young Napoleon, perhaps no other name is so intimately tied to revolutionary France.

Rousseau died of a stroke on July 1, 1778. Much of the European intelligentsia, once practically at the Genevan’s beck and call, had forsaken him by then. The Genevan’s proclivity for paranoid confrontations and his controversial, oft-banned work\(^{51}\) had isolated him both intimately and professionally from former colleagues like Denis Diderot and Jean d’Alembert, as well as from European Enlightenment academic communities in general. The last years of Rousseau’s life were spent in relative solitude as he composed a series of introspective, autobiographical works, some of which he would never complete.

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\(^{51}\) *Émile* was banned in Paris and Geneva shortly after its publication in 1762, as was *On the Social Contract*, published that same year.
It is difficult to imagine that the dying Rousseau, cut off from Parisian society and long finished with what would be his last explicitly political work, could have imagined that his polemics would be at the forefront of French public thought when a crowd of revolutionaries stormed the Bastille some 11 years later. Yet it was true – Rousseau’s name and many of his principles were on the minds and lips of the French people as both bourgeois and peasant resolved to be done with the injustices of royal rule. Naturally, the Genevan was only one philosophical face of the uprising – Montesquieu, Diderot, Voltaire, Helvetius, d’Alembert were but a few other lauded thinkers – yet, as the long decade of the Révolution française wore on, Rousseau’s reputation endured as the stature of others rose and fell.

To some extent, this consistent popularity had less to do with Rousseau’s philosophy than with his role as a revolutionary symbol. The departed Rousseau attained a deity-like status early on in the revolution; as Jonathan Israel details in his book Revolutionary Ideas, the first anniversary of the Bastille’s fall was celebrated with a parade in which a “large bust of Rousseau, bedecked with a civic crown, was carried in triumph several times around [the Bastille’s] ruins” to singing and fanfare. When French de-Christianization escalated following the 1793 rise to power of the Jacobins, Rousseau became a pseudo-theological figure in newly-created civil religions; his image was particularly instrumental for Maximilien Robespierre’s deist Cult of the Supreme Being. Even as Robespierre took a strong anti-intellectual stance, lambasting “atheism and la philosophie as a political and moral culture,” he claimed that Rousseau alone among the philosophes “evinced true grandeur of soul and true purity of doctrine, presenting virtue and the Divinity as drawn from nature in opposition to la philosophie.” To some extent, there is an irony here – Rousseau famously

52 Both Rousseau’s Poland and Constitutional Project for Corsica were completed in 1772.
54 Ibid, 563.
55 Ibid, 564.
advocates the creation of a civil religion in the *Social Contract* as an important tool for achieving cultural homogeneity; that he would become the theological centerpiece of such a religion is, perhaps, quite apropos.

Of course, Rousseau was not simply an iconoclast whose legacy of subversiveness and philosophical contrarianism made him popular in a partially anti-intellectual movement. In fact, Rousseau’s “anti-establishment” image had little to do with the impact of his actual philosophical work on the Revolution. Even in its reformist early stages, when nobles and landed gentry were determined to create a constitutional monarchy, the Revolution felt the influence of Rousseau’s writing. In early debates over the ratification of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in 1789 in the National Constituent Assembly, “…the Constituents consciously drew a major portion of their conceptual vocabulary from the *Social Contract*; indeed, key points of contention […] are structured as a disagreement over the proper interpretation and application of Rousseau’s principles.”

However, the Declaration, while certainly a radical document by some standards, was drafted by a nobleman, a clergyman, and a wealthy foreign dignitary, hardly mouthpieces of the impoverished *sans-culottes*. Despite the fact that articles one, three, and six of the Declaration were clearly influenced to some degree by Rousseau’s ideas, particularly the general will and equality of rights, the document is bereft of a meaningful discussion of economic and cultural equality. While early stages of the Revolution, led by the bourgeoisie, lawyers, and some radicalized nobles and

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57 Respectively, the Marquis de Lafayette, the Abbé Sieyès, and Thomas Jefferson.
58 It is important to note that the notions of general will and rights equality were not exclusive to Rousseau among Enlightenment philosophers. While Rousseau is associated with the notion of the general will and certainly developed it further than any of his peers, he adapted the term from Diderot’s entry on natural right in the *Encyclopédie* (Rousseau, *Political Economy*, 126, footnote 6); the term was used in theological contexts for centuries prior. Natural rights theory owes much more to John Locke, Thomas Paine, and early American political philosophy than it does to the Genevan.
clergy, did abolish serfdom in France, they did so not out of political principle, but rather due to practical concern; the riotous peasantry endangered the stability of the nation. The young Revolution took care to ensure legal equalities, but the cultural and economic levelling that preoccupied Rousseau would not be championed until the rise of the radicals.

After the execution of Louis XVI in January 1793, the Revolution entered its most tumultuous phase. Robespierre, perhaps the most ardent acolyte of Rousseau to take power during the Revolution, drew heavily on the *Social Contract* as he and his fellow radical Jacobins altered the political direction of Revolutionary France. The king had been officially deposed months before his beheading, his monarchy replaced by the First Republic, but it was only after his execution that the democratically elected National Convention lost power and the nine-member Committee of Public Safety took functional (if not official) control of France. Before long, Robespierre and his radical Jacobin faction, *la Montagne*, were in control of the Committee. The Committee’s reign, which lasted roughly a year, remains notorious for mass executions of political dissidents; this period is now popularly remembered as the Reign of Terror.

Robespierre was indisputably a Rousseauian, or at the least a self-professed one, and like most of the very few who have historically claimed such a title, his admiration was quite selective and tended towards some aspects of Rousseau’s work more than others. However, unlike the bourgeois revolutionaries who crafted the *Declaration*, Robespierre chose to pay serious attention to Rousseau’s ideas on inequality, particularly cultural inequality. There is an obvious possible argument that Rousseau’s critique of partisan division inspired or at least outwardly justified the Committee’s oppression of dissenters. Some historians, including Israel and scholars who adhere to his idea of the “Radical Enlightenment,” argue that Robespierre’s brutality is a result of his readings of the *Social Contract*.

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60 For an example of this critique, see: Rousseau, *On Political Economy*, 132
Contract,

while others, such as Alfred Cobban and François Furet, argue that Rousseau’s “influence was not needed, as has been alleged, to develop an idea of governmental despotism, which could be learnt in full from the ancien régime.”

Robespierre and the Committee’s interpretations of Rousseau may have led to more than the executions for which the Terror is most famous. Although the Montagnards and other left Jacobins were, more than any other early revolutionary faction, devoted to the cause of the poor and the petty bourgeoisie, it was their understanding of cultural inequality, not economic inequality, that led to the most drastic social changes. The theater (and French cultural output in general) under the Committee was heavily guided by Rousseau’s comments on the arts in the Discourse on the Arts and Sciences, the Social Contract, and especially the Letter to d’Alembert. Israel details the transformation of the theater under the Committee:

… so uniformly did the theater present only officially sanctioned values, affirmed one commentator with apparent pride in June 1794, that “could Rousseau return and watch our revolutionary plays,” exalting only virtue, filial piety, and hard labor, he “would not have complained of the immorality of our theatres” as he did those of his time.

Ideological artistic consistency was not relegated to the theater alone: revolutionary songs were, famously, ubiquitous during this period, and visual art had strong ties to Jacobin leadership. Six painters were on the Revolutionary Tribunal, the body responsible for trying political dissenters, the most famous paintings of the age, such as The Death of Marat, were essentially propaganda pieces. The cultural renovators of the Republic even went so far as to institute a new calendar system.

What Robespierre and the left Jacobins perhaps failed to realize was that even a perfectly homogenous promotion of values would be useless if the populace and governing bodies were

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61 Israel, Revolutionary Ideas, 498.
63 Israel, Revolutionary Ideas, 520-521.
divided by fear and ongoing economic disparities. It was perhaps this incongruity between cultural homogeneity and economic stratification, an incongruity aptly understood and critiqued by Rousseau, that led to the eventual overthrow of Robespierre and the Committee in the counter-revolution on July 27, 1794— or, according the new Republican calendar, 9 Thermidor, year II.

The fall of Robespierre in 1794 led to the end of the Terror, and along with it ended the most severe cultural regulations. The National Convention, which survived the Thermidorian Reaction, continued to draw on the image of Rousseau, orchestrating his corpse’s interment in the Panthéon in October 1794. In 1795, the Convention was replaced by the Directory, a moderate, weak executive committee, and a new legislature, the similarly ineffective Corps Légitatif; this government would remain intact until the end of the Revolution in 1799. As martial victories abroad, particularly Napoleon Bonaparte’s 1796 Italian campaign, seized the public’s attention and bolstered their faith in a tepid government, the necessity for Rousseau as a political symbol waned, and to the bureaucratic Directory the Genevan’s political suggestions seemed largely irrelevant.

Radicals did not simply disappear post-Thermidor, however, and the scattered remnants of la Montagne endeavored to reclaim the republican nature of the Revolution. From these remnants emerged the Society of the Equals, founded in 1796 by radicalized former Jacobin François-Noël “Gracchus” Babeuf, who was ideologically opposed to the bureaucratic Directory in practically every way. As the Directory slowly drifted to the right, the Equals caught the attention of the poor by adopting Rousseau’s most radical ideas on economic equality. While Babeuf and the Equals did, in truth, draw much of their theory from thinkers outside of strictly Rousseauian tradition (particularly egalitarian philosophers Sylvain Maréchal and the Abbé de Mably), their material demands of “land

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65 Israel, Revolutionary Ideas, 598.
66 Ibid, 670.
redistribution on a fairer basis, progressive taxation, and universal public education”⁶⁸ were straightforward policy interpretations of Rousseau’s normative claim that “no citizen should be so rich as to be capable of buying another citizen, and none so poor that he is forced to sell himself.”⁶⁹ The Society of Equals grew in membership and ambition, even going so far as to plan a (never orchestrated) coup de main against the government. Eventually, the Society was disbanded by the Directory and its leaders, including Babeuf, were put on trial. In his defense, Babeuf repeatedly invoked Rousseauism, quoting the *Social Contract* and further stating:

Rousseau said: “I fully realize that one should not undertake the chimerical project of trying to form a society of honest men, but I nevertheless believed that I was obliged to speak the whole truth openly.” When you condemn me, citizen jurors, for all the maxims that I have just admitted stating, it is these great men whom you are putting on trial.⁷⁰

Babeuf and Augustin Darthé, a fellow Equal, were sentenced and executed on May 27, 1797. The first experiment in Rousseau-influenced economic equality, the Society of Equals laid the groundwork for radical egalitarian economic movements in the years to come.

There exists a long-standing debate over whether the excesses of the French Revolution were inevitable results of Rousseau’s philosophy. Some academics argue that Rousseau’s authoritarian leanings directly caused many, if not all, of the Committee’s worst abuses, while others point to Rousseau’s liberty-loving, humanitarian writings in an effort to defend the integrity of his work. What both of these approaches ignore is that a philosophy alone rarely (if ever) forms a people or a movement, and that a people whose needs are great instead gravitate towards ideas that provide explanations for their material conditions. While the works of thinkers like Rousseau help to shape the direction of social movements, a political philosophy, more often than not, does not ignite

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⁶⁸ Israel, *Revolutionary Ideas*, 633.
⁷⁰ Fried and Sanders, *Socialist Thought*, 69.
an insurrection where there is no other cause for one. To explain the actions of Robespierre as a result of the Genevan’s thought is one thing; to explain every act of violence involving the city poor, the radical press, and the rural peasants as an act of principled Rousseauism is quite another.

Rather than claim that Rousseau’s thought contained the potential for bloodshed, a potential that would inevitably materialize, it is perhaps more reasonable to argue that Rousseauism was ubiquitous in revolutionary France only because Rousseau presents so many political possibilities. Recalcitrant nobles, autocratic Committee members, and radical egalitarians all found a guide in the Genevan. As we move forward through history, examining other governments and their links to Rousseau, it is necessary to keep in mind that even Robespierre, fanatical and devoted, could not be a pure Rousseauian, if only because Rousseau’s corpus cannot be properly theologized. Even if Rousseau the man could become a figure of reverence, his work, filled with tensions, is incoherent as a literal dogma, if not as a broad political philosophy. Consequently, no one faction in the Revolution could completely adopt his work as their own without radically amending their own positions; in the centuries to follow, no movement would try, choosing instead to scrap Rousseauism as a whole and extract from it its most useful parts.

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The French Revolution provides us with the best opportunity to examine Rousseau’s suggestions deliberately enacted a mere few decades after their conception. However, echoes of Rousseau can be found in other movements, most of which lack a direct ideological connection to his work. In this section, we will briefly highlight strains of Rousseauian ideas in fascist, anti-imperialist, and liberal democratic contexts, specifically in the 20th century.
Bertrand Russell once boldly stated that “Hitler is the outcome of Rousseau,” a claim that has been echoed by critics of Rousseau’s nationalism, authoritarianism, and affinity for “traditional” values. Although reductive, Russell’s statement certainly has its justifications: 20th century fascist movements have, generally speaking, featured overt appeals to chauvinism and have even toyed with social democratic economic levelling in some cases. And after all, was it not Rousseau who claimed: “It is certain that the greatest miracles of virtue have been produced by the love of country”?

It is important for our project that we acknowledge the grain of truth in Russell’s accusation. The selectively applied economic reforms in Nazi Germany and Mussolini’s Italy were used as a tool to unite population majorities under the flag of fascism, as “party-sponsored assistance by word and deed constituted an excellent springboard for the mobilization of the masses…” Rousseau’s support of patriarchal gender roles is also reflected in the rise of the Third Reich: social roles for women eerily echoing those supported by Rousseau were a fundamental part of patriarchal Nazi propaganda, as the “desirability of motherhood for all German women became the central issue and family was seen as the germ cell of the nation…” The similarities between Rousseau’s thought and fascist policy reveal that the two share an important understanding: a reduction in political division (or in the case of fascism, political resistance) must be preceded by a reduction in social divisions.

What Russell and other critics perhaps misunderstand about the connection between Rousseau and fascism is that some degree of tactical similarity does not make two philosophies of governance identical. Rousseau’s attitude towards nationalism is, ironically, not “nationalistic” – that is, he does not think that patriotism or rhetoric of national superiority are necessarily correct, merely

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that such ideologies are useful. The project of German global hegemony, for instance, would surely be bewildering and likely repellent to Rousseau, who saw patriotism as a cohesive, uniting social force rather than one primarily aimed at outward conquest. Furthermore, Rousseau specifically attacks several core components of fascism in his work; he famously laments rule by tyrant in the Second Discourse, and lambasts the evils of conquest in The State of War. Of course, there is a publicity objection to be made – “How can a populace know that their nationalism is merely functional, not reflective of a grand truth?” – but there is still a clear distinction between Rousseau’s nationalism, which seeks to benefit all, and a fascist nationalism, which aims at uplifting specific portions of the population at great cost to others.

The most important and serious ideological gap between Rousseauism and fascism is, somewhat contradictorily, the strongest ideological tie between them: minimizing inequality. While fascist governments have promoted varying degrees of equal access to government services and have proposed equalizing cultural narratives, this “equality” is consistently undercut by a far more severe set of unequal conditions. The Nazi regime’s dedication to any kind of meaningful economic levelling was superficial at best, as a policy of privatization and aiding wealthy party elites was the actual norm;75 moreover, it is essentially illogical to argue that fascists, especially the Nazis, ever genuinely cared about equality when their cultural and economic policies rested on genocidal practices which furthered the isolation, stigmatization, and eradication of long-persecuted social and ethnic groups. It is difficult to reconcile the Rousseau who stated that slavery “is contrary to nature and no right can authorize it”76 with the horrors of Auschwitz.

Fascism is hardly the only political ideology that makes use of nationalism. Anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist movements, for instance, have utilized tactics resembling Rousseauian cultural

76 Rousseau, Political Economy, 124.
levelling in efforts to fight for national autonomy and equitable access to global resources. From his practical examination of the colonized Corsica and underdeveloped Poland to his analyses of international relations in *The State of War*, Rousseau consistently advocated national cultural homogeneity not as a means of domination, as fascist interpretations would suggest, but as a means of liberation. In her essay “The General Will and National Consciousness,” Jane Anna Gordon draws parallels between Rousseau’s later political works and Frantz Fanon’s postcolonial theory, noting how both thinkers express the importance of cultural homogeneity when discussing the formation or reformation of political states. For both Rousseau and postcolonial theorists, Gordon argues, “the possibility of legitimate political life turns on identifying what the differences of members of a polity share while refusing to reify forms of diversity that are the products of a lack of political possibility.”

Additionally, Rousseau’s economic suggestions, specifically in the *Poland* and *Corsica*, take on a stabilizing role in the formation of a newly formed or newly reconstituted nation. As Gordon notes, for Rousseau:

> What could sustain the character of a newly articulated nation was to maintain and deepen activity and life in the entire state by paying close attention to the emerging nature of civil power, to assure that it would take the form of legitimate authority rather than abusive wealth.

While Gordon clearly refers to Corsica here, the same logic applies to Rousseau’s suggestions for Poland, which he viewed as a lesser power in danger of conquest from Russia to the east and the Germanic states to the west. Rousseau’s suggestions for Poland are far from radical, but he

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78 Ibid, 40.
79 It is worth noting that both of Rousseau’s predictions here were realized several times over in the years following his death.
emphasizes the importance of national unity and attention to economic inequality much as Fanon does in his suggestions for revolutionary Algeria. Classes with interests exterior to those of the nation proper,⁸⁰ they agree, undermine the potential success of the emerging nation.

The echoes of Rousseau in fascism and anti-imperialism should perhaps be expected, as the Genevan is a thinker often categorized, both complimentarily and derogatorily, as a radical. But how does Rousseauian equality fit into liberal democracy, the apparently-moderate standard for modern government?⁹

Certainly, fascism and anti-imperialism have no monopoly on nationalism, and as Ethan Putterman notes, Rousseau’s cultural suggestions for Poland and Corsica “anticipate similar-type governmental regulative practice currently in effect in the United States and Europe.”⁸¹ Indeed, Putterman is right; liberal democracy benefits greatly from the uniting, equalizing ideal of the nation, and Rousseau’s cultural suggestions for Poland (the bestowing of public honors, state-sponsored sporting competitions, and so forth) find their evolved forms in national anthems, military parades, and the countless rituals and events that ideologically wed a people to their nation. Notably, the significant constitutional freedoms of most liberal democracies result in a patriotism sustained by mores and customs as well as by government edict; Rousseau, who argues in several works that custom is a more powerful method of governance than law, would surely find some merit in this.

The general avoidance of economic levelling by liberal democracies, especially in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, has been a topic of much recent discussion; we will save analysis of this issue for Chapter 5, in which I will discuss the role of Rousseau in contemporary politics. For now, it should be enough to say that where liberal democracies have succeeded in fostering patriotic

⁸⁰ Rousseau argues against Russia-born monarchs ruling Poland, while Fanon decries the national bourgeoisie in Algeria and other imperialized nations.

⁹¹ Ethan Putterman, “Realism and Reform in Rousseau’s Constitutional Projects for Poland and Corsica,” in Political Studies 49, No. 3 (August 1, 2001) 490.
sentiment and even on occasion nationalist fanaticism, they have in many places failed to address problems of economic inequality to an extent that would satisfy Rousseau.

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Rousseau is and was a man of history. He found ideas analogous to his own in the past in ancient Rome and Sparta; it is only to be expected that we should find that his thought spawned successors just as engaging as these predecessors. Still, my survey of Rousseau and modernity may seem confusing to some: “How is it valuable to show traces of Rousseau in movements that diverge so significantly from one another? Doesn’t it now seem as if Rousseau’s thought is infinitely interpretable, a philosophy signifying everything and nothing?”

Surely it goes without saying that this chapter does much to indicate the many directions in which Rousseau’s thought has been led, carried by an ideologically diverse group of heirs. However, as previously stated, my aim is not to make Rousseau’s thought seem vague and relativistic, and in fact, I have shown two concrete, specific things to be true about Rousseauism.

Firstly, I have shown that Rousseau’s work benefits from (or perhaps suffers from) a diverse material applicability. To those who argue that Rousseauian thought is muddled, contradictory, and abstract, we can respond by pointing to 200 years of history and saying: “Tell us again how the Genevan’s head is in the clouds when his ideas have been concretely implemented throughout modernity.” Despite the textual difficulties of the general will, sovereignty, and inequality, movements and governments have found elements of value in Rousseau and have applied them in manners tailored to material conditions; some of these movements have even independently discovered the merits of these ideas without knowing them to be Rousseauian at all.

Secondly, I have preemptively refuted the natural response to complaints about the implementation of Rousseauian ideas, complaints saying “Rousseauian thought has been implemented, yes, but should we really use the failures of the French Revolution as our basis for
political planning?” *Au contraire*, I reply, we should not and need not draw upon the Revolution alone when applying Rousseau’s ideas to contemporary politics. As I have shown with this thorough examination of Rousseau in history, there is a litany of ways in which Rousseauian ideas can be applied, selectively or holistically. History acts as a corrective as we apply the Genevan’s work to our current world; by acknowledging the Revolution, fascism, the failures of liberal democracy, and so forth, we are able to return to the philosophical content with an understanding of which ideas work, which do not, and which are only successful when implemented in conjunction with others.

In our final two chapters, I will reexamine Rousseau’s texts and evaluate them anew with an understanding of their historical usage and of criticism from varying philosophical sources. Equipped with tangible examples of what Rousseauian equality can look like in practice, I can now theorize as to how the Genevan’s analysis of social disparity may help us to create a world not unlike the one he wanted, a world characterized by unity and justice.
Chapter 4:

Tension and Cohesion: Constructing a Rousseauian Theory

Having provided context in previous chapters, I now move on to my own analysis of Rousseau. In this chapter, we will discuss the dilemmas of the Rousseauian theory of inequality: its seemingly contradictory demands, its struggle to deal with both the normative and the descriptive, and its ambitious vision for a political future. While it will be necessary (to some degree) to follow the paths of the thinkers addressed in Chapter 3 by removing some select elements of Rousseau’s work from the context of his entire corpus to discuss their merits, it is not our intention to simply pick and choose what is valuable and to discard the rest. Instead, this section will serve two main functions: to argue that a relative consistency regarding issues of inequality can be found within Rousseau’s grand political project, and to critically contrast the totality of this composite project with its divergent constituent components – that is, to critique the ways in which some of the particulars of Rousseau’s work do not serve his broader purpose.

To refute the common view of Rousseau (that his political work is inconsistent to the point of incomprehensibility) I will return to his relationship with inequality and make the counterpoint that Rousseau’s project is, in relation to this key issue, largely self-contained and cohesive. While in previous chapters I have openly argued that there are tensions and fragmentations within Rousseau’s thought that have made it difficult for thinkers to develop and easy for political figures to co-opt, in this chapter I argue that these tensions, while significant and worthy of critical attention, serve interrelated functions that can all be tied back to Rousseau’s primary political goals. The difficulties in Rousseau’s work on inequality have left it open to academic criticism, susceptible to selective readings and applications, and subject to favorable and unfavorable readings from a wide range of political groups, but despite this, I will argue that critics who refuse the possibility of a coherent Rousseauian political ideology are ultimately mistaken.
Once I have firmly established the features of this political ideology, I will critique it, returning to apparent contradictions to argue that, while the Rousseauian political project can logically be viewed as consistent, it lacks in its original form both the efficacy and teleological value that Rousseau surely would have sought to ascribe to it. What we mean by this is relatively simple – while Rousseau, within his own framework, possesses pragmatic justifications for his disparate, apparently-conflicting arguments, a critical exterior examination of this framework reveals that these tensions undermine the practical purposes the overall project is intended to address.

We will conclude this chapter, which will consist primarily of independent argumentation, with a brief recognition of the value of Rousseau’s project and a brief proposal for reshaping the Rousseauian framework to suit the needs of both today and the future, while retaining the core elements of his analysis of inequality. This chapter will, in sum, provide a critique of Rousseau, a critique of his critics, an assessment of his project, and an argument for its usefulness, all of which will enter into the discussions in our final chapter on Rousseau and contemporary political concerns.

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Rousseau’s critical view of inequality is, as previously discussed, justified by multiple political philosophical “values.” He argues that reductions in cultural and economic inequality serve a practical purpose, protecting the sovereign from stark internal divisions which would prevent it from pursuing the general will. He also makes arguments in a slightly different vein which seem to suggest that a state guided by the general will ought to provide equal consideration to each of its members, an equality which goes beyond the legal and civic realms to ensure that the most extreme cultural and economic disparities, which would harm or hinder citizens, do not arise. Put succinctly, Rousseau has both practical and humanist arguments in favor of reducing inequality.

Rousseau’s corpus contains several points that seem to conflict with this practicality and humanism, however. There are several instances (as mentioned in Chapter 1) in which Rousseau
seems to downplay or outright deny the problematic nature of certain inequalities. For example, he describes the theoretical value of localized direct democracy, but in practice advocates for a more hierarchical governmental structure that is devised by a sole wise legislator\textsuperscript{82} and maintained by a magistracy;\textsuperscript{83} he further argues that certain titles of nobility can be maintained in a just state.\textsuperscript{84} Additionally, he argues for the confinement of women to traditional household roles and clearly dismisses the idea that women should play any active role in government.\textsuperscript{85} These proposals, which argue in favor of inequalities from an ostensibly practical perspective, seem to contradict Rousseau’s broader arguments in favor of reducing inequalities for practical purposes.

Yet these apparent exceptions to the rule-of-limited-inequality do, in fact, play an important and comprehensible role in the Rousseauian political project (as he frames it). Understanding how these apparent tensions work towards a common goal requires an understanding of the aims which drive Rousseau’s project, and demands that we consider the extent to which equality is a \textit{means} for Rousseau and to what extent it is an \textit{end}. Returning to these dual underlying ideas – means and ends, descriptivity and normativity, practicality and ideology – allows us to, against all odds, view the Rousseauian project not as a series of fragmented parts, but as a whole.

Rousseau plainly outlines several of the fundamental criteria for his political project in the first book of the \textit{Social Contract} when he states that:

\textsuperscript{82} The legislator, described in Chapter 7 of book II of the \textit{Social Contract}, draws in part upon Plato’s idea of a “philosopher-king” in the \textit{Republic}. Since Rousseau (unlike Plato) carefully cautions against giving the legislator any executive or long-term legislative power, it is perhaps best to think of the legislator as the writer of a national constitution, not as actively involved in a state’s administration.

\textsuperscript{83} Again, it is important to add a caveat. Rousseau was keenly aware of the corruptibility of a magistracy and indeed warned against the unavoidable decay of the state due to the inevitably self-interested magistracy (also called the “prince”). Rousseau argued that to properly represent a body politic/state, a “prince” must be beholden to the general will and must be a servant of the sovereign (the people).

\textsuperscript{84} This argument is presented extensively both in the \textit{Social Contract} and the \textit{Poland}; see \textit{Poland} 48 for one such instance.

\textsuperscript{85} This argument is mentioned fleetingly in the \textit{Discourse on Political Economy} among other sources and is expounded at length in the \textit{Letter to d’Alembert}; see \textit{On Political Economy} 124 for an example.
I want to inquire whether there can be some legitimate and sure rule of administration in the civil order, taking men as they are and laws as they might be. I will always try in this inquiry to bring together what right permits with what interest prescribes, so that justice and utility do not find themselves at odds with one another.\textsuperscript{86}

This passage alone gives us a substantial amount of meaningful information. Rousseau’s political project aims to outline, or at least broach the possibility of, a “legitimate and sure”\textsuperscript{87} rule – implying some degree of non-oppressive governance and security – while attempting to reduce the conflict between “justice and utility.”

What this quote suggests is that Rousseau is not particularly interested in winnowing down his work’s aims to a single philosophical virtue. As I noted in Chapter 2, Neuhouser argues that Rousseau’s egalitarian suggestions are simple means aimed towards the end of liberty; Kendall suggests that they are a means towards security; Althusser suggests that they a means of resolving dialectical dilemmas inherent in the basics of his contractarian framework. What these analyses fail to realize is that Rousseau does not narrow his field of vision so readily. He extols liberty, security, legitimacy, and pragmatism all, often within the same work, and while it is difficult for us to comprehend a system in which these concepts are not in constant conflict, Rousseau aimed to devise a system in which these tensions could disappear – and for that system to work, inequalities must be diminished. This means that equality is not simply a means to an end, but a means to many ends, a uniquely important method with which a plurality of political goods can be achieved.

Let us briefly explain how these ideas, in Rousseau’s proposed society, may be reconciled. Liberty and security, two ideals often regarded as inherently at odds, are not opposed (or are, at least, less opposed) in a world without strict divisions: cultural and economic levelling reduce the partisan discord that so concerned Rousseau, which in turn effectively reduces the motivation for

\textsuperscript{86} Rousseau, \textit{Social Contract}, 156.
\textsuperscript{87} In the original French, “légitime et sûre,” implying “legitimate and sure” but also “legitimate and safe” or “legitimate and secure.”
intranational conflict and (if Rousseau’s nationalist proposals are adhered to) unites a state’s populace against exterior threats, thus heightening security. How does this also ensure liberty? By reducing the ability of the affluent to use their positions to take advantage of the underprivileged, thereby rescuing the poor from slavery and the rich from the moral degradation that Rousseau so worriedly associates with high society cultural affects. While Rousseau suggests that the economic aspects of such levelling be instituted through legal restrictions, the theoretical “non-liberty” of such laws is countermanded both by the positive liberties that such levelling introduces (the ability for a poor person to be free from subjugation) and by Rousseau’s suggestion that these inequalities can be fought by less restrictive, extralegal means – including the development of a negative cultural attitude towards wealth and greed via cultural homogeneity.

Instituting equality to diminish the tensions between legitimate, justifiable governmental action and uninhibited, purely practical action is, for Rousseau, similarly straightforward – practical policies veer into illegitimate/authoritarian territory when a ruling class subjects a portion of the population to lesser conditions in order to benefit the remaining portion, but in a society that has lessened or erased such conditional divisions, (in theory) there will be no disparate party that a government can exploit for the benefit of another. This is to say, what is practical for one person in a Rousseauian state of relative equality should be practical for all – meaning that, so long as the magistracy is acting in accordance with the general will, pragmatic methods will be inherently legitimate and will tend towards the good of all. Rousseau here reconciles a long-standing political tension – the conflict between political right and political reality – by making a basic argument in favor of uniting the will of the government and the will of the whole people. In a relatively equal

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88 Legal restrictions on wealth, mainly by way of taxes on luxuries, produced goods, and property, are suggested throughout Rousseau’s corpus, but most emphatically in the *Discourse on Political Economy*, *The Government of Poland*, and the *Social Contract*.

society, where most laws affect the average citizen more or less the same as their peers, a government will not have to worry itself over appeasing one group at cost to another; simply by fulfilling its sole mandate to the equal masses, the homogenous “people,” the government upholds its legitimacy without sacrificing its practical aims.

Rousseau’s attempts to reconcile political ideals via equality indicate the coherent nature of his ideological system, but to properly brand Rousseau’s disparate ideas as functionally compatible rather than wholly contradictory, we must also address two of Rousseau’s stances that seem to undermine his grand plan: his views on gender roles and governmental hierarchy. Later in this chapter, we will seriously criticize these two shortcomings, but for the sake of our argument that Rousseau’s political work forms a cohesive unit, it is essential to outline how his logic affirms the notion that “traditional” gender roles and hierarchical governance are integral (or at least non-detrimental) elements in the Rousseauian project.

Feminist writer Penny A. Weiss addresses the connection between Rousseau’s gender roles and his larger project in her book *Gendered Community: Rousseau, Sex, and Politics*. Weiss is determined to refute Rousseau’s apparent anti-feminism, but insists on critiquing it not as an outlying element of his philosophy, but as a core part of it; she thus devises a series of hypothetical arguments explaining how strictly defined gender roles can coherently function within Rousseau’s political project. Weiss claims that Rousseau does not argue that women should be relegated to the home due to a belief in the biological inferiority of women—after all, he describes men and women as extremely similar in the state of nature—but instead advocates for a “practical” division of labor that grants men and women different but (in his view) *not unequal* access to power. Weiss posits, for example, that Rousseau views the man’s power as a citizen-participant in governance to be comparable in value to

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90 Rousseau, *On Inequality*, 57.
91 The parallels here to the racist segregationist doctrine of “separate but equal” access are not lost on the author, nor should they be on the reader.
the woman’s influence over her husband in the home, writing “[a]s long as women affect the assembly, through their general influence on mores and education and their particular influence on individual men, they are considered by Rousseau to be political actors. His definition of ‘politics’ is a broad one, not unlike the feminist definition.”92 Rousseau believes that women belong in the private sphere, true, but he also believes that the private sphere is an important site for political action. Moreover, Weiss argues that Rousseau views the burdens of citizenry unique to each gender as equally demanding and rewarding; men are called to war and must endure the pressures of public life while women are called to motherhood and must endure the pressures of private life. Naturally, Weiss seriously objects to Rousseau’s conclusions from her own political and academic standpoint as a feminist, but she still emphasizes that Rousseau does not view his positions on gender as incompatible with his views on equality, even if we do.

A similar reading can be applied to the problem of hierarchy and nobility in the Rousseauian system. In the *Poland*, Rousseau advocates the retention of Poland’s nobility; in the *Social Contract*, he argues that nobles can coexist with a legitimate and just government so long as the law “cannot name specific persons to be admitted”93 to such elevated ranks. Similarly, he argues that while direct local democracy is the ideal form of governance, it is often impractical, and less democratic governmental forms such as aristocracy and monarchy are pragmatically best in some contexts. Surely, the classic argument goes, nobility and aristocracy or monarchy cannot coexist with anything resembling an egalitarian or equitable society. However, it is important to note two key clarifications on this point: firstly that Rousseau, in both his theoretical argumentation in the *Social Contract* and his practical advisement in the *Poland*, recommended that elevated ranks (and for Poland, even the crown) should be more or less meritocratic, in the sense that they are awarded based on individual

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service to the populace, and should furthermore be equally accessible in principle to all or most people;\textsuperscript{94} secondly that Rousseau consistently extols democracy over other forms of government even as he critiques its practical shortcomings, and clearly calls for ranks to be homogenized in democracies, stating that such governments require “a high degree of equality in ranks and fortunes, without which equality in rights and authority cannot subsist for long.”\textsuperscript{95} Even if Rousseau admits that there are contexts in which monarchy or aristocracy may be necessary for stable government, he repeatedly denounces the contexts that give rise to such a necessity – hence his admiration for the small, democratically-governable city-state. It is absolutely essential to note that in the world Rousseau wants to build – a world in which political values can be collectively achieved via egalitarian measures – the practical problems that give rise to aristocracy and monarchy must be absent; thus, his suggestions regarding aristocracy and monarchy are cautionary ones advising how best to govern outside of the ideal state we are discussing, not within it.

It is possible, then, to envision a Rousseauian project in totality, a project whose fundamental elements all work towards a political world in which a coexistence of disparate ideals is made possible by egalitarian realities. Of course, for the skeptical reader, there are sure to be objections galore to this internally “compatible” framework, some of which I will soon affirm. However, by establishing that the major tensions in Rousseau’s political project can, by a logic, be conceived as a whole system rather than a web of thinly interrelated concepts, we have now provided a new starting point for critique – instead of picking apart the individual portions of Rousseau’s work for their singular weaknesses, we now have the chance to critically analyze his work as a system.

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\textsuperscript{94} Rousseau, \textit{Social Contract}, 179 and \textit{Poland}, 52.
\textsuperscript{95} Rousseau, \textit{Social Contract}, 199.
Now that I have argued, in opposition to Rousseau’s critics, that even his most far-flung political suggestions can be viewed as aspects of a unified project, it is time to critique this project as we believe Rousseau presents it. While the incompatibly of Rousseau’s “egalitarianism” with his opinions on gender and non-democratic governance may seem to contain the most obvious opportunities for critique of the political project as we have so far outlined it, I will first present a number of broader objections to the notion that the ideals that Rousseau champions – legitimacy, pragmatism, liberty, and security – can be made compatible via his egalitarian measures. Then we will move on to critiques of his approaches to gender and hierarchy.

Perhaps the most difficult broad issue with Rousseau’s proposed cultural and economic homogeneity is the matter of its institution. While there is, of course, ample historical precedent for the implementation of economic levelling through the past few centuries, via both reformist and revolutionary means, the real difficulty comes with the implementation of Rousseau’s cultural homogeneity – which lacks large-scale, successfully-implemented modern historical-philosophical precedent.96 Geraint Parry, in his essay “Émile: Learning to Be Men, Women, and Citizens,” discusses the great difficulty of the tasks required to completely homogenize a society’s customs. Parry focuses primarily on the particular problems of re-educating an entire generation as culturally-uniform citizens, claiming that in order to create citizens determined to pursue the general will one must create a society of people “who are equal with oneself in their knowledge and understanding of the community and in their commitment to the public good.”97 Creating a society composed entirely of such citizens is difficult enough when one considers education alone; the task seems nearly impossible when analyses are turned to the many other cultural institutions that may have to be completely uprooted: the arts, the press, and (extremely alarmingly) ethnic, religious, and racial

96 In antiquity, Plato’s advocacy of the banishment of poets from his idealized kallipolis in the Republic offers a notable precedent for Rousseau’s more developed idea.
cultural traditions. As we discussed in Chapter 3, the most laudable attempts at fostering such cultural homogeneity were enacted in service of anti-colonial liberation movements; the worst were enacted in the service of fascism. Furthermore, if such cultural changes were to be introduced via gradual reforms, it is difficult to imagine that the removal of cultural institutions could be peacefully accomplished without the aid of such institutions themselves – a problematic catch-22, to say the least.

The difficulties of instituting economic levelling are far better documented, and in many cases, such levelling has produced positive results. However, it is extremely difficult to conceive of practically instituting economic levelling in the specific manner that Rousseau recommends – that is to say, regression to pseudo-agrarian social democracy seems to be fundamentally impossible in the contemporary age. Althusser’s criticisms, discussed in Chapter 2, correctly highlight the ahistorical nature of such a proposal; while a return to agriculture-driven localized economy can be envisaged, it certainly cannot be realistically envisaged without a frank acknowledgment that such changes would take radical, potentially destructive means to come to fruition.

These broad concerns, which highlight the apparent impossibility of implementing Rousseauian suggestions without aggravating the problems they endeavor to solve, are important, but we must also discuss more specific problems with Rousseau’s project by returning to issues of gender roles and hierarchy.

While to some extent the Rousseauian justification for strict gender roles may seem evidently flimsy to a contemporary liberal or leftist reader, it is important to point out why this justification fails conceptually even by his own logic. As Penny Weiss argues in *Gendered Community* (shortly after she outlines the hypothetical Rousseauian argument for gender roles), Rousseau’s ostensible belief that a gendered division of labor need not be unequal stems from an ignorance of the realities of such divisions. While Rousseau may have truly felt that the “traditional” role of women in private
life is equal in power and influence to the “traditional” role of men in public life, a wealth of feminist work has ardently and effectively argued that this is rarely, if ever, the case. Weiss concisely argues that “sexually-differentiated forms of power,” especially as Rousseau presents them, inherently rely on and produce “the acceptance of and need for manipulation, the preservation of the male ego, the objectification of women’s sexuality, the relative overvaluing of the masculine, and the silencing of women.”98 Bluntly, Weiss argues (and I agree) that power a woman may hold in the private sphere over her children or husband is effectively undermined by the profoundly oppressive patriarchal structures that necessarily accompany Rousseauian gender divisions. Consequently, Rousseau’s views on gender must be scrapped if his project is to genuinely rely on egalitarian measures to achieve political harmony.

Again, a similar logic applies to Rousseau’s views on hierarchy, both in governance and nobility. While Rousseau’s zeal for democracy is enviable, it is difficult to envision a contemporary political world consisting entirely of tiny nation states. As a result, it is similarly difficult to imagine that most Rousseauian political states would not be forced to revert to an aristocracy or monarchy in order to meet their practical needs; needless to say, these reversions would undermine the entire premise of the political project. Rousseau fundamentally fails to balance “justice and utility” on this issue by insisting that democracy is not practicable on a large scale. Again, a reworking is required here – if the core tenets of Rousseau’s project are to be realized, democracy must be reconceived as possible not just locally, but on a grand scale.

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In this chapter thus far, I have corralled Rousseau’s most contradictory ideas into a single project, despite the warnings of his most severe critics, and then have subsequently become a critic

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of this system, arguing that the logics justifying it are not compatible with the realities and necessities that confront them. Yet, we must conclude by noting that the Rousseauian system that we have pieced together, flawed as it may be, contains philosophical merit and contemporary usefulness.

Philosophically, Rousseau’s ideas are admirable for their ambition and thought-provoking in their achievements. The intention at the heart of this social project – to materially realize a reconciliation of humanity’s greatest ideals – suggests an attitude of radical optimism, grounded in a deep loyalty to the possible. Rousseau fundamentally believed, and repeatedly argued, that elements of political harmony need not be separated, and that they in fact are best realized in conjunction with one another. For Rousseau, liberty has little meaning without security and pragmatism little without legitimacy – and none of these ideals are possible without a foundation in economic and cultural equalities designed to ensure that these political fruits can be enjoyed by all.

In our contemporary age, characterized by frantic and ill-considered calls for liberty alone, security alone, legitimacy alone, and pragmatism alone, we can turn to Rousseau to realize that we need not pursue a solitary virtue. Moreover, we need not assume that prosperity can only be had by one or by some, but rather have the welcome opportunity to arrive at the conclusion that Rousseau did – that political right can only be achieved for all, by all, and with the will of all. In our next and final chapter, I will bring Rousseau into contemporary politics. I will explore the difficulties of adapting his work to the present, the practical challenges presented by his previously established philosophical shortcomings, and the parallels between contemporary movements and Rousseauian thought.
Chapter 5

Resurgence and Reimagining: Rousseau in Contemporary Politics

In the few short years since the watershed 2016 United State presidential election and the rise of President Donald Trump, political analysts and opinion writers have thoroughly mined the history of philosophy in an effort to draw parallels between the tumultuous circumstances of the day and the work of thinkers past. As a result, Rousseau has, in some small part, re-entered the contemporary political conversation, with his name appearing in newspaper and magazine titles like “How Rousseau Predicted Trump”\(^99\) and “Would Jean-Jacques Rousseau actually approve of Trump? Not exactly.”\(^100\)

These articles mainly explore Rousseau in relation to Trump and the ultraconservative right-wing movement that carried him to the White House. However (as I believe I have previously evidenced) Rousseau’s thought encompasses considerations beyond a single election, and indeed beyond electoral politics; he explores the political ramifications of culture and economy, broaches issues of gender (if poorly), and describes a societal vision and the means to achieve it. Consequently, a discussion of Rousseau’s relevance to contemporary movements must take into account the breadth of political problems facing the world today. This final chapter will examine Rousseau’s relevance to current social movements, will specifically highlight the ways in which his theories are echoed by contemporary calls for economic levelling and cultural overhaul, and will discuss how Rousseau’s work may be a compelling guide for growing progressive movements.


First, a few obvious caveats. When discussing Rousseau and contemporary politics, it is important to acknowledge which elements of his thought we do not intend to adapt to the present. Perhaps understandably, I have no intention of applying his politics of gender to the current day, and in fact argue that Rousseau’s conception of gender roles has no place in any thoughtful or substantive contemporary political theory. Additionally, my approach to a contemporary discussion of Rousseau will be broadly progressive, mainly due to the fact that I believe that, despite its conservative apologists and anti-feminist elements, Rousseau’s thought is broadly left-liberal, with an economic bent towards social democracy and an indisputable egalitarian tendency overall.

I also think it is important to specify that this chapter will focus largely on political considerations in the United States. In part this is a measure of convenience, as a discussion of Rousseau’s role in international politics deserves a level of scrutiny this short chapter cannot provide. In addition, the recent rise of both social democracy and calls for cultural homogeneity in the United States function as useful entry points for an analysis of Rousseau and contemporaneity. However, any omission of relevant international political concerns from this paper should not be taken as a statement of prioritization of American concerns; Rousseau’s ideas are internationally resonant and indeed, as I noted in Chapter 3, resemble post-colonial concepts that have received ample endorsement from movements in the developing world.

With these clarifications established, we will now move on to the analysis in earnest. I will focus on three contemporary American political phenomena: the ascendancy of a new social democratic movement, the current problems of cultural homogeneity and heterogeneity, and the erosion of democratic governmental structures. In addressing each of these phenomena we will dissect both current evocations of Rousseau-adjacent ideology and the potential for Rousseau-inspired solutions to related political problems.

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Even a cursory look at Rousseau’s economic suggestions reveals their similarity to social-democratic ideas. While we have previously examined the significant ideological distance between Rousseauian philosophy and Marxist theory, the current left-economic movement, spurred on by self-proclaimed socialist Senator Bernie Sanders’ 2016 Democratic presidential run, is largely non-sectarian, and its rhetoric resembles that of Rousseau perhaps more than that of Marx or Engels. The rise of the so-called “democratic socialists,” whose ranks include Sanders, Congresspersons Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib, and a mass of supporters in organizations such as Our Revolution and the Democratic Socialists of America, has rested on dialogue centered around reduction of income inequality rather than worker ownership of the means of production.

For example, in a January 2019 press release from Sanders in support of his *For the 99.8%* Act tax reform bill he stated:

> Our bill does what the American people want by substantially increasing the estate tax on the wealthiest families in this country and dramatically reducing wealth inequality. From a moral, economic, and political perspective our nation will not thrive when so few have so much and so many have so little.

Ocasio-Cortez has expressed similar attitudes in her public statements and interviews (“What we are seeing now is a ruling class of corporations and a very small elite that have captured government”), as has Tlaib. These ideas, drawing on the “1% versus 99%” phrasing popularized

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101 I refer to “democratic socialists” in quotes mainly because the term, used often by Sanders and representatives of the Democratic Socialists of America, lacks a narrow definition. Generally speaking, politicians speaking of “democratic socialism” seem to refer mostly to social-democratic ideas of a large welfare state bolstered by nationalization of some (but not all) major industries. The Democratic Socialists of America themselves are, according to their website and various promotional materials, a “big tent” socialist organization that welcomes socialists of various tendencies.


by the Occupy Wall Street movement, eschew traditional Marxist notions of liberation and class conflict in favor of language that contrasts the richest billionaires and the poorest workers, rather than the classically-defined bourgeois and proletariat.

Statements such as these are quintessentially Rousseauian. Like Rousseau, the politicians at the forefront of the contemporary social-democratic movement do not seek to completely disrupt the material relations of political economy, but instead seek to dilute extravagant wealth and remedy extreme poverty. Even Rousseau’s most extreme calls for economic levelling do not encourage complete economic egalitarianism, but rather state that “one of the most important items of business for government is to prevent extreme inequality of fortunes”\textsuperscript{104} and encourage reforms which prevent or discourage both the acquisition of massive wealth and the perpetuation of extreme poverty.

Additionally, in what is perhaps more a coincidental resemblance than a significant philosophical parallel, Rousseau’s oft-derided arguments for an economic pivot away from modern industry are partially revived in contemporary left politics, albeit in a far different context: the Green New Deal, a social-democratic policy designed to shift American industry and infrastructure towards renewable energy, reprises some of the critiques of production Rousseau uses to advocate for a return to agrarian production. Of course, no contemporary politician supports anything resembling Rousseau’s pseudo-feudal regression, but common arguments against the Green New Deal – especially those that harp on its logistical unfeasibility – mirror those chiding Rousseau for his impractical economic suggestions.

As I argued in the last chapter, Rousseau views the reduction of economic inequality as an essential for establishing a society that realizes the greatest political ideals to a full extent. In

\textsuperscript{104} Rousseau, \textit{On Political Economy}, 136.
contemporary social-democratic movements, I argue that we see a compelling version of Rousseauian economic philosophy presented both in rhetoric and in policy proposals. While the current public representatives of such ideas are perhaps few, their relative popularity indicates a real possibility that extreme income inequality could be significantly reduced in the near future, fulfilling one key requirement for the consummation of a Rousseauian society.

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As this work has made clear, economic considerations are not the only nor perhaps the most important prerequisites for Rousseau’s ideal world. A level of cultural homogeneity is also essential – but in present-day America, sharply divided by political and cultural rifts, such a goal may seem incredibly lofty. The additional fact that the loudest contemporary supporters of cultural homogeneity are often white nationalists and xenophobes does little to further legitimize the relevance of Rousseau’s philosophy of mores.

However, as we argued in our previous chapter, Rousseau’s arguments regarding cultural homogeneity have serious weaknesses (particularly regarding gender) and have historically been implemented only clumsily and uncritically – Robespierre’s ham-fisted attempts to create a civil religion and regulate art during the French Revolution spring to mind here. A critical reimagining of Rousseauian cultural levelling could present a powerful tool for combatting white supremacist and right-wing extremist efforts to subjugate minority cultures to Western ethnic hegemony.

To craft such a reimagining, we must return to the root of Rousseauian cultural theory – the insistence on creating a sovereign in which all or nearly all members follow the direction of the general will. As we noted in Chapter 3, Rousseau is not concerned with the notion that any particular culture is superior and deserves total national adherence so much as he wants culture clash to be minimal enough to not divide the sovereign into incompatible rival parties. I argue that, by
adhering less to a strict rule of total cultural equality and more to a guiding principle of cultural compatibility, we will be able to adapt Rousseau’s ideas to the current age.

There are ample precedents throughout history of national and local movements establishing unity across cultural boundaries in the service of similar political goals. As far as Rousseauian cultural theory is concerned, various cultures need not share common traditions and history so long as they share common ends. While the institution of a cultural coalition stretching across racial, gender, religious, sexual, and ethnic lines requires a circumvention of many Rousseauian practical suggestions – veneration of national history, a unifying religion, et al – if it meets Rousseauian goals, then these breaks from minutiae are ultimately inconsequential. Furthermore, the possibility for intercultural coalition defies Rousseau’s ideas in an effort to redeem their best elements, leaving behind the rigid, traditionalist specifics that led the Genevan into questionable positions on gender and national propaganda. Some of the most important progressive projects of the past 100 years have built their platforms on similar goals, goals which aim to refine past ideas in order to bring forth their genuine potential – here, we can echo Martin Luther King, Jr.’s still-resonant call for America to “rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed” by demanding that Rousseau’s philosophy do the same.

It is important to distinguish between this idea of a politically-useful cultural coalition and the idea of multiculturalism as an end in itself. Much as Rousseau extols cultural homogeneity as a political tool rather than as a mode of propagating a single “correct” culture, so too do I argue here that multiculturalism’s intrinsic value is a nonissue in this Rousseauian context. My principal

105 As stated previously, this chapter approaches Rousseau from a broad left perspective; as such, we refer here to groups such as the Rainbow Coalitions of 1968-1969 and 1984 in America, the 1972 Common Program in France, and various other left-leaning coalitions, both electoral and non-electoral.

argument is that Rousseau’s claim that a single national culture would achieve beneficial political ends is incorrect, and that a tolerant multicultural society based around select shared values actually achieves the goal that Rousseau thought cultural homogeneity would. To clarify – my intention is not to offer a broad argument for or against multiculturalism, but to argue that Rousseau is fundamentally mistaken when he claims that a monolithic set of all-encompassing cultural institutions would properly and durably ease divisions within existing intranational cultures. Attempts to institute a single national culture have historically exacerbated disparities between factions of the populace and systems of tyranny – it is important to note how calls for cultural homogeneity often tend to, in reality, function as calls to reinforce reactionary norms imposed by the powerful upon the oppressed.

The notion that cultural elements are valuable not simply due to their differences but also due to their commonalities contains the necessary underpinnings for both a lasting multiculturalism and a political project designed to achieve long-term stability and liberty. The difficulty of humanely achieving a Rousseauian monoculture has been noted by practically every Rousseau scholar who has written on the topic; a nation that maintains economic balances while ensuring that its multiple historically-rich cultural traditions are maintained would surely benefit from the same democratic cohesiveness Rousseau so zealously pursued without delving into needless, fruitless bloodshed. With this said, I believe that it would be far too easy to write off Rousseau’s entire cultural framework simply because a broad, undeveloped call for cultural homogeneity contains similarities to the direst political movements of our time. Instead, we can acknowledge the validity in Rousseau’s idea – political will does require some level of consensus to be democratically enacted –

107 Examples of cultural impositions causing or continuing violence and subjugation are unfortunately common; while obvious examples such as the Nazi regime and the Spanish Inquisition spring to mind, contemporary examples (such as recent attacks on non-white and non-Christian minority groups in the United States) are not lacking.
while acknowledging that his end goals are best achieved via intercultural solidarity, not via an oppressively-maintained cultural hegemony that subjugates minority cultures.

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Evoking Rousseauian ideas when talking about the collapse of contemporary American democracy may seem counterintuitive. The philosophical foundations of American government were built on Locke and Montesquieu, after all, and Rousseau himself is skeptical about the possibility of genuine democracy, even though he clearly thinks it the ideal system for a world where practical problems are of little concern.

Why, then, do I argue that Rousseau’s thought is relevant to contemporary crises of American democracy? The answer is twofold: firstly, contrasting Rousseauism with the political and philosophical bases of American government gives us the opportunity to reassess these bases in a new light; Rousseau’s writing gives us a theoretical framework that we can use to critique the United States’ historical failure to achieve democratic outcomes and pursue economic egalitarianism. Secondly, Rousseau’s claim that cultural and economic equalities are necessary prerequisites for right government provides significant insight into the cultural and economic roadblocks to present-day democracy in the United States.

Rousseau is at times starkly practical, as we have previously noted, and this occasionally leads him to misidentify the plausibility or implausibility of a political endeavor; namely, he believes true democracy is a difficult (if not impossible) proposition because “it is unimaginable that the people would remain constantly assembled to handle public affairs”\textsuperscript{108} and it requires “a very small state where it is easy for the people to gather together and where each citizen can know all the others.”\textsuperscript{109}

While Rousseau is perhaps correct in stating that his particular vision of democracy, in which a

\textsuperscript{108} Rousseau, \textit{Social Contract}, 199.

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid, 199.
national populace regularly meets in its entirety to make political decisions, is unrealistic, he perhaps goes too far when he suggests democracy itself is truly impossible for a large national population.

Rousseau is onto something with his recognition that popular participation is key to democracy, and while I do not intend to argue in favor of a strict observance of his public square governance, I do believe that Rousseau’s arguments in support of the direct participation of the sovereign point to a major problem in contemporary American politics: a lack of citizen control over everyday governance. While local governments solicit some degree of direct citizen involvement, the major decisions made at state levels and national levels are, at least in many areas, inaccessible to the average citizen – especially those afflicted by the most barbaric effects of inequality. In Rousseauian terms, our contemporary political world, populated by lobbyists and political action committees, greatly hampers the ability of the sovereign to directly guide the path of its own government.

In this problem lies both a Rousseauian criticism of the basic governmental structure of the United States – outside of elections, it lacks formal institutions which provide citizens with direct means of holding their magistracy accountable – and of present-day economic structures which allow small groups of affluent citizens to exercise disproportionate control over (ostensibly) democratically elected politicians, many of whom are carried to power by the resources of rich individuals and corporations. For Rousseau, calling this sort of system a democracy would be appalling; he would be far more likely to brand this type of system as a sort of aristocracy\textsuperscript{110} or oligarchy, and would argue that regular, substantive input from the sovereign into political decision-making is a necessary constitutive component of democratic government.

\textsuperscript{110} Rousseauian aristocracy as explained in the Social Contract is a midpoint between true democracy and monarchy that in many ways resembles contemporary conceptions of representative government.
A Rousseauian response to the American national crisis of democracy would encourage a return of the non-office holding citizen to the active, decision-making political process\footnote{Much of Rousseau’s praise for his home state of Geneva (specifically in the Letter to the Republic of Geneva that prefaces the Discourse on Inequality) is directed towards the laudable fact that Genevan citizens had a considerable amount of control over their city’s legislation.} and the institution of a certain measure of executive power in the sovereign. This is an essential step to curb politicians who work for private wills and not the general will, and could take the form of increasingly powerful, citizen-controlled local governments – or perhaps in the short term, legal restrictions on the role of PACs in elections and other such measures that would weaken the influence of the rich, if not directly bolstering the influence of the poor. This sort of equality-based program (in this case most notably economic equality) would be genuinely necessary for creating actual democracy; senators, congresspersons, and even presidents controlled even in part by wealthy donors with a private interest in retaining their wealth are an obvious infraction upon basic rules of Rousseauian economic homogeneity, and do much to undermine the national pursuit of the general will. From a Rousseauian perspective, a restructuring of democratic participation and of money in politics would be an obligatory and urgent prerequisite for elevating the nation to even partial democratic status.

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The extent to which Rousseau’s thought remains both politically relevant and practically viable in certain contemporary contexts is considerable. His ideas, when crudely applied, have historically given rise to violence and instability, but a plausible reassessment and reimagining of Rousseauian thought, with present-day concerns and criticisms kept in mind, brings forth an abundance of useful material solutions to persistent problems. In the American political landscape, where left-leaning politicians seem unwilling to turn to Marxist ideas but are determined to bring
about some semblance of equality, Rousseau’s ambitious but markedly different theories ought to have great purchase.

An egalitarianism that acknowledges the impossibility of right government without social unity, that advocates democracy even in unfavorable circumstances, and that holds great optimism regarding the prospect of a people working towards the common good – this is the ideology that Rousseau offers to us. Even with all its apparent contradictions, the contradictions that naturally appear in philosophies characterized above all by their ambition, Rousseauian thought still provides radical ideas of great hope and possibility – the very ideas that are most vital in a historical moment of devastating inequality and fallen democracy.
Conclusion

Rousseau is a difficult thinker. By claiming that he presents a coherent political argument, I do not believe that I have in essence denied the fascinating (and often infuriating) tension that characterizes his work. That being said, I sincerely hope I have sufficiently argued that difficult work, especially work that seems to defy convention, deserves proper reexamination and critical reassessment. As I stated early on, in Chapter 2, there are no proper Rousseauians – I add now that if there were, I would not be one. With that caveat set, I still believe that the roadblocks to a proper Rousseauism are, largely speaking, surmountable. While I harbor no illusions as to the current possibility of the development of a Rousseauian academic “school,” I do hope that his treatment in the academy improves to an extent that such a proposal may someday not seem out of the question.

Of course, Rousseau’s relevance will linger on regardless of its academic treatment, as I believe this thesis has made clear. His impact, on various schools of academic thought as well as the annals of history, has long endured and will continue to do so, if not in journal citations then in the deeds of the contemporary movements that draw upon his powerful ideas, impassioned arguments, and concern for political justice. Earnest pleas for equality and democracy have been on the lips of politicians and revolutionaries for hundreds, if not thousands, of years; amongst these cries, Rousseau’s stands out as one of the most ambitious and determined.

There is a great power and great humanity in Rousseau’s view of equality; even though he laments the necessity for governance at all, as opposed to the “state of nature,” it is very telling that he argues passionately for a government that completely defies the individualism of that natural condition. Instead he advocates for a state that is responsible for the basic care and nourishment of all, that can only fulfill its true potential when it works for everyone, and that keeps power with the people. Such sentiments have fallen in and out of fashion with the ebb and flow of time, but – as a
sentimentalist rather than an academic – I believe that they contain some internal truth about what we humans owe each other.

If all we can gain from Rousseau is that message, then it is enough. That being said, I hope that this thesis has convincingly presented the case that there is much, much more of value in Rousseau, and that by examining his work we are able to more closely examine ourselves, the world that we have built for ourselves, and the world we might be able to build one day, as citizens and equals.
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