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All or nothing with no in-between

"Rousseau for everyone?" Before we get too comfortable with the founder of ecology, the pioneer of the Occupy movement and the forefather of hiking, let us attempt to take a proper look at him in this anniversary year.

By Daniel Di Falco

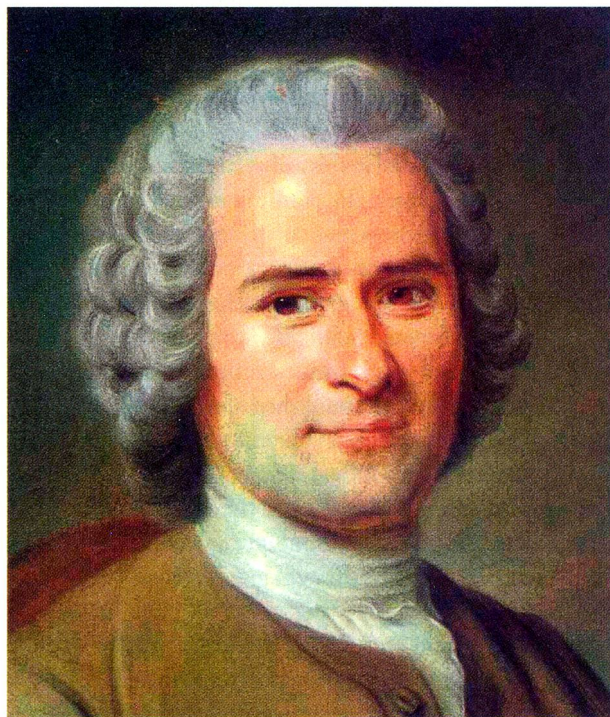
During their lifetime we keep them small, but in death we make them larger than life and bask in their glory – this tends to be the fate of illustrious figures. It is no different with Geneva and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the philosopher, pedagogue, author, composer and botanist, just somewhat more dramatic.

On 9 June 1762, Rousseau fled from Paris in a carriage with an arrest warrant hanging over him because of his novel "Emile", which besides his reform teachings also contained the profession of a religion without a church. The police seized the books fresh off the press. They were torn to pieces and burnt under a parliamentary decree in the courtyard of the Palace of Justice. Rousseau reached Geneva and hoped to be welcomed in the city where he was born on 28 June 1712. He had always proudly declared himself a "Citoyen de Genève" (citizen of Geneva), and hailed Geneva as a "model for all other peoples".

Geneva received him as a persona non grata. The city fathers also immediately banned Rousseau's "Contrat social" (Social Contract) as well as "Emile". They issued a warrant for his arrest, and this time his books were burnt in front of the city hall. He fled again and obtained temporary asylum in Neuchâtel, which was under Prussian rule at the time, after being turned away by the Bernese as well. Now in exile, Rousseau took revenge on Geneva in a war of words. He renounced his citizenship in a letter to the mayor.

And in 2012? Geneva is honouring him with a magnificent celebration to mark his 300th birthday – there is hardly a day without a planned event. The city has also revamped the Île Rousseau, including the Rousseau memorial, and adorned it with

new poplars. A new house of literature has been named after him, and the Rousseau Society, which publishes his complete works, is now well subsidised. Rousseau's estate is part of UNESCO's world heritage, and his name represents a touristic asset for Geneva: along with Dunant and Calvin, he makes the city famous the world over, embodying the



Jean-Jacques Rousseau painted by Maurice Quentin de la Tour (1753)

"esprit de Genève" (spirit of Geneva). The fact that he was ostracised during his lifetime and his books burned "for fear of the revolutionary wind that he created" is acknowledged in the official guidebooks with remarkable candour.

Admittedly, it took some time to get to this stage. The memorial on the small island in the Rhone was created by the revolutionaries of 1846. They honoured Rousseau as a pioneer of democracy and, in so doing, provoked Geneva's establishment, the patri- cians and the Church, who regarded him as a godless figure and an instigator of the

revolutionary terror in France. The row was still raging in 1878, the year of the centenary of his death, but it had subsided completely by the time of the celebrations of 1912 – his 200th birthday was a public festival. The people of Geneva had reconciled themselves with the past and come to accept the less controversial sides to Rousseau. "Rousseau

pour tous" (Rousseau for everyone) is this year's anniversary slogan. Really? Rousseau for everyone? Rousseau for everyone, and Rousseau for everything. In March, a podium debate was held in his honour in New York. Sitting there alongside politicians, academics and a representative of "Occupy Wall Street" was Pascal Couchepin, who had no difficulty giving an answer to the question as to what Rousseau would have said about the current state of democracies. He would have been concerned, and the issues causing anxiety would have been those which trouble the former Federal Councillor – growing social inequality, dwindling public spirit and the power of money in politics. Rousseau would have condemned the financial industry's "confiscation of such a large share of value creation",

as Couchepin put it, as "feudalism". And everything somehow fitted together nicely. Rousseau – the voice of the statesman from the Federal Palace, the anti-capitalist activist on the street and the philosopher from the 18th century.

Thousands of answers

But didn't the great man say that the financial system was a threat to any republic and that even the term finance was a "slave's word"? He did, it was in the "Contrat social", and he said much more besides – enough in fact for thousands of answers to the question

as to what is currently relevant about his thinking. Rousseau was the first to describe the people as sovereign and is therefore the patron saint of the “indignant” and the “outraged” in their struggle against the arrogance of the ruling classes. He was also the first person to take such a radical stance against the power of science and technology, on behalf of nature and morality. Even though the terms did not exist back then, today he would have been an environmentalist, a Green and a critic of growth. He dismantled the myth of the adulation of progress and discovered another truth – the triumph of reason drives the humanity out of man.

So much for reason! Instead, Rousseau released emotion from its shackles. “I am my heart”, he said, and probably no philosopher has done as much for the good reputation of emotion and conscience. He drew a contrast between society, with its restrictive conventions and formalities, and “natural man”, who is honest and genuine, primal and intuitive. Awareness of social justice, the fight for human rights and humanitarian efforts are today based on these convictions.

Timelessness and current relevance

What more does it take to prove the modernity of this three-hundred-year-old thinker? He could also be lauded as the forefather of escapists after his Robinson Crusoe-like exile on St. Peter's Island in Lake Biel in 1765 or the pioneer of hiking on account of his love of walking and nature. He can also be seen as the mastermind behind living in the countryside because of his loathing of cities and his enthusiasm for rural life. And someone also claimed this year that without Rousseau there would be no organic food.

Rousseau for everyone? Rousseau in everyone. This raises the question of what is left of him. It would appear that Rousseau has influenced western thinking so comprehensively that we encounter him today in every part of our self-perception. In fact, he has continued to have a sustained and fundamental impact. Ideas once resulting in arrest warrants have become common sense. Hats off to Rousseau – we could spend an entire anniversary year thanking him for making us everything we are.

However, that would not be particularly interesting. It would be confusing two things, timelessness and current relevance. Rousseau – the progenitor of everyone and

everything? If that were the case, we could practically forget about him again. So, what does he have to teach us that we have not already internalised? If Rousseau has significance for us today, it is to cause us concern not offer us comfort. He did not want to confirm the certainties of his contemporaries but instead to challenge them.

Let us return to 1750. Did the boom of the sciences help to “improve morality” – this was the key question in the competition that the Academy of Dijon held for academics. The answer Rousseau provided in his essay “Discours sur les Sciences et les Arts” (Discourse on the Arts and Sciences) shocked Europe and instantly made him famous. He won the competition with the disturbing notion that the development of civilisation was in truth a story of decline and decay: in his “natural state” man lives independently and freely, but in society he is like a slave in increasingly tight chains – the evil lies in the essence of society. This provoked a scandal in this age of Enlightenment that celebrated the continuous, indeed inevitable, improvement of life by science and technology.

Rousseau opened up a chasm around which he would build his entire philosophy – nature is good, society is bad. His main works were then published almost simultaneously twelve years later, the two titles that made him a political refugee in 1762, and even though it seems the “Contrat social” and “Emile” were attempts to overcome the chasm, they made it even greater.

Theory and practice in democracy

Assuming there was a state but a judicious one and not one where the Church and king could mask their tyranny as the work of God, how should such a republic be conceived and established? This is the issue the “Contrat social” addresses. Various philosophers before him had set out the idea that a state was only legitimate if it was conceptually based on a “contract”, an agreement between free and equal people. However, Rousseau rejected all their proposals and put greater emphasis than his predecessors on freedom and equality in the solution to the problem of how to reconcile human nature with political rule. He wrote: “The problem is to find a form of association in which each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone, and remain as free as before.” Only the law should be above the individual.

It sounds like a statement that we could all endorse – of course we are all free democrats, of course we do not obey people but laws. However, it did not take Rousseau long to show that this is just theory and must always remain so. Even a simple parliamentarian, though elected, rises above other citizens. And above the laws since he makes them. “The moment a people gives itself representatives, it is no longer free”, wrote Rousseau. What he called for was a state without politicians, government or officials – inconceivable under the conditions of modern life.

Furthermore, an absolute common good



The Rousseau memorial on St. Peter's Island in Lake Biel

exists in his absolute republic, a state-like interest, so to speak, that everyone has in equality and freedom which must never be ignored, not even in a referendum. He wrote: “This presupposes, indeed, that all the qualities of the general will still reside in the majority: when they cease to do so, liberty is no longer possible.” This also conflicts with the modern perception of democracy, according to which there is competition of interests and the majority decides.

Man or citizen

This, however, is not negotiable for Rousseau: freedom and equality either exist completely or do not exist at all. His “Contrat social” is not a draft for an ideal republic but rather evidence that even in his age the

judicious state is an impossibility and the original kingdom of freedom and equality is lost to man as a citizen. And what about today? Rousseau is like a thorn in the side of real democracy. What about the outvoted? What about referenda that ignore the imperative of freedom and equality? Can authorities exist that use unlawful means to apply laws? Rousseau's current relevance is a healthy uncertainty about what we actually mean when we call ourselves democrats.

With the “Contrat social”, Rousseau buried the republic, and that had consequences. His work “Emile”, a tract on pedagogy disguised as a novel in which public education

and can, paradoxically, only succeed in an artificial sphere that protects the child from society. Here is Rousseau's great chasm again – natural education on one side, public on the other; the interests of the individual on one side, his integration into society on the other.

The hero of the novel also grows up in rural seclusion under the guardianship of an educator called Jean-Jacques (Rousseau, of course). The aim is for Emile to discover his innate freedom, which will later help him to survive in life outside. The teacher dedicates all his efforts to this every day for two decades. And then everything goes wrong. At the end, we meet an unhappy loner who has been dealt many blows by destiny. “Everything vanished like a dream”, Emile writes to his teacher. “Still young I lost everything – wife, children, friends, in sum everything – even commerce with my fellows. My heart has been torn apart by all its attachments.”

The young man has fallen into that epochal abyss that Rousseau once again presents to his readers – man is “good by nature” but there can be no approximation between him and society. The vision of a successful life also fails because it would require total control over the pupil. In the same way as a republic that reconciles man and citizen is impossible, so is an education that sustains the contradiction of individual and society. Rousseau's diagnosis is once again crushing and completely at odds with the image of the great human benefactor we encounter everywhere in this anniversary year.

Principle and reality

Jean-Jacques Rousseau would have been three hundred years old on 28 June. His main works will celebrate their 250th anniversary and, despite the fact that he fought against this on many occasions, both provided the script and served as bibles for revolution – the “Contrat social” for a political one and “Emile” for an educational one. One thing that was clear to Rousseau is that the development of civilisation is irreversible. “Retour à la nature?” (Return to nature?) is the slogan that defines the image of the philosopher, yet it does not come from him. Rousseau strictly ruled out any such return. He did not proclaim any utopia and certainly not a return to one. All he had to offer was an exhaustive look at disaster and the contradictions in which modern life engulfs mankind. This is also how he would have

wanted “Emile” to have been understood. “This so frequently read, so little understood and so sinistfully interpreted book is nothing more than a tract on the original goodness of man which aims to show how vice and fallacy, which are unfamiliar to man's basic nature, pervade him from outside and transform him unnoticed.”

In principle at least. But Rousseau is a man of principle, and you will search in vain for a sense of reality in his work. Perhaps that represents a provocation in an age like ours that values “solutions” above all else – Rousseau does not play the game. He presents us with principles that are valid, with democracy or education aimed at children, and his books are the blackboards on which he shows what remains of them at the end of the day.

His arch-enemy Voltaire, the great mind of the Enlightenment, provided us with a marginal note that he wrote in one of Rousseau's books: “You always exaggerate everything.” But Rousseau's demonstrations on the blackboard remain difficult to refute even today precisely because he was so absolute and inexorable. And what about the principles? Less remains of them than one might have hoped. For Rousseau this would not detract from the ideals that he held high. It is more a case of reality being unsuccessful. We continuously fail to meet our own expectations – this is the reminder with which Rousseau burdens and unsettles us. He still gets us up off the sofa. Even now.

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ROUSSEAU 2012

Exhibitions, presentations, operas, plays, readings, concerts, films, discussions and city tours – Rousseau is everywhere. Geneva is the epicentre of the anniversary year. The highlights are a “Republican Banquet” and a spectacular multimedia event in the La Grange park to mark Rousseau's 300th birthday on 28 June. The entire programme can be found at: www.rousseau2012.ch. Anniversary events will also be held in the canton of Neuchâtel (www.rousseau300.ch, www.neuchatel-tourisme.ch) and on Lake Biel (www.biel-seeland.ch).