

Alexis Keller

ROUSSEAU AND THE REPUBLICAN TRADITION

Merja Kylmäkoski (2000): *The Virtue of the Citizen. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Republicanism in the Eighteenth-Century French Context*. (forthcoming: Peter Lang)

The idea of writing about Rousseau after two centuries worth of reflections about the author of *Du Contrat Social* may seem, at first glance, rather audacious, if not of little interest. We may even believe that everything has been said, that the force behind Rousseau's thought has faded with time and lost its relevance. Merja Kylmäkoski's thesis proves just the opposite. Not only does she remind us of the extent to which the popularized Rousseau is a myth, but she also guides us to rediscover certain decisive characteristics of Rousseau's philosophy by positioning it within the republican tradition brought to the fore by Quentin Skinner and J. G. A. Pocock. Moreover, Merja Kylmäkoski emphasizes David Rosenfeld's and Helena Rosenblatt's arguments on the importance of Geneva's political and religious context in Rousseau's thought¹ and offers us an original perspective by comparing Rousseau's republicanism to that of certain French writers.

In her Chapter II, Merja Kylmäkoski discusses the meaning behind the concepts of republic, virtue, and citizen, as well as how they interact with one another in Rousseau's political thought. She describes how Rousseau distances himself from French thinkers, how he warns his readers of his contemporaries' frequent confusions, particularly with the terms "bourgeois" and "citizen." "The real meaning of this [last] word has been almost wholly lost in modern times," wrote Rousseau in 1762 (*Du Contrat Social*, Chapter 6)². She also discusses how Rousseau's concept of citizen is typically masculine, as compared to the eighteenth century's feminine and archetypal vision of economic and speculative man. At the same time, she emphasizes the political vision of virtue found in Rousseau's philosophy. Following Montesquieu, Rousseau was not looking to turn man toward God. His concept of virtue is not Christian; it is Stoic and, above all, republican. From this perspective, his *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* and *Du Contrat social* are republican texts in which Rousseau pits ancient "mœurs" against modern corruption in a formula borrowed directly from Montesquieu's presentation of the principle of democracy: "The ancient politicians discussed morals and virtues incessantly; our politicians speak only of commerce and money." Even Rousseau's contemporaries made no mistake about the citizen of Geneva, seeing in his work "the first teachings on a Republic."

Consequently, we understand better why Rousseau, in his debate with Melon over luxury, rejected the theory of "doux commerce" put forth by Montesquieu, Hume, Millar, and Gournay (Kylmäkoski, Chapter IV). This theory challenged several main points of the republican concept of the citizen, beginning with the need for equality, the concept of frugality, and the idea of active participation in political power, a point dear to Rousseau. Merja Kylmäkoski is correct to point out that Rousseau's critics come from several angles (Chapters IV and VI). First off, in terms of politics, Rousseau insists that commerce promotes tyranny by distracting citizens from their public duties and confining them to their shops, making them love peace and stability more than liberty, and power of government more than its legitimacy and its submission to laws. In his *Lettres écrites de la montagne*, Rousseau explains to the citizens of Geneva how their concern for their private matters has caused them to let the magis-

trates and the “Petit-Conseil” encroach on their attributions. “You are neither Romans nor Spartans. You are not even Athenians. Leave the great names alone as they are not your own. You are businessmen and artisans, bourgeois who are always busy with their private matters, their work, their businesses, their merchandise, men for whom liberty itself is nothing more than a means to acquire freely and to own without fear.” (*Oeuvres Complètes*, Paris, Gallimard, tome III, pp. 881–882).

In terms of morality, Rousseau sees the issue of corruption as a crisis of values. By evoking Petty’s and Mellon’s claims that political arithmetic reduces everything, including men, to a common denominator, Rousseau asserts that virtue cannot be appreciated in such a formula. If a man’s value is only measured by his consumption inside a State, we can only measure the difference in wealth and luxury; we definitely cannot measure military merit, resistance to being conquered – the only points that count in politics. Thus, between virtue and commerce arises a distinction between the being and the appearance, which separates the transparency of virtuous “mœurs” and the deceptive uniformity of a world in which “we no longer dare to appear to be what we are.”

Throughout her work, and based on writings by Judith N. Shklar and Maurizio Viroli³, Merja Kylmäkoski argues that Rousseau, in his critique of luxury and “doux commerce,” develops a comprehensive theory of the “contradictions of the social system” (*Œuvres complètes*, tome IV, p. 311). What appears beneath the mask of civil peace is, in reality, a merciless war that pits men against each other in a situation similar to what we find in Hobbes’ natural state. What appears to be peace and quiet is nothing more than vile servitude and what appears to be a union is actually a division. Alleged kindness is nothing more than the exacerbation of passions, politeness nothing more than the art of deception, sociability nothing more than mistrust and jealousy, and ties of commerce and civility nothing more than the knots by which the powerful bind the poor to dependency. As for laws, they are nothing more than the formidable power with which the strong arm themselves against the weak. In short, modern society, which claims to be the chef-d’œuvre of the art of governing and the masterpiece of the human mind, is a system of secret conflicts and competitions in which the fear that men inspire in each other

and the need they have to protect themselves causes them to renounce liberty.

By describing in great detail Rousseau's critiques of the theorists of "doux commerce," Merja Kylmäkoski makes a bold comparison between the author of *Du Contrat social* and Abbé Coyer (Chapter V). In 1756, Abbé Coyer published a 215-page work entitled *La Noblesse commerçante* in which he invites the nobility to become commercial and to step outside of their military roles. He explains that the benefits will be two-fold: the nobility, particularly the poor nobility who is confined by misery to lands it does not even have the means to cultivate, will become rich and be able to maintain its rank; commerce, free from prejudice that turns away those who are not businessmen, will no longer be despised, but become an honorable occupation. It will grow, agriculture will benefit, the population will increase, and consumption will rise. To convince the nobility to focus on commerce, Abbé Coyer uses the mercantilist connections between war and commerce, most of all, maritime commerce. He points out the similarities between them, the ways in which they complement each other, only to conclude that the age of military invasions is over and the age of commercial society is upon us. This idea is not new, but his work caused a great sensation and prompted reactions from all sides. In 1756, Philippe Auguste de Foix, the Chevalier d'Arcq, countered with *La Noblesse militaire, ou le patriote français*. Many others borrowed arguments from Montesquieu to state their belief in the incompatibility of the nobility, the monarchy, and commerce. In particular, the parliament of Grenoble, in consultation with General Inspector Moreau de Séchelles, published an *Observations sur un projet d'édit pour donner à la noblesse du royaume la faculté de commercer sans déroger* (1757) commentary about a proposition to give the kingdom's nobility the possibility of conducting commerce without losing any of its privileges.

Merja Kylmäkoski explains that, by partially dissociating luxury from commerce, Abbé Coyer links commerce to virtue and peace, which enables him to break the classic association between civic virtue and military virtue and to discredit republican criticisms of commerce. Clad in republican virtues, commerce becomes a positive model of society in Abbé Coyer's writings, a model that he uses to denounce the nobility's claim to create a system based on its values.

He can thus reject the idea of a kingdom founded on weapons and the virtues of war. At the same time, Abbé Coyer draws a connection between the republic and commerce. This connection benefits the latter, which in turn becomes an egalitarian model: commerce, like the republic, likes equality. "If it were true that commerce flourished in republics," writes Abbé Coyer, "we could only conclude that a monarch has to make its commerce republican." He goes on to say that "commerce belongs to everyone" and that it accepts "anyone who presents himself."

Yet Abbé Coyer is not seeking to found a republic. He does not resolve the debate over the republic and commerce; instead he sticks to generalities about a State that he wants, no matter what form it takes, to be prosperous and powerful. He thus refuses to address constitutional questions, believing there is no direct link between the *Magna Carta* and England's commercial success. Rousseau happily accepts the challenge of discussing constitutional choices and Merja Kylmäkoski emphasizes his difference of opinion with Abbé Coyer on that issue, while carefully noting that they both belong to the republican tradition. Perhaps she should have more clearly expressed the fundamentally egalitarian aspect of their two political systems. Of course, as she notes, they are not trying to answer the same questions. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Abbé Coyer considers equality to be a basic rule and rejects those who believe, as did the patricians of corrupt Rome, "that birth is the first merit" (*La Noblesse commerçante*, Paris, 1758, p. 27). Everyone knows the significance of equality for Rousseau and its inseparable tie to the concept of liberty.

On this last point, drawing on the analyses of Quentin Skinner and Maurizio Viroli⁴, Merja Kylmäkoski clearly identifies the links between Rousseau and Machiavelli's republican tradition: the emphasis on political participation, the role of the armed citizen, and the requisite complementary nature of liberty and virtue (Chapter VI).

Marja Kylmäkoski knows Rousseau's work very well and skillfully paints him into the context of French Enlightenment in general and into the debate over luxury in particular. However, she was perhaps too ambitious. Even though she spared no expense to tackle all the concepts of the republican tradition, her thesis does not give enough weight to certain ideas that played a more predominant role than

others do in Rousseau's thinking. For example, she only devotes few pages to the concept of law and the concept of equality. Similarly, by concentrating mainly on French debates and even though she knows the Geneva's context very well, she has not made enough use of it for her argument. However, this does not affect the high quality of a work that sheds new light on the Rousseau's concept of the citizen, on the illuminating debates on virtue, and skillfully repositions the former "Citoyen de Genève" in the classical republican tradition.

References

- ¹ Helena Rosenblatt, *Rousseau and Geneva. From the First Discourse to the Social Contract, 1749-1762*, Cambridge University Press, 1997. David Rosenfeld, *Rousseau's Genevan politics: An Essay in historical interpretation*, UMI, 1993.
- ² All translations are my own.
- ³ Judith N. Shklar, *Men and Citizens. A Study of Rousseau's Social Theory*, Cambridge University Press, 1987. Maurizio Viroli, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the "well-ordered society,"* Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- ⁴ Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*, Cambridge University Press, 1998.