

Rousseau in Corsica

About: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Affaires de Corse*, C. Litwin
(dir), J. Swenson (éd.) Paris, Vrin

By Christopher Kelly

Upon the request of Corsican leaders, Rousseau undertook the writing of what would later be published as *Projet de constitution pour la Corse*. This new critical edition shows that this unfinished work requires a new title and a new understanding of Rousseau's goals in undertaking it.

A part of the power of Rousseau's writing comes from its sense of urgency. The political aspect of this urgency is seen most clearly in the prediction that he made in *Emile* (and repeated in *Sur le Gouvernement de Pologne*): "I hold it to be impossible that the great monarchies of Europe still have long to last. All have shined, and every State which shines is on the decline."¹ These precise predictions of imminent political turmoil were made in late works, but the sense that Europe is involved in an unacknowledged intellectual, moral, and political crisis that is certain to overturn the existing order of things is present from the beginning of Rousseau's career. In the face of self-congratulation over the restoration and progress of the arts and sciences his *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* argues that the European states are engaged in the pursuit of a false brilliance that will come at the cost of their ability to endure. Consistently over more than two decades Rousseau wrote with an acute sense of this political, and more than political, crisis. Rousseau presents the outcome of this crisis as inevitable: he is not a revolutionary who seeks to bring it about nor a conservative who attempts to avoid the inevitable. Nevertheless he does not lapse into passivity. He is concerned both with the possibilities that will come into being after the collapse and with the ways individuals and governments can conduct themselves in the period of crisis.

¹ The English translations are from *The Collected Writings of Rousseau* edited by Roger D. Masters and

Why Corsica?

This perspective helps us to understand his willingness to answer requests for advice from places such as Poland and Corsica, two communities that were derided for their failure to participate successfully in the striving after brilliance of the great monarchies. Both were attempting to liberate themselves from the influence of corrupt monarchies and republics—Russia in one case and Genoa in the other. Rousseau may not be alone in taking an interest in these cases, but it was distinctive of his approach to embrace two places that were thought to be ill-governed and incapable of being well-governed. Where others saw Poland as a hopeless case because of its bizarre institutions that kept it on the verge of anarchy, Rousseau argued, these very institutions could help it to preserve itself in extraordinarily difficult circumstances. It was this that made Poland “one of the most singular spectacles that can strike a thinking being”². Where others saw Corsica as a backward, semi-barbaric society, Rousseau claimed, that it was the only country in Europe “capable of legislation”.³ This last statement attracted the attention of Corsican leaders and led to their request for Rousseau’s advice. Rousseau began, but did not complete his work on Corsica and it was ultimately published only in 1861 under the title, *Projet de constitution pour la Corse*, a title by which it has been known ever since. The research embodied in this new volume shows clearly that this unfinished work and accompanying material require a new title and, with the new title, a new understanding of Rousseau’s goals in undertaking it.

For almost twenty years the “Groupe Rousseau” has been meeting and occasionally producing volumes, each of which focuses on a particular text by Rousseau and, most of which contain a newly edited version of the relevant text. These volumes are always of high scholarly quality. The versions of the text come from fresh looks at the manuscripts. Collectively the essays give close to a comprehensive treatment of the text being studied. The present volume is the most recent product of the Groupe’s work and it is a worthy addition to the earlier volumes. It is most similar to the 2008 volume *Principe du droit de la guerre. Écrits sur la paix perpétuelle* which, building on work begun by Grace Roosevelt, in effect creates a coherent work out of what had been regarded as fragments. In the present case, the authors and editor show that Rousseau did not write a project for a constitution for Corsica. Instead, he assembled a dossier containing several parts: a preamble, a plan of government, and notebooks for his work. In short, he produced a collection of parts that the Groupe has renamed (following Rousseau) *Affaires de Corse*. The editors present a careful reconstruction of the manuscripts with their variants and restore the order of the fragments at the end of the work from the misordering of earlier editions. They have also included Rousseau’s correspondence with Matieu Buttafoco that led to his project. Finally, members of the Groupe have written fourteen essays covering every part of Rousseau’s work as well as providing helpful discussions of Corsican history. These commentaries, plus the editorial

² *CW* 11, p. 170. (“un des plus singuliers spectacles qui puissent frapper un être pensant.” *OC* III, p. 170).

³ *CW* 4, p. 165. (“capable of legislation”. *OC* III, p. 391)

apparatus, cover three times as many pages as the manuscript material and, consequently lead the reader to wonder whether the Groupe has left anything to be said about Rousseau's work on Corsica. At the very least, this volume establishes the important issues that should henceforth guide scholarly work on it.

Curing Prejudices

Several of these issues are pertinent for considering Rousseau's work as a whole. The basic issues of Rousseau's proposals for Corsica are stated in the preamble. First, he stresses the importance of forming a unity between "the body which governs and the body which is governed".⁴ He says that the wisest people "forment le gouvernement pour la nation." He, on the contrary, argues that it is better to form "la nation pour le gouvernement" (60). Numerous of the contributors to this volume (B. Bernardi, F. Calori, C. Litwin, G. Olivo, and A. Revel) call attention to this striking claim. Rousseau says that his reason for this choice is that the alternative leads to a quicker disaster once the government begins to decline. This shows that his presupposition is that invariable fate of all governments is to decline. As he says in the *Contrat social*, "The body politic, like the human body, begins to die at the moment of its birth, and carries within itself the causes of its destruction".⁵ The principal cause of this inevitable decline is the tendency of the government to usurp sovereignty from the people. Measures should be taken to forestall this, but its inevitability also makes it necessary to manage the decline. Here Rousseau suggests that, once it begins to decline, a government formed for the nation it governs will lose its suitability for the nation. If, to the contrary, the nation is formed for the government, the dependency of the nation upon the government will keep the two in harmony even in decline. Indeed, if the people are formed for a free government, as was the case in Rome, their attachment to freedom can act as a brake on the decline of the government.

A second statement in the preamble gives an idea of the sort of formation necessary for the Corsican nation. The fact that the Corsicans had *mœurs* that made them uniquely suited for legislation does not mean that they were well-prepared in every way. As Rousseau says here, "The Corsicans have not yet taken on the vices of other nations, but they have already taken on their prejudices".⁶ In an important essay, Bruno Bernardi (followed by F. Calori, A. Morvan, F. Champy, and P. Crétois in their essays) provides an account of the "art d'écrire" by which Rousseau countered these prejudices. He shows persuasively that Rousseau felt it necessary to oppose the prejudices of the Corsicans by masking the

⁴ *CW* 11, p. 123.

⁵ *CW* 4, p. 188. ("Le corps politique, aussi-bien que le corps de l'homme, commence à mourir dès sa naissance et porte en lui-même les causes de sa destruction", *OC* III, p. 424).

⁶ *CW*, p. 11; pp. 123-124. ("Les Corses n'ont pas pris encore les vices des autres nations mais ils ont déjà pris leurs préjugés", *OC*, III, 60)

conclusions to which he was leading or by remaining silent about his true reasons for the policies he recommended. Rousseau, thus, writes a “double discours” (225) in which he both reveals and conceals.

There are two main prejudices that Rousseau felt obliged to counter. Both of these are prejudices of the very reformers who had asked for Rousseau’s assistance. They are not so obviously prejudices of the Corsicans in general. The first of these was the desire of the leaders of the Corsican liberation to re-establish the aristocracy that had been essentially destroyed by the Genoans. Rousseau, to the contrary, thought that the Genoans had unwittingly performed an essential service by clearing the path for the establishment of a democratic sovereignty without requiring the Corsicans themselves to do the dirty work (68, 227 and 238). The second prejudice is different in nature. It is a prejudice in favor of the doctrine of “doux commerce” which sets as its goal the integration of Corsica into an international economic system. Rousseau was opposed to this approach in principle and thought that in the Corsican case it would lead to a ruinous dependency on trading partners. In this instance, unlike the prejudice in favor of aristocracy, the prejudice presents itself as rational enlightened doctrine rather than tradition. As Rousseau says about the Corsicans, “their sentiments are upright, it is their false enlightenment that fools them. They see the false glitter of neighboring nations and burn to be like them”.⁷ In this case as in the *Lettre à d’Alembert sur les spectacles* Rousseau presents himself as the defender of a healthy public sentiment threatened by a seductive intellectual doctrine. Here, rather than combatting the doctrine directly, Rousseau coaxes the Corsican leaders to a policy that appears to lead to their goals, but which in fact undermines them. It is not unlikely that his awareness of his opposition to the goals of his audience led Rousseau not to complete this work.

Amour-propre and Politics

Ultimately, Rousseau turns more directly to the Corsican people and their way of life. He urges them to adopt an economic system based on agriculture rather than trade and several of the essays in the volume explore this dimension of Rousseau’s thought (see, in particular, the essay by P. Crétois and the one by J. Swenson and C. Litwin). Perhaps even more significantly, Rousseau urges moving away from notions of self-interest characteristic of economics and toward a formation of amour-propre. Recent scholarship on Rousseau has stressed the positive function of amour-propre in Rousseau’s accounts of civic education. In a valuable essay that concludes the volume C. Litwin discusses an important passage that confirms this beyond any question. Rousseau outlines the inadequacy of interest and fear as political motivations and insists that pride (*orgueil*) and vanity (both of which derive from amour-propre) are the real sources of good and bad political activity. Pride, unlike vanity,

⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 164-165. (“[L]eur sentiments sont droits ce sont leurs fausses lumières qu’ils les trompent ils voyent le faux éclat des nations voisines et brûlent d’être comme elles”, 136)

aims at the genuinely fine goals of independence and power (101-102). While Rousseau stresses civic education, this education does not eliminate all concern for oneself. Instead, it develops a spirit of emulation in which citizens compete for public honors accorded for public service (88). This element of Rousseau's thought is apparent as early as the important final endnote to the *Discours sur l'inégalité*.

In sum, by providing a truly adequate edition of Rousseau's *Affaires de Corse* the Groupe Rousseau has made this collection of materials accessible in a new way. This new edition and the accompanying essays make it possible to see how this unfinished work sheds light on important themes of Rousseau's thought as a whole.

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