

## Rousseau: Conservative or Totalitarian Democrat?

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IN RECENT YEARS, there has been a movement among certain people who call themselves conservatives to reinterpret the radical French thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau as a conservative. To most people who have studied Rousseau's thought, and its influence on the French Revolution, such an idea must seem absurd. In the past four years, however, this idea has gained public currency through such works as Allan Bloom's popular best-seller, *The Closing of the American Mind*, and Arthur M. Melzer's more scholarly work, *The Natural Goodness of Man: On the System of Rousseau's Thought*, which received a glowing review in one of the most respected conservative publications in America, *National Review*. The review, written by Joel Schwartz, the executive editor of *The Public Interest*, refers to a "surprisingly conservative Rousseau" who is "deeply indebted to Platonic and Aristotelian political philosophy" and concludes by referring to Rousseau as an "unexpected friend." (RR, 47-48)<sup>1</sup> What element have conservatives since Edmund Burke failed to see in Rousseau, which now leads Bloom and Melzer to openly embrace him? The answer, according to Schwartz, is Rousseau's "communitarian solution" to the problems of society. (RR, 47) Rousseau's emphasis on a "common good" is designed to stop the "disintegration of society into particular wills." (See CAM, 118)<sup>2</sup> But can Rousseau's communitarianism really be considered conservative? Many enemies of conservatism, such as the Jacobins and modern-day Marxists, have used the language of the common good. One important thing that separates conservatives from the others who emphasize the common good is the conservative concern that the common good not come at the expense of the particular good. This

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means that the goals of a society must not be destructive of the important subunits of that society, such as the family, the neighborhood, the individual states, and the Church. When measured by this standard, Rousseau's thought is anything but conservative.

Melzer finds Rousseau's answer to the problems of society in the *Social Contract*, and so we should, conceivably, be able to find Rousseau's doctrine of communitarianism therein. (See NGM, 120)<sup>3</sup> Only six paragraphs into the *Social Contract*, however, we have Rousseau's first attack upon the role of subsidiary organizations, in the form of the family.

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The most ancient of all societies and the only natural one, is that of the family. Even so children remain bound to their father only so long as they need him to take care of them. As soon as the need ceases, the natural bond is dissolved. Once the children are freed from the obedience they owed the father and their father is freed from the care he owed his children, all return equally to

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independence. If they continue to remain united, this no longer takes place naturally but voluntarily, and the family maintains itself only by means of convention. (SC, 142)<sup>4</sup>

The only natural society is the family. All other associations must be merely conventional. The idea that, for example, race and nationality are more than merely conventional does not seem to occur to Rousseau. Only the immediate and undeniable bond of father to children can be considered natural. But even this bond, Rousseau goes on to say, is, in the end, merely conventional.