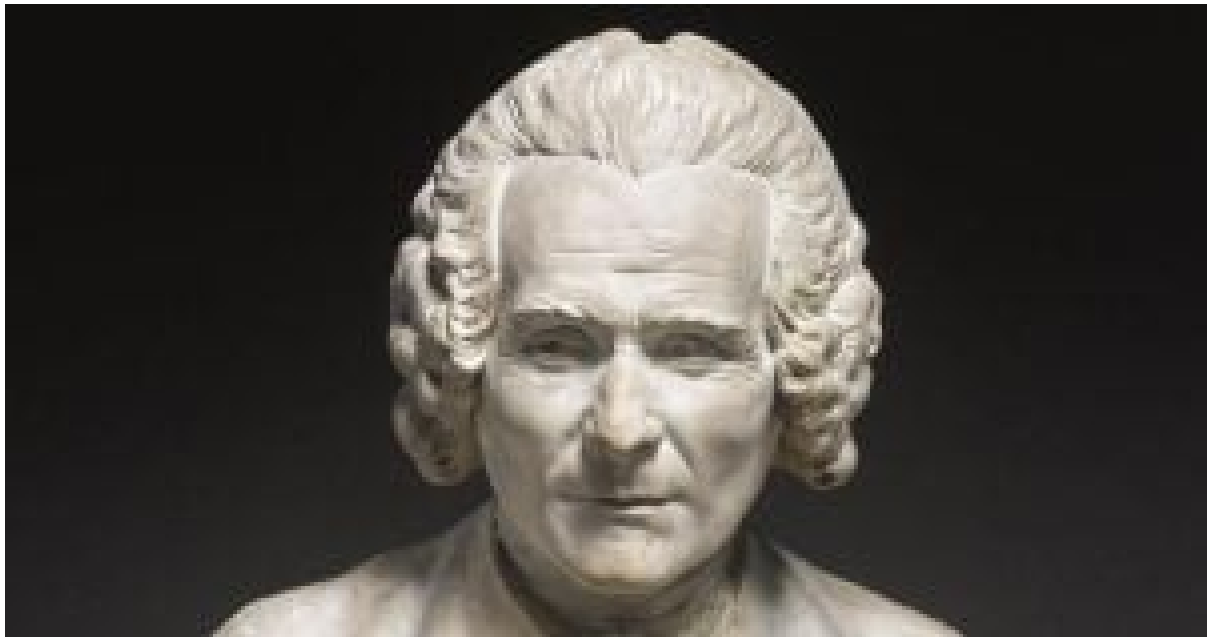


# Rousseau – The Woke Savage



by Fergus Downie (February 2022)

*“How is it possible that the friend of mankind is no longer the friend of men.” Dr Tronchin*

*“There was once a man called Rousseau who wrote a book containing nothing but ideas. The second edition was bound in the skins of those who laughed at the first.” Thomas Carlyle*

**“I have said the truth.** If anyone knows facts to the contrary to what I have just said even if they are proved 1000 times, they are lies and impostures. [Whoever] examines with his own eyes my nature, my character, morals inclinations pleasures habits and can believe me to be a dishonest man is himself a man who deserves to be strangled.” Thus, Jean Jacques Rousseau after reading *Confessions* to an awestruck literary gathering. It is a brilliant piece of theatre and the cloying sentimentality of it all brings the great man ever closer to the 21st century. It is said in these shrill times that facts don’t respect your feelings but what are such paltry things beside the high emotion of a sensitive nature, and who in their heart of hearts would not trade places with a man who

could wield a child's power with such skilful venom? It is the best part of three hundred years since the stunned audience at Madam d'Epiny's salon heard this impassioned declamation and these days we have lesser talents and larger audiences. Such a philosopher can never grow old and given every philosophy is at least partly autobiographical the personal details are especially significant. Rousseau is an open book principally because his most important one was written about himself, and he left no doubt he was great subject matter. How he viewed himself was all important and given that he transposed his own self-image onto an imaginary humanity it is important to have the measure of it. Rousseau was in his mind's eye that immensely important figure, an outsider, even if a far from oppressed one, and he learned quickly to turn his wounds into a currency just at the time overwrought Europeans were ready to pay. Born into moderate affluence few have ever wrought so much imaginary misery from it. With Rousseau hypochondria was turned into an artform and such infirmities as he suffered from he bore with the dignified fortitude of a five-year-old. *Confessions* is full of his agonies and the effects of a probably genuine bladder problem are relayed with comic earnestness:

*I still shudder to think of myself in a circle of women, compelled to wait until some fine talk had finished...When at last I find a well lit staircase there are other ladies that delay me, then a courtyard full of constantly moving carriages ready to crush me, ladies maids who are looking at me, lackeys who line the walls and laugh at me. I do not find a single wall or wretched little corner that is suitable for my purpose. In short, I can only urinate in full view of everybody and on some noble white stockinged leg.*

It is difficult not to be moved – many men have known the fear of urgent business tragically delayed but only small children are prone to fixate on these mishaps as cosmic injustices. That in itself provides a clue to the riddle. Notoriously he

never had to grow up. A kept man like Marx, the necessity of sustained employment was unknown to him, and he coupled this indolence with a stalled psychological development which left him preternaturally child-like with all the inbuilt fanaticism one might expect. It can be a terrifying spectacle, and Rousseau, doubtless wisely, spared himself that trial of wills. At a time when unwanted children lived on borrowed time, he sent all five of his to the orphanage. Not all were content to see this callousness as the price of genius. Thus, the scathing rebuke of a great Irishman:

*We have had the great professor and founder of the philosophy of Vanity in England. As I had good opportunities of knowing his proceedings almost from day to day, he left no doubt in my mind that he entertained no principle either to influence his heart or to guide his understanding but vanity; with this vice he was possessed to a degree little short of madness. Benevolence to the whole species and want of feeling for every individual with whom the professors come in contact, form the character of the new philosophy. Setting up for an unsocial independence, this their hero of vanity refuses the just price of common labour, as well as the tribute which opulence owes to genius, and which, when paid, honours the giver and the receiver, and then pleads his beggary as an excuse for his crimes. He melts with tenderness for those only who touch him by the remotest relation, and then, without one natural pang, casts away, gustful amours, and sends his children to the hospital of foundlings. The bear loves, licks, and forms her young; but bears are not philosophers.*

Burke was a good hater, but it was a well-aimed blow. The contrast between Rousseau's abstract love of humanity and his dissolute character is so striking it is impossible not to dwell on it, particularly when one appreciates the first is simply a cynical overcompensation for the second. One should as a rule play the ball not the man. Ad hominem are the

lowest sport but postmodernists are not entirely wrong in dwelling on the genealogy of an idea, and in Rousseau's case he literally asked for it. His autobiography is his seminal philosophical work, and by his own words, there was no greater proof of injustice than his own audible yelps of pain. Joseph Conrad wryly observed that even the most justifiable revolution was paved by 'resentments disguised as creeds'. Rousseau never attempted to conceal it precisely because he, a self-professed historian of the human heart, was merely a suffering fragment of an afflicted humanity. His introduction to *Confessions* gives any reader fair warning of his saintliness:

*I have begun on a work which is without precedent, whose accomplishment will have no imitator. I propose to set before my fellow-mortals a man in all the truth of nature; and this man shall be myself. I have studied mankind and know my heart; I am not made like any one I have been acquainted with, perhaps like no one in existence; if not better, I at least claim originality, and whether Nature has acted rightly or wrongly in destroying the mould in which she cast me, can only be decided after I have been read.*

Suffice to say many did read him and overwrought flourishes like this were a large part of the appeal. The Europe in which Rousseau made his debut was experiencing the growing pains which all modern societies are fated to endure, and the most troublesome of these is the rootless anomie that makes each man a spectator of his own destiny. All of us at some point feel this alienated condition and one does not need to be an existentialist philosopher to realise most of our lives are lived second-hand. For the most part we would not forgo the advantages – it is our ability to live at this high level of abstraction which gives us our unprecedented material and technological power – but the sense of living as a passionless automaton is demoralising nonetheless. 18th century France was not yet the iron cage the haunted Max Weber but to many effete

Parisians it was soulless enough and left them gasping for passionate release. This need to grasp life in its concrete immediacy and feel intensely was the most striking feature of polite society at the time and it gave Rousseau the supreme opportunity. Had he been born earlier in the century he would probably have starved, in an age where the retreat from cold austere reason was well underway he was the prophet born. No one was better placed by birth and temperament to indict an entire social order and in the essay submitted to the Dijon Academy in 1749 he duly provided it.

The indictment contained in *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* was total and proceeded along familiar Old Testament lines. In the beginning all was Arcadian bliss. The first solitary man has a thinly furnished mind, and the simplicity of his desires is the guarantee of his freedom. Naturally indifferent to his fellow men and subject to the uniform constraints of nature he is devoid of the competitive striving which disturbs the tranquility of his modern counterpart. Only when his innocent sentiments of self-love and pity are transfigured into a corrupted amour propre does he enter his veil of tears. Natural inequality is no problem for Rousseau, without a corrupted social consciousness little can be made of them. When however, he lives his life in the eyes of others strength and weakness are quickly transformed into oppression and servility. Of the benefits of progress he was unsparing:

*Thus it is that luxury, profligacy and slavery, have been, in all ages, the scourge of the efforts of our pride to emerge from that happy state of ignorance, in which the wisdom of providence had placed us. That thick veil with which it has covered all its operations seems to be a sufficient proof that it never designed us for such fruitless researches. But is there, indeed, one lesson it has taught us, by which we have rightly profited, or which we have neglected with impunity? Let men learn for once that nature would have preserved them from science, as a mother snatches a dangerous*

*weapon from the hands of her child. Let them know that all the secrets she hides are so many evils from which she protects them, and that the very difficulty they find in acquiring knowledge is not the least of her bounty towards them. Men are perverse; but they would have been far worse, if they had had the misfortune to be born learned.*

None of this was particularly original, most moralists and philosophers had taken the Fall to be the starting point of their enterprise, and Rousseau was no less sanguine than they were on the possibility of a return to Edenic nature. All the same this was a harmonious unity which never surrendered its charms and once one appreciates that this is the idealised standard by which all social orders were to be judged the apparent shifts in emphasis which preoccupy so many biographers are liable to appear redundant. As a counter to the corrupted armour propre of competitive societies one may embrace rural idiocy or the militarised virtues of Sparta but the object is the same – the transforming of a man's inclination into his duty and the replacement of personal dependence with the kind of impersonal limits imposed by nature. Having an essentially therapeutic function it barely matters whether it is achieved by Spartan automatons or docile peasants. Here the meaning and importance of equality is fundamentally recast. It is not a product of mutuality or contract so much as sameness, an assumption fraught with consequences. It allowed Rousseau to bypass the real problem of politics – the tricky adjustment of interests between the real socially rooted individuals of any existing society and construct a political philosophy on the basis of inner soliloquies. If all men were essentially the same why could he not speculate with profit on the fate of nations? A further fateful conclusion inevitably followed. Rousseau considered the traditional burden of political philosophers to be a mirage. They had seen the defining task of philosophy to be the untidy adjustment of liberty and equality. For Rousseau

this is explicitly excluded. Liberty is equality and when one realises the first man is both solitary and undifferentiated any paradox disappears. It is as Judith Skhlar noted the 'individualism of the weak', all that is required to realise it is an exercise in synchronised solipsism. The General Will is no sinister aberration from a benevolent creed it is the natural corollary of Rousseau's undemanding vision of human nature. Men were naturally good and their freedom rested on an agreeable meekness of ambition. Rousseau was obliged by his vocation to condemn the conformity of his time but it stood condemned less on account of its lack of originality than on its self-inflicted pains. Health and happiness rather than originality are the highest ends. The nature and function of the general will in Rousseau's thought is very clear – it is simply a generic will, the lowest common denominator prudence that everyone shares. It is in effect the will against inequality and in the frenetic pursuit of levelling equality even moral distinctions are suspect. Rousseau famously railed against the impiety of the philosophe but his idealised portrait of natural Christianity in *Emile* is as impressively barren of divinity as any modern spiritualist fad. It repelled Calvinists and Catholics in equal measure and one can easily understand why. Nietzsche at his most virulently anti-Christian had at least credited the dying faith with implanting a fruitful tension in the soul, in Rousseau it is precisely this quest for martyrdom which is suspect. The Savoyard vicar finds peace of conscience in a village where virtue is simply applied self-interest. Since pain and remorse are the only natural woes little more is required than a simple life. Conscience is a spontaneous impulsion which is generated by our natural self-love. Morality is uninhibited spontaneity. It is difficult to think of more disastrous ideas taking root in an educated mind but it would be a category error to describe it as illiberal. Rousseau's influence on liberals like Mill was considerable, and his ideas chimed well with the fashionable sensationalist psychology of the age – he only differed in what he did with it. For Locke and other

empiricists it was a weapon to combat priests, for Rousseau the inherent passivity of it all – man the plaything of sensations – only heightened his latent sense of victimhood. Suffering was the fundamental social fact besides which even a vast accumulation of knowledge was insignificant. If we had learned less we would have suffered less. Prominent Enlightenment thinkers dared to know and escape the infancy of mankind, Rousseau wished to remain there and it was inevitable that his attention should have turned towards the instruction of children. The various discourses are pitiful works, and the Social Contract is a notoriously muddled affair. *Emile* by contrast is one of the most brilliant and disastrous books of the modern age.[1]

By his own admission the dubious manual was conceived as an exercise in self exculpation. Burke was not the only one to linger on Rousseau's abandonment of his children and once Voltaire joined the fray the citizen of Geneva was in dire need of an alibi. If it also provided the raw material for a citizen who might meekly submit to the general will so much the better . Given Rousseau's starting point It should come as no surprise that the predominant pose of the educator is one of benign neglect. Wolmar is creepily woke. He controls the child's will by prearranging experiences and controlling his environment rather than imposing personal authority. The inner 'genius' of the child unfolds spontaneously- it is a negative education against society but one is nevertheless struck by the fact that this inculcates a docility more profound than the sternest patriarch could instil. Never having been forced to obey he can barely conceive of rebellion. Tellingly, at the end of this apprenticeship and on the brink of fatherhood *Emile* still feels the need of his tutor. What emerges actually amounts to very little and Rousseau never saw this as a problem. All that counted, was, in a world which had not yet reaped its bitter harvest, self-esteem. *Emile* is meticulously guarded against the oppressive censures of his tutor; he saw the suffering that might emerge as an unmitigated evil which



could never be the price of a flowering personality. Resignation and submission to objective necessity was all he sought – anyone reading into it a Romantic preoccupation with finely textured self-expression is wide of the mark. Rousseau made a cult of authenticity, but this is not to be confused with creativity – a corrupt vice that could only excite the rancour of the meek. It is a remarkable work and it is a tribute to his steely consistency that no deconstruction is necessary. One can be enthralled or appalled but there is no secret to be unmasked. All that is required as a culture suitably designed to covet the rewards.

The totalitarian implications of Rousseau's theories were a long time in vogue after the Israeli scholar Talmon did his worst but could a man meditating on a raft on Lake Geneva feeling the currents and weeping on the picturesque sufferings of peasants really be the source of genocidal impulses? Probably, there is a fine line between sadism and pity after all and his own moods, oscillating wildly between agitated compassion and violent hatreds hint at how easily one low-bred sentiment fades into the other. The larger question is how, minus the accompanying literary brilliance, these unimpressive ideas manage to acquire intelligent hosts. Here at least the answer is clear, particularly as it manifests itself in what passes for a political theory. As we saw the general will that Rousseau expounds as a form of edifying virtue is just that – general – the lowest common denominator uniformity that men enjoy when they are free to wallow in a gently promiscuous asocial state and spared the ordeal of a challenging life. For Rousseau the arts and sciences of civilisation were a disaster precisely because they raised men from this primitive solitary equality, and it is not difficult to understand the psychological appeal to those smitten with envy. Our only mistake is to locate the appeal in the wrong place. The wounds of class are real but whatever left wing intellectuals might fancy they were never incubated in the industrial phalanxes studied by modish post war sociologists. Boss hatred there is

always tempered by the narcissism of small differences – we always compare ourselves with our neighbours, capitalists are as real to most workers as griffins. Besides the vengeance that can be hoarded by the professional class the hatreds of proletarians are petty. Conrad was familiar with the déclassé bourgeoisie type that dominated the anarchist movement of his day, and Ludwig Mises taxonomy of radical white-collar discontent is as relevant now as it was then. Here the raw material for resentments disguised as creeds are in ample supply, and what Mises observed of the elite professions could be multiplied ad nauseum for the mass-produced 'knowledge workers' of the 21st century. Hyper credentialism has swollen their numbers beyond reason, and the bovine drift of such individuals to the left is easily explained. No great effort is required. Bloodless intellectuals make much of the allegedly profound ideological ruptures of postmodernism but had they been more conscientiously dialectical they would have seen an underlying Marxist consistency. Marxism, as the radical American sociologist Alvin Gouldner noted is itself simply the false consciousness implanted by bourgeois self-interest, and all the dreary post war revisions of that creed were simply a footnote to that fact. E.P. Thompson a sentimental British communist who had fought his way through Italy in a proletarian tank company saw this clearly and dismissed the non-vulgar Marxism of the 60s as the creed of a 'revolting bourgeoisie'. No great contribution from structural linguistics was necessary to foment postmodernism – its class interest has always been naked, and the essential foundations were laid by Rousseau. Even Foucault the great bugbear of conservative social commentators was no more than a particularly repulsive neophyte. And what is the contemporary spectacle of 'virtue signalling' but a stale iteration of Rousseau's howling curses? Remove this sentiment from the clunking fetters of 19th century political economy and what is left is the romance of condemnation with an ever-expanding litany of injustices. That is no small thing. Rousseau died many years before Marx was born but he is far and away the

more modern thinker. Who with the requisite privileges would not wish to sink into this funk?

The revolt of the elites has now reached proportions Christopher Lasch could scarcely have imagined and repentant Marxists are prone in any case to misdiagnose the disease. Greedy indifference was never their greatest sin. If the poor had simply been cut loose, they might at least have been left with their own problems to solve – the more sinister development has been their enlistment in a personal psychic melodrama which has turned cities like San Francisco into psychedelically tinged latrines. Only a grandiose self-absorption could look on such achievements without reproach. It is a 21st century reproduction of an old Romantic ritual, with the drug addled victim standing in for the starving peasant girl as an object of sentimental pity. One can gaze at such tragedies for eternity particularly when you create them. Plenty of signalling very little virtue.[2]

Rousseau at least was a brilliant man, only someone with a heart of stone could read *Confessions* without laughing, but the impression left of a man disintegrating under the weight of a remorselessly consistent creed is instructive. The signs of mental illness were clear from an early stage, but it is worth noting that the underlying philosophy would have produced a morbid cast of mind in anyone. For Rousseau, as for Yale students, even the most elemental social encounters were lacerations – the accompanying hypochondria was entirely predictable even if his genes compounded the strain. To judge by his famous letter to David Hume it was considerable, but by the sixties there were enough fashionable academics to believe these were simply adaptations to an iniquitous social order, and the surplus of florid feelings in any case was part of the attraction. Madame Epinay said that Rousseau contributed nothing original but set everything ablaze. Let us hope we will only have to deal with metaphors.

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[1] Paul Johnson describes the degenerate logic perfectly: “What began as a process of personal justification in a particular case – a series of hasty ill thought-out excuses for behaviour he must’ve known, initially, was unnatural – gradually evolved, as repetition and growing self-esteem hardened them into genuine convictions, into the proposition that education is the key to social and moral improvement and, this being so, it was the concern of the state. The state must form the minds of all, not only as children (as it had done to Rousseau in the orphanage) but as adult citizens. By a curious chain of infamous moral logic, Rousseau’s iniquity as a parent was linked to his ideological offspring, the future totalitarian state.”

[2] There is a wise English proverb about not shitting on your own doorstep but it has little purchase among California’s progressives. Lenin’s defining question ‘Who, whom’ matters. It’s usually not their doorsteps that are besieged.

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**Fergus Downie** toils to heroically little effect in an obscure corner of the British state.

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