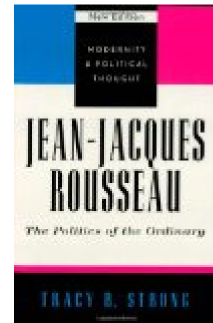
H-Net Reviews in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Tracy B. Strong. *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Politics of the Ordinary.* Lanham and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002. xxx + 201 pp. $30.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7425-2143-8.



Reviewed by G. Matthew Adkins (Department of History, University of Dayton)
Published on H-Ideas (October, 2003)

Ordinary Politics, Uncommon Ideas

Ordinary Politics, Uncommon Ideas

In *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Politics of the Ordinary*, Professor Strong's goal is to explicate the centrality of the common or ordinary in Rousseau's philosophy. Strong believes that the notion of the common is not only the key to understanding Rousseau, but that it allows us to conceptualize an important problem within modern Western society. As Strong writes in the preface, "[P]olitics rests, I argue with Rousseau, on a particular availability, that of the ordinary or the common" (p. xxix). This "ordinary or the common" has been "lost" in modern political society and must somehow be regained, Strong argues, for political society to recover legitimacy. In Strong's view, then, an understanding of Rousseau is a vital starting point for repairing the ills of modernity.

First published in 1994, this new 2002 edition of *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Politics of the Ordinary* attests to the continued interest in Rousseau and to the transcendence of his ideas. Rousseau speaks to us across the centuries, and his ideas are profound enough that they seem to demand a multiplicity of interpretations. "Part of what makes a thinker a great thinker," Strong asserts in the preface to this new edition, "is that almost any interpretation of him or her seems possible" (p. xxiv). Strong insists, however, that he does not seek to interpret Rousseau so much as *to read* him. Rousseau writes in order to reject interpretation, argues Strong, and the many conflicting interpretations of him (whether as a democrat, totalitarian, or communitarian) only demonstrate what Rousseau himself suspected–that everyone has misread him. How then does Strong propose to read Rousseau correctly when everyone else has not only misread him, but has, in Rousseau's own opinion, lacked the ability to read him? In a sense I think this is the wrong question. To misread Rousseau, Strong contends, is to insist upon a correct interpretation of him when in fact there is no single correct interpretation. "In general," Strong writes, "it does not seem to me fruitful in discussing political theorists to try to get them 'right' " (p. 2). To read Rousseau's texts correctly, then, is to approach them as one would approach another human on equal terms, which avoids interpretation. "I do not–I hope–for the least moment entertain the idea of *interpreting* this other person: to the degree that I do, I will never come to know nor will I be moved by that person" (p. xxi). Unfortunately, Strong does not explain why interpretation somehow precludes knowledge.

Strong's attempt to read, while not interpreting, Rousseau results in an intensely personal work that intertwines Rousseau's and his own ideas to the point that they are virtually indistinguishable. One reviewer of the first edition of this book noted that Strong's methodology makes the work exceptionally difficult to follow.[1] This is true, but the path may be worth the effort. Strong thinks that he is on to something important, namely everyone has misread Rousseau because the condition of modern society–a condition that Rousseau himself recognized and sought to overcome with his writings–is such that no one can know anyone else, that we cannot grasp "the human" in ourselves or in others. We are lost to each other–in fact, we are not really human–because

modern society is based upon conditions of inequality, and inequality prevents us from "thinking the thought of the common, the thought made possible in a space in which I am in just the same way as are you" (p. 35). In a society based on inequality, difference and identity become a source of domination and create a desire to "make something of someone" which renders it impossible to encounter the other as he or she really is (p. 141). If he is right that Rousseau sought to erase difference and identity as a source of domination, "to be incarnated by his words as his readers," then by seeking to erase the difference between author, subject, and reader, Strong is only practicing what he preaches about Rousseau (p. 10). I would hardly expect such an ambitious approach to be simple.

Nor does Strong's approach fail to bear fruit. The desire to read and not interpret Rousseau's texts is what leads Strong to focus on the extraordinarily useful notion of the common or the ordinary as the key to understanding Rousseau, and as the chain that links together all of Rousseau's works. Strong reads Rousseau as a *modern*, which means, so writes Strong, "to find that that person ... is in important conversation with oneself" as a modern (p. xxii). If Rousseau's concerns are modern, as are Strong's, then his writing is also about the crisis of modernity, which, Strong believes, is the alienation of the human, the inability to experience the common. In fact, Strong goes so far as to suggest that Rousseau provides us the language to describe the crisis of modernity, so we owe our recognition of being modern at least partly to him (although I'm not sure we should thank him for it). Having found the key to reading Rousseau, Strong is able to explicate what Rousseau, and therefore Strong, thinks is wrong with society, how it got that way, and what can be done about it.

What Rousseau thinks is wrong with society is easy enough to discover, Strong believes, because it pervades his writings, and because we (moderns) have an inchoate recognition of it, namely that we are not really human. We are not human because we have lost that which allows us to make ourselves available to others as we are to ourselves (to paraphrase Strong's constant refrain)–our commonalty, or the quality that permits us to have differences without their becoming a source of domination. For Rousseau, the human being is nothing in a state of nature–is in fact *nul*. This means that political society is constitutive of the human. Human nature itself is made in political society, but is only truly human in a society where we can express our commonalty as the general will. We have lost our commonalty, however, because contemporary political society is based on inequality and dependency, having been conceived first by the rich, the property owners, to protect individual interests rather than express a general will. In such a society, Rousseau argues at the beginning of *The Social Contract* (1762), all individuals are enslaved by relationships of power, and those who think themselves the masters most of all. According to Strong, Rousseau's obsession with presenting himself as a human, indeed as the *only* human, in his *Confessions* (1770) is integral to his desire to reveal his otherness, his difference, and so escape those who would "make something of him," which is an act of domination. Everyone else is a peasant, bourgeois, king, or nobleman, but Rousseau alone is human (p. 15).

Although Rousseau claims in *The Social Contract* not to know how society ended up founded on inequality, his other works suggest differently. Strong begins, reasonably enough, with the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (1750). As is famously known, Rousseau chose to answer the Academy of Dijon's 1749 essay topic, "Has the reestablishment of the sciences and the arts contributed to the purification of morals? " with a counterintuitive negative. Much has been made of Rousseau's apparently revelatory rejection of the arts and sciences and his subsequent break with the enlightenment philosophes. As Strong argues, however, the notion that the arts and sciences brought corruption to the human race was not new: Voltaire had developed the theme in *Alzire* (1734), and Rousseau himself wrote of it in his short play *The Discovery of the New World* (c. 1740). It is Rousseau's reason for rejecting the arts and sciences that Strong finds most revealing: according to Rousseau, the arts and sciences are bad because they "introduce inequality between humans by means of the distinction of talents and the disparagement of virtues."[2] In Strong's exegesis this becomes, "the desire to know, when placed in a condition of inequality in which one person compares himself to another, becomes a form–reinforces the structures of domination–of inequality" (p. 25). In short, the arts and sciences, whether or not they are bad in themselves, are not for human beings. They cannot help us achieve the common and thus become human.

The arts and sciences do not seem to be the primordial origin of inequality, however. They only perpetuate the problem of a society "in which one person compares himself to another." In chapters 1 and 2, Strong delves primarily, but not exclusively, into the *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality* (1755) and the *Essay on the Origin of Languages* (1755) for Rousseau's ideas of how inequality has become the mode of society. There

are, unfortunately, no easy answers, for Rousseau avoids any developmental notions of human nature. Strong argues that, for Rousseau, human history–even human nature, since human nature is socially constructed–is an accident. Accident led to the development of close-knit human communities that practiced primitive festivals where "each begins to look at the other and want to be looked at himself."[3] In this early theater, a natural animalistic sense of pity was inverted to envy, pride, vanity, and shame. Theater, as Rousseau complains in a letter to d'Alembert, gives the audience a sense of superiority and thus sets human society on the path to inequality (p. 63). Theater is pretense, an illusion, and thus, Strong maintains, is the "paradigm for social inequality" (p. 59), a paradigm eventually institutionalized with the rationalization of private property to the advantage of the rich. The result is slavery for all and since slaves are unable to contract among themselves freely, they cannot experience the common.

The solution, of course, is a society based on a social contract, which Strong explores in chapter 3. Here Strong situates Rousseau's ideas mostly in response to David Hume's. In his proto-conservative arguments, Hume maintains that a social contract is impossible: people may consent to their government, but they do not voluntarily contract to it. For public order to be possible in a society of ordinary people, we must rely on historically developed habit. As Edmund Burke would later insist, society must rest on tradition; change is dangerous. But to Rousseau, Strong argues, all present-day governments are false since they are based on inequality. Without equality, there can be no true citizenship, nor even a clear sense of a *we*, and thus no experience of the common and no humanness. What then would have to be the case for citizenship to exist? Clearly, we must have a free will common to all, that is, a general will. Here Strong explodes the debate over whether Rousseau's general will is a collective or individual faculty. According to Strong, the general will is an expression of individual freedom; it is not the will of the majority, but the will that each individual has in common with everyone else. "I can only have a general will that is my own as far as I am distinct from you. Far from being an expression of a single, unitary overarching collective consciousness, the general will is in fact the expression of the multiplicity and mutability of my being" (p. 83).

But how does a general will exist? And where? Here I think Strong's reading of Rousseau is at its most powerful. According to Strong's reading, Hume is entirely wrong to focus on government. To Rousseau, it makes no difference what form of government a society has, only that there is recognition of what government *is* and where true sovereignty lies. Sovereignty has nothing directly to do with government. Rather, "sovereignty is the general will in action" (p. 89). It is inalienable because there is no sense in the idea that the will can be transmitted like power, or, say, email. This sovereignty, the general will in action, establishes the laws that frame political institutions, but it can never legitimately surrender its right to do this. Government, then, is only concerned with administration, as a body that serves to carry out the general will. The form of the government–be it democratic, monarchic, or aristocratic–does not matter. Nor is there any reason to suppose Rousseau rejects representative government, as so many have argued. Rousseau only rejects representative sovereignty, Strong writes, "as a *contradictio in adjecto*" (p. 96). Moreover, where sovereignty is the general will in action–for that is where sovereignty can only legitimately exist–then there is a social contract. This contract, in establishing conventional equality (never mind physical or intellectual equality) creates a sense of the common, and thus constitutes citizens. The human is created in politics where society is based on a social contract.

The rub was that Rousseau did not seem to think that a society based on a social contract could exist in the present state of human development. "Anyone born in slavery is born for slavery–nothing is more certain," he writes. "Slaves, in their bondage, lose everything, even the desire to be free."[4] The prerequisite for a legitimate political society, then, is a new human nature, for there is never anything natural or unchangeable about the human. But how is this new nature to be effected? Toward the end of book 2 of *The Social Contract*, Rousseau argues for the necessity of a "superior intelligence," the legislator, to teach the public what it should desire, but it is not clear how the legislator is to accomplish his mission. Strong believes Rousseau provides us the answer in *Emile*, published not coincidentally the same year as the *Social Contract*. "*Emile*," writes Strong, "is a book for moderns–those who have available to them only a society of inequality such that they cannot see in the world around them a common life" (p. 106). The purpose of the education Emile receives, Strong argues, is to make him capable of humanity and thus able to live in a just society. Presumably, then, Strong believes a whole new human nature, available through proper education, is necessary to repair the ills of modernity. What a burden for us teachers.

The Politics of the Ordinary is a study of ideas, and at

times a history of ideas. For the most part Strong considers Rousseau in splendid isolation, or at best in dialogue with the most profound political thinkers of his age, such as Hobbes, Locke, and Hume. Strong makes various nods at the larger historical contexts of Rousseau's works–psychological, religious, social, and cultural–but these are generally overridden by his desire to situate Rousseau as a modern. Like the version of Nietzsche that Strong presents in his first major work, the Rousseau painted for us here is ahead of his time, far too transcendent merely to be a critic of absolutism, for example.[5] He seems to speak more to us than to his contemporaries. I wonder, however. Were the other philosophes so clueless about Rousseau? Rousseau's sense of persecution was not mere paranoia, and Voltaire and d'Alembert, to name two, had reasons to fear Rousseau's critiques. As early as 1750s in the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, Rousseau turned the philosophes' method of unmasking and debunking received ideas upon itself, thus denying the universal validity of scientific reason. Science and philosophy, Rousseau argues in the first discourse, do not serve truth; they only serve the ambition, avarice, and vanity of learned men. Armed with their "deadly paradoxes," Rousseau declaims, the philosophers are to be blamed for "undermining the foundations of faith, and annihilating virtue."[6] By such an attack, Rousseau put himself beyond the pale of the *parti philosophique*, as his peers were quick to recognize. To deny the universality of reason was to reject the legitimacy of the liberal philosophic cause. Thus d'Alembert refers to Rousseau as a cynic, and worse, a "deserter who wages war against his country, but a deserter who hardly any longer has a state to serve."[7] To Voltaire, of course, Rousseau was only a "poor devil."

Strong does not intend *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Politics of the Ordinary* to be an exhaustive history of Rousseau and his times. Acutely aware of the limitations of his approach, Strong provides a bibliographical essay in his afterword to acknowledge his influences and point out the various ways Rousseau has been read in the fields of philosophy, political theory, literary criticism, and history. Although not a comprehensive history of ideas or intellectual history of Rousseau, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, in questioning the relationship between author, text, and reader, challenges the way we read and interpret any important thinker.

Notes

[1]. Victor Gourevitch, "Recent Works on Rousseau," *Political Theory* 26:4 (August 1998): pp. 536-556.

[2]. Rousseau, *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, part 2. Cited from *The First and Second Discourses*, trans. Roger and Judith Masters (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964), p. 58.

[3]. Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, part 2. Cited from *The First and Second Discourses*, p. 149.

[4]. Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), pp. 51-52.

[5]. Tracy Strong, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975, 1988).

[6]. Rousseau, *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, part 2. Cited from *The First and Second Discourses*, p. 50.

[7]. See D'Alembert to Voltaire, 9 April and 31 October 1761, in the *Oeuvres Completes de Voltaire*, 68 (Kehl, 1785), pp. 159-162, 182-185.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-ideas

Citation: G. Matthew Adkins. Review of Strong, Tracy B., *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Politics of the Ordinary.* H-Ideas, H-Net Reviews. October, 2003.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8318

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.