

**Rousseau and the Ancients**  
**Rousseau et les Anciens**

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## Rousseau, Diversity, and Universal Rome

There is, from people to people, a prodigious diversity of manners, temperaments, and characters. Man is one; I acknowledge it; but man modified by religions, governments, laws, customs, prejudices, and climates becomes so different from himself that one should not seek among us for what is good for men in general, but for what is good for them in such a time or such a country. (5: 16)<sup>1</sup>

Rousseau's commitment to universal values in human life is well appreciated, as is his peculiar penchant for those values embodied in Roman life. From the ancient world Rousseau drew ideals with which he sought to inspire resistance to the modern trends that troubled him. Yet his intent on finding modern solutions to the problems of good government and individual well-being meant that while his writing problematized some aspects of modernity's flow, it pushed it forward in others. Hence we find his curious combination of a strong admiration for both ancient universals as well as modern notions of difference and originality.

In this paper I am interested in exploring Rousseau's relation to two often neglected developments in eighteenth century thought: the deepening valuation of human diversity, and the creeping *devaluation* which accompanies it: that of ancient Rome. The parallel nature of the two movements is hardly coincidental. In fact, Europe's growing appreciation of particularity among human groups works to slowly undermine the universalism symbolized by an eternal Rome. This acknowledgment, and subsequent embrace, of the diversity of "peoples" gradually entrains a soft relativism in politics and the arts — a relativism which is not characterized by indifference, but rather is linked to an increasingly strong admiration for originality and distinctiveness. I argue that these developments form an important backdrop to the modern political understanding of the nation that is also emerging at that time. It is an understanding that ultimately eclipses the idea and the possibility of a continent-wide empire.

As with all historical movements in thought, their march is uneven and studded with the idiosyncrasies of prominent thinkers. The unique juncture of these trends that we find in Rousseau's work is illuminative. While hanging on to certain fundamental universal ideals, Rousseau introduces a new *functional* understanding of human particularity. Unlike so many of his contemporaries, he is not seduced by a simple exoticism in his appreciation of difference. Its appeal is based rather on utility, especially its po-

litical utility in the forming of nation-states. At the same time, Rousseau raises Roman virtues to new heights. He advises the Poles to emulate the Romans, yet calls on them to be themselves. Coupling his deep appreciation for the diversity of human communities, with an equally profound love for the example of Rome, requires some considerable intellectual gymnastics. But as we shall see, his attitude towards the Roman Empire ultimately reflects, and in many respects coalesces, the growing national sentiments of the times. For Rousseau, Rome is a powerful symbol for the inspiration of patriotic citizens, but it is also a quiet warning about the incapacities of empires.

Exploring these aspects of Rousseau's thought brings out the powerful effects entrained by the new lore of diversity. Widespread exposure to the voluminous literature produced by returning voyagers left its mark on eighteenth-century Europe. A profound thinker with universalist predilections, the philosopher from Geneva was circumspect, but nevertheless impressed.<sup>2</sup> While unwavering in his belief that Roman virtues remained universally applicable and admirable, he introduced a new understanding of the political usefulness of difference — rejecting the Roman imperial model for a national one. And while resisting the growing taste for the exoticism of difference, Rousseau came to emphasize distinctiveness as being true to oneself — ultimately making the nation the only modern locus for real freedom.

In addressing the issues raised above I have not confined myself to the political writings of Rousseau. In addition to the most directly relevant works (the three *Discourses*, *On the Social Contract* and *Considerations on the Government of Poland*), I have consulted his *Constitutional Project for Corsica* and his *Abstract and Judgment of Saint Pierre's Project for Perpetual Peace*. I have also found rewarding for my purposes Rousseau's work on education (*Émile*), the arts, (*Letter to M. D'Alembert on the Theater*, the preface to *Narcisse*), music, and even romantic love (*Julie or the new Heloise*). Not only is this list far from exhaustive,<sup>3</sup> but the confines of this paper require that I proceed thematically rather than addressing each work in its integrity. Each of these works strikes many chords, the end result, however, is far from cacophony. In Rousseau's view of the world, the nation as polity makes increasing sense.

### **Diversity: Rousseau's functional embrace**

Before turning to Rousseau's perspectives on classical Rome, I will begin by laying out his views on human diversity. Fully appreciating the various roles that diversity plays in his work, allows us to grasp the significance of his critique of Rome and of his greater project of explaining

the modern need for nationalism. The existence of a vast world of diverse peoples beyond the borders of Europe was a prominent theme of the age and one continually fed by the ever expanding numbers of travel journals and compilations thereof. While Rousseau devoured much of the growing travel literature with all the rest, his perusal differed in object from that of his contemporaries. There is no special charm in diversity for Jean-Jacques, no delight in experiencing that which differs from himself. Despite this lack of simple pleasure, Rousseau values diversity more than most. For he harbors a unique appreciation of diversity's contributions to politics. The particularity of human groups requires *and* sustains national politics — the unique context in which modern individuals can thrive. While those remaining purists of universalism bemoan its stubborn persistence, Rousseau emphasizes its fragility, and calls for direct intervention when necessary to create and maintain distinctly separate communities.

The usefulness of diversity is in fact multi-faceted for Rousseau. His preoccupation with difference has little to do with exoticism — the experience of difference for the sake of difference itself. Rather he applauds it for its role in the development of human reflection, its teaching about universal man, as well as the creation of particularity in human groups. The latter function is the most important because it concerns political life. For Rousseau, particularity provides the glue of politics, the springs of patriotism, and the social cohesion necessary for the freedom and integrity of individuals. Good government requires more than the purest justice because it inspires no enthusiasm; like our health, we appreciate it only after we lose it (3: 955). What must be added to justice is difference. Rousseau praises the ancient examples of Moses, Lycurgus and Numa for understanding the importance of distinctive customs in the development of free peoples (3: 958). And he tells Poland that in order to succeed as a state it must develop distinctly national institutions — those that “form the genius, the character, the tastes, and the mores of a people.” Only they “inspire that ardent love of the fatherland, founded upon customs impossible to uproot” (3: 960). And only the love of the fatherland effectively induces individuals to overcome their particular interests in favor of the general interest.<sup>4</sup>

Although Rousseau remains committed to certain universal principles in government, (e.g., the participation of the population in the creation of legislation),<sup>5</sup> he considers every republican government as legitimate (with republican meaning simply a state which is ruled by law).<sup>6</sup> All considered, diversity wins considerable respect from Rousseau in the realm of governmental institutions. He is extremely cautious about disturbing historically developed practices, he is dubious whether free government can survive under all physical circumstances (climates), and, he is appre-

ciative of the vigor which difference can breed. He goes as far to argue that given a love of the fatherland, even bad legislation would make good citizens (3: 961).<sup>7</sup>

Given these beliefs, it is not surprising to find Rousseau bemoaning the creeping uniformity of modern Europe.<sup>8</sup> He laments that the original character of peoples is disappearing. Interestingly, Rousseau does not decry this uniformity as boring, but rather for its moral effects: there are no longer French, Germans or Spaniards, there are only Europeans — worse, they are all scoundrels with the same passions and tastes and without a fatherland (3: 960). He complains that all the capital cities are now just alike, where all the peoples mix together and all mores (*mœurs*) are confounded. “Paris and London are in my eyes but the same city” (4: 850).

Ancient peoples, by contrast, were more settled and isolated from one another, thus preserving the indigenous effects of air and territory on their characters. The constant movement and communication of Europeans no longer allows for such time-honored effects. Rousseau argues, “in our days [...] European inconstancy does not leave to any natural cause the time to make an impression” (4: 830). As civilization progresses, travel, commerce, conquest and urbanization, all work to diminish the differences caused by natural forces (3: 208). With “peoples” no longer being formed — at least not naturally (3: 444) — Rousseau views the diversity that feeds stable polities as threatened. In these circumstances, Rousseau calls for reinforcing measures. His advice to Poland is the creation and maintenance of Polishness, with “a natural repugnance for mingling with the foreigner” (3: 962).

For Rousseau, a just and enduring polity under modern conditions can only be based upon sustained parochialism. Because justice alone is not enough for a state to thrive, one must create enthusiasm for its laws through a unity of identity. This unity cannot be based on universal principles, but rather draws its strength from difference. Human identity must be circumscribed or else it is in danger of losing its force. The compassion of a cosmopolite is too thinly spread — such an individual is unable to muster the will to act virtuously within a community. The distinctness of nations preserves the possibility of a life of integrity and thus ultimately, true freedom. This association of difference with liberty is a powerful one. It lends force to the growing conception that nations are natural and unique entities — and the necessary basis of politics. It is with these thoughts in mind that I wish to turn to Rousseau’s views on Rome.

### **Rome: inspiration and quiet warning**

In eighteenth-century Europe, I argue that the changing valuation

of diversity was accompanied by a changing valuation of Rome. In fact, to embrace diversity was to question the possibility of a universal Rome. This is also true of Rousseau. But the Genevan's vision of Rome is hardly uncomplicated. At a time when many historians were seeking to demystify the story of Rome, Rousseau was busy glorifying the early republic. At a time when many of his contemporaries were turning their praise towards Athens (either for its example in the arts or in commerce), Rousseau "per-versely and incomprehensibly chose Rome, Sparta, and primitivism over the polished charm of modernity".<sup>9</sup>

In this section I seek to shed some light on Rousseau's dual attitude toward ancient Rome. His high praise for the virtuous Roman is well-known; only the illustrious Spartans rival them in his work. Yet his words of admiration are reserved for the early Romans of the republican era. Less noted are his criticisms of the Roman Empire, occasionally forthright, often barely masked. I hope to explain why to admire Romanness was not to admire their universality. Building on Montesquieu's critique of the Empire's overweening size and inability to maintain the loyalty of its citizens, he advocates a smaller, and most significantly, a more parochial polity. Perhaps only the crucial importance of the Roman example to Rousseau's understanding of virtue prevents him from more boldly dethroning the imperial model. If Rousseau's valuation of diversity does not quite lead him to spell out the death knell of Roman universalism, it is because his glorification of the first five hundred years of Roman rule muffles his critique of the latter five hundred.

In order to fully grasp Rousseau's admiration for Rome — particularly where it begins and ends — it helps to appreciate several things. First of all, the huge gulf that he sees as separating ancients and moderns (as well as the nature of that gulf) has a big impact on the paths he views as open to us as moderns. Secondly, the power of symbols is overwhelmingly important for Rousseau — and he uses the symbol of Rome to great effect in his work. The extent to which moderns may be able to recapture (albeit in new forms under new conditions) the good life known to the early Romans may depend on our ability to understand and use the symbolic in our politics. Lastly, Rousseau's critique of the Roman Empire is not to be overlooked. He pushes several of Montesquieu's arguments on the causes of its fall even further and adds a few of his own. And where many are as yet reluctant to draw a firm line between the 'good' republic and the 'bad' empire — whether due to the flourishing of arts or the grandeur of conquest under the early emperors — Rousseau does not hesitate to do so.

Let us begin with what Rousseau views as the incapacities of the moderns. The gulf that he sees lying between ancient and modern men

could not be painted more starkly. Rome is described as a “continuous miracle” that lasted for 500 years (3: 262), while Sparta is nothing less than a “republic of demi-gods” (3: 12). The tone reserved for the moderns, however, is one of disdainful reproach: they have laws only to learn obedience, customs only to amuse loose women, and they gather together only for the sake of a cult “which has nothing national about it, which in no way recalls the fatherland” (3: 958). No modern people receives the kind of lavish praise that Rousseau bestows upon the “illustrious” Romans and the “courageous” Greeks. Even the Genevans, who receive high praise for their political constitution as well as for their virtue, cannot compare.<sup>10</sup> They are simply not on the same symbolic level and their proximity in time and space means they are not spared Rousseau’s critical tongue.

Rousseau does admit that there have been some modern improvements in government, namely, the separation of powers within government (3: 977) and the structure of confederation between states (3: 431, 564). However, these innovations do not make a dent in the lost ground. He views the modern invention of representation as a clear step backwards, which usurps the right of the people to decide issues for themselves (3: 429). Far worse is that modern political theorists do not understand the importance of mores and customs to good government (3: 394). In observing modern nations, Rousseau finds only lawmakers, “but not one legislator” (3: 965). His harshest and most general indictment is that modern men are simply no longer citizens. Floating between their desires and their duties, they are no good for themselves or for others. Such a man is today’s Frenchman or Englishman; he is a bourgeois, a nothing. Rousseau gravely concludes: “These two words, fatherland and citizen, should be erased from modern languages” (4: 249–50).

Rousseau’s words are intended to startle. The deep chasm he depicts between the ancient and modern worlds is clearly meant to provoke and instruct. Understanding this aspect of his style is key to understanding his impact. He condemns and infuriates, only to hold out potential hope to moderns:

When reading ancient history, it seems to us that we are transported into another universe and among other beings. What do the French, the English, the Russians, have in common with the Romans and the Greeks? Almost nothing but their bodily form. The strong souls of the Romans and the Greeks appear to others the exaggerations of history. How could those, who feel so small, think that there were such great men? They existed however, and they were humans like us. (3: 956)

Rousseau denies outright the thesis that the ancient greats, formed by an-



other age and climate, were in fact different beings. The force of climate may mold and shape, but it does not change the very nature of man. Thus the gulf that exists is not unbridgeable; and we must not give up hope of ever approaching similar heights for mankind. It is up to the moderns then, to activate that leaven which remains “in the hearts of all men, awaiting for its fermentation, only to be put into action by proper institutions” (3: 969). As the Poles are the modern people which he finds “least far” from the ancients, Rousseau encourages them to seize the moment and to raise their souls to their pitch (3: 959, 961).

These brief remarks merely highlight the important function that the polarity of moderns and ancients serves in Rousseau’s thought. The symbolism of these two juxtaposed worlds was both a reality for Jean-Jacques as well as a useful tool. For he seeks not only to be read and understood, but to persuade and inspire. Cold reason is not sufficient to such a task and Rousseau relies on a more expressive language, full of illustrative examples to fulfill his goal. He believes that alone reason has no active energy, thus it can never achieve anything great. To inspire greatness requires the expressive language of signs: “Always to reason is the mania of small minds. Strong souls have another language; it is by this language that one persuades and brings about action” (4: 645).

Rousseau’s effusive comments on Rome (and Sparta as well) can only be properly grasped with this in mind. A free polity is nourished by the realm of the symbolic. It requires eloquence in its leadership and a spirit of emulation in its citizenry — both driven by the symbolic. The ancients, understanding this, could bring about change through persuasion, while the moderns must rely on “cannons and currency” (5: 428). Part of Rome’s unique wisdom lay in its attendance to the importance of signs. Power was draped with symbolism in order to bring it closer to the hearts and minds of the citizens: “What attentions the Romans gave to the language of signs! ...everything with them was display, representation, ceremony, and everything made an impression on the hearts of citizens” (4: 647). Similarly he praises the Greeks for stimulating emulation amongst the citizenry through public recitations of Homer and the public bestowal of awards for competitions. These are the practices that raised Greek courage and virtue “to a degree of energy of which nothing today can give us an idea, and which is not for moderns even to believe” (3: 958). Yet this aspect of antiquity is one that remains within reach and Rousseau urges us to follow similar paths. Moderns, as individual members of a community, can improve themselves and the polities they live in by emulating the great men of the past, as well as the virtue they find in each other.<sup>11</sup>

Not only can individuals find worthy objects of emulation, but the

Roman people, according to Rousseau, serves as the “model of all free peoples” (3: 113). This deep-seated belief necessarily colors his treatment of Rome. Its role as preeminent model, as potent symbol in Rousseau’s thought, means that the beloved Republic overshadows the increasingly suspect Empire. The Republic occupies the symbolic space of Rome and we are left to piece together his critique of the latter half of Roman history. For Rousseau, such an emphasis is an important corrective to modern histories that focus only on revolutions and catastrophes and which render a people famous only in its decline: “all our histories begin where they should finish” (4: 526–27). Thus he chooses to focus on Rome’s early glory days to create the model he seeks. This does not mean, however, that the “lessons” of Rome’s fall are lost on Rousseau. In fact, a closer examination tells us that exactly the opposite is the case.

The lavish admiration of Jean-Jacques for the world’s “freest and most powerful people on earth” (3: 444) describes republican Romans. The Rome of outstanding patriotism, purity of mores and martial valor is undoubtedly the Rome of the first five hundred years. That Rousseau was preoccupied with *this* Rome, does not mean that he was oblivious to the ongoing reassessment contemporaries were making of the universal Empire. In fact, the two Romes are remarkably distinct for Rousseau, providing a uniquely clean contrast. While the Republic was defined by freedom, virtue, discipline, poverty, simplicity and ignorance; the Empire was characterized by the opposing values of servitude, corruption, effeminacy, great riches, splendor and over-refinement.

The history of Rome had for some time been under reexamination. The old idea that Roman rule was somehow guided and perpetuated by God’s hand on earth, with the political reunification of the continent awaiting only the right leader, was one which held less and less weight. Even Bossuet’s renowned *Universal History*, written in 1681 and often viewed as a traditional Christian perspective of Rome, began to introduce a more historical approach to events. Later, Montesquieu made more radical departures and the process of demythologizing was under way. Rousseau appears at first to be partial towards Bossuet’s position. In an early fragment entitled *Universal Chronology*, Rousseau muses that we find the traces of the Sovereign Master on every page of history, that it is He who decides “the fate of princes and the duration of empires.”<sup>12</sup> More significantly, in his published work he occasionally appears to justify their empire, claiming that virtue made the Romans “mistress of the world” (3: 258), “the masters of nations,” “worthy of [...] governing the earth” (3: 14–15). Nevertheless, we shall see that such words are clearly meant to extol their virtue and not their empire.

In his *Abstract and Judgment of Saint Pierre's Project for Perpetual Peace* (a relatively early work), Rousseau speaks approvingly of the unity of a common culture which the Roman domination of Europe helped bring about.<sup>13</sup> But this appreciation is tainted with ambivalence as well as a certain pessimism. A common culture allows for the possibility of a confederation among sovereign states, which in turn diminishes the risk of national wars. While this is truly a worthy cause, Rousseau sees its eventuality only dimly. It may simply be an unattainable ideal, worse, attainable only through revolution, or worse still, it may be something more to be feared than desired (3: 600). In the final analysis, it is not clear that even the unity thus far developed in Europe does not bring more harm than good. Europe, he says, is ravaged by constant discord and war; nice words are accompanied by intolerance, cruelty and misery. In the end, "this supposed brotherhood of the peoples of Europe" is but "a derisive name" for expressing their mutual animosity (3: 568).

Given this early ambivalence towards unity on Rousseau's part, his subsequent critiques of the uniformity of Europeans come as less surprising. In his last political work, *The Government of Poland*, he demands that Roman law — the ultimate symbol of Roman universalism — as well as custom, be banned from Polish schools and courts. At the time Rousseau was writing, Roman law was undergoing considerable reassessment. This once highly revered achievement was now seen by many as but a compilation of excessive and often defective laws that had little or no relevance to developing national jurisprudence. Rousseau refers to Justinian's Digest as a "hodgepodge" or "jumble" [*fatras*], summing up much of the era's new attitude (3: 1001).

In this sense, and in many others, Jean-Jacques was not immune to the ongoing demystification process of Rome. In his *Social Contract*, he recognizes the oft-depicted early period of Roman history as most likely fable (3: 444). In *Émile*, he questions why Rome should be the center of sanctity any more so than Mecca (IV.555). And finally, in *Julie or the new Heloise*, Rousseau's level-headed character Claire praises the politics of Geneva, claiming that had she been born there she would have had a Roman soul. She dares to think, "Rome is no longer at Rome, she is everywhere that I am"; then hesitates, and adds, "But why then Rome, and always Rome? Let us remain in Geneva" (500).

These small (and not so small) question marks about the standing of Rome, Rousseau occasionally allows to slip by. But just as often, he is engaged in symbol maintenance. Rome must continue to shine, for he finds its example extremely useful to the construction of strong nations. As the bases of imperial Rome and nationhood are fundamentally at odds with

one another, Rousseau uses the powerful word and image of Rome to refer only to his beloved Republic. And he attempts to excuse the vices that appear long before the emperors. Rousseau weakly explains the creeping love of luxury observed in Roman triumphal marches as “the luxury of the vanquished, the more it glittered, the less it seduced” (3: 964). And although he emphatically condemns conquering peoples, Rousseau excuses Roman conquest in the names of virtue: “the only talent worthy of Rome is that of conquering the world and making virtue reign in it” (3: 15) and, remarkably, self-defense: “The Romans were conquerors by necessity and, so to speak, in spite of themselves. War was a necessary remedy to the vice of their constitution. Always attacked and always victorious, they were the only disciplined people amongst barbarians and became the masters of the world by constantly defending themselves” (3: 1013).

In this way Rousseau protects the image of Rome. So as not to bifurcate one of his most cherished symbols, Rousseau never tells us outright that there are two different Romes. The Empire he often leaves unnamed when he seeks to instruct by this negative example. Nevertheless, the Empire and Rome’s decline are clearly linked. Rousseau is undaunted by the flourishing of the empire (in the arts and in conquest) under Augustus and other subsequent emperors. For Jean-Jacques, the symbolic end of Rome comes with the end of the Republic: “But Rome was for five hundred years a continual miracle that the world should not hope to see again” (3: 262). With the founding of the Republic in 509 B.C. and Julius Caesar’s appointment as dictator in 46 B.C., the period loosely referred to is clear.

In a few places, Rousseau does speak more specifically about the onset of decline. In the first *Discourse* he argues that degeneration first sets in at the time of Ennius and Terrence. These two famous literary men lived during the late Republic (about the time when the Punic Wars were introducing great wealth into the capital). But, he claims it is after Ovid, Catullus, and Martial (again literary men, living at or about the time of the fall of the Republic), that Rome “formerly the temple of virtue, becomes the theater of crime, the disgrace of nations, and the plaything of barbarians” (3: 10). Elsewhere, Rousseau argues that there comes a time when citizens lose interest in the common cause. No longer willing to defend their homeland, rulers are forced to turn to mercenaries: “Such was the state of Rome at the end of the Republic and under the emperors” (3: 268).<sup>14</sup> By the time of Augustus, a decreasing population (Rousseau’s favored indice of an ill polity) demonstrated the degeneration of Rome (4: 851).

Although Rousseau never systematically treats the decline of Rome, his work contains numerous passages that explore the reasons behind its degeneration. They are of particular interest to us because his answer to the

question, why did Rome fail, provides insight into his belief in the nation as the preferred basis for modern politics. I have come across seven important causes which Rousseau names at one point or another as leading to the downfall of Rome. The first three: luxury, Christianity, and philosophy, I will deal with only briefly as they are not directly relevant to our primary purpose. The latter four, however, call for a little more attention. They include the issues of mercenary armies, state expansion, state size, and the mixing of peoples.

The theme of luxury as a cause of decadence is one that Jean-Jacques inherits directly from the ancients themselves. Although certainly important to Rousseau's thought,<sup>15</sup> it had long been a contending theory about the fall of Rome, and tells us little about new thinking on the nation. Blaming Christianity for the fall of Rome is also not new; it is an old refrain that Augustine himself had feared and combated. Rousseau dwells briefly on this cause, concluding forcefully, "when the cross chased out the eagle, all Roman valor disappeared" (3: 467). Finally, while the negative effects that the introduction of Greek philosophy wreaked on Rome are not a cause uniquely cited by Rousseau, he certainly gives it a novel and idiosyncratic force. He maintains that as Rome filled with philosophers, the fatherland was forgotten and good people disappeared: "Until then the Romans had been content to practice virtue; all was lost when they began to study it" (3: 14).

The use of mercenaries to fight a country's battles is a move that repeatedly receives scorn from Rousseau's pen. For a free polity to endure, soldiers must be citizens; they must be imbued with loyalty for the homeland. Those who sell their blood to fight for any cause debase themselves; those who hire them undermine the state. This opinion clearly originates from the experience of Rome. He states that the early victories of Rome were won "by brave citizens who knew how to give their blood to their country in time of need, but never sold it." In the late Republic, however, Marius "dishonored the legions by introducing free men, vagabonds and other mercenaries". In time, these mercenaries "proud of their debasement, held in contempt the laws by which they were protected, as well as their comrades whose bread they ate, and believed it a greater honor to be Caesar's satellites than Rome's defenders." Of mercenaries, he concludes: "It would not be difficult to show that this was one of the principal causes of the ruin of the Roman Empire" (3: 269).

Despite the defense we have seen Rousseau make of early Rome's conquests, he is, in fact, extremely critical of expansionary peoples. Those who try to take the freedom of others, ultimately will lose their own.<sup>16</sup> He does assert that the yoke of domination which Rome extended over so many

peoples, returned finally to fall on itself (3: 10). Interestingly, Rousseau does not tend to condemn conquest based on the moral injury inflicted upon its victims. Rather he focuses on the corruptive forces acting upon the victor: "...nothing is as downtrodden or miserable as conquering peoples, and even their successes serve only to increase their miseries" (3: 268). As yet, this is not really a nationalist argument. Rousseau never articulates that this oppression might be due to one community's attempt to incorporate another. But conquest is ultimately a firm predictor of future demise. Montesquieu had argued that military expansion was bred into the very political constitution of early Rome. In a thinly masked allusion to Rome, Rousseau validates his conclusion: "[W]e have seen states so constituted that the necessity for conquests entered into their very constitution, and in order to maintain themselves, they were forced to grow endlessly. Perhaps they congratulated themselves greatly on this happy necessity, which nevertheless showed them, along with the limits of their size, the inevitable moment of their fall" (3: 398).

The burdens of size is a theme which Jean-Jacques inherits from the Baron as well, with Montesquieu naming the Empire's overwhelming size as a major factor in its decline. Rousseau not only echoes this, he makes it a dominating concern in his analysis of modern states. "Greatness of nations! Vastness of states!" he exclaims, are the biggest source of misfortunes, "especially the countless calamities that undermine and destroy civilized peoples" (3: 970). While Rousseau only indirectly cites Rome as illustration, it is the looming example behind all of his statements on the subject and direct reference to the capital is never far in the text. He argues that increased size leads citizens to become detached from their homeland, which in turn leads to the destructive reliance on mercenary armies (3: 268). Ultimately, his insistent refrain on the debilitating effects of size can only recall one image to mind, that of the Empire.

According to Rousseau, some of the great difficulties that challenge large states are simply administrative. At some point, the size of a state is incapacitating. Large polities "crushed by the weight of their own numbers" groan under the oppression that necessarily follows, for just as God alone can govern the world, "it would require men of more than human capacities to govern a large nation" (3: 970). Yet in considering state size, administration is hardly the sole concern. Rousseau's reasoning is deeply connected to his understanding of the benefits of the nation as polity. Polities that are too large are no longer communities; not only does government become cumbersome, but the citizenry suffers from the loosening of social bonds. The government enforces its laws with "less vigor and speed" and is unable to prevent sedition in distant places. In addition,

the people have “less affection for leaders that it never sees, for the fatherland, which is like the world in its eyes, and for its fellow citizens, most of whom are foreigners to it.” Once a state becomes so large that it encompasses multiple peoples, the difficulties are compounded:

The same laws cannot be suitable to so many diverse provinces which have different customs [*mœurs*], live in contrasting climates, and which cannot tolerate the same form of government. Different laws produce nothing but discord and confusion among peoples living under the same rulers and who are in constant communication, pass through or get married in each others’ areas and, subjected to other customs, never know whether their patrimony is actually their own. (3: 387)

This description of a multi-national state is hardly flattering. Such a state no longer enjoys the benefits of truly national (or communal) politics: “Talents are buried; virtues unknown, vices unpunished in this multitude of men unknown to one another.” While Rome is once again left here unmentioned, the direction of the critique is clear.

It is on this basis that Rousseau recommends to the Poles to narrow their frontiers and to federalize government as much as possible within the remaining territory. This is an attempt to instill the benefits of smallness, where the people identify with one another and with their government, thus creating a society “of a size limited by the extent of human faculties.” However, Rousseau is not so unrealistic as to expect that one might produce the conditions of national politics by a simple redrawing of boundaries across the continent.<sup>17</sup> He is far more conservative about such types of drastic action. Nevertheless, his warning message is clear: “a body too big for its constitution collapses and perishes, crushed by its own weight” (3: 388).

Already in his concerns about size, Rousseau has touched on another issue: the idea that the “mixing of peoples” weakens the foundation of the state. As we saw above, he argues that a large state embracing diverse provinces and various peoples necessarily encounters certain problems: the varying climate requires different forms of government; the difference in laws then only creates confusion; and finally, intermingling undermines the distinctiveness of peoples and thus, implicitly, their identity with their own group and their loyalty to their homeland. Fellow citizens are foreigners to each other and their patrimony is left in doubt (3: 387). This conclusion is a very modern (and nationalist) viewpoint of the downfall of Rome. Rousseau also decries the effects that the mixing of peoples has on the development of both language and music. Yet, far worse for the political development of mankind, the same mingling works to destroy the

customs of each of them. When Rousseau speaks of the destruction caused by the barbarian invasions of the Roman Empire, he is referring above all to the havoc wreaked upon the national *mœurs* of different peoples. He critiques everything “that facilitates communication between diverse nations”. For such interaction never transmits virtues, but only crimes, and ultimately, “alters among all of them, the manners [*mœurs*] that are proper to their climate and the constitution of their government”. Following upon the barbarian invasions, he writes that the crusades, commerce, exploration “and more” only “prolonged and augmented the disorder” (2: 964).

Rousseau’s embrace of human diversity is based on his assessment of the nature of man as well as of the particular political needs of modern man. In a world of expansive travel and commerce, he claims that Asia is better known to contemporary Europeans than the former inhabitants knew their own continent. He finds such extended knowledge and experience threatening to good politics. Where identity and loyalty for a community’s members are unclear, virtue is left with little support. Thus for Rousseau, to recreate the citizen in modern conditions requires a shining symbol as to the possibilities of politics, as well as the strong maintenance of the distinctness of nations. Hence we find the unique combination of Rousseau’s perspectives on diversity and Rome. He is at once gazing backward towards ancient universals and forward towards modern historicist values. Ultimately, the goal is not for all of us to become Romans, but in following separate paths, to raise our souls to their level.

The belief that in the uniqueness of nations, moderns may find their political salvation, is a fundamentally new idea. Its seeds can be found in Rousseau’s great mentor, Montesquieu. His masterwork, *The Spirit of the Laws*, is above all an attempt to explain the diversity of mankind. There one finds strong hints that the differences among ‘peoples’ are not divergences from the norm to be tolerated or bemoaned, nor are they merely curiosities to entertain — rather they are political assets to be taken full advantage of. Rousseau not only develops this idea, he makes human freedom and well-being dependent on it. The Roman example is a powerful symbol of patriotism and civic virtue, a demonstration of what humans can achieve. But if moderns want to recreate such conditions of virtue, they must rely on their own ingenuity and each community must create their own politics. To imitate the success of others, or even simply to seek justice, is a sure path towards apathetic citizenry and eventual absorption by others. According to Rousseau, nations must seek difference, and to preserve it, they must also in some degree seek isolation. To live in a multinational state, such as the Roman Empire, is to lose one’s patrimony — and the possibility of virtue and freedom along with it. Thus our goal should



not be the recreation of a universal Rome, nor even the creation of a hundred smaller Romes; it should be that of producing and maintaining diverse communities capable of bringing virtue to its greatest height.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>All citations in parentheses are from the *Pléiade* edition; unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own. I would like to thank Ruth Grant for her valuable advice in putting together my thoughts, and my husband George for walking our little one at critical moments.

<sup>2</sup>Rousseau was very critical of the travel literature being produced. He writes that he looks forward to the day that philosophers will travel and observe, as opposed to the current bands of sailors, merchants, soldiers and missionaries (3: 100).

<sup>3</sup>The topics under discussion here would surely benefit from a close reading of Rousseau's autobiographical writings, something I must leave for a later project.

<sup>4</sup>He continues: "every man is virtuous when his private will conforms in all matters with the general will, and we willingly want what is wanted by the people we love" (3: 254).

<sup>5</sup>A democracy is where "there are more citizen magistrates than simple private citizens" (3: 403). "Small" for Rousseau is a state where all citizens know each other by sight, thus neither virtue nor vice can be hidden from public judgment (3: 112).

<sup>6</sup>Whether this definition assumes citizen participation in the ratification of legislation is unclear (cf. 3: 380).

<sup>7</sup>Nevertheless, we must note that even where inferior legislation serves the laudable goal of creating difference, judgments regarding what are "good" or "bad" laws clearly remain.

<sup>8</sup> Here it is important to note that Rousseau critiques only the growing uniformity amongst nations. He has no appreciation for plurality *within* nations. In both respects, he despises the corrupting influence of capital cities. They work both to break down diversity between "peoples" *and* the homogeneity within. The similar effects of royal courts and large, densely packed populations dissolve the original character of nations — first in the capitals, and then gradually, their hinterlands (171). The cosmopolitanism of capital cities also introduces a confused diversity of moeurs into what he believes must be homogenous communities. This "corruption" further dissolves the diversity of nations.

<sup>9</sup>The words are Allan Bloom's, from the introduction to his translation of Rousseau's *Letter to M. D'Alembert on the Theater (Politics and the Arts)*, Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990), xiv.

<sup>10</sup>Rousseau's very concern about the potential corruption resulting from establishing a theater in Geneva demonstrates his conviction that Geneva is no new Sparta: "But let us not flatter ourselves that we shall see Sparta reborn in the lap of commerce and the love of gain. If we had the same maxims, a theatre could be established at Geneva without any risk; for never would citizen or townsman set foot in it" (Bloom 67).

<sup>11</sup>Rousseau's position on emulation appears to evolve over time. In his early work he approves the emulation of great men. In *Émile*, however, he continues to approve the more general (and one might even say anonymous) emulation of ancient citizens as well as the virtuous among one's fellow citizens, but he is quite negative about the more direct emulation of specific men.

<sup>12</sup>He then refers approvingly to Rollin and the Père Lami for their similar views (5: 489).

<sup>13</sup>However, he names Christianity as the foremost cause of this union: "one cannot deny that it is above all to Christianity that Europe still owes today the sort of society which has endured among its members" (3: 566).

<sup>14</sup>In another instance, Rousseau notes that when the citizenry falls into servitude, all deliberation ceases, and people revert simply to adoration or curses: "Such was the vile manner in which the Senate expressed its opinions under the Emperors" (3: 439).

<sup>15</sup>A particularly clear example: "The Roman Empire, in turn, after devouring all the wealth of the universe, was the prey of people who did not even know what wealth was" (3: 20).

<sup>16</sup>"Those who want to be free must not want to be conquerors" (3: 1013).

<sup>17</sup>In the *Abstract and Judgment of Saint Pierre's Project for Perpetual Peace* (1756), Rousseau goes as far to argue that the existing territories of the nations of Europe are more or less natural: "The position of the mountains, seas, and rivers, which serve as boundaries to the nations who inhabit it [Europe], seems to have decided the number and the size of these nations; and we may say that the political order of this part of the world is, in certain respects, the work of nature [...]. In fact, let us not think that this much vaunted balance has been established by any one, or that any one did anything with the design of preserving it: we find that it exists" (3: 570).