

***Frail Happiness: An Essay on Rousseau***

TZVETAN TODOROV. Trans. John Scott and Robert Zaretsky

University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001; 120 pages.

Many liberal commentators portray Jean-Jacques Rousseau's political writings as the eighteenth-century utopian anti-individualistic antechamber of the tragically real totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. Todorov's essay challenges this widespread critical stance and argues for a thoroughly humanist reading of Rousseau's political thought. Certainly, as Todorov asserts, Rousseau was aware of the pressing need for order and equality within the "general association" of the polis. However, he was not blind to the equally pressing need for individual self-realization either. In order to substantiate this interpretation, Todorov engages in a careful and meticulous exercise of textual analysis, which draws from the whole corpus of Rousseau's writings. By doing this, Todorov can chart the thought of Rousseau as a comprehensive, sophisticated, and largely consistent philosophical system, thus implicitly dismissing another widespread critical interpretation of Rousseau's philosophy as chaotic, fragmentary, and inconsistent.

Todorov does recognize the ambiguities and the inner tension characterizing much of Rousseau's extensive philosophical production. Also, he does not deny the persistence of "a certain philosophical extremism" (3), which, however, should not be taken as the distinctive trait of Rousseau's work. Todorov claims that Rousseau's extremism is due to "sheer intensity of thought" (3), rather than to political fanaticism. The virulent tone of certain works of Rousseau's derives, for Todorov, from Rousseau's desire to show most vividly and sharply the consequences that certain sets of premises imply. Unfortunately, this virulent tone is taken to be proof of Rousseau's own commitment to that particular view. Rousseau's *Social Contract* is certainly the most representative text in this sense. Still, to a deeper and broader scrutiny, Rousseau's vehemence appears to be part of a more complex and genuinely humanist enterprise. Specifically, Todorov speaks of a generally unrecognized "third way" (18) proper to Rousseau's philosophy. With it, Rousseau would attempt to combine together the goals of collective welfare and individual self-realization.

According to Todorov's account, Rousseau's system hinges on the "opposition between the 'state of nature' and the 'state of society'" (5). The state of nature is a forever-lost, animal-like condition of blissful ignorance. In it, neither language nor self-consciousness existed. As a consequence, there existed no notion of, and no opposition between, "goodness" and "evil," "happiness" and "unhappiness," "justice" and "injustice." After the creation of language, which requires "sociability," i.e., mutual recognition and self-recognition for the sake of successful communication, human beings started breaking up the original harmony of the whole into a dissonance of particular elements. The conditions for disagreement, conflict, and vice were thereby generated. Despite this grim historical account, Rousseau does not demonize sociability and society in toto. On the contrary, he regards them as something momentous, identifiable with the birth of the human being qua human. Contrary to the popular myths surrounding Rousseau's "bon sauvage," he does not preach a return to the "state of nature" of our happily idiotic ancestors. As Todorov explains,

"there is no turning back" (10). Rather, Rousseau invites us to go forward, looking for ways in which the lost harmony of the "state of nature" can be reproduced analogously (i.e., not identically). Todorov states that Rousseau envisaged three main ways in which this harmony can be approached, of which only two are generally recognized by scholars: the way of "man" and the way of the "citizen" (12).

The latter way, the way of the "citizen," is probably the more famous. It is the one around which most of the critical views of Rousseau's political philosophy orbit. By reflecting on this option, Rousseau powerfully describes the institutions of that polis in which citizens want to establish total harmony by annihilating individuality. Todorov regards Rousseau's intellectual attempt as an extraordinary example of "'if ... then' analysis" (25), a hypothetical study rather than a political manifesto. He claims that Rousseau did not and could not think of the way of the "citizen" as the ideal solution, for it involved the disintegration of two fundamental virtues, which Rousseau himself believed to be generally needed in order for the human being to be happy—namely, "individual freedom" and "equality." Most tellingly, Rousseau recommended the way of the "citizen" to only two actual communities of his day: Poland and Corsica. Rousseau believed that in these two nations no widespread culture of individualism had yet developed. A Sparta-like social reality could therefore be reasonably realized there, without having to immolate individual freedom on the altar of collective harmony.

The former way, the way of "man," is the one cultivated and practiced by Rousseau himself in the later years of his life. It is the way of solitary, quasi-ascetic isolation from society. Harmony is to be regained within oneself by a peculiarly Rousseauian fourfold medicine, which Todorov terms "limited communication" (35). First, one should express oneself primarily in the private form of writing rather than in the public form of speaking. Second, one should turn one's private imagination into the new universe in which one may spend most of one's time. Third, one should rediscover the prehuman wilderness of nature in remote places, far from humankind and from any concern related to human affairs. Finally, one should treat other people as sheer extensions of one's own being, as the few persons one needs to deal with can be regarded no more as actual individuals, but merely as instruments for one's own goals, similar to "pets and domestic animals" (41). Although personally experienced and implemented, Todorov believes this fourfold medicine not to be Rousseau's ideal way to harmony. On the contrary, in the very same autobiographical works where the "way of the solitary individual" (53) is described, Rousseau repeatedly observes the painful shortcomings of this ascetic lifestyle and its inherent contradiction with the human "constitutive characteristic—sociality" (47).

Neither the way of the "citizen" nor the way of "man" appears to be satisfactory. Fortunately, according to Todorov, Rousseau presents a generally unrecognized "third way," which can be discerned particularly in his *Emile*. The protagonist of this "third way" is the "moral individual." Its distinguishing feature is the capacity for the "reconciliation of these two opposite terms": "citizen" and "man" (56). Appropriately, the pedagogy of *Emile* comprises "two phases of education" (62): "negative education," which is aimed at fostering the individual's unique traits of soul and body, and "social education," which is aimed at helping the individual to relate amiably, but not subserviently, to other members of the community.

Rousseau's educational project would appear to be aimed at training the individual in "a healthy form of sociability," which Todorov regards as a special form of "wisdom" (65). As a practical skill, this "wisdom" does not assure the successful balance between individualistic and collectivistic forces a priori, but only a posteriori, i.e., only as the result of the individual's life-long application of its abilities for mediation. Rousseau's "third way" is risky and unstable, and the happiness that it can generate is a "frail happiness" (66).

No less frail, however, is Todorov's overall defence of Rousseau's philosophical achievements as a largely consistent system of humanist thought. His novel interpretation may sound convincing at first, thanks to the many relevant passages that he cites. Still, this extensive drawing from Rousseau's entire corpus also undermines some of Todorov's aims. The myriad of contrasting suggestions, remarks, observations, and hypotheses that can be found in Rousseau's immense intellectual production can also suggest a view of his legacy that is less that of a consistent humanist system of thought, and more that of a fluid and often incongruous wandering of the mind among diverse scenarios and convictions. To resolve all internal contradictions and ambiguities by speaking of "sheer intensity of thought" is not sufficient. In fact, by reshuffling the quotations from Rousseau that Todorov collects, one could write a counter-essay. Perhaps, it would be better to say that the comprehensive, humanist "third way" belongs less to Rousseau himself than to a new postmodern entity whom we could baptize "Rousseau-Todorov." It is as such that the "wisdom" of the *Emile* can be rediscovered and used to re-read Rousseau's philosophical corpus. It is as such that the "third way" can be said to underlie the entire body of Rousseau's work. It is as such that a thoroughly humanist view of Rousseau can become plausible and valuable, though not capable of erasing once and for all the plausibility of alternative interpretations. After all, the greatness of Rousseau lies in the diversity of insights that he has been able to generate with his rich and polymorphous intellectual production. One or two scholarly labels, however positive they may sound, are not enough to contain him and his work.

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***Articulated Experiences: Towards a Radical Phenomenology of Contemporary Social Movements***

PEYMAN VAHABZADEH

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Employing all the familiar postmodern terminology, Vahabzadeh's *Articulated Experiences* is a fast-paced exploration of contemporary social theory aimed at establishing an antifoundationalist theory to accommodate "new [social] movements ... [which] generally involve nontotalizing antifoundationalist praxis" (1). Using this theory, Vahabzadeh then seeks to answer the question: "Are we post-modern yet?" (3). The book draws heavily upon Laclau and Mouffe's highly acclaimed *Hegemony and Socialist Strategies* (1985) and Gramsci's *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (1971).