BOOKS

HOW ROUSSEAU PREDICTED TRUMP

The Enlightenment philosopher's attack on cosmopolitan élites now seems prophetic.

By Pankaj Mishra

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Rousseau's lowly background made him the Enlightenment's great outsider. Illustration by Jeffrey Fisher

"I love the poorly educated," Donald Trump said during a victory speech in February, and he has repeatedly taken aim at America's élites and their "false song of globalism." Voters in Britain, heeding Brexit campaigners' calls to "take back control" of a country ostensibly threatened by uncontrolled immigration, "unelected élites," and "experts," have reversed fifty years of European integration. Other countries across Western Europe, as well as Israel, Russia, Poland, and Hungary, seethe with demagogic assertions of ethnic, religious, and national identity. In India, Hindu supremacists have adopted the conservative epithet "libtard" to channel righteous fury against liberal and secular élites. The great eighteenth-century venture of a universal civilization harmonized by rational self-interest, commerce, luxury, arts,

and science—the Enlightenment forged by Voltaire, Montesquieu, Adam Smith, and others—seems to have reached a turbulent anticlimax in a worldwide revolt against cosmopolitan modernity.

No Enlightenment thinker observing our current predicament from the afterlife would be able to say "I told you so" as confidently as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, an awkward and prickly autodidact from Geneva, who was memorably described by Isaiah Berlin as the "greatest militant lowbrow in history." In his major writings, beginning in the seventeen-fifties, Rousseau thrived on his loathing of metropolitan vanity, his distrust of technocrats and of international trade, and his advocacy of traditional mores.

Voltaire, with whom Rousseau shared a long and violent animosity, caricatured him as a "tramp who would like to see the rich robbed by the poor, the better to establish the fraternal unity of man." During the Cold War, critics such as Berlin and Jacob Talmon presented Rousseau as a prophet of totalitarianism. Now, as large middle classes in the West stagnate and billions elsewhere move out of poverty while harboring unrealizable dreams of prosperity, Rousseau's obsession with the psychic consequences of inequality seems even more prophetic and disturbing.

Rousseau described the quintessential inner experience of modernity: being an outsider. When he arrived in Paris, in the seventeen-forties, at the age of thirty, he was a deracinated looker-on, struggling with complex feelings of envy, fascination, revulsion, and rejection provoked by a self-absorbed élite. Mocked by his peers in France, he found keen readers across Europe. Young German provincials such as the philosophers Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Johann Gottfried von Herder —the fathers, respectively, of economic and cultural nationalism— simmered with resentment toward cosmopolitan universalists. Many small-town revolutionaries, beginning with Robespierre, have been

inspired by Rousseau's hope—outlined in his book "The Social Contract" (1762)—that a new political structure could cure the ills of an unequal and commercial society.

In the past decade, a number of books have asserted Rousseau's centrality and uniqueness. Leo Damrosch's biography, "Restless Genius" (2005), identified Rousseau as "the most original genius of his age—so original that most people at the time could not begin to appreciate how powerful his thinking was." Last year, István Hont, in "Politics in Commercial Society," a comparative study of Rousseau and Adam Smith, argued that we have not moved much beyond Rousseau's fears and concerns: that a society built around self-interested individuals will necessarily lack a common morality. Heinrich Meier, in his new book, "On the Happiness of the Philosophic Life" (Chicago), offers an overview of Rousseau's thought through a reading of his last, unfinished book, "Reveries of a Solitary Walker," which he began in 1776, two years before his death. In "Reveries," Rousseau moved away from political prescriptions and cultivated his belief that "liberty is not inherent in any form of government, it is in the heart of the free man."

If Rousseau seems like the central protagonist in the anti-élitist revolt currently reconfiguring our politics, it is because he was present during the creation of the value system—the Enlightenment belief in what he called "the sciences, the arts, luxury, commerce, laws," which changed the character of Western culture and eventually that of the world at large. The new dispensation generally benefitted men of letters. Rousseau, however, became one of its rare critics, at least partly because the Paris salon, the focal point of the French Enlightenment, was a milieu in which he had no real place.

Rousseau had little formal education, but he accumulated plenty of

experience during a largely unsupervised childhood and adolescence. Born in Geneva in 1712, to a struggling watchmaker and a mother who died shortly after giving birth, he was only ten years old when his father deposited him with indifferent relatives and left town. At the age of fifteen, he ran away and found his way to Savoy, where he quickly became the boy toy of a Swiss-French noblewoman. She turned out to be the great love of his life, introducing him to books and music. Rousseau, always seeking substitutes for his mother, called her *Maman*.

By the time he arrived in Paris, he had already worked in various subordinate capacities throughout Europe: as an apprentice engraver in Geneva, a footman in Turin, a tutor in Lyons, a secretary in Venice. These experiences, Damrosch writes, "gave him the authority to analyze inequality as he did." Soon after his move to Paris, he took up with a near-illiterate laundress, who bore him five children, and made his first tentative forays into salon society. One of his earliest acquaintances there was Denis Diderot, a fellow-provincial who was committed to making the most of that decade's relatively free intellectual climate. In 1751, Diderot launched his "Encyclopédie," which synthesized key insights of the French Enlightenment, such as those of Buffon's "Natural History" (1749) and Montesquieu's hugely influential "The Spirit of the Laws" (1748). The encyclopedia cemented the movement's main claim: that knowledge of the human world, and the identification of its fundamental principles, would pave the path of progress. As a prolific contributor to the "Encyclopédie," publishing nearly four hundred articles, many of them on politics and music, Rousseau appeared to have joined in a collective endeavor to establish the primacy of reason and, as Diderot wrote, to "give back to the arts and the sciences the liberty that is so precious to them."

But his views were changing. One afternoon in October, 1749, Rousseau travelled to a fortress outside Paris, where Diderot, who had

tested the limits of free expression with a tract that challenged the existence of God, was serving a few months in prison. Reading a newspaper on the way, Rousseau noticed an advertisement for an essay competition. The topic was "Has the progress of the sciences and arts done more to corrupt morals or improve them?" In his "Confessions," published in 1782, and arguably the first modern autobiography, Rousseau described how "the moment I read this I beheld another universe and became another man." He claims that he sat down by the roadside and spent the next hour in a trance, drenching his coat in tears, overcome by the insight that progress, contrary to what Enlightenment philosophes said about its civilizing and liberating effects, was leading to new forms of enslavement.

Rousseau is unlikely to have received his epiphany so histrionically; he may have already started formulating his heresies. In any case, his prize-winning entry in the contest, published in 1750 as his first philosophical work, "A Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences," abounded in dramatic claims. The arts and sciences, he wrote, were "garlands of flowers over the chains which weigh [men] down," and "our minds have been corrupted in proportion" as human knowledge has increased. By the mid-eighteenth century, Paris's intellectuals had erected a standard of civilization for others to follow. In Rousseau's view, the newly emergent intellectual and technocratic class did little more than provide literary and moral cover for the powerful and the unjust.

Diderot was happy to indulge Rousseau's polemic, and did not initially realize that it amounted to a declaration of war on his own project. Most of his peers saw science and culture as liberating humankind from Christianity, Judaism, and other vestiges of what they saw as barbarous superstition. They commended the emerging bourgeois class, and placed much stock in its instincts for self-preservation and self-interest,

and in its scientific, meritocratic spirit. Adam Smith envisaged an open global system of trade powered by envy and admiration of the rich along with mimetic desires for their power and privileges. Smith argued that the human instinct for emulation of others could be turned into a positive moral and social force. Montesquieu thought that commerce, which renders "superfluous things useful and useful ones necessary," would "cure destructive prejudices" and promote "communication among peoples."

Voltaire's poem "Le Mondain" depicts its author as the owner of fine tapestries and silverware and an ornate carriage, revelling in Europe's luxurious present and scorning its religious past. Voltaire was typical of the self-interested commoner who promoted commerce and liberty as an antidote to arbitrary authority and hierarchy. In the seventeen-twenties, he speculated lucratively in London and hailed its stock exchange as a temple of secular modernity, where "Jew, Mohammedan and Christian deal with each other as though they were all of the same faith, and only apply the word infidel to people who go bankrupt."

Exhorting the pursuit of luxury together with the freedom of speech, Voltaire and the others had articulated and embodied a mode of life in which individual freedom was achieved through increased wealth and intellectual sophistication. Against this moral and intellectual revolution, which came after centuries of submission before throne and altar, Rousseau launched a counterrevolution. The word "finance," he said, is "a slave's word," and the secret workings of financial systems are a "means of making pilferers and traitors, and of putting freedom and the public good upon the auction block." Anticipating today's Brexiters, he claimed that despite England's political and economic might, the country offered its citizens only a bogus liberty: "The English people thinks it is free. It greatly deceives itself; it is free only during the election of members of Parliament. As soon as they are elected, the

people are enslaved and count for nothing."

In the course of nearly twenty books, Rousseau amplified his objections to intellectuals and their rich patrons, who presumed to tell other people how to live. Rousseau did share a crucial assumption with his adversaries: that the age of clerical tyranny and divinely sanctioned monarchy was being replaced by an era of escalating egalitarianism. But he warned that the bourgeois values of wealth, vanity, and ostentation would impede rather than advance the growth of equality, morality, dignity, freedom, and compassion. He believed that a society based on envy and the power of money, though it might promise progress, would actually impose psychologically debilitating change on its citizens.

Rousseau refused to believe that the interplay of individual interests, meant to advance the new civilization, could produce any natural harmony. The obstacle, as he defined it, existed in the souls of sociable men or wannabe bourgeois: it was the insatiable craving to secure recognition for one's person from others, which leads "each individual to make more of himself than of any other." The "thirst" to improve "their respective fortunes, not so much from real want as from the desire to surpass others," would lead people to try to subordinate others. Even the lucky few at the top of the new hierarchy would remain insecure, exposed to the envy and malice of those below, albeit hidden behind a show of deference and civility. In a society in which "everyone

pretends to be working for the other's profit or reputation, while only seeking to raise his own above them and at their expense," violence, deceit, and betrayal become inevitable. In Rousseau's bleak world view, "sincere friendship, real esteem and perfect confidence are banished from among men. Jealousy, suspicion, fear, coldness, reserve, hate, and fraud lie constantly concealed." This pathological inner life was a devastating "contradiction" at the heart of modern society.

According to Rousseau, modern civilization's tendency to make people seek the approval of those they hate deformed something valuable in "natural" man: simple contentment and unself-conscious self-love. True freedom in these circumstances could be reached only by overcoming the hypocritical, painfully divided bourgeois within us. Rousseau thought that he had made this effort; he separated himself with a showy fastidiousness from the upwardly mobile man, "the sort who acts the part of the Freethinker." In his "Dissertation on the Origin and Foundation of the Inequality of Mankind," he wrote, "In the midst of so much philosophy, humanity, and civilization, and of such sublime codes of morality, we have nothing to show for ourselves but a frivolous and deceitful appearance, honor without virtue, reason without wisdom, and pleasure without happiness."

Rousseau's denunciations of intellectuals may have acquired an extra edge from the fact that Voltaire exposed him, in an anonymous pamphlet, as a hypocritical proponent of family values: someone who consigned all five of his children to a foundling hospital. Rousseau's life manifested many such gaps between theory and practice, to put it mildly. A connoisseur of fine sentiments, he was prone to hide in dark alleyways and expose himself to women. More commonly, he was given to compulsive masturbation while sternly advising against it in his writings.

Like many who moralize against the rich, Rousseau was not much interested in the conditions of the poor. He simply assumed that his own experience of social disadvantage and poverty—though he was rarely truly poor and had a knack for finding wealthy patrons—sufficed to make his arguments superior to those of people who lived more privileged lives. Like many self-perceived victims, he was convinced that no one really tried to feel his pain. Meier, in his dense but precise and enthralling analysis, points out that the epigraph of Rousseau's last book is the same as that of his first: "Here I am the barbarian, because I am not understood by anyone." It is actually the least jarring of the many melodramatic notes he struck during an intellectual career driven by self-pity and recrimination.

Yet, because Rousseau derived his ideas from intimate experiences of fear, confusion, loneliness, and loss, he connected easily with people who felt excluded. Periwigged men in Paris salons, Tocqueville once lamented, were "almost totally removed from practical life" and worked "by the light of reason alone." Rousseau, on the other hand, found a responsive echo among people making the traumatic transition from traditional to modern society—from rural to urban life. His books, especially the romance novel "Julie," vastly outsold those of his peers. The story of a nobleman's daughter who falls in love with an impecunious young tutor, "Julie" was the best-selling novel of the eighteenth century. As Damrosch notes, it dealt with characters whose "rural obscurity gave them a greater integrity than city sophisticates had." The characters' hard-won wisdom, a theme throughout Rousseau's novels and other works, made them as popular with Kant, in Königsberg, as with quietly desperate provincials throughout Europe.

Rousseau could have followed the professional trajectory of the many philosophes who, as Robert Darnton has written, were

"pensioned, petted, and completely integrated in high society." But he turned down opportunities to enhance his wealth, refusing royal patronage. As he grew older and more famous, he also became more paranoid. He quarrelled with most of his friends and well-wishers, including Hume and Diderot, and many people derided him as a madman. His bitterest disagreements were with Voltaire. Yet, during the French Revolution, the two men, who both died in 1778, were disinterred from country graves and lodged opposite each other in the Panthéon. Their posthumous proximity, which enlisted them jointly into the patriotic mythology of the Revolution, would have horrified them.

Rousseau was infuriated by the callousness of wealthy socialites like Voltaire. The rich, he wrote, have a duty "never to make people conscious of inequalities of wealth." Whereas Voltaire's biggest foe was the Catholic Church, and religious faith in general, Rousseau, though critical of clerical authority, saw religion as safeguarding everyday morality and making the life of the poor tolerable. He claimed that secular intellectuals were "very imperious dogmatists," contemptuous of the simple feelings of ordinary people, and as "cruel" in their "intolerance" as Catholic priests.

And, unlike Voltaire, a top-down modernizer who saw despotic monarchs as likely allies of enlightened people, Rousseau looked forward to a world without them. Rousseau's ideal society was Sparta. Small, austere, self-sufficient, fiercely patriotic, and defiantly un-cosmopolitan, it was as much an idealized vision of an ancient political community as the Islamic State caliphate is to radical Islamists today. As Rousseau saw it, the corrupting urge to promote oneself over others had been sublimated in Sparta into civic pride and patriotism. There was obviously no place in such a society for the universalist egghead

who loves distant peoples "so as to be spared having to love his neighbors."

Rousseau's rejoinders to cosmopolitan commercialism have constituted the basic stock-in-trade of cultural and economic nationalists worldwide. Poland's ruling Law and Justice Party, which is busy purging pro-E.U. "liberal élites" from national institutions and mainstreaming homophobia and anti-Semitism, would be thrilled by Rousseau's warnings about the "cosmopolitans who go on distant bookish quests for the duties which they disdain to fulfill in their own surroundings." Pitilessly ostracizing Mexicans and Muslims, Donald Trump may find much philosophical backup in "Émile; or, On Education." "Every patriot is severe with strangers," Rousseau wrote. "They are nothing in his eyes." Trump, in his tussle with Megyn Kelly of Fox News, and with womankind in general, might also draw comfort from Rousseau's view of "woman" as "specially made to please man," who "must make herself agreeable to man rather than provoke him."

Many such proclamations of varying harshness helped to create the commonplace perception of Rousseau as the spiritual godfather of Fascism. But there is much more evidence that he extolled the collective only insofar as it was compatible with the inner freedom of its members—freedom of the heart. As he wrote in "Reveries," "I had never thought the liberty of man consists in doing what he wishes, but rather in not doing that which he does not wish." This basic distrust of external constraints on individual autonomy naturally slid into a suspicion of the great and opaque forces of international trade—the crucial difference, according to István Hont, between Rousseau and Adam Smith.

The triumphs of capitalist imperialism in the nineteenth century, and

of economic globalization after the Cold War, fulfilled on a grand scale the Enlightenment dream of a worldwide materialist civilization knit together by rational self-interest. Voltaire proved to be, as Nietzsche presciently wrote, the "representative of the victorious, ruling classes and their valuations," while Rousseau looked like a sore loser. Against today's backdrop of political rage, however, Rousseau seems to have grasped, and embodied, better than anyone the incendiary appeal of victimhood in societies built around the pursuit of wealth and power.

Rousseau was the first to make politics intensely personal. He could never feel secure, despite his great success, in the existing social pyramid, and his abraded sensibility registered keenly the appeal of a political ideal of equally empowered and virtuous citizens. Tocqueville pointed out that the passion for equality can swell to "the height of fury" and help boost authoritarian figures and movements to power. But it was the socially maladjusted Genevan, whose writings Tocqueville claimed to read every day, who first attacked modernity for the unjust way in which power accrues to a networked élite.

The recent explosions of ressentiment against writers and journalists as well as against politicians, technocrats, businessmen, and bankers reveal how Rousseau's history of the human heart is still playing itself out among the disaffected. The Jacobins and the German Romantics may have been Rousseau's most famous and influential disciples, but Rousseau's claim that the metropolis was a den of vice and that virtue resided in ordinary people makes for a perpetually renewable challenge —from the right and the left—to our imperfect political and economic arrangements. It is uprooted people with Rousseau's complex wounds who have periodically made and unmade the modern world with their unds for radical equality and cravings for stability. There will be more of them, it is safe to say, as billions of young people in Asia and Africa negotiate the maelstrom of progress. ♦

An earlier version of this article erroneously connected the epithet "libtard" with the radio host Rush Limbaugh.

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Pankaj Mishra most recently published "Bland Fanatics: Liberals, Race, and Empire." His novel "Run and Hide" will be published in 2022.

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