

BOOK REVIEWS

Joshua Cohen: *Rousseau: a Free Community of Equals* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010)

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Joshua Cohen's book, *Rousseau: a Free Community of Equals* interprets Rousseauan political thought with the tools of analytical philosophy. It is part of a wider project of "translating" the works of early modern philosophers into contemporary academic speech. Moreover, together with Rawls's *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy*, Cohen's book represents a radical turn in the interpretation of Rousseau's philosophy. Similarly to Rawls, Cohen's book seeks to challenge an older generation of Rousseau's exegetes. Cohen's central thesis is that Rousseau's philosophy does not represent the blueprint for a non-democratic oppressive society. For Cohen, Rousseau is the designer of a deliberative democracy composed of public-minded, free and equal citizens.

The book is composed of five chapters, dedicated to explaining the main lines of Rousseauan thought. The first three chapters represent the investigation of Rousseau's main political project: the society of the general will. In the first chapter, Cohen, like all interpreters of Rousseau departs from the fundamental problem: how can "each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone, and remain as free as before"? Cohen interprets this sentence as a description of the state of nature. The state of nature is composed of interdependent individuals who are interested in personal security and self-preservation and who possess a conception of the good. Since coordination is necessary, these individuals enter into civil society in order to satisfy their interests.

Cohen describes and defends the society of the general will in the second chapter. He illustrates this society by its four characteristics: 1) the particular interest condition, 2) the common good condition, 3) the priority condition, and 4) the reasonable confidence condition. These can be summarized as: (1) individuals with private interests in security and self-preservation (2) share a non-aggregative conception of the common good (3) which they place above their private reasons when taking political decisions and (4) which they reasonably believe is embodied by the society's institutions.

In the third chapter, Cohen discusses the sovereignty of the general will. He interprets Rousseau as an opponent of legal positivism. According to Cohen's rendition, Rousseau claims that a law (an expression of the general will) is just only if it advances the common good. Therefore, just laws cannot infringe on individual

liberties because individual rights are constitutive of the common good. Thus, Cohen attempts to show that Rousseau's rejection of the doctrine of natural rights does not undermine his commitment to individual liberties. The general will is formed by the deliberation of free and equal individuals who subordinate their private interests to the common good. Since the general will can only advance the common good, negative liberties cannot be infringed.

The fourth chapter presents Rousseau's psychological assumptions about human nature. Cohen describes and analyzes Rousseau's doctrine of "the natural goodness of humanity". If human beings are naturally good, then the society of general will is a feasible political project. Rousseau argues for the natural goodness of humanity by separating inclinations, which emerge out of instinct in the state of nature from beliefs, which are formed in society. If beliefs about one's proper place in society are misguided because of extant social inequalities, then natural motivations will be corrupted. Rousseau argues that existent unequal societies pervert people's natural inclinations and make them seek social positions of superiority. However, an institutional framework which allows people to recognize each other as equals will engender the appropriate conceptions of respect for fellow citizens.

Finally, the fifth chapter discusses Rousseau's institutional proposals. Cohen believes that, in Rousseau's broader conception, direct democracy is not necessary. Rather, he interprets the Rousseauian texts as requiring institutions that engender in citizens the proper ordering of reasons. Citizens should place reasons of the common good above reasons of personal interest. This requirement is best, but not exclusively, met by direct democracy in popular assemblies. Other institutional arrangements such as imperative mandates for representatives can achieve the same goal. Therefore, Cohen argues that Rousseau's ideas would be compatible with modern-day large societies.

Two innovative concepts are employed by Cohen in response to those who interpret Rousseau as an anti-democrat. Firstly, Cohen sets out to answer the charges of those like Allan Bloom and Ernst Cassirer who argue that Rousseau demands the social engineering of citizens. Those who support this interpretation maintain that in order for Rousseau's society to be feasible, all citizens must be indoctrinated to eliminate all personal wants and desires and to think only of the common good. Cohen replies by arguing for the distinction between "integration-through-unity" and "integration-through-ordering". The first represents the Platonic type of integration, in which citizens abandon private interests completely. However, Cohen views Rousseau as requiring only the second, which could be considered as a weaker version of integration. Citizens would thus maintain their private interests, but subordinate them to the common good when making political decisions.

The second main argument against Rousseau addressed by Cohen is related to a famous passage about the total alienation of rights to the sovereign. Rousseau's critics interpret this passage as the former's abandonment of natural rights and the complete subordination of the individual to the collective will. However, Cohen disagrees with this approach. He accepts that natural rights are abandoned when citizens enter civil society. However, he argues that individual rights will be preserved in the society of the general will. Rights will be conferred to the individual by the general will, and rights can only be claimed with reference to the content of the general will. Thus, the right to property will be protected, not because it is natural, but because the owner is the trustee of the general will. Cohen adds that, because of the particular interest condition, a considerable bundle of rights will be granted to the citizen.

A weakness of this argument derives from Cohen's underestimation of Rousseau's claim about the sovereignty of the general will. Rousseau maintains that individuals will alienate their rights to the community only insofar as necessary for the community's wellbeing. However, the sovereign community is the judge to what is necessary. Thus, Cohen fails to see that the complete subordination to the community can occur if a majority of citizens decides so.

Overall, Cohen's attempt to justify Rousseau's ideas, leads to innovative understandings of the *Social Contract* and other works. The language of analytical philosophy is well employed. Clear and precise, the book is addressed to not only experts on Rousseau but also to those interested in philosophy in general.

Jeffrey Stout, *Blessed Are the Organized. Grassroots Democracy in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010)

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Alongside theories of democracy and the evolution of its forms from the 5th century B.C. there is a rich tradition of political reflection. The latter aims to reveal the functioning of such a regime at the often ignored level of common citizens. In the political theory of democracy, researchers distinguish between normative and empirical approaches. However, the above mentioned tradition seems to be less characterised by a methodological approach (be it normative or empirical), theoretical-political in nature, and more anthropologically oriented. In this direction, the most meaningful example seems to be Alexis de Tocqueville's who, although seen as an outstanding theorist of democracy, may also be described as an "excursionist" in search of real, palpable democracy, of a democracy that is being