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FORUM

The year 2005 marked the 250th anniversary of the publication of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Discourse on the Foundation and Origin of Inequality between Men. *The following essays were originally presented at a session devoted to this Second Discourse at the annual conference of the Society for French Historical Studies, in March 2005. As the concluding comment points out, the essays represent the rich variety of methodologies and interpretive strategies to be found in intellectual history as it is now practiced. Both the essays and the comment also leave no doubt that the* Second Discourse *is one of those remarkable texts whose multi-layered meanings are virtually inexhaustible. Like previous generations, we profit from re-reading it—both for its significance as a textual moment in the Enlightenment and for what it has to say to us about the present condition of mankind.*

ROUSSEAU'S GIFT TO GENEVA

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People often seem to forget that Rousseau dedicated his *Second Discourse* to "The Republic of Geneva." This is a shame because, in doing so, they miss precious clues not only about the meaning of the *Discourse* itself, but also about its place in Rousseau's political thought as a whole. It is also rather curious, because Rousseau's dedicatory letter to Geneva is actually not so easy to overlook; in the Pléiade edition it takes up more than ten pages of tightly worded text and is thus almost twice as long as Rousseau's more frequently cited "Preface" that follows it. Ignoring the dedication is, of course, part of a larger and more general problem in Rousseau scholarship: the still widespread tendency to read Rousseau out of historical context and with little concern for his intended meaning.

It is no accident that Rousseau dedicated the *Discourse on Inequality*, his most radical work of all, to his hometown of Geneva; but it requires some research into the historical context to understand why. To summarize a longer argument only briefly here:[1] in Geneva a patrician ruling elite was using social contract theory to

1 This argument is explained more fully in Helena Rosenblatt, *Rousseau and Geneva* (Cambridge, 1997).

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subvert the democratic principles of the city's ancient constitution. Arguments taken from theorists such as Pufendorf, Barbeyrac and Burlamaqui—joined with notions of *doux commerce* that were current during the Enlightenment—were being used to legitimize an increasingly oligarchical regime. As perhaps the period's most famous "citizen of Geneva," Rousseau's duty was to speak out. His main line of argument in the *Second Discourse*—his devastating attack on both social contract and *doux commerce* theory—was thus perfectly designed to counter the patrician arguments being used in Geneva.

Rousseau's *Dedication* makes it clear that he did, indeed, intend to send a message to his fellow citizens. Their republic was in danger and needed their immediate attention. Through ostensible flattery, Rousseau delivered an ingenious criticism of the values of Geneva's patrician magistrates as well as a strong warning about the direction in which they were taking the republic. In fact the *Dedication* also contains an outline of Rousseau's theory of the ideal democratic state. However, it is not just the political ideas expressed in the *Dedication* and the *Second Discourse* that are so interesting and worthy of attention; it is also how he delivers his message. As usual, Rousseau employed multiple discourses and techniques to make his point. If, within the *Discourse* itself, Rousseau masterfully appropriated the language and concepts of social contract theory only to subvert them radically, he accomplished a similar feat in the way that he dedicated his work to Geneva. Rousseau reinforced his overall political message by appropriating, and then subverting, the rules and conventions of gift-giving.

To understand how Rousseau did this, a few things need to be known about the early modern European art of gift exchange. Anthropologists and cultural historians have taught us much about this recently.[2] They have shown us that gifts and other economically non-quantifiable services and privileges were the medium through which social relationships were articulated and maintained. At a time when writers, artists and scientists relied on the material assistance and protection of patrons, gifts were the currency with which their debts were paid.

The subtle and not-so-subtle game of gift-giving could involve some rather curious paradoxes. For example, it was frequently the person of inferior rank, in other words the person in need of patronage, who initiated the gift-giving. The purpose of this was to challenge a prospective patron to return the gift—and this return gift was expected to reflect the wealthier person's means and rank. A

2 The literature on gift-giving is growing. I have found especially useful Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France* (Madison, WI, 2000) and *idem*, "Beyond the Market: Books as Gifts in Sixteenth-Century France," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 33 (1983), 69–88; Sharon Kettering, "Gift-Giving and Patronage in Early Modern France," *French History* 2, 2 (1988), 131–51; Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls (New York, 1990).

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permanent patronage relationship was generally considered to have begun when a prospective patron acknowledged, but did not reciprocate, a client's gift. The patron thereby signalled his acceptance of a kind of indebtedness, which would then be repaid over time, by something resembling a salary. The point is that the gift was, in fact, far from freely bestowed. The "polite fiction" of gift-giving was that the gift was really a kind of investment; gift-giving functioned on the unspoken premise of a compulsory reciprocity.[3]

Another "polite fiction" about this power game was that it tended to reaffirm existing political and social hierarchies. Evidence of this can be found in countless patron–client letters written about gifts. A ritualistic language of courtesy was used to express a relationship that was clearly based on personal service and dependence. Normally the client would declare his loyalty, affection, respect and desire to render obedient service. He would humbly request the patron's friendship and protection. The patron, in return, would assure the client of his esteem and protection, his gratitude for any services already rendered and his intention to reward these services generously.[4]

The gift of books, along with their published book dedications, are no exceptions to this general rule, although here, of course, the client expressed himself in *public* to the patron. Evidence suggests that discreet feelers were habitually sent out ahead of time to see if a designated person would agree to serve as dedicatee and perhaps even to negotiate the specific terms of the patronage. Getting an appropriate patron to accept the dedication of a book could be a tricky, frustrating and drawn-out affair, as the famous eighteenth-century natural law theorist Jean Barbeyrac found out. In Barbeyrac's correspondence one finds complaints about at least one prospective dedicatee who declined the invitation, and one who accepted and then never lived up to his side of the bargain—no money came.[5]

We know that the whole system of literary patronage came under severe stress during the eighteenth century. Aspiring writers now had to contend with two perhaps not unrelated forces: the advent of a large-scale marketplace in printed material on the one hand, and the decline of aristocratic and princely patronage on the other.[6] Voltaire expressed some rather strong opinions on both of these developments. In his article "Gens de lettres" for the *Encyclopédie*, he stated his

3 Kettering, "Gift-Giving," 137.

4 Here I rely heavily on the work of Kettering, "Gift-Giving," esp. 138–45.

5 Philippe Meylan, *Jean Barbeyrac (1674–1744) et les débuts de l'enseignement du droit dans l'ancienne Académie de Lausanne* (Lausanne, 1937), 126.

6 John Lough, *Writer and Public in France: From the Middle Ages to the Present Day* (Oxford, 1978); Alain Viala, *Naissance de l'écrivain. Sociologie de la littérature à l'âge classique* (Paris, 1985); Eric Walter, "Les Auteurs et le champ littéraire," in Henri-Jean Martin and Roger Chartier, gen. eds., *Histoire de l'édition française*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1984), 2: 382–99.

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firm belief that *independence* was a crucial quality defining the man of letters. Voltaire thought that private patronage rendered such independence impossible and therefore was not an option for anyone wanting to be a true *philosophe*: "Compose odes in praise of Lord Superbus Fatus, madrigals for his mistress; dedicate a book of geography to his porter, and you will be well received. Enlighten men, and you will be crushed."[7] If private patronage prohibited the independence so essential to a man of letters, so did exposure to the fickle operations of the commercial marketplace. In several articles written for the *Dictionnaire philosophique*, Voltaire described disdainfully those to whom he referred as "the unhappy class who write in order to live," or "la canaille de la littérature."[8] For Voltaire, a true *philosophe* needed to avoid dependence both on a wealthy or aristocratic patron and on the market. The best way to do this was through royal patronage. Thanks to the generosity and protection of the monarchy, wrote Voltaire, "we no longer encounter those dedicatory epistles offered to vanity by self-interest and servility."[9]

Indeed, by the last decades of the Enlightenment a remarkable number of *philosophes* were receiving literary pensions, gratifications and *traitements* of various types from the French king, as Robert Darnton and others have shown.[10] French *philosophes* also accepted various financial arrangements with other monarchs, and dedicated works to them too. Catherine the Great's generosity towards Diderot is well known, and Frederick the Great subsidized many French writers.

In this, as in so many other areas, Rousseau proved to be both a *philosophe* and an *anti-philosophe*.[11] His fierce independence and deep revulsion for any system of personal servitude is of course legendary. Early on in his career he made the decision to support himself by the humble craft of music-copying rather than accept any gifts that could even be construed as patronage:

> Determined to pass the little time I had left to live in independence and poverty, I applied all the strength of my soul to breaking the irons of opinion, and to doing courageously

7 Voltaire, cited in Roger Chartier, "The Man of Letters," in Michel Vovelle, ed., *Enlightenment Portraits*, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Chicago, 1997), 145.

8 Voltaire, cited in Chartier, "The Man of Letters," 146.

9 Voltaire, cited in Chartier, "The Man of Letters," 144.

10 Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, MA, 1982). See also *idem*, "The Facts of Literary Life in Pre-Revolutionary France," in Keith M. Baker, ed., *The Political Culture of the Old Regime* (Oxford, 1989), 261–91.

11 On Rousseau as both *philosophe* and *anti-philosophe* see Mark Hulliung, *The Autocritique of Enlightenment: Rousseau and the Philosophes* (Cambridge, MA, 1994).

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everything that appeared good to me, without bothering myself in any way about the judgment of men.[12]

When it came to dependence on a private patron, Rousseau remarked,

I do not know a more debasing and more cruel subjugation than that one. I saw no remedy for it except to refuse the big and small gifts and not to make an exception for anyone whatsoever.[13]

In order to free himself from the pressures of opinion—the judgments of other men, Rousseau had to refuse literary patronage.

When his friend the Marquise de Créqui tried to bend the rules a bit by overpaying him for his music-copying, Jean-Jacques declined her gift and explained, "indebtedness and friendship are incompatible in my heart . . . I will earn my living and I will be a man."[14] The reference here to being "a man" is interesting. In this particular context it may very well have something to do with the fact that Madame de Créqui was an important *salonnière*, and, as we know, the *salonnières* were also engaged in a very important form of patronage. Dena Goodman and others have described the invaluable role they played in furthering the careers of talented men. In the salons, French men of letters—and prospective men of letters—submitted themselves to female governance and thereby acquired contacts and learned the polite behaviour that they needed to succeed.[15] While others, such as Voltaire, waxed lyrical about the so-called reign of women, Rousseau bitterly complained about a form of rule that turned men into women, presumably by making them frivolous and superficial, but also by making them servile and dependent.[16]

In the summer of 1752, after the great success of his opera *Le Devin du village*, Rousseau was informed that the king was preparing to offer him a pension. Here, then, from Voltaire's point of view, was Rousseau's big chance. But, as he explains in the *Confessions*, the mere mention of the king's offer caused him "anxiety" and "perplexity." After a night of feverish thinking, Rousseau turned the invitation down. What would a pension from the king really mean? "Farewell

12 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, ed. Christopher Kelly, Roger Masters and Peter Stillman, tr. Christopher Kelly, 10 vols. (Hanover, NH, 1995), 5: 304.

13 *The Confessions*, 5: 308.

14 As quoted in Maurice Cranston, *Jean-Jacques. The Early Life and Work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, Middlesex, 1987, 261.

15 Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, NY, 1994).

16 *Lettre à d'Alembert sur son article Genève* (Paris, 1967), esp. 137–8. On Rousseau's view of *salonnières* see Helena Rosenblatt, "On the 'Misogyny' of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: *The Letter to d'Alembert* in Historical Context," *French Historical Studies* 25 (2002), 91–114.

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truth, freedom, courage. After that how could I dare speak of independence and disinterestedness?"[17] Diderot apparently scolded him for this decision; in Diderot's mind Rousseau was just being pigheaded and irresponsible. After all, he had mouths to feed. But perhaps what Rousseau said to Bernardin de Saint Pierre on another occasion was relevant here as well. Rousseau simply asked, "does one not have to respect a man to accept him as a benefactor?"[18]

Rousseau's attitude points to the interconnectedness of a *philosophe*'s view of patronage and his politics. Of course most of the *philosophes* believed that reform had to come from above. Thus Voltaire, who thought so highly about royal patronage, also celebrated the age of Louis XIV and the advent of absolute monarchy. Thus also even the arch-republican Helvétius dedicated his *De l'Homme* to Catherine the Great. And of course the *philosophes* were not alone in placing their political hopes in a reforming monarch. Natural law thinkers from Grotius and Pufendorf to Barbeyrac dedicated their books to the crowned heads of Europe. So, in fact, the gift of a book was not just about the hunt for patronage; it was very much about politics as well. There was always a political subtext present. And Rousseau, of course, understood this well.

Consider, for example, Barbeyrac's dedication of his translation of Grotius's *Le Droit de la guerre et de la paix* to "his British majesty," King George I. Rousseau knew it well. It begins with a telling story about the book's provenance. Grotius himself had dedicated it to Louis XIII. A first translation had then been dedicated to Louis XIV. Another edition had been dedicated to Emperor Leopold. Yet another version had been presented to William III. It was now Barbeyrac's turn to search for a "crowned head." He was determined to find a "potentate" to whom he might dedicate a book, which, in his own words, concerned itself with "the advancement of a beautiful Science, a large part of which can be regarded as a Science suitable for Kings."[19]

Rousseau, as we all know, placed no such hopes in "crowned heads." And he did not wish to advance a "science suitable for Kings." In fact, he denounced those intellectuals who turned themselves into servants of a monarchy and thereby aided and abetted an oppressive social and political order. Such men did nothing but "spread garlands of flowers over the iron chains with which men are burdened."[20] Thanks to them the situation in France had degenerated to the point that Frenchmen no longer even understood the meaning of citizenship: "We have physicists, geometers, chemists, astronomers, poets, musicians, painters,"

17 *The Confessions*, 5: 319, 379, 380.

18 Quoted in Cranston, *Jean-Jacques*, 261.

19 Hugo Grotius, *Le Droit de la guerre et de la paix*, trans. Jean Barbeyrac, 2 vols. (Amsterdam, 1724) Gallica #FRBNF30544779, 1: n.p. My translation.

20 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts," in *idem*, *The Basic Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Donald Cress (Indianapolis, IN, 1987), 22.

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he lamented, but "we no longer have citizens."[21] Part of the problem, then, were the *philosophes* themselves, and along with them the natural law theorists whom they so admired, who paid court to kings both in their persons and in their writings:

> Anyone can see . . . how this learned man [Grotius] and his translator, Barbeyrac, become entangled and caught up in their sophisms, for fear of either saying too much or too little . . . Grotius . . . desirous of paying court to Louis XIII (to whom his book is dedicated), spares no pain to rob the people of all their rights and to invest kings with them by every possible artifice. This would also have been the wish of Barbeyrac, who dedicated his translation to King George I of England . . . If these two writers had adopted the true principles, all their difficulties would have been alleviated and they would always have been consistent. However, sad to say, they would have told the truth and paid court only to the people. For truth does not lead to fortune, and the populace grants neither ambassadorships, university chairs nor pensions.[22]

All of this makes Rousseau's long and flowery dedication of his *Second Discourse* to the Republic of Geneva especially interesting. Here, as elsewhere, Rousseau adopts an existing genre only to subvert it radically. In his *Dedication* he employs the conventions of literary patronage, and thus the language normally used to express relationships of personal dependence and subservience, to convey, instead, a radically republican message. The kind of gift-exchange Rousseau will engage in, the power game *he* will play, then, is not that of a grovelling subject speaking to a magnanimous master, but that of a citizen speaking to his fellow citizens and equals. Rousseau's gift would be no ordinary gift. It would not reaffirm existing social and political hierarchies; rather, it was precisely intended to overturn them. Just as, in the *Second Discourse* itself, Rousseau used the language of natural law against the natural law theorists, in the *Dedication* he used the established forms and conventions of the patronage system to subvert the practises of personal servitude and to promote, rather, the virtues of citizenship.

First of all, Rousseau's dedication was in fact addressed to a sovereign, but this sovereign was not a "crowned head." Instead, the *Second Discourse* was given to the entire Republic of Geneva; that is, the "Magnificent, Most Honored and Sovereign Lords" of the General Council, the assembly in which all Genevan citizens had a seat. In acting this way, Rousseau of course deliberately snubbed, and definitely annoyed, the smaller governing council of Genevan patricians who liked to think that they were the sovereigns and liked to behave as if they were as well.

Second, dedications habitually contained many flattering remarks about the dedicatee. Some of these remarks were quite intentionally hyperbolic—this was part of the *genre*—and flattery tended to be intermingled with expressions of

21 Rousseau, "Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts," 17.

22 Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, in *Basic Political Writings*, 155.

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personal humility, loyalty and devotion. Here, also, Rousseau followed normal conventions, except, of course, for the fact that he directed his praise not just to the ruling heads, so to speak, but to all the citizens of Geneva, the men, the women, and even the pastors.

This brings us to another point. The flattery, even in the most obsequious dedications, was often slanted to convey a particular political message. For example, in Barbeyrac's dedication to George I, mentioned above, Barbeyrac calls the king "the model of a good prince" and a "sacred person," and then further flatters him by saying that he does not listen to flattery. But Barbeyrac also praises George I more specifically for the "justice and moderation" of his rule, for the "enlightenment" of his government and, most importantly, I think, for the fact that he willingly accepts to rule according to laws that restrict his own power. This, Barbeyrac promises the king, "warms the heart of all those Europeans" who admire the "liberty of England." Barbeyrac also thanks the king for the support he is giving to the Protestant cause in Europe and the important battle he is fighting against the "opinionatedness of the theologians." The point is that, even here, there is a good dose of political sermonizing intermingled with the flattery.

Rousseau does the same in his *Dedication* to the Republic—delivering a political message through the very values he chooses to flatter Genevans for. He praises Geneva's magistrates for their "moderation," "simplicity of mores" and "respect for the laws." He admires his fellow citizens' "talents," "education" and "virtue." Geneva's women are held up for their "gentleness," "wisdom" and also "virtue," and finally the pastors are praised for their "zeal for the prosperity of the state." Rousseau's strongest words of praise, however, are for the Genevan constitution and he pointedly reminds his citizens how very lucky they are to live under a "democratic government, wisely tempered." The former syndic Jean Dupan was undoubtedly not the only Genevan to note that Rousseau painted his fellow citizens "as we should be, and not as we are."[23]

As I mentioned earlier, it was part of the standard procedure of patronage to obtain permission for a dedication prior to its publication. Partly this was to ensure that the dedicatee would accept the responsibility of reciprocating by his support and patronage. In a letter to the Genevan pastor Jean Perdriau, Rousseau describes how he handled this part of his gift to Geneva:

> I agree with you that it would have been proper to obtain the approbation of the Republic or the Council, as the custom tends to be, and I was so much of this opinion that my trip to Geneva was undertaken in part with the intention of soliciting this approbation; but I did not need much time or observation to recognize the impossibility of receiving it; I

23 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Correspondence complète*, ed. Ralph Leigh, 52 vols. (Geneva, 1965–98), 3: 136, my translation.

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sensed that requesting such a permission was to ask for a refusal . . . Thus my experience made me take the firm decision to be my own only censor.[24]

Not only did Rousseau go ahead and publish the *Dedication* knowing full well that his political sermon was unwanted, but records show that he sent a copy directly to Geneva's governing council further requesting that it be reported on in council. Upon receipt of the text and accompanying letter, Genevan government records state, "The decision was that the said Dedicatory Epistle being [already] published, deliberating on its contents is out of the question."[25]

Finally, by a crucial convention of gift-giving, every gift created the obligation of a counter-gift. Here Rousseau clearly laid down the gauntlet. Would Genevans reciprocate his selflessness, his courage, his virtue? Would they follow his lead and start behaving like citizens again? Obviously, Rousseau was not interested in a job or a pension. This dedication was not related to a request for patronage—rather, it was offered in close conjunction with his reassumption of the rights and duties of Genevan citizenship. It is not without relevance that, only a few years later, Rousseau expressly described his ideal social contract in terms of both a gift and an advantageous exchange: "each person *gives* himself whole and entire . . . in giving himself to all, each person gives himself to no one . . . he gains the equivalent of everything he loses."[26]

In dedicating the *Second Discourse* to Geneva, Rousseau was thus assuming the role of a virtuous citizen entering into a contract of citizenship. He hoped to inspire other Genevan citizens to fight corruption and protect their republican constitution. Would they return his gesture with patriotic gestures of their own, in effect renewing the terms of their citizenship? In this, Rousseau was sorely disappointed:

> this Dedication—dictated to me by the purest patriotism—only attracted me enemies in the Council and jealous people in the bourgoisie. Mr Chouet, then first Syndic, wrote me a decent but cold letter . . . I received a few compliments from private people . . . and that was all: I did not see that any single Genevan was truly grateful . . .[27]

Rousseau's dedication, Formey noted, should not to be confused with other dedications.[28] Formey was right. Here, for once, was a truly disinterested gift, from someone who really knew "the price of liberty."[29] Evidently, however, Genevans thought this price too high to pay.

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24 *Correspondance complète*, 3: 57–9, my translation.

25 "Notes et variantes" to the *Dédicace* in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, gen. eds. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (Paris, 1964), 3: 1287, my translation.

26 Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, 148; added emphasis.

27 Rousseau, *The Confessions*, 5: 331–2.

28 Formey, quoted in the "Notes et variantes," 1288.

29 Rousseau wrote to Genevan Marcet de Mézières in 1751, "C'est à force de vivre parmi des esclaves que j'ai senti tout le prix de la liberté." *Correspondance complète*, 2: 154.

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