Journal of Political Science Research (2025)
Clausius Scientific Press, Canada

DOI: 10.23977/polsr.2025.060114
ISSN 2616-230X Vol. 6 Num. 1

Rehabilitating Popular Sovereignty: Rousseau's Unheeded Prescription for Democratic Disengagement

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Keywords: Rousseau, Popular Sovereignty, General Will, Bertrand Russell, Liberalism, Totalitarianism, Carl Schmitt, Political Apathy, Democracy, Locke

Abstract: Russell's division between "good" and "bad" democracy is unsound. There were no two options of democracy in history from which we can choose, and the theoretically 'good ' one suggested by Russell based on pluralism invites more testimony to prove its superiority. It may prevent a dictator from hijacking political power, yet it fails to expand access to political participation for the disadvantaged groups, which makes them more and more indifferent toward politics. Such an aloof attitude may spread to other social classes, while electoral and representative mechanisms still function, the public is increasingly disengaged.

1. Introduction

Plato once made a famous assertion: politics is a noble lie. The ruling class must make citizens believe in their "lie" to maintain the well-being of the citizens.[1] However, Rousseau put forward an opposite view: imposture in politics is an abuse of power that ultimately leads to the corruption of humanity, and authenticity must be pursued in politics.[2] The delicate and strained balance between politics and truth might be the reason why Rousseau is still such a controversial figure: he is a radical proponent of democracy as well as a precursor of totalitarianism.

The criticism of Rousseau reaches its climax with the work of Bertrand Russell, who said that Hitler is a product of Rousseau and likened him to John Locke, who gave us such leaders as Churchill and Roosevelt.[3] Russell suggests that there is a division into two kinds of democracies, one of which retains liberties, and the other is inclined to tyranny. This paper questions the optimism of Russell, and holds that the association of Rousseauian popular sovereignty with totalitarianism is a misinterpretation out of context. The apathy resulting from the disintegration of the political community poses a greater threat to today's fragile democracy than tyrants do.

2. The Problem with Russell's Genealogical Divide

Being one of the founders of British liberalism, Locke has a lasting impact on parliamentary democracy. His emphasis on natural rights-life, liberty, and property-and the separation of powers laid the groundwork for limited government, a principle that resonated deeply with Churchill. As British Prime Minister during World War II, Churchill defended constitutional liberties against fascism, framing the conflict as a struggle to preserve "parliamentary democracy, individual freedom,

and the rule of law"-values directly traceable to Locke's Two Treatises on Government.[4] In this sense, Russell's linking of Churchill to Locke is plausible: both saw government as a protector of individual rights rather than an absolute authority.

Nonetheless, the connection of Roosevelt with the Lockean tradition is somehow incorrect. Roosevelt enacted sweeping New Deal legislation in response to the Great Depression, including the creation of regulatory bodies like the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) and the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), which concentrated significant power in the executive branch. These measures shortened legislative review processes and expanded executive discretion, directly contradicting Locke's insistence on checks and balances to prevent arbitrary power. Locke argued that "the legislative is the supreme power" and that even the executive must act "under the trust reposed in him" to serve the public good; Roosevelt's New Deal, by contrast, blurred the lines between legislative and executive functions, with agencies like the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) wielding both rule-making and enforcement powers. This divergence suggests that Roosevelt's pragmatism owed less to Lockean liberalism than to a new form of "administrative democracy," one that prioritized state intervention over strict separation of powers.

The assertion by Russell that Hitler was the result of the ideas of Rousseau is even more debatable. The cultural historians like Holborn have shown that Nazism is rather a low type that has no systematic reference to any philosopher. The rise of Nazism, driven by the lower middle class hit by the Depression, must be contextualized socially, not traced to classical thought.[5] Indeed, Nazi ideology was a hodgepodge of racial pseudoscience, anti-Semitism, and ultranationalism-doctrines entirely alien to Rousseau's emphasis on equality and the "general will." Rousseau's Social Contract explicitly rejects discrimination, stating that "each individual, in making a contract, as we have seen, alienates himself totally and unreservedly," which requires that all citizens be treated as equals. Hitler's regime, by contrast, was built on the exclusion of Jews, Roma, and other "undesirables" from the political community-a practice diametrically opposed to Rousseau's vision of a unified, inclusive sovereign body.

It can be argued that, historically, there has never been a dual tradition of democracy, as suggested by Russell. However, what is does not necessarily determine what ought to be. Max Weber proposes the methodological concept of the Ideal Type, arguing that social science research should strive to extract a perfect representation of the complexities of social phenomena.[6] We still need to determine whether Rousseau's theory contains certain toxic elements that could lead to its potential abuse. Such caution is not without foundation-during the Terror, Robespierre, deeply influenced by Rousseau, attempted to establish a "Republic of Virtue" which ended in bloodshed. The dictators of our days did not mention Robespierre in their speeches, but may we not consider Robespierre as the precursor of them--and go on to say that Rousseau sowed the seed of totalitarianism?

3. Decoding Rousseau: Popular Sovereignty and Its Misinterpretations

Arguably, for Bertrand Russell, the most dangerous aspect of Rousseau's theory is popular sovereignty. The concept of sovereignty originated in the writings of 17th-century absolutists, including Hobbes and Bodin. In the view of Karl Löwith, sovereignty is a secularization of the divine will.[7] The essence of politics should be exposed by abolishing parliament.[8] The desire of Rousseau to seek a genuine political body also resembles the hatred of Schmitt against the mixture of social and political, since he also states that the general will must be homogenous and coherent, otherwise it will be divided into the will of all.

To understand why Russell viewed this as dangerous, one must first grasp Rousseau's distinction between the "general will" (volonté générale) and the "will of all" (volonté de tous). The "will of all" is a simple sum of individual preferences, which can be swayed by self-interest, passion, or

demagoguery. The "general will," by contrast, is the collective rationality of the people, directed toward the common good-what Rousseau called "the true interest of each member." This distinction is crucial: Rousseau did not equate majority rule with the general will; instead, he argued that citizens must deliberate as citizens, setting aside private interests to pursue what benefits the community as a whole. For example, in The Social Contract, he insists that "the people never ceases to desire what is good, but it often ceases to see it," requiring institutions (like public assemblies and civic education) to refine their judgment[9].

Russell, however, conflated the general will with unconstrained majority rule, fearing it could justify tyranny. This misreading is rooted in his bleak view of human nature. As early as 1919, Russell claimed in his essay Dreams and Facts that "Man is essentially a dreamer," driven by irrational passions rather than reason.[10] He thus viewed Rousseau's faith in the general will as naïve, warning that "holders of power, always and everywhere, are indifferent to the good or evil of those who have no power." Yet Rousseau's theory includes safeguards against such abuse: he emphasized that the general will cannot violate natural rights, as the social contract is founded on the principle that "no one has a right to demand of another what he does not demand of himself." Far from endorsing tyranny, Rousseau's sovereignty is bound by the moral equality of all citizens.

Russell's critique also overlooks Rousseau's emphasis on civic virtue as a bulwark against corruption. For Rousseau, a healthy republic requires citizens who identify with the common good, cultivated through education, public festivals, and a "civil religion" that inculcates values like patriotism and justice. This is a far cry from the authoritarianism of Hitler, who weaponized nationalism to dehumanize minorities. The Nazi regime's "Volksgemeinschaft" (people's community) was not a Rousseauian general will but a racialist fiction, excluding those deemed "un-German" rather than uniting citizens around shared values. As historian Hannah Arendt noted, Nazism's "mass man" was not a deliberative citizen but a passive follower-precisely the type of apathy Rousseau warned against.

4. Rousseau vs. Schmitt: The Perversion of "Pure Politics"

Schmitt's political theories provided a philosophical basis for state terror mechanisms. There is an exciting resemblance that can be observed in the political theory of Schmitt and Rousseau. Schmitt visualizes sovereignty as the essence of politics and argues that a political order is based on the difference between the friend and the enemy. Institutionalized bargaining and pluralism of multiparty parliamentary democracy were the most appropriate form of government to suit a society in which the categorical boundaries were being erased.

Yet the similarities end here. Schmitt's "friend-enemy" distinction is inherently exclusionary, defining politics as a struggle to eliminate threats to the community-whether real or imagined. For Schmitt, sovereignty lies in the power to "decide on the exception," meaning the sovereign can suspend law to protect the nation, a principle that directly enabled Nazi atrocities like the Enabling Act of 1933, which granted Hitler dictatorial powers. Rousseau, by contrast, rejected such exceptionalism: the general will, he argued, must always operate within the bounds of the social contract, which guarantees equality for all members. The "homogeneity" of the general will is not ethnic or racial but moral: it arises from citizens recognizing their shared stake in the republic, not from purging dissent.

Moreover, Schmitt openly opposed democracy, dismissing it as a cover for "factional interests," while Rousseau was a champion of participatory governance. Rousseau lived during the Ancien Régime, when the Third Estate-comprising common people-lacked political representation despite bearing the brunt of taxation. His call for universal suffrage and direct democracy was a radical demand for inclusion, not exclusion. As Charles Taylor notes, Rousseau explicitly rejected "second-

class citizenship," insisting that all who contribute to the community must have a voice in shaping it. This vision is antithetical to Schmitt's authoritarianism, which sought to concentrate power in the hands of a sovereign elite[11].

5. The Elitism of Russell's Critique

It can also be argued that Russell's rejection of the progress in human nature contains an elitist bias. He interprets 'progress ' as elevating individuals to moral perfection, which may turn out to be a distortion of humanity. However, he ignores the struggle of the less-than-human, or 'subaltern ' in Spivak's words, into a citizen with full rights.[12] The lifestyle of the Waorani people relies on the harmonious relationship with the Amazon rainforest, which has been terribly disturbed by economic imperialism, especially the exploration of multinational oil interests. The extraction of oil has led to degradation of the environment and displacement, as well as systematic marginalization of the Waorani, depriving them of the land that is fundamental to their livelihood. This dispossession was institutionalized by further land privatization and the introduction of regimes of property rights that embedded colonial logic in the law. The fight against oil drilling by the Waorani is not a chronological process of becoming perfect humans, but a fight to be recognized as subjects with rights entitled to dignity, and Russell, through his elitist worldview, failed to appreciate the fact that such communities existed. It is a paradox of democracy within Russellian liberal theory: it presupposes that democracy is non-discriminatory; however, in reality, they are interwoven with the subtle system of exclusion, which is exactly what Rousseau attempted to fight against with his popular sovereignty.

This elitism is further evident in Russell's dismissal of Rousseau's emphasis on equality. For Russell, equality was a utopian fantasy that could only be enforced through coercion; yet for marginalized groups, equality is a prerequisite for political participation. Consider the struggle of India's Dalits (formerly "untouchables"), who were excluded from Lockean "natural rights" by caste hierarchies. Their fight for political representation-embodied in movements like B.R. Ambedkar's push for reserved seats in parliament-echoes Rousseau's demand that all citizens be full members of the sovereign body. Like the Waorani, Dalits did not seek "moral perfection" but recognition as equals, a goal that liberal pluralism, with its focus on individual liberties rather than collective inclusion, often fails to address.

6. The Fragility of Liberal Democracy: Beyond Russell's "Good" Model

We have proved that Rousseau is not necessarily interlinked with "bad democracy" . If Russell's "bad democracy" label is flawed, is his theory of "good democracy" any more robust? Admittedly, post-war liberal thinkers, wary of sovereignty's abuses, prefer an alternative model that is founded on pluralism and human rights. For example, Jacques Maritain, an influential figure in the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, claims that sovereignty and Absolutism must be scrapped together because they forge the same evil.[13] Post-WWII liberalism sought to replace sovereignty with universal human rights rooted in individual dignity rather than state membership. This imagines rights as inherent to individuals, independent of state power.

It is not the first time that philosophers intend to tame the absolute power of sovereignty; Rousseau's contemporaries, the ones composed of the Scottish Enlightenment, had already proposed the idea of a community retaining some diversity. While Adam Smith still believes that virtue is core in politics, he leans towards particularism and refuses to give a universal account of virtue. For him, virtue is simply a tendency to self-adjustment, which allows us to live in a society. Virtue and self-interest, once seen as conflicting by Machiavelli, can coexist in Smith's view. The view of Rousseau on virtue and corruption seems to be utopian in comparison with the pragmatic vision of humanity expressed by Adam Smith. It seems more promising to design a well-working market where everyone

acts in his self-interest but with reasonable constraints that will result in collective welfare[14].

The liberal alternative is no less idealistic than Rousseauian politics. Detaching rights from the state leaves the question about their enforceability. The Rwandan Genocide proves that when sovereign powers commit atrocities, universal human rights provide little protection without enforcement power. In three months, about 1,000,000 people were killed, yet the United Nations failed to intervene. A greater challenge is that the "community of overlapping interests" assumes that individual interests can naturally converge into a common good through institutional negotiation, which is largely untrue. Marginalized groups such as refugees, Indigenous peoples, and women must actively politicize their interests to be included. Only through the campaign carried by the suffragettes, the second wave of feminists in the 1960s could fight for equal pay. Such a process was never natural or automatic. Women must be primarily politicized then their voice can be heard.

Contemporary democracies illustrate this fragility. In the United States, voter turnout in presidential elections has hovered around 60% since 2000, with even lower rates in midterms, signaling widespread political apathy. In Europe, populist parties have risen by exploiting this apathy, framing mainstream politicians as "out of touch" with ordinary citizens. These trends align with Tocqueville's warning that democracy's greatest enemy is not tyranny but "a soft despotism" where citizens "abdicate their wills" and let institutions govern without their input.18 Rousseau's emphasis on active citizenship-on citizens deliberating, participating, and caring for the common good-offers a remedy. He understood that democracy dies not when tyrants seize power, but when people stop believing they have a stake in it. As Tocqueville once warned, democracy has two enemies: mass atrocity and political indifference.[15] Concerning the declining voting rate in the past decades, the latter may be a threat even more dangerous. Therefore, Rousseau is still relevant to us, not as a phantasm of totalitarianism, but as a warning against apathy. Rousseau's legacy is not Hitler, but a call to rebuild political communities where all citizens feel they belong. In an era of polarization and disillusionment, this call is more urgent than ever.

7. Conclusion

Bertrand Russell's dichotomy between "good" and "bad" democracies misrepresents Rousseau's political philosophy. Rousseau's theory of popular sovereignty, far from endorsing tyranny, emphasizes civic virtue, collective deliberation, and inclusive participation—antithetical to the exclusionary authoritarianism of figures like Hitler or Schmitt. Russell's critique reflects liberal elitism, overlooking Rousseau's demand for equality as a corrective to systemic marginalization. Contemporary democracies face crises not from Rousseauian ideals but from political apathy and fragmented interests, proving his warnings about disengaged citizenship prescient. Rather than a harbinger of totalitarianism, Rousseau offers a remedy for democracy's fragility: revitalized political communities where sovereignty rests on active, equal participation. His legacy challenges us to confront indifference and rebuild democratic belonging.

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