# ROUSSEAU IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF ERIC VOEGELIN

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Eric Voegelin's relative silence on Rousseau is striking.[1] In the whole of his correspondence, and in the thirty-four volumes of his collected works, less than a dozen passages refer to Rousseau, and only a handful of these – comparatively short – engage with his thought. Given Rousseau's towering stature in the history of philosophy, and considering Voegelin's project to synthesize Western thought from antiquity to the present, one wonders at the immensity of such indifference. This is especially the case when considering that opportunities to comment kept presenting themselves. Strauss, most notably, mentioned Rousseau several times in his letters to Voegelin, but it was only when he had to respond to Strauss's article, "The Intention of Rousseau," that the Austrian finally wrote back with some reflections on the Genevan. And even then, those reflections were not so much on Rousseau's thought proper, as on its similarity with Vico's.[2]

Why so much reticence? In *The Voegelinian Revolution*, Ellis Sandoz observes that Voegelin associated Rousseau with the rise of the totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century even before J.L. Talmon wrote *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (1952).[3] This fact could help explain Voegelin's silence because totalitarianism was a vital subject for him. After all, his whole life's work arose from a dual impulse: to explain the totalitarian movements whose rise caused his flight from Europe, and to reforge and revalorize philosophy so as to

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[1] I am grateful to T John Jamieson for having brought this fact to my attention, and suggested the subject of this paper.

[2] Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, *Faith and Political Philosophy: The Correspondence between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, 1934-1964*, tr. and ed. Peter Emberley and Barry Cooper (Columbia, MO: The University of Missouri Press, 2004 [1993]), p. 39.

[3] Sandoz, *The Voegelinian Revolution: A Biographical Introduction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000), p. 63.

make totalitarianism impossible. In this optic, remaining taciturn on Rousseau could have been a strategy to obscure the philosophically brilliant beginnings of the totalitarian worldview.

But the matter is more complicated. For the few times that Voegelin does discuss Rousseau, he does not identify him as a harbinger of totalitarianism. Instead, he suggests that Rousseau was a deeply misunderstood thinker, that if he helped to prepare totalitarianism, this was less because his philosophy was inherently flawed, than because his posterity failed to recognize its truly important aspects – the very ones, in fact, that could have prevented the formation of the totalitarian ideology.

## I

Voegelin first discusses Rousseau in his essay "Ought in Kant's System," where Rousseau and Kant appear as epitomies of eighteenth-century anthropology. Both thinkers, Voegelin observes, portray human beings as animals who belong to nature, and as moral beings who possess a unique capacity for deliberative action. Their dual existence is comprised of personal and national variants. The personal variant divides action into natural actions comprising actions of instinct, habit, and reflex, and into actions of culture, that is, those actions that are reasonable, technical, and genuinely free.[4] As for the national variant, Voegelin does not detail it here, but we shall see below that it occupies him greatly in other works.

Rousseau's and Kant's anthropology seems to have interested Voegelin because it made it possible to theorize personal transformation across historical time. "Kant," he wrote,

> repeatedly dealt with corporeality … as that of an impurity of the innermost being that ought to be stripped away in a temporal process, and on several occasions he drew a parallel between his own view and that of Rousseau. In its beginnings, the human race

[4] Voegelin, "Ought in Kant's System," in *Published Essays, 1929-33*, in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 8 (2003), pp. 181-2.

> was subject to the rule of its instincts and was directed by these to what was best for it. In this state, actions followed predetermined mechanisms and neither commandments and prohibitions nor infractions of ethical norms existed. This happy estate is disturbed by the stirrings of reason, which introduces misery and wretchedness as well as the advantages of culture into the history of humanity. … Thus the transition from the animalistic crudeness and guardianship of nature to the state of moral freedom and reign of reason is a progression, to be sure, but it is at the same time an evil. By it, human beings move from a life of innocent security and purity into a life of dangers caused by the free, untrammeled, and hence uncertain guidance of reason and by the manifold vices and sufferings of culture. In these reflections, Kant's affinity with Rousseau is at its closest.[5]

It was a felicitous affinity. "Ought in Kant's System" was an attempt to infuse legal theory with a philosophy of human beings and human actions that shone by its absence in the work of contemporary jurists, who analyzed law only as a positive phenomenon. In this context, Kant and Rousseau's dual triumph was, firstly, to have investigated the essence of man, and, secondly, to have done so within a temporal framework that enabled the adaptation of the philosophy of human beings to the intellectual historical problems faced by contemporary jurists. In the first instance, then, Rousseau was valuable to Voegelin because he developed a historical anthropology that revealed the problematic aspects of personal existence, and that offered hope for improvement by arguing that personal existence changed across historical duration.

[5] Ibid., pp. 188-9.

## II

Further, Rousseau's anthropology was valuable because it theorized the *national* variant of human existence. This is the aspect of Rousseau's philosophy that most interested Voegelin, and he exposed it in two passages that reveal how his own views evolved. The first passage appears in a letter to Eduard Baumgarten dated November 5, 1932. In response to Baumgarten's question: how did the French make the step in 1789 out of the isolation of the will to the *volonté générale*? Voegelin answers that no such step was ever taken, since it was not the Revolution that created the concept of the general will, but Rousseau, who conceived of it not as the summation of individual wills, but as an entity in itself.

This is a basic description of Rousseau's doctrine of the general will, but what follows it is unique. According to Voegelin, Rousseau's *Social Contract*, *Constitutional Project for Corsica* and *Considerations on the Government of Poland* suggest that the apt German translation of "general will" was *Volksgeist*, or "spirit of the people," understood as a historical source of national life. Rousseau, Voegelin maintains,

> speaks at length of national character as the first prerequisite for the political existence of a people and very strongly emphasizes: if a people has no character, it must be given one. Only then can it receive a constitution—and this national character is the *volonté générale*. Between it and the general will there is no contradiction, because in France the individual will was always understood to be a mere *agens* within the framework of the general will. The individual will can be so strongly emphasized because in any case the national *volonté générale* dominates each person with such power that I believe we Germans can hardly imagine.[6]

[6] Voegelin, *Selected Correspondence, 1924-49*, in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Jürgen Gerbhardt and tr. William Petropoulos (34 vols., Columbia, MO: The University of Missouri Press, 1995- ), vol. 29 (1995), p. 102.

In the letter to Baumgarten, the general will thus appears identified with the *Volksgeist* – an identity without precedent, or posterity, in Rousseau studies. Moreover, Voegelin intimates that the idea – and reality – of the general will-national spirit was consummated in France – since "we Germans can hardly imagine" how strongly the general will dominates each Frenchman. He reiterates this view when observing that for "Durkheim, the student of Rousseau, the objective spirit is identical with the *volonté générale*, the totality of norms and regulations that are binding for a respectable Frenchman."[7]

Four years after the letter to Baumgarten, however, in *Der autoritäre Staat* (completed 1936), Voegelin approaches Rousseau from a different angle. He observes that what is fundamental about Rousseau's political thought is not his much-touted theory of the general will. Rather, it is his contribution to the theory of law. Voegelin seems to have felt that Rousseau's interpreters had missed the main point of his political philosophy, which is articulated in Chapter 19 of Book II of *The Social Contract*. Here, Rousseau distinguishes between four types of law: political law, civil law, penal law, and – most importantly – the law that is engraved in the hearts of men. It is this latter type of law that drew Voegelin's attention. Scholars have attended to it little, and this is hardly surprising, since *The Social Contract*, which discusses only political law, does not dwell upon it. But as Voegelin points out, the *Constitutional Project for Corsica* does. It identifies the law inscribed in the hearts of men as the spirit of the nation.

Voegelin considered that this spirit was the key to Rousseau's thought, and one of his most important contributions to the history of philosophy. Unfortunately, though (Voegelin implies), this fact has been neglected by interpreters, who have focused instead on the general will, which is only the foundation of Rousseau's politics. His philosophy has a much higher

[7] Ibid., p. 103.

goal: to grasp the physical, spiritual, characteral and historical foundations of the existence of a people.[8] Understanding these foundations is the art of the Legislator, the means that enable him to produce particular laws – that is, laws composed not of the commonalities between the world's laws, but of the differences between them. It is an irretrievable singularity: "Rousseau went so far in his *Social contract* as to exclude expressly the transfer of his ideas, which were meant for the model of Geneva, to a national realm like France."[9]

What Voegelin believed was important about Rousseau's philosophy, in short, was his political particularism, his suggestion that constitutions are viable only insofar as they are adapted to the history and character of a people. It was a suggestion unique in Rousseau studies, which have generally emphasized the universalism that bound him to the Enlightenment. And it was Voegelin's way of rehabilitating Rousseau, exhibiting the aspects of his thought that could actually have *prevented* totalitarianism.

The idea that the laws of nations had to be adapted to their characters was a relativist concept at least as old as Montesquieu. But Rousseau had made another, more original, contribution to nationalist existence: he had introduced the idea of education that had remained France's great problem as it struggled across the centuries to possess the souls of its youth.[10] It was a problem that arrested Voegelin, because he saw it as related to his own central philosophical preoccupation: he noted that a monograph should be written on the history of political education from its beginnings in Rousseau and Herder, until the totalitarian movements[11] – a comment that suggests the link he made between Rousseau and totalitarianism.

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[8] *Der autoritäre Staat: ein Versuch über das österreichiche Staatsproblem* (Vienna and New York: Springer, 1997), pp. 36-7.
[9] Voegelin, "Marsilius of Padua," in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 21 (1998), p. 93.
[10] *Der autoritäre Staat*, p. 38.
[11] Ibid., p. 39.

III

When reclaiming Rousseau as a particularist and a precursor of nationalist historicism, however, Voegelin championed him as the corrector of the Enlightenment. This was the Straussian line. Strauss had written to Voegelin that, from Rousseau on, the anti-Platonic and anti-Aristotelian answer of the Enlightenment had been considered unacceptable. Rousseau had begun the attempt to complete and correct the Enlightenment, and the historical school, every form of historicism, Bergson, positivism, Hegel's dialectic, etc., had sprung from his initiative.[12]

Voegelin approved of this general picture but sketched a version of it that was distinct from Strauss', and that did not lend to Rousseau so original a position. For Voegelin, the problem was less that the Enlightenment contradicted the ancients, than that modernity constituted a loss. All the "outstanding political philosophers" – Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Marx – had understood this loss, and had been "concerned with the rediscovery of man, with the arduous task of adding to his stature the elements that he has lost in the transition from the Middle Ages to the seventeenth century. Political theory must give him back his passions, his conscience, his sentiments, his relation to God, his status in history." The movement of correction culminated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and it did so not in historicism and positivism, as Strauss claimed, but "in philosophical anthropology becoming the center of political thought."[13]

The aim of this monumental project of addition was to save the individual from isolation, and the means employed to achieve it was to describe and construct the nation as the

[12] Strauss to Voegelin, 9 May 1943, *Faith and Political Philosophy*, p. 18.
[13] *History of Political Ideas*, in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 25 (1999), p. 51.

new social substance. Here Rousseau's role had been foundational: "The great break," wrote Voegelin, "comes toward the end of the eighteenth century with Rousseau; and the new theory of the *general will* is consummated with the Romantic idea of the *Volksgeist*, of the national spirit as the active substance of history."[14] Once more, general will and *Volksgeist* are associated with each other. But they are no longer identical as they were in the letter to Baumgarten. Instead, they are genetically related, with the first engendering the second. And this seems to have been Voegelin's final word on the matter, since it appears in the *History of Political Ideas*, which he worked on in spurts and starts from 1939 to 1954.[15]

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In conclusion, Voegelin appreciated Rousseau as a thinker who had attempted to compensate for the philosophical losses of modernity. In an extremely original interpretive move that jars with conventional portrayals of Rousseau as an anti-particularist and an enemy of history,[16] Voegelin identified Rousseau's idea of the general will as the ancestor of *Volksgeist*, and insisted on the Genevan's political particularism. These were positive innovations from Voegelin's perspective: they had helped to prepare the (nationalist) historicism that Strauss claimed had corrected the Enlightenment. They were aided in their aims by Rousseau's historical anthropology: for imagining that humanity was spiritualized across time offered the hope that it might recapture the "relation to God" and "status in history" of which modernity had stripped it. In fact, Rousseau was the true progenitor of the political anthropology that for Voegelin had constituted the culmination of the anti-Enlightenment movement.

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[14] Ibid.
[15] Jeffrey C. Herndon, "Voegelin's *History of Political Ideas* and the Problem of Christian Order" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, 2003), p. 6.
[16] See George Armstrong Kelly, "Rousseau, Kant, and History," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 29, 3 (1968).

The pity was that Rousseau had been misunderstood. No one had discerned his particularism or understood the true thrust of his concept of the general will. As a result, he had failed to exercise a proper influence. At the time of the French Revolution, for instance, the revolutionary literature he represented was not so well known. His *Social Contract* was little read, and much too complicated to sway greatly. This meant that the revolutionary idea of *volonté publique* probably had greater practical influence than Rousseau's *volonté générale*, which was accessible only to persons highly trained in theory.[17] [18] The one policy that Rousseau had lent the Revolution was the "caesaro-papist regime of a non-Christian religion" represented by his idea of a civil religion.[19] And he had introduced the concept of political education that had fed into totalitarianism. Bit meither of these were great achievements in Voegelin's philosophical ethic.

Voegelin thus believed that Rousseau's philosophy contained constructive aspects, but that these had been obscured, and that they coexisted with destructive and misunderstood elements that had enjoyed an abundant posterity. The task of conducting the massive amount of critique and reinterpretation required to reverse this situation – sieving the wheat from the chaff, and assigning to each element its proper significance – may have seemed too colossal to him, especially given his own, enormously synthetic task. Hence his silence.

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[17] Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas, Volume VII: The New Order and Last Orientation*, in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 25 (1999), pp. 115-16.
[18] This is a reversal of Voegelin's position in the letter to Baumgarten discussed above, which explicitly identifies Rousseau as the inventor of the revolutionary notion of the general will.
[19] Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas, Volume VIII: Crisis and the Apocalypse of Man*, in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 26 (1999), p. 208.