

Interpretation

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Flora Champy, *L'Antiquité politique de Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Entre exemples et modèles*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2022, 632 pp., €73.

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Rousseau's place in the "quarrel between the ancients and the moderns," considered in its broadest sense, is perplexing. In the mainly literary terms of the original "querelle" that began in the generation before his birth, he is clearly a partisan of the ancient writers against his contemporaries who he thought had sacrificed beauty and wisdom on the altar of success in the eyes of a corrupted general taste. Nevertheless, his own greatest literary success, *Julie or the New Heloise*, was at the cutting edge of the modern genre of the novel. In political terms, he held up Sparta and Rome as the best political communities against modern monarchies. Nevertheless, his own political thought was more radically democratic than anything previous, ancient or modern. In philosophic terms, he praised "the friend Plato."¹ Nevertheless, he said that Bacon was "the greatest, perhaps of Philosophers."² One could say that, in general, he returned to antiquity in order to push modernity farther on its path.

There have been numerous scholarly attempts to explore Rousseau's relation to antiquity. In her new treatment of Rousseau's encounter with ancient practical politics and political philosophy Flora Champy gives by far the most complete and rigorous account ever completed. Her "genetic and literary" (540) approach shares the characteristics of the work of a number of French scholars who, over the past two decades, have taken a fresh look at many of

¹ Rousseau to Julie von Bondeli, January 28, 1764, in *Correspondance complète de Rousseau*, ed. R. A. Leigh (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1965–1991), 19:90. The translation is mine.

² Rousseau, *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, ed. Roger Masters and Christopher Kelly (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1990–2010), 2:21. This edition will be cited as *CW*.

Rousseau's works. Their approach is characterized by careful examination of the various stages of his manuscripts. Champy's work is bolder in that it covers the entire range of Rousseau's work. She builds her case slowly and inexorably, brick by brick, and, in doing so, issues a powerful challenge to influential interpretations of Rousseau by figures such as Judith Shklar and Benjamin Constant.

As the subtitle of her book indicates, Champy makes use of the different notions of examples and models for understanding what she calls Rousseau's "political antiquity." Rousseau's rhetorical uses of exemplary figures from antiquity—Fabricius, Cato, and others—are well known. Rousseau uses vivid portraits of such figures to great rhetorical effect. Without underestimating the importance of such uses, and while documenting them scrupulously, Champy gives priority to "models," and particularly communities rather than individuals. Unlike an exemplary figure, a model is not simply a standard to be imitated. Instead, it is the most revealing example, not necessarily an unsurpassably perfect one. Thus, according to Champy's account, Rousseau's praise of the Romans does not mean either that they cannot be improved upon or that they can be imitated in all circumstances. Republican Rome is a model because it allows us to understand what free government requires better than any other community does. For example, when Rousseau discusses the Roman institution of the tribune he argues for the necessity of such an institution, but also claims both that there are alternative versions and that the Roman one was flawed.

Champy's exploration of Rome as a model that reveals the nature of a series of political issues allows her to correct the sometimes excessive attention that has been paid to Rousseau's somewhat less frequent praise of Sparta. Judith Shklar, for example, presents either Sparta or a hybrid of Sparta and Rome as Rousseau's utopian fantasy of political life (429–32). Champy shows us a much more hard-headed and clear-sighted Rousseau. She examines the precise terms and context of Rousseau's praise of Spartan politics and compares it with his much more detailed depiction of the Romans as "the model of all free peoples" and as "the freest and most powerful people on earth."³ In particular, she is one of a few scholars who have paid close attention to the treatment of Roman institutions in Books III and IV of the *Social Contract*. More commonly these chapters are simply ignored or even regarded as mere padding to allow the chapters on civil religion and the legislator to fit in a

³ See *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, in *CW*, 3:4, and *Social Contract*, Book IV, chap. 4, in *CW*, 4:203.

broader context. This is so even in some books devoted exclusively to explaining the *Social Contract*. In fact, Champy shows that the concrete discussions of Roman institutions shed considerable light on Rousseau's general and abstract principles of political right presented earlier in his book.

The fact that she stresses the particular importance of Rome does not mean that Champy neglects other important models, including Sparta. Her attention to both Sparta and Rome allows her to highlight two crucial issues of Rousseau's political thought. Sparta shows the importance of the function of mores as a foundational issue. This has hardly been ignored in Rousseau scholarship, but Champy's discussion is fresh and lucid. Rome shows a different issue: how a community can counter the inevitable tendency to decline as government gradually usurps the functions of sovereignty that rightly belong to the people. Much modern political thought from Hobbes on seems to strive to solve the problem of good government once and for all, at least in principle. Central to Rousseau's view, on the contrary, is that every community has the seed of its own destruction present from the beginning. The political problem is not subject to a definitive solution even in principle. Rome, more than any other community, reveals both this inevitable tendency and what can be done to forestall it for as long as possible. In his treatment of both Sparta and Rome Rousseau shows himself to be more of a realist than a romantic utopian.

Rome, then, rather than Sparta is Rousseau's preeminent model because it best shows the nature of the problem of preserving republican political communities. Both its relative success and its ultimate failure are what constitute it as a model. I would suggest that this account of what a model means could also be applied to Rousseau's proposals for reform in Corsica and Poland. Champy shows us the way Rousseau's ancient models clarify his treatments of contemporary communities such as Geneva, Corsica, and Poland. This is true, but it is also the case that he selected Corsica and Poland for extensive analysis because they could serve as models as well. It is not an accident that these places (particularly Poland) were regarded as particularly unpromising communities by most of Rousseau's contemporaries, including as acute an analyst as Montesquieu. Rousseau argues that it is precisely their alleged backwardness and corruption that could be converted into strengths when compared with powerful nations such as France or England. They are models, not in the sense of being utopian standards, but in being case studies that clarify the fundamental questions.

Perhaps the most influential interpretation of Rousseau's partisanship for ancient politics came from Benjamin Constant and his distinction between

the liberty of the ancients and the liberty of the moderns (348–52). Constant saw Rousseau's support of the active republicanism of the former as laying the groundwork for a dangerous politics that had the potential to lead to new forms of tyranny. The echoes of Constant's views can be found in Isaiah Berlin and in the mainly Anglophone scholars of the second half of the last century who attempted to link Rousseau with all forms of totalitarianism. Champy insists upon a much more nuanced account of Rousseau and shows that he blends some aspects of ancient citizenship with others close to Constant's modern citizenship.

The cases of Sparta and Rome, to which could be added the limit case of Judaism (335–38), are the models that help to explicate Rousseau's principles and their implications. Rousseau's use of ancient thinkers as opposed to ancient practice presents a somewhat different set of issues. Earlier scholars such as Charles Hendel, Madeleine Ellis, Allan Bloom, and David Lay Williams have called attention to Rousseau's general and specific engagements with Plato, although these scholars disagree about the nature of these engagements. Rousseau's Greek seems not to have been good enough to read Plato in the original. Champy has made use of Rousseau's markings and marginal notes in his copy of Ficino's translation of Plato to establish many of the specific passages that he addressed in his works. In particular, her attention to Rousseau's markings shows how carefully he read Plato's *Laws* as well as the *Republic*. Moreover, she is careful to note that Ficino's Latin translation (as well as Leonardo Bruni's translation of Aristotle) sometimes departs from the meaning of the Greek. She has also made ample use of the notes Rousseau took from his reading of thinkers like Cicero and the Aristotelian commentator on Rome, Carlo Sigonio. Although one cannot limit Rousseau's reflections to such evidence, it is extraordinarily useful to see the marks of his impressive erudition. Champy demonstrates beyond any possibility of refutation what a learned and careful commentator Rousseau was. He was certainly no mere dilettante.

To demonstrate that Rousseau was well acquainted with the thought of Plato and Aristotle does not settle the question of what he thought of them. In general, Champy's account of Rousseau's uses of these authors is that he found in them important ideas that he could use against modern thinkers such as Hobbes and Montesquieu. In effect, Rousseau used the ancient thinkers to expose problems with modern thinkers; problems which he then set out to solve on his own terms (395–97). In effect, Champy argues that Rousseau agreed with ancient thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero

about the precise nature of the problems to be considered rather than that he necessarily followed their solutions. Champy's excellent book stops just short of considering the question of Rousseau's agreements with or departures from Plato and Aristotle in detail. Without exploring it in detail, she does point to a decisive difference between Rousseau and Aristotle on the question whether man is a political animal (402). More attention needs to be paid to Rousseau's consideration of the Platonic and Aristotelian consideration of the status of the philosophic life as well. Although Champy has not settled every question concerning Rousseau's encounter with antiquity, she has advanced our understanding on many fronts.

GUIDELINES FOR SUBMISSIONS

Interpretation welcomes manuscripts in political philosophy broadly conceived. Submitted articles can be interpretations of treatises of political philosophy as well as literary works, theological works, and writings on jurisprudence that have an important bearing on political philosophy.

All submissions must be in Microsoft Word® and sent, as an email attachment, to interpretation@baylor.edu.

Submissions must be under 8,000 words, including notes and bibliographic references, and must be accompanied by an abstract of no more than 150 words. Because *Interpretation* is a double-blind peer-reviewed journal, all author identification and all references that would identify an author's own publications must be removed from the document. A separate title page, with the author's affiliation and contact information (including address, postal code, email address, and phone number) must be included with your MS.

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Words from languages not rooted in Latin should be transliterated to English. Foreign expressions that have not become part of English should be accompanied by translation into English.

The editors of *Interpretation* are committed to a timely appraisal of all manuscripts, and expect to be able to have a decision on submissions within four to six weeks.