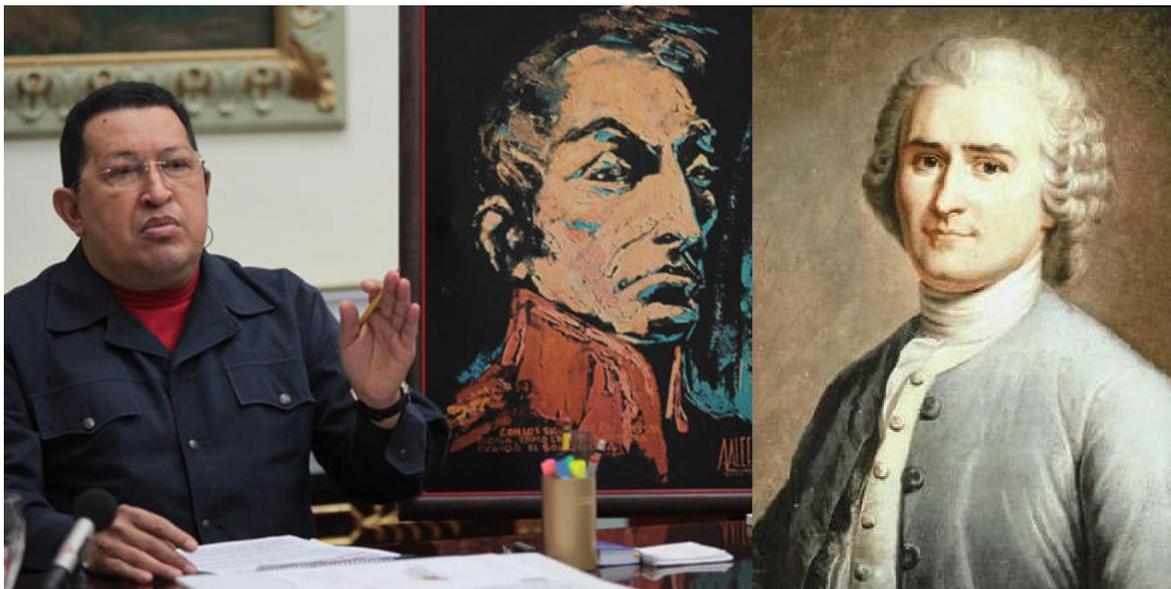




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The Venezuelan crisis viewed as an extension of the victory of Bolivar upon Miranda and a new demonstration of Rousseau's fault

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Venezuelan crisis is endogenous

Venezuela is suffering the worst crisis of its history and of Latin American countries. The exogenous factors – the low oil price, the US attitude or the death of the leader Hugo Chavez in 2013 - are of course aggravating parameters but not at all the main cause of what is fundamentally an endogenous crisis of the whole society far beyond economic aspects but entirely created by domestic governance and political options. These options were defined by the late-Hugo Chavez (1954-2013, president from 1998 to 2013, but were kept unchanged by successor President Maduro), under the name of “*Socialism for the XXIst century*” or “*Bolivarian Revolution*” based upon a strong centralization of constitutional powers and an ideological opposition to pluralism, market economy and orthodox macroeconomic recipes.

Despite these nice intentions and some creative aspects, the net results are dramatically negative upon the standards of living not only from an economic point of view but also from the political one such as citizen rights, individual freedom and availability of public goods, which deteriorated sharply. Of course, such a complex situation deserves and requires a very careful analysis, historical rigor and a lot of nuances, distinguishing positive aspects from big mistakes and overall the issue of their possible links for systemic reasons. Our modest contribution does not pretend to gather these necessary analytical qualities but simply to open a Socratic debate about the philosophical basis of the adopted options by the “Chavist” regime.

The purpose of our contribution is to single out some features of the political options we consider to be at the roots of the governance and constitutional failures of this “*Bolivarian Revolution*”. There are clearly some lessons to draw from this worrying experience. We pretend that the Venezuelan crisis is not comparable to previous cases of Latin American crisis or “bad governance” cases but it is emblematic of a deeper and old philosophical conflict which continues to divide our societies. Is it a coincidence that Chavez revolution has been welcomed by many extreme left parties or alternative movements as Spain’s “Podemos” party? Is it just for fun that Jean-Luc Mélançon, the most powerful left leader in France and the candidate during the last French Presidential election, has shown the Venezuelan regime as an example applicable to France (in 2017!)? Is it also anecdotic the permanent reference by Venezuelan leaders to the Libertador Simon Bolivar, a military hero and leader of the political independence of several Hispanic colonies in South America?

The historical defeat of Miranda’s democracy by Bolivar two centuries ago

This reference to Bolivar is the analytic line we chose to use for this synthetic presentation of the deepest aspects of the governance issue. Indeed, Venezuela witnessed, from the very beginning of its existence as a Republic, an internal political dispute between two heroes, Bolivar (1783-1830) and Miranda (1750-1816). The latest was the Father and Precursor of the emancipation of Latin America, but he was betrayed by his younger disciple, Simon Bolivar, during the war against the Spanish Army, in 1812. Bolivar took over Miranda and imposed a very different kind of political regime with respect to Miranda. This ideological conflict and the way it ended at that time is very emblematic of the present crisis in Venezuela, where the revolutionary principles managed by the regime lead inevitably to the paradoxical self-destruction of freedom in the name of democracy.

According to our analysis, this old Bolivar-Miranda split provides a very instructive starting point for the examination of the philosophical principles inspiring the Chavez regime but also useful for the analysis of any other political regime. Bolivar was a direct follower of the French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), one of the major author of the Enlightenment ideas. Miranda, also inspired by the Enlightenment ideas, was much more cautious as a result of the lessons he drew from his personal experiences as an actor in several revolutions and as a victim during the worst period of the French revolution, under the criminal abuses of the Jacobin, famous followers of Rousseau, like Robespierre during the “Terror” (1793-1794). Although Miranda and Bolivar fought together in the revolution against the colonial regime and promoted a radical independence from Spain’s absolutist regime, they conceived very different governance systems, as shown by their constitutional views.

Miranda wrote four successive constitution projects¹ based upon a genuine separation of powers controlled by check-and balance mechanisms under a representative democracy, geographical subsidiarity and strong human rights vigilance, along the line of the pragmatic Anglo-Saxon democracies. Unfortunately, Miranda's projects and democratic ideas remained useless with his elimination by Bolivar, who imposed the opposite option with a Jacobin centralization of powers in the name of the people, following Rousseau's principles, and announcing a dark future of "popular democracy" at the expense of human rights.

Although this story dates from two centuries ago, there still exists a close connection with the Venezuelan present drama. President Chavez, claiming "*I am a Rousseauian Democrat*", was also a direct follower of Jean Jacques Rousseau, in the same way as Robespierre, Marx, Lénine, Mao, Pol Pot, Castro and...among many others, Mélançon, are. It is therefore crucial to question the conventional ideas about Rousseau and to try to understand what is at stake with his principles and their links with the fundamental aspects of governance.

***"C'est la faute à Rousseau"* or Rousseau the betrayer of freedom**

Rousseau is generally considered, especially in France, the defender of individual freedom since his doctrine is based upon the principle that freedom is one of the very few absolute values which defines a human being i.e. the essence of what being a man is, therefore for him no compromise shall be admitted on freedom. However, life in society, which is also an essential principle for humankind, impedes absolute freedom by imposing some rules which coerce the individual's freedom. This is the universal philosophical question on how to reconcile two opposite absolute values, inner to the human being: individual liberty and the authority of the community through the coercion of rules. Rousseau pretended, very proudly (and said that this discovering was the central event of his entire life), to have solved this governance key-issue by a pure logical argument showing the coherence of human nature without any pragmatic concession but by strengthening the sacred value of freedom.

His "solution" consists in reducing the meaning and scope of "individual freedom" for submitting it to the Community interests, that he sets as "naturally" superior to those of any individual. In this way he necessarily eliminates any contradiction since individual liberty – altered and constrained by Rousseau's definition - could not anymore oppose to the collective rules and interests: for Rousseau an individual is only free as far as he renounces voluntarily to do whatever he likes for giving priority to the interests of the community. Such a coincidence between liberty and authority is only logically possible if men shall want only that, which the moral law in fact enjoins.

In fact, there is nothing new in Rousseau's idea since he borrows the basis of his solution from the Christian (Calvinist and Thomist) teleological vision of personal freedom, for giving it a secular interpretation: being free is not to do whatever individuals want to do but to do what fits better with

¹Ghymers, C., « Miranda visionnaire: l'intégration régionale dimension indissociable de l'émancipation latino-américaine. Une interprétation de la pensée politique et économique du précurseur des libérations latino-américaines », in *Francisco de Miranda, l'Europe et l'intégration latino-américaine*, with L.X. Grisanti, Association Internationale Andrés Bello, Brussels & Louvain-la-Neuve, ed. Versant-Sud, 2001, Also Ghymers, C. "Las constituciones de Miranda: Los primeros ensayos constitucionales en la América española", congreso de Latinoamericanistas españoles, Valencia, September 2010, in Antonio Colomer Viadel (coord.) *Las Cortés de Cádiz, la Constitución de 1812 y las Independencias Nacionales en América*, ed. Ugarit, colección Amadis, Valencia, 2011

the interests of the Community, choosing to sacrifice their own interests for the sake of society is the only way to realize their ontological nature. However, for being opposed to Christianity and to the idea of a superior ethics (God), he attributes to democracy the power to define what is good or bad for the Community.

Up to this point, Rousseau's logics, although wrong for changing the meaning of freedom with respect of his starting postulate (absolute value of freedom which becomes in fact relative by submitting it to the collectivity), looks attractively correct and should be acceptable by everybody for setting the common-sense principle of a necessary compromise between individual liberty and community authority that any society has anyway to choose in order to be manageable. But Rousseau refuses any compromise...

The key mistake he made was to postulate a single way for fixing democratically the general interests. For Rousseau, only the popular assembly would be legitimate, setting another postulate: popular assembly is sovereign for expressing the "general will" and cannot be wrong by "political" definition of the sovereignty of the people. Therefore, the interest of the community must dominate the individual interests and rights, but instead of fairly claiming it, Rousseau disguises this hypostasis of community under a reduction of the scope of liberty. This hypocrite philosophical option, disguised into a pure logical argument, has developed terrific effects upon humankind, allowing for the explosion of Jacobin movements and for justifying any dictatorship, both on the extreme left and on the extreme right, explaining that Rousseau should be better known as the betrayer of freedom and being the genuine enemy of human rights, contrary to the official picture.

Rousseau's wrong syllogism as a basis of any dictatorship

Rousseau's logical argumentation is merely wrong from a pure methodological aspect. Let's express his worrying argumentation into a pure syllogism form:

- Nature prescribes two simultaneous absolute laws: man has to be free from any coercion, but also nature does impose to man to be coerced by collective rules for living in society,
- Nature being harmonious, it is impossible to see a contradiction between these two absolute, universal and eternal laws and thus liberty and authority cannot conflict for they are one, being the reverse and the observe of the same medal: necessary collective coercion cannot counteract individual freedom.
- Therefore, individual freedom necessarily consists to freely accept to be submitted to the Community interest and rules, any dissident is not a free man but an antisocial being who must be "forced to be free."

Clearly, in a pure methodological aspect of deduction from a syllogism, there is a flaw because the adjusted extension of the first premise for dominating the conclusion violates the basic logical rule of any syllogism. The other aspect of his logical mistake, which reveals a totalitarian unconscious intention, is his preference for sacralising freedom in an absolute value for excluding any compromise or trade-off between the individual and his group. This explains the fact that he opted for changing the definition of liberty in order to impose its contrary by playing with the words to refuse any pragmatic compromise: "*A man who is self-chained is not a prisoner...since self-control is not control but freedom*". Rousseau leads so to the absurd principle that the only genuine free choice for individuals is to renounce to personal freedom since people are necessarily naturally right: "*the surrender of each individual with all his rights to the whole community so that he obeys to himself and remains as free as*

*before*² ...in this case, how can you not be free since nobody coerces you but the State, and the State is you and others like you looking for your common good?

From this submission of individuals to the group, Rousseau advocates for the centralization of powers into the hands of direct democracy expressing more easily the "general will" without necessarily having to check with the population through regular, competitive elections. Rousseau argues that in a pure democracy there would be no need for any effective separation of powers since democracy requires that the executive branch to be placed under direct authority of the legislative branch without any autonomy, or that both powers be merged through the direct control of popular assemblies or committees. Rousseau, like his disciple Chávez, was thus a promotor of "plebiscitary" or "ratifactory" elections ("yes" or "no") without the need for representative or multiparty debates. Rousseau's Social Contract (1751) can thus be seen as a manual for engineering Jacobin plans of revolutionary change or "great leaps forward". It follows, from Rousseau's analysis, that the separation of powers or checks and balances is not needed because those institutions would only get in the way of a heroic leader's ability to act on the general will. Rousseau, just like Marx one hundred years later, would also be against intermediaries or what we now call "civil society" because that would also hinder a leader's ability to carry out the general will, which he presumably knows intuitively better. Hence, as in Chávez's Venezuela, the Rousseauian principles can disparage and undermine political parties, and dispense with the give and take of competitive, pluralist, interest-group bargaining and negotiation because those obstruct his ability to implement the general will and rule directly for "the people." In contrast, empirical observations show along history that such agencies as political parties, interest groups, and pluralist give-and-take are absolutely essential for building resilient democracy and to protect human rights.

Upon such theoretical views, Rousseau's philosophy moved to a criminal paradox for freedom and democracy that all the dictatorships in the world used effectively in an Orwellian way. Rousseau is in fact the intellectual father of totalitarian regimes, from Stalin to Hitler and Pol Pot. Indeed, if other citizens think differently to the "general will" and do not surrender their freedom to the Community (to the State but in fact to the dictator), it means they are not seeking the common good because they do not understand their own nature, they are not free but alienated by ignorance, corruption or madness. They have lost their human nature and represent a threat for society which must defend itself by denying them any right.

Therefore, Rousseau's doctrine of absolute liberty leads directly to its opposite, to absolute despotism and the negation of human rights. It is actually amazing that Rousseau's views were not massively opposed but were so widely accepted and continue to feed dictatorships in the world. The only lucid thinkers came from Oxford philosophical school with two important contributions, Talmon and Berlin³. The first coined the concept of "Messianic democracy" about Rousseau. The important empirical observation to make is that from Robespierre and Marx to Castro and Chavez, the Rousseau's way of thinking has produced a worldwide regression in human rights respect and a massive submission of

² Rousseau (free translation from French by the author), cited by Touchard, Jean, *Histoire des idées politiques*, Vol. II, (Paris, 2005). p. 424.

³ Talmon, Jacob L. *The origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, Secker & Warburg, vol. 1: 1952, London, vol. 2: 1960, London and Berlin, Isaiah, *inaugural lecture delivered by Isaiah Berlin before the University of Oxford on 31 October 1958*, reprinted in *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford University Press, 1969

citizens to political and intellectual serfdom. If the intellectual origin relies in Rousseau, the complicity of a huge number of intellectuals is engaged too. The Venezuelan case is another example.

What is the Bolivarian revolution/Chavist movement?

Although other countries and political movements have used this name or referred to the Bolivarian Revolution, its most prominent and structured case is the political movement and government led by the late President Chavez in Venezuela from 1998-99 to the present days of May 2018 despite his death during his third mandate in 1993.

The ideological radicalization created both domestically and internationally has produced a sharp division among social scientists and observers of Latin American issues, making it more difficult to present a synthetic analysis without being classified immediately as a partisan or an opponent to the Chavist movement. Furthermore, the ideological fight between anti-Chavist and Marxist supporters biases the debate since the difficulties and failures of this regime are immediately attributed by its partisans to the capitalist system and its international vested interests, which would impede a participative democracy to succeed without a more radical revolution. Our purpose is precisely to try to escape from this lack of analysis by focusing upon the link between the deviations of the attractive Bolivarian democratic/social ambitions and the Rousseau's principles adopted by the Chavist movement. How to explain the failures of the Bolivarian Revolution, the loss of democracy, freedom and socio-economic welfare that everybody could easily observe objectively following the mere facts in Venezuela after two decades of Chavism? Whatever the quality of its social goals and even the positive experiences achieved under this regime, how was it possible to divide so cruelly a society making impossible any basic social consensus? The fact that we consider the Bolivarian Revolution as a systematic implementation of Rousseau's doctrine and especially of his logical mistake, does not imply that we could not acknowledge the positive objectives and creative social realizations of the Chavism while considering that the same social objectives could be better reached in a different conception of democracy, relying upon a more balanced method that allows for the consolidation of democratic institutions through pluralistic debates in the respect of a genuine separation of powers.

Aware of the risks of misunderstandings, let's try to present shortly the main aspects of the Bolivarian Revolution or the Chavist movement.

Although the "Bolivarian Revolution" is named after the *Libertador* Simón Bolívar by the President Chavez, it is obvious that this movement is entirely made by Chavez's personal thinking and ideology. Chavez used Bolivar's figure for his deeply rooted impact upon local popular culture as the symbol of his political project for Venezuela and all Latin America. Chavez, sharing Bolivar's deep adhesion to Rousseau's doctrine of people power and limitation of individual freedom, turned Bolivar's anticolonial and anti-imperialist thinking towards state socialism to organize a massive redistribution of the oil revenues so as to give an effective answer to long-lasting popular claim for social justice and some limited participation to political power through local direct democracy and the creation by the State of "community groups" of partisans acting as parallel (paramilitary) popular powers, as well as the "social missions" implementing social policies out of the official administrations. In political science terminology, this kind of popular revolutionary movement is clearly a case of populism according to

the Oxford Bibliographies⁴, by its “anti-system” nature organized by the bond of its leader and the masses, “rooted not only in cognitive-rational elements but in emotions, buttressed by a certain style of addressing the masses, directed at the most popular sectors of the population; a persisting call to plebiscitary-like decisions, which grants symbolic empowerment to popular sectors while retaining a powerful appropriation of voice by the leader; an emphasis on executive power overriding the division of powers, and often leading to legislation by decree. Consequently, a “politics of anti-politics,” or in less loaded terms, the weakening or manipulation of some of the basic institutions of representative democracy...”.

The ideological and cultural components of Chavism are a subtle mix of Chavez’s personal interpretation of Christianity⁵ (mixed with some “liberation theology”), local cultural roots anchored in past-Venezuelan heroes complementary of Bolivar with some creative form of popular participation, together with old socialist/nationalist principles addressing popular and marginalized classes of the citizens for providing them more social justice. These social objectives are dealt with a combination of creative people mobilization (the impressive social missions) with quick-fix recipes, like price-controls, trade protectionism, state nationalization and intervention oriented to social protection and welfare services with heavy subsidies, etc. All these tools creating a generalized “clientelist” dependency particularly difficult to reverse, and a general widening of the personal power of the leader. However, the Chavist movement became also more participative with the “Law of Communal Councils” (2006) which allowed for an impressive wave of bottom-up upsurge of local organizations the development of community initiatives with central state resources.

Other heroes are also used by Chavism to mobilize the masses, such as the Venezuelan Ezequiel Zamora (1817-1860, romantic military hero named “General of the Sovereign People”) and Simón Rodríguez (1769-1859, educator and Bolivar’s mentor, socialist philosopher), who formed with Bolivar what Chavez named the “tree of the three roots” or the basis of his revolutionary ideology. In addition, the socialist Colombian Jorge Eliécer Gaitán (1903-1948, who was about to become president of Colombia but was murdered before the election), as well as some famous anti-imperialist leaders as Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and Salvador Allende. The Venezuelan Marxist historian Federico Brito Figueroa (1922–2000) also influenced Chavez’ socialism directly and General Perez Arcay, his professor at the military academy.

As a result, Chavism is made up of a combination of four main premises:

- Grassroots political participation of the population via popular votes and referendums (popular democracy) delegating to the charismatic leader most of the powers, bashing the representative democracy and its democratic institutions and eliminating its checks-and-balances,
- state control of the economy combined with the rejection of market economy, orthodox recipes, neo-liberalism and free-trade dispositions, allowing the promotion of solidarity rather than competition,
- South American economic and political sovereignty with an anti-imperialism external diplomacy for feeding a political hemispheric integration against the United States,

⁴ Roniger, Luis, Modern Populism in Latin America, 2017

⁵ Hugo Chavez declared that Christ is “the greatest socialist in history.”

- Strong nationalism instilling in people a national ethic of patriotic service, ensuring more popular unity.

The Bolivarian Revolution as an illustration of Rousseau's fault

From a methodological point of view, the last two decades in Venezuela represent a clear case of Rousseau's doctrine implementation, like elsewhere any theocratic regime or any other historical dictatorship on the right as well as on the left side of the political range. Whatever the assessment of the quality of the intentions or of the person leading a political regime – and Bolivarian revolution belongs to the top quality group in terms of social intentions and social creative realizations - once a political or religious movement pretends to own a single truth, democracy and individual freedom are in direct peril because Rousseau's principles and his wrong syllogism will inevitably be applied by the regime to defend its power and the "rent-seeking" of its own oligarchy and army. Therefore, Rousseau's philosophy leads inevitably to the destruction of democracy and its substitution by an Orwellian "popular democracy" like the Soviet Union, its satellites during the cold war, and the Cuban and North-Korean surviving cases. Venezuela joins this list.

The Chavez regime provides a perfect demonstration of this law since any opposition is considered as a necessarily perverse betrayal for opposing a movement defending the general interest and the majority of people. The most synthetic way to express the "Rousseauian degree" of the Chavist regime is by recalling a slogan written as a syllogism upon Caracas walls and protest banderols:

*"All the power to the people
Chavez is the people
All the power to Chavez"*

Indeed, the Bolivarian revolution relies upon the "popular power" by direct democracy i.e. under the control of popular assembly, not representative democracy. The result is the tendency to centralize all the powers and to resist to all kinds of check-and-balances mechanisms, moved by emotional popular pressures to delegate all the powers to the political leader.

The Bolivarian constitution of 1999 demonstrates the centralization bias upon which relies Chavism. The new constitutional assembly which was elected to write it but was composed by 125 Chavist partisans on a total of 131 members, behaved as the country's "supreme authority". This assembly voted to give themselves the power to abolish government institutions and to dismiss officials who were perceived as corrupt or as operating only in their own interests, subordinating all other institutions to the executive power. This assembly even granted itself the power to overhaul the judicial system, and the Supreme Court was replaced in the 1999 Constitution with the Supreme Tribunal of Justice submitted to the government. The constitution strengthened the power of the President of the Republic and eliminated most of the check-and-balances. From 1999, the three constitutional powers were effectively controlled by a majority of Chavist partisans. As Miranda already warned during the debates upon the redaction of first constitution of Venezuela in 1811, a situation in which, when the three powers were dominated by the same political majority, it would be worse than an absolute tyranny, because democracy is not warranted by majority alone but by the effective division of powers ensured by the free action of independent check-and-balances.

This is precisely what was excluded by the Chavist movement, following Rousseau's view of popular power, leading inevitably to the loss of democracy as shown by the refusal by the executive power to accept his defeat in the legislative election of December 2015 when the opposition won the legislative election with even a super-majority of 112 seats against 55 won by the Chavist movement, allowing the Parliament to constitutionally change the government. Indeed, the proof of the disappearance of democracy in Chavism was brought to light when the executive power, controlling closely the Supreme Tribunal of Justice and the National Electoral Commission, declared the Parliament "in a situation of contempt" and transferred powers from the Parliament, which had a huge opposition majority since January 2016, to the Supreme Tribunal of Justice, which has a majority of government partisans. This ruling also granted President Maduro the power to suspend elections and imprison opposition deputies. Then, the government called for the formation of a new constitutional assembly under the condition that it would be composed by partisans of the executive. Indeed, the members of this parallel new legislative power were selected not by democratic election but by social organizations loyal to Chavism. These are merely facts that express clearly the failure of the Bolivarian Revolution to ensure democracy and freedom.

From Rousseau's postulate that the movement is necessarily legitimate since it seeks only the common good and it is supposed, by definition, to represent the "general will", any criticism or opposition appears as necessarily perverse and directed against people's interests, being either corrupted by private or foreign interests or mistaken by ignorant citizens or lost people mentally ill. As it was the case with the Bolshevik movement during the Russian revolution, even if the general election was lost by the movement, the movement remains legitimate because citizens are ignorant and are not able yet to understand their own interests (alienation), therefore democratic election is not meaningful once the result does not warrant the power to those actually defending people. Once in power, it is not rational to let opposition members to become candidates to elections, or to accept the freedom of criticizing the government, as shown by the Cuban regime, another pure case of Rousseau's followers.

