Introduction and method

Great star what was thy happiness if thou shineth for no one? (Friedrich Nietzsche, 1888: 5)

"Today is Freedom day" thundered the headline in the Independent, a British newspaper, on 1 May 1997. The perplexing headline was followed by a no less mystifying quote: "The English people believes itself to be free: it is gravely mistaken; it is free only during the election of MPs; as soon as the Members are elected the members are enslaved." The quote was followed by the name J.-J. Rousseau. On the day when the Labour Party was about to win a landslide victory over then Prime Minister John Major’s accident-prone administration, a national newspaper chose to cite a long deceased philosopher, and not to probe into the incoming government’s proposed policies, or the outgoing administration’s (dismal) record. A strange editorial decision perhaps, but an interesting one all the same. The Independent’s decision to quote Rousseau on the front page, on the day of the most important election for a generation, shows that classical philosophers are taken seriously, and is indicative of the underlying (tacit) assumption that Rousseau has something to say to us even today, more than two hundred years after his death. This is a book about Rousseau, which outlines his philosophy, precisely because he – the most untimely of all the great minds – somehow diagnosed the state of our society before it was formed or fully established. This might sound mystifying, yet it is not an altogether radical position. Indeed, most of the tradition of Western philosophy has been based on the assumption that philosophy (as opposed to science) reveals timeless truths. For this reason it is necessary that each generation seeks to establish contact with the living thoughts of deceased men and women. Machiavelli – another thinker in the premier league of great minds – once wrote about this (after he had fallen from grace and was exiled from his country):
When evening has come, I return to my house and go into my study. At the door I take off my clothes of the day, covered with mud and mire, and I put on my regal and courtly garments; and decently re-clothed, I enter the ancient courts of ancient men, where, received by them lovingly, I feed on the food that alone is mine and that I was born for. There I am not ashamed to speak with them and to ask them the reason for their actions; and they in their humanity reply to me. And for the space of four hours I feel no boredom, I forget every pain, I do not fear poverty, death does not frighten me. I deliver myself entirely to them. (Machiavelli 1994: 3)

Two hundred years later, one of his most famous disciples, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, sought to emulate the Florentine master, by taking up his pen. Like his philosopher colleague, the Swiss thinker also believed that political philosophy should be a continuing dialogue with the classics. In the introduction to the Discourse sur l’inégalité (The Origin of Inequality), Rousseau, almost echoing Machiavelli, set out to transcend history and speak directly to all of mankind.

As my subject of interest is mankind in general, I shall endeavour to make use of a style adapted to all nations, or rather forgetting time and place, to attend only to men to whom I am speaking. I shall suppose myself in the Lyceum of Athens, repeating the lessons of my masters, with Plato and Socrates for my judges, and the whole of the human race for audience. (III: 135)

This little book is an attempt to re-open a dialogue with the classics. It attempts not only to see the masters in context – as has become popular among modern thinkers – but rather to seek inspiration from the great minds to deal with contemporary political problems. Rousseau – and indeed any other classic – is politically relevant only if he reveals timeless insights. If a classic cannot inspire he is nothing, and is better confined to the dustbin of failed political doctrines.

This book is based on the premise – to be supported in the text – that Rousseau speaks through the ages. It seeks to show that Rousseau, while he may not have the answers to contemporary problems, at the very least provides new angles and perspectives on the debate. By failing to take these contributions seriously we rob ourselves of an important source of inspiration when we deal with the political problems of our times. Of course, Rousseau is not the only thinker to inspire. Marx, Plato, Smith, Aristotle, Madison, Hobbes, Hegel and Locke have made other – in many ways equally interesting and valuable – contributions to that never-ending debate which is political philosophy. This book, however, presents a perspective from the point of view of Rousseau. It is to be hoped that others will take up the challenge, and translate the doctrines of the other
great minds into contemporary politics. For the classics are not merely dinosaurs who stalk the academic scene, apparently impervious to the natural selection of so-called scientific progress; rather they avail themselves for discussions with posterity – a discussion that will never be concluded.

To follow this approach is likely to attract criticism. The bulk of British writers on the subject of the history of ideas follow a contextual approach (Skinner 1969). Quintin Skinner – the foremost of the contextualists – has rejected the idea that the classics may have political relevance beyond their own time. He has gone so far as saying that it ‘must be a mistake even to try to write intellectual biographies concentrating on the works of a given writer, or to write histories of ideas tracing the morphology of a given concept over time’ (Skinner 1969: 48). For, as he goes on, ‘the classic texts are concerned with their own alien problems’ (52). Any ‘statement is inescapably the embodiment of particular intentions, or a particular occasion’, and thus specific to its context in a way that it can only be ‘naïve to try to transcend’ (50).

Skinner has a point. Rousseau was obviously a product of his age. As is natural, even for a genius, he reacted to developments in his own age. Yet this does not mean that we cannot learn from his writings. Moreover, in addition to explicitly stating that he was writing for all subsequent generations (see above), Rousseau arguably wrote about issues that were as salient then as they are now. The issue that ‘power corrupts’ may serve as an illustration.

Rulers have always sought absolute power (or as few restraints as possible), hence the nature of the problem of constitutionalism has stayed unaltered, although the political circumstances have changed. It is, of course, true that we – as readers – belong to different traditions, and all reading is a dialogue with the author. We come to the classic text from within our personal hermeneutic horizons, which colour our reading. Yet this does not mean that we cannot learn from the classic. As German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer puts it (Gadamer 1960: 184), our ‘pre-conception’ (Vorurteile) may colour our reading but the process goes both ways, and in the process of reading, our own ‘hermeneutic horizon’ changes as a result of our reading. By engaging with the text we modify our prejudices – and broaden our horizon. It is the latter part of the ‘Hermeneutic circle’ (356) which is the stuff of a practical and applied reading of the classics of Western philosophy.

Reading the classics is more than just overcoming the hermeneutical problems of reading prose from a bygone age. The classical masters were
broad thinkers, and as such they inspired many different interpretations from a wide range of diverse – and often unrelated – academic subjects. Rousseau is no exception to this. As Judith Shklar has noted, ‘even among his versatile contemporaries he was extraordinary: composer, musicologist, playwright, drama critic, novelist, botanist, pedagogue, political philosopher, psychologist’ (Shklar 1970: 5). Being primarily a work of political philosophy the question is: how much of this is relevant for the political theorist? Indeed which texts, published or unpublished, paint a true picture of what he really meant? Ought we to include everything that Rousseau ever wrote? And, if not, where do we draw the line? What qualifies as Rousseau’s political writings? This is far from being a trivial question. As Michel Foucault observed (when writing about a related subject in ‘What is an Author?’):

Even when an individual has been accepted as an author, we must still ask if everything that he wrote, said, or left behind is part of his work. The problem is both theoretical and technical. When undertaking the publication of Nietzsche’s works, for example, where should one stop? (Foucault 1996a: 106)

Foucault believed it impossible to draw the line – he even mused that we had to consider the shopping list as a part of the collected works! Foucault notwithstanding, this study has (for practical purposes) included primarily Rousseau’s political writings (Volume III of his Collected Works in the Pléiade edition), secondarily his letters and non-political writings (e.g. his writings on music, poetry and botany), and accounts by contemporary authors. By including everything that Rousseau wrote for publication and his letters we base the study on the assumption that there is an internal coherence in his thought, which is reflected in his remarks about politics throughout his oeuvre. The hypothesis is that an understanding of his political philosophy is deepened by an understanding of his so-called non-political works. This view is not universally accepted (Skinner 1969: 52).

Rather than focusing on the whole oeuvre, writers have concentrated on smaller parts of his output, with the result that critics ‘have collaborated in producing the mirage of two [or even more] Rousseaus’ (Kavanagh 2001: 397). Thus there is one Rousseau for political scientists and historians of philosophy, another for students of literature and psychology. As inevitable as that border may appear, it has led to a fragmentation that can compromise our understanding of his work. The real challenge in reading Rousseau is to appreciate how his political vision depends on his literary and autobiographical writings while at the
same time recognising the extent to which his literary representations of subjectivity flow from a dialectic of self and other at the core of his political writings. (Kavanagh 2001: 397)

This study is an attempt to do exactly this – and to do so in a way that makes Rousseau a participant in the political debates of the present day. As a discussion partner – rather than as a prophet – we should not accept the words of the ancient masters of yesteryear uncritically. Rousseau would have concurred with the latter view. As he wrote in a letter to Usteri (a Genevan preacher):

My dear friend, I do not propose to convince you. I know that no two heads are organised alike, and that after a good many disputations, a good many objections, a good many clarifications, everyone always ends up adhering to the same sentiments as before … I may have been mistaken always. I have undoubtedly been mistaken often. I have stated my reasons it is up to the public, it is up to you to weigh them, to judge, to choose. (Lettre à Usteri, 1763, Collected Works XVII: 62–5)

Notes
