

Rousseau's dictator factory

John Roskam

Most of the comments made to me by students in the course of my three years of teaching a first-year undergraduate politics subject at the University of Melbourne were unremarkable. Only once was I shocked by something said by a student—after a while, one takes for granted that students from the city's better private schools instinctively believe that communism is fine in theory and that the only problem with it is that it has never anywhere been properly implemented. And after some practice, you learn to ignore the remarks about how the Cold War was an invention to suit the purposes of Joe McCarthy, how the CIA was responsible for the dismissal of Gough Whitlam, and how all the problems of the Middle East would vanish if only Israel ceased to exist.

The subject I taught, *Introduction to Political Ideas*, was one of the few courses available in the Arts Faculty that wasn't about postmodernism, globalization or terrorism. Students were required to read original, unabridged texts of some of the most important works of political theory: Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Locke's *Second Treatise*, Rousseau's *Social Contract*, Mill's *On Liberty*, Marx's *Communist Manifesto*, and Orwell's *1984*. The subject could equally have been called *Introduction to the Great Political Thinkers*, but to have done so would have offended the policy of Australia's tertiary institutions, which is to ascribe every political thought to being a product of class, race or gender. To acknowledge

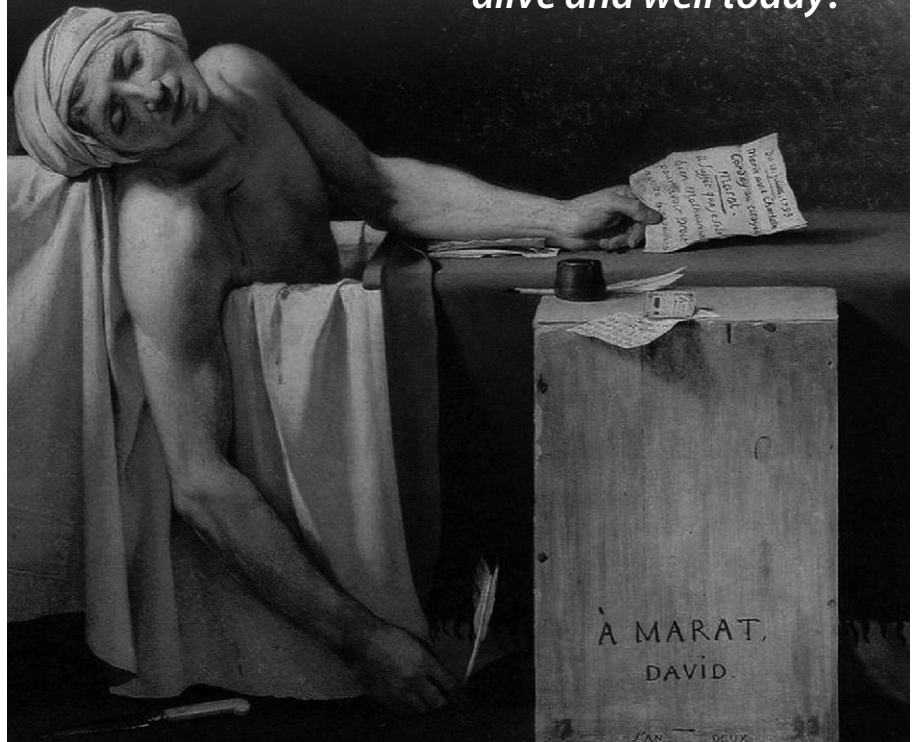
the role of 'great' individuals in either philosophy or history is positively forbidden.

The one occasion when I was truly astonished by what a student said occurred last year after a lecture I had given on Rousseau.

During the lecture I had discussed the ideal State that Rousseau

constructed in the *Social Contract*—a State which required the banishment of anyone who did not offer total obedience to the government. Rousseau also suggested that those who offended against the civil religion should be put to death as 'non-citizens'. I then described Rousseau as a 'fascist' and as a 'totalitarian', and said that ideas like

If it wasn't for Rousseau, would this man be alive and well today?



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these had motivated some of history's most evil dictators to commit their heinous crimes.

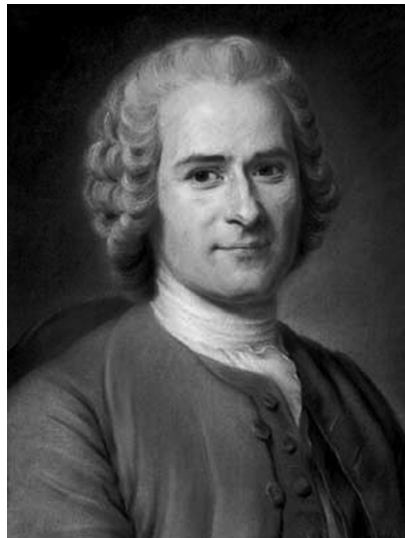
At the conclusion of the lecture I was approached by a female student who said to me, very politely, that she thought I was being 'too hard' on Rousseau, and that I was not displaying the academic objectivity required of a lecturer. My first reaction was to consider asking her whether, when her lecturers in international relations described George W. Bush as a 'moron', she similarly reproached them for their lack of 'academic objectivity'. But I refrained. Instead I replied that I couldn't think of any description of Rousseau other than 'fascist' and that I would welcome her correcting me if I was wrong. I also mentioned that I was hardly alone in my attitude to Rousseau.

At the beginning of my next lecture, I began by recounting to the class what I had been told about my opinion of Rousseau. I said that I appreciated such feedback, and that naturally students were free to make up their own minds about Rousseau. But I then posed a question. If I had been teaching a subject on the Third Reich and I had labelled Hitler a 'fascist', would I have provoked the same reaction? Would any student have said I was being 'too hard' on Hitler? I doubt it.

A number of times since that exchange, I have pondered exactly what it was that had bothered the student. Did she feel a particular fondness for fascists? I doubt it. Was it that she believed that the term 'fascist' should only be used in relation to Hitler, Mussolini and Franco, and that totalitarians of the Left, and their theorists such as Rousseau and Robespierre, Lenin and Stalin should have some other special term reserved for them? Possibly—but probably not.

A more likely explanation lies in a misplaced moral relativism that declines to apply any meaningful description to events and thoughts. This

is not to say that the student had any longing to follow Rousseau, and guiltoline individuals who didn't subscribe to a State religion, for almost certainly she didn't have such a wish. What she possibly did have was a desire to see 'both sides' of Rousseau, which was combined with a reluctance to char-



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acterize any thought or deed as either 'good' or 'bad'. (However, interestingly, when a student in a tutorial, not incidentally the one who took umbrage at my comments about Rousseau, raised the issue of whether adulterers should be stoned to death, every single person in the tutorial categorically agreed that such treatment of adulterers was a 'bad' thing.)

The absence of a willingness to make judgements about behaviour produces travesties of language such as the BBC describing the terrorists that murdered 52 people in London this year as 'misguided criminals'.

The Melbourne Age (November 8, 2005) recently carried an opinion piece by Dr Amjid Muhammad that revealed the desire to be so even-

handed and neutral as to verge on the ridiculous. Dr Muhammad was defending controversial Muslim cleric, Sheikh Mohammed Omran, and the comment by Omran that 'the 9/11 bombings were not perpetrated by al-Qaeda operatives'. Dr Muhammad wrote that such an opinion was 'controversial'. Definitely. And it is absolutely wrong. One might describe other comments of Sheikh Omran as also controversial—such as his belief that Osama bin Laden 'is a good man in some ways, and not in other ways'. (Perhaps the student who complained to me about my views on the *Social Contract* would have been happier if I had simply referred to Rousseau's urging of State-sanctioned murder as being a 'controversial' idea.)

Dr Muhammad accused 'certain sections of the media and the Government' of distorting Sheikh Omran's comments and 'cherry-picking' quotes 'as part of a strategy to inculcate fear into the community'. Exactly what part of Sheikh Omran's statement about Osama bin Laden being a good man the media or the Government is distorting or cherry-picking, Dr Muhammad didn't say. Similarly, he didn't say how the context changes the meaning of Sheikh Omran's remark that al-Qaeda terrorists were not responsible for 9/11.

Of course Sheikh Omran should be free to express such views, just as university lecturers should be free to discuss the consequences of the *Social Contract*. But to have a discussion about such matters pretending that they can be considered in a completely value-free way is to abrogate any responsibility for the maintenance of basic liberal-democratic values.

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