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*H-France Review* Vol. 17 (October 2017), No. 182

Julia V. Douthwaite, ed. *Rousseau and Dignity: Art Serving Humanity*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017. xvi + 274 pp. Prints, photographs, and index. \$50.00 (cl.) ISBN 978-0-268-10036-0.

Review by Sanja Perovic, King's College London.

To be clear from the outset, no scholarly review can account for this extraordinary publication covering: a photography and art exhibit, a documentary film, video-letters, a scholarly conference, interviews, and audience responses from people aged seven to ninety-two, all of which took place in two countries (France and USA) and features material from four continents. What holds together this constellation of events is the tercentennial of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's birth, celebrated in 2012. As the editor Julia Douthwaite notes from the first line of the introduction: this is not a commemorative volume. Rather the goal is to make present some of the contradictions of Rousseau's thought that are still relevant today using a combination of text, image, film and personal testimony. At its heart is a joint collaboration between a large photography exhibit commissioned by Amnesty International to launch the Demand Dignity Campaign in France and a series of events, organized by Professor Douthwaite at the University of Notre Dame for Rousseau 2012, visited by over 5000 people.

To begin with what may be less familiar to readers of H-France: The Demand Dignity Campaign launched in 2009 by Amnesty International focuses on the various abuses associated with poverty. It comes at a time when there appears to be a sense of frustration, perhaps even exhaustion, both with classic notions of individual rights and the related tendency to consider poverty as an economic or structural issue, unconnected with individuals and their capacity for self-expression. To mark this re-orientation, Amnesty International commissioned five photojournalists to document their view of individuals suffering various human rights abuses in Mexico, Nigeria, India, Egypt and Macedonia, especially those connected to poverty. In so doing, it also declared a new orientation for the organization, less based on abstract and legal notions of human rights and more rooted in particular and culturally substantive notions of dignity. This seems on par with new directions in human rights theory; Jeremy Waldron's work being a prominent example.[1] The connection between rights and dignity remains disputed, however. As the critic Stephen Hopgood observes, with this campaign, Amnesty International, a key promoter of human rights in the cold war period, appears to acknowledge other models of political activism, of both the humanitarian and the Left variety.[2] The question thus arises: do terms such as dignity and justice extend the current understanding of human rights or are they rather new terms which exist alongside it and may even, eventually, replace it?

Given the urgency of this question, what better justification for putting together the Beyond Dignity campaign with Rousseau, and staging both at Notre Dame, a campus known for its strong religious affiliation with the social mission of the Catholic Church? Regardless how we may feel about the three elements in this collaboration, the connection works. It works even if one does not accept the premise that "art serves humanity" (the book's subtitle), and if one remains sceptical, as I do, that reading good books and visiting art and photography exhibits (including those focused on the individualist genre of the "portrait") make us more empathetic. It also raises intriguing questions for those who may disagree

with the humanitarian spin given to Rousseau's thought, or those who see Rousseau as a more republican and less liberal figure.

So why does it work and what connections does it spark? First, poverty as we know was central to Rousseau's thought. One could say, along with Jean Starobinski, that the link between poverty and the suffering of all sorts of indignities was almost a structuring device for Rousseau's thought. Second, there is Rousseau's inimitable voice. The crucial link between poverty and a sense of (violated) personal dignity was not simply a case of objective fact but constituted the fabric of subjective experience. As several of the scholarly articles note, personal witness as well as sensitivity to *le regard* of others was central to Rousseau's own writing. This aspect, along with his emphasis on the self-portrait and the communication of lived experience chimes with Demand Dignity's photography exhibit, conceived as so many portraits of otherwise marginalized people, many of which are accompanied by an autobiographical text. As the photojournalist Jean-François Joly notes, with respect to his own photos, "All these pictures are taken vertically. For me, the vertical angle, it is about human dignity...Dignity, that's it, it's the fact of standing up. And thus standing up in the regard of others also" (p. 157). Finally, the link also works because in both Rousseau's writing and the recent Amnesty International campaign, there is an insistent demand to make suffering *public*.

Here we approach what is truly innovative about this book for scholars of the humanities today. This is the implied claim that what counts as criteria of relevance for evaluating a figure such as Rousseau is not simply the degree of scholarly attention he has received over the years, but the ability of his thought to communicate, and in so doing create a new public, a new reception. In other words, the challenge is to remain future-oriented, to treat the complicated legacy of Rousseau's thought as a practical resource for the present. In this respect, the volume contributes to the current revival of interest in what the philosopher Michael Oakeshott,[3] and more recently Hayden White,[4] have called the practical past, the past that relates to our present and future. For Julia Douthwaite, this involves "turning Rousseau 2012 into a platform that might create intergenerational teachable moments" (p. 3). Whichever term is used, the keyword for understanding this volume is *generation* in all senses of the term. Can this encounter generate new perspectives and experiences? From this perspective, the appropriate measure for evaluating such an undertaking is not a book review, but the energy it produced, including the sometimes conflicting retrospectives. There are truly a great number of hands at work in this beautifully produced book: organizing, fundraising, facilitating, translating, interviewing, curating, all committed to the gathering together, the *assembling* of people and objects. Even the list of contributors, birthdate or age duly noted, makes for interesting reading.

While this emphasis on the present may sound like anathema to some scholars, it is also the case that the essays are uniformly lively, well-informed, and easily assignable for undergraduate or graduate level classes. The book is divided into four sections. Part one is dedicated to an exploration of multi-media. This includes reflections by Delpine Moreau on her film *Entre nous Jean-Jacques*, designed as a community outreach program in Compiègne, France. It also includes sharp observations on some manipulative aspects of both commemoration and photography (Townsend) and how photography functions as both evidence and art (Gopinath). Part two discusses Rousseau's relevance for today. Philpott reminds us of the Catholic Church's long-standing opposition to Rousseau and describes how, in repositioning its own mandate as a liberalism without republicanism, the Church eventually absorbed some of his thought. Falaky notes that dignity, in its positive sense, was not a term much used by Rousseau, for whom it still connoted aristocratic privilege. Billing recasts Rousseau as a moral cosmopolitan, perhaps closer to Kant than sometimes acknowledged. Margel focuses on the *regard* in Rousseau. Stewart and Kelly both consider the relevance of the terms dignity and the pursuit of happiness with respect to our current understanding. McDonald offers an interesting analysis of Rousseau's understanding of failure in relation to utopian visions then and now. Part three—comprising fifty-one photographs and accompanying texts—is introduced by the economist Esther Duflos. Part four, "Teach This," includes audience responses both to Rousseau 2012/Dignity and Moreau's film. The

volume concludes with remarks by Charles R. Loving, who curated the art exhibit that accompanied the photography, and featured prints from the Snite Museum collection, including some by Cochin, Goya, Millet, Kollwitz, and Nadar.

It is commonly accepted that exemplary history ended with the eighteenth century. What this edited volume shows, in contrast, is the power of the human example to communicate a context and lifeworld. Rousseau paved the way in this but the photographs also tell another story. For me what stood out was the extraordinary link between poverty and rubbish: in Brault's focus on Cairo, a city of eighteen million inhabitants with no garbage disposal system, and many of its nine million undocumented residents eking out a living in the informal garbage disposal economy. In Joly's photos of the Roma of Macedonia, urban foragers of recycled rubbish. Or in Zumstein's photos of the inhabitants of Makoko and Jaconde, rubbish and sewage-strewn Lagos slums close to prime real estate, or FESTAC Town, a model city built in the 1970s at the height of the Pan-African movement, now left in disrepair. In each case, we are asked to reflect: what is our common humanity? What cultural form can best express it? How do we communicate it? Can we even teach it?

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

Julia V. Douthwaite, "Introduction to Rousseau 2012 and DIGNITY at Notre Dame"

Monica Townsend, "Remembering Rousseau in 2012: A Franco-American Comparison"

Delphine Moreau, "*Entre nous Jean-Jacques*: A Project of Documentary Film-Making"

Gabrielle Gopinath, "Rousseau's Legacy and the Subjectivity of Photographic Meaning"

Daniel Philpott, "Human Dignity, Rousseau, and the Catholic Church"

Fayçal Falaky, "Reinventing Dignity"

Andrew Billing, "Cultivating the Seeds of Humanity: Republicanism, Nationalism, and the Cosmopolitan Tradition in Rousseau"

Serge Margel, "The Madness of the Double: *Rousseau Judge of Jean-Jacques*"

Philip Stewart, "Rousseau and the Sense of Dignity"

Christopher Kelly, "Rousseau and the Pursuit of Happiness"

Christie McDonald, "From Rousseau to Occupy: Imagining a More Equal World"

Julia V. Douthwaite, "Editor's Introduction to Part Three"

Esther Duflo, "Economics: A Tool in the Fight against Injustice"

Guillaume Herbaut, "Mexico"

Johann Rousselot, "India"

Philippe Brault, "Egypt"

Michael Zumstein, "Nigeria"

Jean-François Joly, "Macedonia"

Julia Douthwaite, "Audience Responses to Rousseau 2012/DIGNITY"

Delphine Moreau, "The Video Letters of *Entre nous Jean-Jacques*"

Charles R. Loving, "Postface"

#### NOTES

[1] See for example Jeremy Waldron, *Dignity, Rank, and Rights*, ed. Meir Dan-Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[2] Stephen Hopgood, "Dignity and Ennui: Amnesty International, Amnesty International Report 2009: The State of the World's Human Rights," *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 2(2010):151-165, p. 157. From Hopgood's point of view, "the problem with poverty is not that people's human rights are being abused; the problem is that people starve, lose self-respect, and suffer endless indignities and insecurities. It adds nothing morally to reframe these concerns in human rights terms." [

[3] Michael Oakeshott, *On History and Other Essays* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983).

[4] Hayden White, *The Practical Past* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014).

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ISSN 1553-9172