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Michael Sonenscher, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Division of Labour, the Politics of the Imagination and the Concept of a Federal Government*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2020. xiii + 177 pp. Bibliography and index. \$113.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9789004392144; \$116.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9789004420335.

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What Michael Sonenscher has accomplished in this book is nothing short of remarkable. He offers a new way of reading Rousseau's works as a coherent whole that attempts to solve a thorny political problem. Rousseau wanted to reduce both social inequality and governmental centralization under economic conditions that favored industry over agriculture, which, he saw, would require a complex federal system of government. He realized that the modern world had lost the sources of political motivation and cohesion that had, in the ancient world, come from supernatural beliefs. The challenge, then, was, while still allowing for individual political freedom, to find a way for the world to reenchant itself to provide the motivation necessary to implement his vision of a federal government. Sonenscher convincingly shows that the workings of the human imagination, as Rousseau conceived of it, would provide this modern source of motivation.

It is worth reading Rousseau, Sonenscher says, because his thought may offer "the richest and most theoretically elaborated theory of federalism available in the history of political thought" (p. x). It is worth reading Sonenscher because, in a mere 177 pages, he manages to frame Rousseau's work in a compelling new way, correcting some of the ways it has been misunderstood, providing a comprehensive description of how insights gleaned from careful readings of Rousseau's works fit together into a cohesive vision of a political state, reconsidering how Rousseau reacted to a wide web of predecessors and contemporaries in light of his idea for a federal system, tracing the lineage of Rousseau's ideas on federal government forward through the works of a number of nineteenth-century political theorists, showing how more recent Rousseau scholarship has veered away from a federal reading, and providing strong arguments for returning to Rousseau's account of a federal system. Sonenscher's work is admirable because it covers so much ground so succinctly, cogently, and elegantly.

Rousseau claimed, in *Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques* and the *Confessions*, that there is a unity to his thought and that to see it, one must read his earlier works in light of his later ones. Because of the challenges involved in doing so—owing to features of Rousseau's prose, the difficulty of establishing a chronology, and above all, the fact that it seems like there are really two bodies of work within Rousseau's larger corpus whose messages do not neatly add up—critics have either decided that it is impossible to find a unified message, or they have looked for a way to explain

away apparent contradictions. Among the unity-seekers, the most common approach has been something like a secular theodicy: think Starobinski's "blessings in disguise" (p. 14). [1]

Although he, too, is looking for unity, Sonenscher's approach, as he explains in chapter one, is different. For him the starting point is to acknowledge that the problem Rousseau was trying to solve was difficult and thus, he had to refine his solution over time, using an "incrementally cumulative and increasingly precise analytical procedure" (p. 20). Sonenscher sees Rousseau's claim of unity as "a call for a far more demanding exercise of reconstruction than it might seem" (p. 13). Luckily, this is precisely the tremendous service Sonenscher has rendered by writing this book. Through nuanced reading of Rousseau's writings as re-workings of this problem, Sonenscher explains the apparent inconsistencies between Rousseau's early works that disparage private property, inequality, and life in an interdependent society and his later works that accept these realities and offer a constructive view of how to live with them.

In chapter two, Sonenscher considers Rousseau's development of a federal system as a response to the Fénelon problem. Named after François Fénelon, who first set out a theory of shifting the balance of power by reforming a state from within, the Fénelon problem refers to an inverse relationship between inequality and the centralization of rule. Rousseau integrated elements of a solution proposed by Montesquieu into his own system, while rejecting Physiocracy and a Law-like system of public debt, both of which would redistribute wealth by favoring agriculture in the economy. In chapter three, Sonenscher explains why, for Rousseau, industry would dominate over agriculture in the division of labor, starting from Rousseau's key observation that "humans can—and will—eat and drink almost anything" (p. 55). Left unchecked, the bias toward industry would lead to revolution, but Rousseau believed that balancing human freedom and perfectibility, or the ability "to conceive of something new in place of something old" (p. 62) through the implementation of a federal system, could prevent disaster. Rousseau's system would feature a social contract between an individual's public and private selves; many sizes, types, and levels of governmental units; an electoral system based on graduated promotion; a fiat currency; and a combination federal-reserve-and-treasury (p. 72, p. 84).

In chapters four and five, Sonenscher describes how the imagination's capacity "to endow physical things with moral properties" (p. 87) provides the political motivation within Rousseau's system. Using signs to "speak to the imagination," as he put it in *Émile* (p. 88), a government could harness public opinion to create a more moral climate and individuals could choose to invest things with meanings that would help them participate more meaningfully in politics. The same imaginative power we use to add an image of perfection to the object of our erotic desire can be channeled into love for our nation. For Rousseau, this capacity was made possible by female modesty. Therefore, women were not only responsible for the development of the imaginative capacity but also for morality in society (p. 105). Because the modern world valued the self above the public good, one had to make the public and private goods coincide (p. 124). Both the imagination and political institutions could keep them aligned. On the imaginative side, *amour de soi's* conscience and *amour-propre's* reason would work together to allow individuals to see a course of action that would lead to self-approval, rather than serve their self-interest, which they would then be free to choose (p. 134). On the institutional side, keeping women out of politics would ensure that "the moral [could] maintain its hold over the physical" (p. 136), and the federal system would multiply the distinctions between public and private and the general will to create a "sleeping sovereign" situation (p. 140).

In his final analysis, Sonenscher says that his take on Rousseau's thought is not a theodicy because that would imply a positive outcome to offset the suffering or shortcomings endemic to the system, whereas, like some of his German predecessors, what he finds in Rousseau, is instead the "potentially endless dynamics of perfectibility" (p. 142). However, the possibility of choosing the good provides a reason to hope that the future will not simply be an inexorable march toward increasing inequality (pp. 133-34).

In chapter six, Sonenscher traces the afterlife of Rousseau's thought in the nineteenth century among the legal and political thinkers who were interested in his federal system, including Georg Jellinek, the French socialists, Lorenz von Stein, Rudolf von Jhering, Otto von Gierke, Ernst Cassirer, Carl Joachim Friedrich, and Hegel. Although recent attention has focused on the division of labor, twentieth-century Rousseau studies largely moved away from looking at Rousseau's federal system, especially the role of money and the law. Sonenscher's book fills this gap (pp. 176-77).

Sonenscher's arguments in this dense work are much more complex than these summaries can hope to convey. Readers may already be familiar with Sonenscher's previous work on Rousseau from, for example, *Before the Deluge*.<sup>[2]</sup> Even so, they will find something new here because of this work's scope and totalizing project. Here, Sonenscher weaves together analysis of Rousseau's entire corpus, including unpublished and lesser-studied works, and covering all of his genres, from his *Discourses* and essays to political writings on Poland and Corsica, the *Confessions*, *Julie* and *Émile*, his plays, and his correspondence. Readers familiar with Rousseau will find all the key concepts—*amour de soi*, *amour-propre*, pity, perfectibility, *pudeur*, sovereignty, the general will, and so on—recombined in a concise and thought-provoking way. Sonenscher connects Rousseau to many of his contemporaries, including (besides those previously mentioned) Mandeville, Helvétius, the Marquis de Mirabeau, Hume, and many others as well as to a vast genealogy of later thinkers. He works this material into a whole that is comprehensive and convincing.

While Sonenscher discusses Rousseau's views on women—notably, how they are responsible for morality in society and should not play an active role in politics—he does not present the views of any of Rousseau's women contemporaries. And yet, some women whom Rousseau knew, for example, Mme d'Épinay, disagreed with his views and developed their own Fénelon-style proposals to change the state from within, including through the reform of taxation and marriage.<sup>[3]</sup> However, I think there are historical and thematic reasons that justify why Sonenscher did not include Rousseau's female colleagues, and I find Sonenscher's account immediately applicable in my research as a counterpoint because it is so comprehensive and so well-framed. Rousseau was a nexus who channeled so many currents of thought from his era and those that came before, transformed these ideas through his unique gaze, made the familiar seem strange and "magical" with his powerful prose (p. 1), and captured the imaginations of many thinkers after him. It is possible to trace a lineage before and after Rousseau in many ways, organized by different topics. Other scholars will undoubtedly find that their work intersects with Sonenscher's in productive ways.

While Sonenscher's assessment finds so much of value in Rousseau, it seems clear-eyed regarding the limits of what Rousseau was able to explain in his "grand, sad system" (p. 141) and does not veer into Rousseau apologetics. There are, however, a couple of places where additional explanation on Sonenscher's part would have been welcome. For example, he suggests that Rousseau left the door open to replace gender, as Sieyès and Condorcet did, with some other

dividing characteristic in his schema that relies on having politically active and passive sectors of the populace to maintain stability (pp. 136-37). This is because Rousseau wanted to swap venal offices with a system of election. I would like to press Sonenscher on this point, because as he explains it, without the imagination, there is no political motivation in Rousseau's system. And, for Rousseau, the imagination is unavoidably tied to heterosexual erotic desire: it "[comes] to life" with the awakening of love in adolescence (pp. 102-3), when men and women begin to identify imaginatively with one another through a process of misreading each other's signs (p. 108). Erotic relationships and power differentials are then built into Rousseau's public-private divide and the idea that women must not be active in politics if morality is to keep its hold over physical force (p. 136). Because the distinction between men and women, as he conceived of it, was so deeply entrenched in the functioning of the imagination and politics in turn, how far does Rousseau really leave the door open, within the internal logic of his thought, for us to swap gender for another line of demarcation between the active and passive political classes? Furthermore, if gender can be replaced as the defining characteristic that separates the politically active and passive classes, perhaps any identity that serves this purpose can be replaced. This could happen many times if the changes are motivated by the endless workings of perfectibility. Since Rousseau's system relies on the politically passive class to create stability, how would the system handle the instability potentially introduced by changing how that class is defined?

This book is highly recommended for scholars who work on eighteenth-century history or literature and political theory, especially federal government, in any era. It will be of particular interest to anyone who uses economic and legal approaches and a valuable starting point for anyone who wants to follow Sonenscher in taking up money and the law within Rousseau's work. It may also provide helpful insights to those who study theories of the modern self. Although Sonenscher's prose is easy to follow and the book slim, because of its density and complexity, it is not necessarily an easy or quick read. And thus, although it does provide a comprehensive overview of Rousseau's thought focused on the idea of a federal government, I think it might be challenging for newcomers to Rousseau. That said, it may be appropriate for some advanced undergraduates familiar with his thought and/or the political theory concepts discussed.

Rousseau was a brilliant, but enigmatic, thinker. He left many puzzles behind for us to solve, and Sonenscher provides a key for the unity of his work that is intellectually satisfying. In that sense, he writes in the tradition of Starobinski's *La transparence et l'obstacle*, and though it takes a much different approach, Sonenscher's book deserves a place on the shelf next to that landmark work.[4]

#### NOTES

[1] Jean Starobinski, *Le Remède dans le mal: critique et légitimation de l'artifice à l'âge des Lumières* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989).

[2] Michael Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

[3] For an account of how some of Rousseau's female contemporaries reacted to his work, see Mary Seidman Trouille, *Sexual Politics in the Enlightenment: Women Writers Read Rousseau* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

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[4] Jean Starobinski, *La transparence et l'obstacle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976).

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