



ROUSSEAU'S THEORY  
OF HUMAN ASSOCIATION

TRANSPARENT AND OPAQUE COMMUNITIES

GREG HILL



## Rousseau's Theory of Human Association

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*For Terry, Linda, and Shayna*

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## P R E F A C E

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Jean Starobinski's splendid book, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*, made vivid for its readers the significance of transparency and opacity in the way Rousseau came to understand his life and his relationship to others. "Rousseau desired communication and *transparency* of the heart," but, "meeting with disappointment," he "chose the opposite course, accepting—indeed provoking—*obstruction*, which enabled him to withdraw, certain of his innocence, into passive resignation."<sup>1</sup> I have appropriated Starobinski's wonderfully suggestive metaphor and put it to work with a different end in view: to explore some of the characteristic features of human interaction when the parties' intentions are easy to read, on the one hand, or difficult to discern, on the other. It is my contention that a substantial body of Rousseau's political thought—his conception of mankind's original condition, his critique of polite society, his understanding of how the market economy works, and his misgivings about intermediate associations, as well as his design of an ideal republican state—can be fruitfully explicated and critically appraised by focusing upon the essential aspects of transparent and opaque relations.

In speaking of "Rousseau's *theory* of human association," I do not mean to imply that the "citizen of Geneva" had a fully developed model of human interaction. Rather, I believe that we can find in Rousseau's work an inchoate theory of association, an assortment of provocative conjectures about the prospects for cooperation or conflict under conditions that vary according to the motives and transparency of the interacting parties. It is my task to weave these provocative conjectures together to produce a theory in terms of which we can elucidate, analyze, and assess Rousseau's understanding of human association. Put somewhat differently, I am interested in the logic of transparent and opaque communities and believe it is possible to derive interesting

conclusions about human association by constructing simple models and thought experiments which embody alternative assumptions about the information that is available to the interacting parties. Although this kind of reasoning will, perhaps, seem alien to the spirit of Rousseau's thought, especially in the wake of the many excellent literary interpretations of his work that have appeared in recent years, Rousseau was, in fact, a bit of a modeler, himself, which is evident in his speculative and stylized history of the human species, in his account of the reasoning that leads men to embrace the social contract, and in his characterization of the "general will" as what remains after all the "pluses and minuses" of "particular wills" "cancel one another out."<sup>2</sup>

Rousseau describes the method he employs in his search for the origin of inequality as "conditional and hypothetical reasonings, rather calculated to explain the nature of things, than to ascertain their true origin."<sup>3</sup> In a similar fashion, he begins *The Social Contract* by acknowledging that he does not know how some men actually became masters of others. Rather, his aim is to develop a *rational reconstruction* of the state, which takes "men as they are and laws as they might be" and proceeds to show how a *legitimate* state could have arisen under these circumstances.<sup>4</sup> My "rational reconstructions" are not designed with the aim of justifying a particular set of political arrangements, but rather are intended to illuminate some of the essential characteristics of these arrangements. Of course many of these characteristics have important normative implications. Thus, I try to show that civic cooperation in Rousseau's model republic requires an extensive regime of mutual surveillance; that Hobbes's argument for a sovereign state requires as a necessary premise the natural opacity of human intention; that Adam Smith's argument for unfettered markets presupposes transparent intentions; and that freedom of association under transparent conditions draws a large portion of the citizenry into associations of unequal power, whereas free association under opaque conditions reduces the prevalence and power of such groups, but fosters the kind of "individualism" Tocqueville found latent in America's emerging democracy. Although my immediate objective is to describe the paradigmatic features of transparent and opaque relations, especially as they are exhibited in Rousseau's thought, this book is, for the most part, an exercise in political theory, which aims to disclose the implications of transparency and opacity for enduring controversies surrounding the nature of liberty, equality, civil society, and the democratic state.

## CHAPTER ONE

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### *Introduction*

Judging the quality of human life before “art had moulded our behavior,” Rousseau concludes that “human nature was not at bottom better then than now; but men found their security in the ease with which they could see through one another, and this advantage, of which we no longer feel the value, prevented their having many vices.”<sup>1</sup> In this passage and elsewhere, Rousseau invites us to imagine a form of life in which it was impossible to conceal one’s real intentions from others, each person’s outward demeanor being a true reflection of his immediate purpose. “What happiness would it be,” Rousseau laments, “if our external appearance were always a true mirror of our hearts.”<sup>2</sup> As long as human beings retained this quality, all those vices requiring duplicity were excluded from their social intercourse. With nothing to hide, men and women were content to live together in common huts and “to have the gods for witnesses to their actions.”<sup>3</sup>

Once civilized, human intention lost its transparency. The guileless souls whose aims found spontaneous expression within the primitive societies of Rousseau’s imagination gave way to a new kind of man whose demeanor was moulded in the service of new ambitions—to be admired, esteemed, envied. “Whoever sang or danced best, whoever was the handsomest, the strongest, the most dexterous, or the most eloquent, came to be of most consideration.”<sup>4</sup> This drive for preeminence, which can only be satisfied at the expense of others, must be pursued under the cloak of anonymity or behind the mask of reputation. “It now became the interest of men to appear what they really were not.”<sup>5</sup> Civil society, far from being the intricate web of cooperation depicted by Rousseau’s contemporary, Adam Smith, is rather the site of rivalry and struggle, where the common good is pulverized into the dust of egotism.

If human beings are once more to live in harmony, then, Rousseau insists, we must again become transparent to each other. Yet our original lucidity, made possible by the lack of a *persona*—a being for others—lies too deeply buried in our past to be recovered. Rousseau's solution is, instead, to create close-knit communities in which citizens "will feel themselves always to be acting under the eyes of their fellow citizens,"<sup>6</sup> the ideal state being a small republic in which "neither the secret machinations of vice, nor the modesty of virtue [can] escape the notice and judgment of the public."<sup>7</sup> In this model republic, the citizen no longer lives in self-contradiction, but, in the words of one of Rousseau's most astute commentators, discovers "pure freedom, pure transparency, through intimate association with other free and transparent souls."<sup>8</sup>

These Rousseauian themes—the original lucidity of human intention, the loss of this transparency in the modern cities of Europe, and the possibility of its restoration within small republican communities—have been explored by writers seeking to disclose their meaning and significance within the context of Rousseau's emblematic life and the conflicting cultural forces that collided there.<sup>9</sup> My aim, by contrast, is to lay bare the practical logic that governs the interaction among the transparent and opaque selves of Rousseau's thought, and to explore the implications of this logic, not only for Rousseau's own views regarding interpersonal relations, social inequality, republican virtue, and kindred subjects, but more generally, for human association in some of its social, political, and economic dimensions.

Let me elaborate. Rousseau valued transparent interpersonal relations as an intrinsic good. And he regarded opaque relations as something intrinsically bad. But Rousseau also prized transparency as an instrumental good, being, among other things, the social condition necessary for civic cooperation. And he held a symmetrical view of opaque relations, which Rousseau regarded as the breeding ground for many vices, most importantly the pursuit of private advantage under the guise of virtue. I am primarily, though not exclusively, concerned with the latter two propositions, that is, with the practical consequences and theoretical implications of transparency and its negation.

To be more specific, I want to see whether the distinction between transparent and opaque relations can illuminate some questions in political theory. Can the differences between the social contract theories of Rousseau and Hobbes be explained by recourse to the practical consequences of transparent and opaque intentions? Do the political ramifications of Rousseau's trilogy of passions—*amour de soi*, *amour-propre*, and compassion—vary within the disparate media of transparent and opaque

relations? How does the character of civil society differ when voluntary associations are formed by citizens who know a great deal about one another as opposed to when they know very little about each other? Does transparency necessarily strengthen the general will, and opacity necessarily weaken it? Can Rousseau's critique of "money and commerce" be elucidated and extended via a theory of opaque markets? And, finally, is it useful to construe civic republicanism as a model of a transparent political community and liberalism as a theory for people who are, in many respects, opaque to one another?

### **Rousseau, Rational Choice, and the Human Form of Life: A Note on Method**

My approach to these questions is informed, in part, by rational choice theory, which traces out the consequences of choices undertaken with an end in view and in the face of one or more constraints, including, oftentimes, a lack of information about the plans and strategies of other agents. Because this kind of analysis, which includes the theory of games, is typically used to analyze the utility-maximizing behavior of rational egoists and the outcome of their interaction, some readers may have reservations regarding its application to Rousseau's thinking in light of his richer and more nuanced understanding of the human psyche. Although I am not unsympathetic to these concerns, I ask the skeptical reader to consider the following points. First, while Rousseau was, by no means, an early rational choice theorist in the way some now read Hobbes, he did have a practical, and not just an intrinsic, interest in transparency, as the opening citation of this chapter suggests. Second, in view of Rousseau's depiction of civilized society as a *field of maneuver* where sophisticated individuals compete for preeminence, there is reason to believe the theory of games can be illuminating for it allows a perspicuous presentation of each agent's alternatives and the social outcomes that result from their strategic interaction. Third, I try to incorporate within my simple models and thought experiments some of the subtleties of Rousseau's psychological observations, exploring the interplay between individuals moved by passions as well as by interests. Fourth, the emerging theory of information economics, which explores the systemic consequences of deception and defense against deception can, I believe, illuminate and extend some of Rousseau's ideas about the interaction among, and between, transparent and opaque agents. Finally, I contend that Rousseau has something important to teach the rational



choice school, particularly some of its practitioners in the field of economics, and develop several Rousseauian criticisms of their most cherished institution—the market economy—criticisms which elaborate Rousseau's claim that exchange is seldom completely transparent.

Although there is much to learn by reading Rousseau's works with an eye fixed firmly on the social milieu in which they were written, my working premise is that Rousseau's reflections bear on the *human condition*, that is, on the possibilities and predicaments arising from our ability to conceal or communicate our intentions; from the fact that we are sometimes observed by others, but not always; from our capacity to control our facial expressions and countenance, but not completely; from the fact that we cannot always tell whether someone is trying to deceive us, and so on. Insofar as these circumstances belong to the human form of life, I am hopeful that the following discussion will bear upon those modes of human interaction that are shaped by the potentialities of transparency and concealment.<sup>10</sup>

### Survey of My Themes

#### *Opaque Cities and the Ring of Gyges*

Rousseau was not the first, nor the last, to consider the problems originating in our capacity for deception. The greatest challenge ever posed to the life of virtue—Glaucón's demand that Socrates explain why someone who had the power to satisfy every desire with impunity should nevertheless act with self-restraint—gains much of its force from Glaucón's thought experiment in which a person, in possession of the magical Ring of Gyges, can become invisible at will.<sup>11</sup> Why act with restraint if you can take whatever you want without any risk of being punished? Having initially posed the question in this compelling, but supernatural form, Glaucón discards Gyges's Ring and envisions the next best alternative (which bears a close resemblance to Rousseau's worst nightmare), that is, maintaining a good reputation while surreptitiously engaging in self-aggrandizement. Why live a life of virtue when, by merely having a reputation for virtue, one gains all the advantages of being trusted without incurring any of the costs entailed in being trustworthy?

In the *Republic*, the fundamental question is what kind of life one should lead and, to eliminate extraneous considerations, the question is posed from the perspective of someone who has the power to deceive

others. In Rousseau's critical discourses, by contrast, the focus shifts to the kind of life that is possible when *everyone* possesses considerable deceptive powers.<sup>12</sup> For, according to Rousseau, these are the circumstances that prevail in the dark cities of Europe, where "the war of all against all" is waged beneath the patina of polite society. If the "citizens" of Paris really were opaque to one another and if behind their masks of virtue they plotted assaults against each other, would they not welcome Hobbes's Leviathan?

### A Transparent Republic

Rousseau's solution to the problems created by our capacity for dissimulation is presented to the king of Poland in the following words, "you must arrange things so that *every citizen will feel himself to be constantly under the public eye.*"<sup>13</sup> Although the opaque cities of Europe (and other continents) have grown much larger and more anonymous since Rousseau offered his advice to the Polish king, recent advances in information technology may retrieve the possibility of bringing every citizen's conduct "under the public eye." More than three centuries after Hobbes outlined the necessary conditions for political order among individuals whose declared intentions cannot be trusted, there can be found in England nearly 2 million miniature cameras which, mounted on lampposts, transmit continuous images of Britain's 60 million citizens to local constabularies, which report sharp reductions in public misconduct.<sup>14</sup>

Although anyone who values privacy has reason to worry about the deployment of these remote sensing technologies, some contemporary communitarians welcome the possibility that citizens may, once again, be able to *watch over one another.*<sup>15</sup> Consider the futuristic utopia described in a book appropriately entitled, *The Transparent Society*:

Homes are sacrosanct, but out on the street any citizen, from the richest to the poorest, can both walk safely and use the godlike power [of ubiquitous cameras on lampposts] to zoom at will from vantage point to vantage point, viewing all the lively wonders of the vast but easily spanned village their metropolis has become, as if by some magic it had turned into a city not of people but of birds.<sup>16</sup>

There is exquisite irony in this populist celebration of advanced surveillance technology. It was, after all, "the progress of the arts and sciences" that, in Rousseau's account, made the city and its anonymity possible.

Now technology is eliminating the very shadows that abet what Rousseau regarded as “the worst of all abuses,” citizens paying “apparent obedience to the laws, only in order to break them with security.”<sup>17</sup> Unlike its dark predecessor, the postmodern metropolis might become an “easily spanned village” where neither vice nor virtue go unnoticed.<sup>18</sup>

Not everyone welcomes the possibility that the citizens of the contemporary democratic state will be able to watch over one another with the diligence Rousseau thought necessary for a successful republic. Such intrusiveness bears an uncomfortably close affinity to what Michel Foucault has called the “surveillance society,” where an omnipresent gaze functions as a disciplinary mechanism, not to maintain the civic virtue essential to an egalitarian republic, but to establish and maintain the reign of “normalcy.”<sup>19</sup> Transparency, we shall see, is a double-edged sword that can threaten our autonomy even when its scope is expanded with the aim of eliminating the hiding places which protect those who free ride on the sacrifices of virtuous citizens.

#### *Opaque Markets and the Invisible Hand*

Like Rousseau, Adam Smith also considered the anonymity of urban life and its pervasive interaction of strangers a defining feature of the modern world. But where Rousseau found in civil society a polite version of the Hobbesian struggle for supremacy, Smith discovered something quite different—a rational, harmonious order of exchange where self-centered traders, acting with the sole purpose of advancing their own interests, were led, “as if by an invisible hand,” to increase the wealth of the entire community.<sup>20</sup> And where Rousseau complained that the division of labor brought with it an enslaving dependence on others, Smith countered with a conception of the market economy as an intricate network of *interdependence* where individuals cooperate for mutual advantage.

The contemporary debate over globalization is, in many respects, a contest between Rousseau’s vision of self-governing republics and Smith’s vision of a global marketplace. For our modern-day communitarians, the trouble with expanding markets is that they restrict the scope of self-government.<sup>21</sup> The logic of competition, which compels firms to vie with one another for market share, also forces states to compete for investment capital and, to a lesser, but increasing, extent, for skilled labor. When firms can “exit” the nation-state, shifting their production to countries with less stringent regulations and lower tax rates, the people are no longer sovereign because the range of policy alternatives is constrained by the imperatives of global competition. For Smith’s

contemporary followers, on the other hand, the globalization of markets, like the increasingly popular Internet, promises a wider trading network within which people can cooperate for greater advantage.

At the present time, it is Smith's model of the market economy that is winning the day, extending its dominion over countries that, not so long ago, were devoted to its destruction. Nevertheless, some economists have come to appreciate the Rousseauian distinction between interactions among transparent agents, on the one hand, and interactions among opaque agents, on the other.<sup>22</sup> There is a contemporary school of economic thought which holds that markets are subject to "information asymmetries," that is, circumstances wherein one party to a transaction possesses information which, if it were available to the other party, would alter the terms of the exchange. Thus, merchants know more about the quality of their goods than their customers; workers know more about their propensity for shirking than their employers; borrowers typically know more about their prospects for repayment than their creditors; and people shopping for insurance usually know more about their risks than insurers. In these opaque conditions, even honest traders must think and act strategically. And when every market participant is either concealing information about her offer or taking measures to defend against such deception, the nature of "trade" begins to look less like Smith's depiction of honest barter, and more like Rousseau's characterization of commerce as an arena of calculated rivalry dominated by the clever and the powerful.

#### *Intermediate Associations in Transparent and Opaque Societies*

I have outlined a few of the problems that emerge when the character and intentions of human beings are not transparent. I want to conclude this overview of my themes by mentioning a couple of the difficulties that arise when the cooperative qualities of individuals *are* transparent. The central dilemma is that, while transparency is necessary for civic cooperation, it is also favorable to the formation of what Rousseau calls "partial societies," that is, secondary associations which advance the relatively narrow interests of their members. These intermediate associations divide the citizen's loyalties between the group that advances his or her particular interests and the wider political community that exists to serve the common good. In addition, the more people know about one another, about their capacity for self-discipline, for hard work, for intelligent decision making, and the like, the easier it is for those with valuable skills and assets to form exclusive associations amongst

themselves, reinforcing social inequalities and fragmenting the community. Such outcomes need not be the intended result of one group of citizens seeking superiority over others, but may, for example, be the unintended consequence of affluent families looking for quality schools, safe neighborhoods, and well-kept yards.

In opaque societies, by contrast, citizens lack the information that is necessary to sort themselves into exclusive associations. Hence, the organizations formed by anonymous citizens tend to be more heterogeneous in composition and, given a plausible set of assumptions, more equal in power than the associations that emerge within transparent communities. In the limiting case, where association membership is a random draw from the population, the composition of associations will mirror that of the wider community, which renders them less threatening to the republic than the more homogenous associations that form within transparent communities. Although limiting cases can be theoretically interesting, it is more realistic to think about transparency and opacity as a continuum in which citizens can acquire more or less information about one another's character, resources, objectives, interests, and the like. Bearing these qualifications in mind, my aim is to show that freedom of association produces different kinds of organizations, with divergent political consequences, depending on the ease with which those joining together for mutual advantage can ascertain one another's assets and liabilities.

### Plan of the Book

The book is organized in the following way. In chapter two, I outline several variations of the prisoner's dilemma game in order to illustrate the different kinds of interaction that take place in Rousseau's primitive communities, in the great European cities he despised, and in the ultra-transparent republic he urged upon his fellow citizens. These games vary in two dimensions: (1) the likelihood that players will recognize one another's real intentions; and (2) the interests and sentiments that motivate the players. I begin with "*amour de soi* games," which are played by simple souls whose intentions are immediately expressed in their outward bearing, giving them a transparency that makes cooperation possible even in encounters that take the form of a single-play prisoner's dilemma game. Next I explore the "*amour-propre* games" that are played in polite society, where individuals, desperately seeking to surpass one another, employ the arts of deception to conceal their real ambitions. Even

though these vainglorious men and women would prefer mutual restraint to mutual aggression, their concern with relative position raises the threshold level of transparency necessary for cooperation, while, at the same time, they are becoming more opaque to one another. Finally, I consider “compassion games” played by other-regarding individuals whose cooperative disposition, like the character of Rousseau’s citizens, is well-publicized. This mode of transparency, where neither virtue nor vice can “escape the notice and judgment of the public,” provides the mutual assurance necessary for civic cooperation, but only under conditions of mutual surveillance.<sup>23</sup>

The subject of chapter three is Rousseau’s critical view of intermediate associations and the threat they pose to the unity of the republic. I analyze the composition, character, and extent of association when citizens can easily assess one another’s character, abilities, and resources, and when they cannot. My primary objective is to show that the transparency which sustains civic virtue is also favorable to the formation of exclusive and unequal associations that divide the citizen’s loyalties between the “partial societies” that advance his or her particular interests and the republic that serves the common good. By contrast, associations in opaque societies tend to be more diverse in composition, more equal in power, and, ironically, more compatible with the demands of citizenship. Opacity can, however, engender the corrosive “individualism” and unraveling of association that Tocqueville warned against in his study of America’s nascent democracy.<sup>24</sup> In order to illustrate Tocqueville’s point, I develop a simple model to explain why association membership becomes less attractive when the cooperative quality of citizens becomes less transparent and how the “exit” of productive association members sets in motion a self-reinforcing process that can unravel the fabric of civil society. In overly simple terms, freedom of association under opaque conditions is favorable to equality, but also to dissociation. Transparency corrects the problem of dissociation, of “individualism,” but at the cost of greater inequality and a contraction of the common life that is essential to republican democracy.

In chapter four I examine the scheme of social cooperation given theoretical expression by Rousseau’s contemporary, Adam Smith, who discovered a hidden order beneath the turbulent surface of market society. My principal aim is to show that Smith’s argument in favor of competitive markets requires as a necessary premise traders whose intentions are transparent. If, however, “we never know with whom we have to deal,” as Rousseau contends, then the impersonal rule of the price system gives way to strategic interaction, which produces outcomes that