

Reassessing Rousseau's Cultural Thought: The Letter to d'Alembert on the Theatre

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Abstract

An analysis of Rousseau's cultural and artistic ideas, as taken from the famous *Letter to d'Alembert on the Theater*. The relation between art and society is examined in keeping with Rousseau's political thought, and contrasts are drawn with the present Western system of democracy.

There are few works that summarize Jean-Jacque Rousseau's cultural ideals better than the *Letter to d'Alembert on the Theatre*, published in 1758. Written in protest to the entry in the *Encyclopédie* for the desire to put a theatre in Geneva Rousseau's letter of protest highlights the most polarizing qualities of his ideas, shown in their application to the working order of a society, and its relation to the artistic community. Taken up with the relatively small cause of protesting a local theatre, Rousseau was able to characteristically imbue an event of his life with a larger importance that through his letter would touch on not only the nature of art in a society, but also the civil code necessary as the foundation for a truly free society. Most importantly, however, is the larger criticism of the rapidly growing enlightenment-ideals that Rousseau stood against through his protest, in which he completely alienated himself from the prevailing political thought of his time, centered in the enlightenment, for the long lost ideals of Sparta and classical antiquity.

It is here where I wish to direct the reader's attention, in the possible reassessment of these ideas, both in Rousseau's time, and touching on our own. Through the concept of the theatre Rousseau was able to lay out his comprehensive ideas of work and Spartan living, fundamentals which he felt could guarantee man's freedom. It is also here, however, where we see the great pitfall of his cultural theory, which many believe was an early forebear to the forced egalitarianism of the 20th century, and state control of the arts as a means of shaping human behavior.

Central to Rousseau's ideas of cultural theory is his assessment and rejection of the theatre, or rather, everything that the 'theatre' stands for. While Rousseau covers a range of problems from the behavior of actors, the role of women in society and financial problems associated with a theatre, at the core of his argument is the idea that the entertainment provided by the theatre, while amusing, will only be detrimental to the long-term health of a society. Beginning with this basic assessment, it becomes immediately apparent that Rousseau is not following the idea that the increased use, productivity and growth of artistic endeavors is any indication of a liberal or just society. Through his first point concerning the theater, Rousseau establishes that in order for a society to be truly free, the strictest rules are required for artistic expression and amusements. Before looking at the criticism associated with this idea, however, let us briefly provide a context for Rousseau's thinking, and its contrast in the face of the growing cultural ideals of the enlightenment.

Taken together with the *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, in which Rousseau famously argued that the continued progress of the sciences and arts corrupted human morality, it would appear that Rousseau's view of a free society has little to do

with either education or art. This is in incomplete assessment, however, and largely ignores the point of view from which Rousseau is coming from. Far from denying the pursuance of education and art, Rousseau instead argues that unlike his contemporaries, art and education on their own are unable to give, or provide a measurement for the level of freedom enjoyed by a society. These pursuits when removed from the civic duties an individual must perform have only the power to distract, and eventually erode the work that is truly necessary in a society.

As mentioned in the introduction, this is admittedly an older idea concerning political theory, largely ‘outside’ the predominant trends of the enlightenment, and no longer a part of our conception of democracy. That being said, it is from here that Rousseau’s social thought originates, and an incomplete assessment of this original idea leads to a groundless criticism that has unfortunately been the case with Rousseau, epitomized by Voltaire who criticized Rousseau’s freedom in a letter written to him saying “One feels like crawling on all fours after reading your work” (Voltaire 1973).

Having established the political theory behind Rousseau’s basis for rejecting a theatre in Geneva, we are now better able to understand not only his criticism, but total rejection of the proposed ‘ideals’ of d’Alembert that the theatre could fulfill. According to d’Alembert, “...Geneva would have a theatre and morals (manners), and would enjoy the advantages of both; the theatrical performances would form the taste of the citizens and would give them a fineness of tact, a delicacy of sentiment” (4). Rousseau’s criticism is that far from achieving the said ideals, which render no real benefit to the virtues required for a truly civil society, the theatre will eventually produce a completely negative effect, whereby love of virtue and hatred of vice will be replaced by a social order of fine taste and manners, the absolute worst the enlightenment has to offer.

At its very foundation the theatre is only a form of amusement. All instruction it is capable of offering has to be done through the pleasures, and worse, in such a way as that it will not offend theatergoers and thus prevent them from returning. It is here that we reach Rousseau’s first major point of citizenship and artistic amusement, whereby the best life is one in which work and civil duties provide their own pleasure, such that the unhealthy separation of pleasure and work is not achieved. If this is not possible, and amusement cannot be derived from work, than amusements must be carefully developed that help a man complete that which he is required to do. As amusements like the theatre have such a strong affect on the people of a city, they must be examined carefully so as to avoid a disconnect between the realities of living, and those of the worlds created through amusements. As Rousseau writes “The state of man has its pleasures which are derived from his nature and are born of his labors, his relations, and his needs... A father, a son, a husband, and a citizen have such cherished duties to fulfill that they are left nothing to give to boredom” (16).

With this point we briefly touch upon dangerous territory within the political thought of Rousseau, from where it is possible to see the 20th century representation of this idea through the forced egalitarianism and cultural and artistic control seen in a variety of totalitarian states, most notably the former U.S.S.R. While Rousseau’s civil ideal did not feature a ruling party that enacted laws meant to shape the behavior of a people, the means by which it could be achieved was not far from what was seen in the Soviet Union. This is particularly the case with the Soviet doctrine of *socialist realism*, whereby the Communist Party directed all artistic endeavors towards championing the

goals of socialism, with severe and often fatal punishment for those who refused to tow the party line. As Rousseau makes no claim as to how the state would mandate and administer artistic amusements within Geneva, further criticism of his cultural ideals in this area are groundless. Even with this point being said, however, the 20th century application of artistic control remains an important consideration when assessing the present-day relevance of Rousseau's cultural thought.

So, the theater can only amuse, and as Rousseau tells us amusements when separated from duty can only produce a shallow, decrepit and frivolous society. Even if, however, theatrical amusements were harmless, Rousseau has even more ground to criticize d'Alembert, and his assertion that the content of these theatrical amusements could still cultivate "a fineness of tact, a delicacy of sentiment." According to Rousseau this remains an impossibility, as the playwright, unlike the Pastor or Philosopher, is entirely depended on the whims of the public, whose tastes influence what he has to say. That is, the first role of the playwright is the success of the play, such that people return to the theater. "Any author who wants to depict alien morals for us nevertheless takes great pains to make his play correspond to our morals. Without this precaution, one never succeeds..." (19).

If for instance by presenting human nature in a play, ideas expressed in such a way as to offend the public's taste concerning their own vices and failings could jeopardize their return, eliminating both the writers first goal, and all subsequent chances for his voice to be heard in the future. Rousseau summarizes the inability of plays to educate or instruct as follows, that "They are very instructive, if you please; but they are even more boring. One might as well go to a sermon" (47). Unlike the pastor and philosopher the writer is always at the whims of the public, and thus his truths are always made suspect in having to appeal to the public's tastes and pleasures. We now have two main problems with the theater, the first being that its amusements run counter to those that will help the public complete and excel in their civil duties, and the second being that its content can never truly 'civilize' or instruct, owing to its dependence on the public's willingness and participation in order to continue functioning.

Even with all this said, Rousseau sees a greater problem still with the theatre, that far from taking a man's mind off of his work, actually diminishes the very virtues that d'Alembert thought it could correct, a criticism of the theatre that Rousseau divides between tragedy and comedy. Tragedy, according to the ideals of d'Alembert could function as a way of cleansing negative passions and vices, and in general make a population aware as to their effect. Rousseau finds two major problems to this point. The first is that in keeping with the aforementioned ideas as to a playwright's success, the writer is not able to choose the issues necessary for a population to address and instead must align his version with public taste, whatever that may be. The second and greater problem is that the underlying assumption that such a 'cleansing' through theatre is possible is a fundamentally flawed idea. As Rousseau writes regarding this point, "I hear that tragedy leads to pity... But what is this pity? A fleeting and vain emotion which lasts no longer than the illusion which produced it... a sterile pity which feeds on a few tears and which has never produced the slightest act of humanity" (24). In fact, through the act of viewing tragedies unfold in the theater, the opposite effect can occur.

First, an understanding of virtue and vice would be necessary to comprehend the plays themselves, thus the tragedy does not instruct the qualities as to how to love or hate.

Second, and more pressing is Rousseau's question as to how the theatre is able to 'practice' the acts of loving virtue and hating vice for the public, simply by their comprehending and watching the play. Where is the underlying work that would allow such a change to take place and the evidence that the theatergoing public is somehow better able to participate in their duties than those who do not attend the theater. Thus the theatre does not teach the qualities of virtue and vice, as they must be understood before watching a play, and second, provides no mechanism beyond experiencing the play whereby these qualities are developed amongst the populace.

In Rousseau's estimation, the sum of these two aspects present yet another problem as the theatre begins to produce a negative and damaging effect on the civility and virtues of a population. The act of viewing the play becomes an experience whereby the theatergoing public can cheapen the love of virtue and hatred of vice, through consistent exposure to these qualities on the stage. Their hearts remain touched when experiencing a play, but through no work of their own. Instead of going through these trials ourselves we are content to watch the depiction of others, a process that eventually diminishes the mechanisms required to achieve true virtue, and the rightful hatred of vice. "In giving our tears to these fictions, we have satisfied all the rights of humanity without having to give anything more of ourselves; whereas unfortunate people in person would require attention from us, relief, consolation, and work... It could be said that our heart closes itself for fear of being touched at our own expense" (25).

Unlike tragedy, comedy does not feature a dulling of the senses, but instead exerts a dangerous interest on our social norms, and in particular their growing influence over the actions necessary to practice civil virtue. D'Alembert's proposition that comedy can make vice look ridiculous, thus diminishing its effect is once again refuted by Rousseau, who instead suggests that virtue can be made to be ridiculous, turning men away from the path to do good based upon the power of social norms influencing how he is viewed by those around him. Rousseau's criterion is that the ultimate goal of comedy in the theater will lead to society where good manners and public taste will take the place of virtue. This would in turn gradually eliminate the desire of those who would practice virtue, for fear of turning their back on an increasingly powerful, but conventional society of manners. Vice remains unaffected through this transition, and if anything is better able to disguise itself amongst powerful but misleading qualities of social niceties and manners. What is worse, is that unlike tragedy, which typically casts figures so far removed from reality that they are held in fantasy, comedy typically depicts a world which is closer to our own, "...the morals of which have a more immediate relationship with ours, and whose characters resemble men more... every aspect strikes home with the audience. (34)"

Rousseau references the work of Molière to make this point, in particular his play *The Misanthrope*, which for Rousseau highlights all the major problems in theatrical writing and practice. First, there is Molière, whom Rousseau describes as "the most perfect comic author whose works are known to us" (34). An incredibly talent who like all other dramatists must unfortunately subjugate his own ideas in order to achieve public success, epitomized in the writing of *The Misanthrope*. In *The Misanthrope* we see the protagonist Alceste, a good and virtuous man who is made to look ridiculous through his virtue, particularly in comparison to his friend Philinte. Philinte is characterized as wise, in that he avoids the anger produced by Alceste's virtue by simply being disinterested and

caring only for the pleasure of daily living. Or as Rousseau describes, “One of those decent members of high society... Everything is fine because it is to their interest that nothing be better... Who, at a good dinner asserts that it is not true that the people are hungry; who, with a well-lined pocket, find it quite disagreeable that some declaim in favor of the poor...” (39). For Rousseau, Philinte represents the peak of social depravity hidden under a veil of manners, reinforced through the comic play.

Thus is the civil man made ridiculous, and a pattern reinforced in the theatergoing public that it is better to observe societal norms and manners than risk the public denunciation associated with virtue. Comedy, like tragedy, gradually weakens our capacities for civic virtue. Unlike tragedy, however, comedy does this primarily through the gradual reinforcement of social norms that stress manners over virtue. Small and large changes are both seen through the effect of the theatre, and the underpinning for a truly civil and free society gradually deteriorated.

The reasons of Rousseau’s argument are thus epitomized, art for art’s sake, the hallmark of the enlightenment will not help strengthen and establish the necessary qualities of a civil and free society. Instead, without the necessary safeguards required in protecting freedom, enlightenment-based practices will have the opposite effect, gradually reducing society to a series of petty manners, where vice still exists, but good citizens remain unable to stop it through fear of being ridiculed in breaking societal norms required to practice virtue.

Where does this argument leave us? Also, is it simply a long-lost point that no longer has any bearing on our present society? The aforementioned example of the Soviet Union makes this a difficult area to navigate, yet I will try to present a brief case as to why Rousseau’s thinking still has some relevance to Western democracy. First, in his criticism of the theater Rousseau is highlighting only the most extreme aspects of the enlightenment. This is in keeping both with Rousseau’s rhetoric, and is an effective way of presenting the argument. Surely the expression of art through the medium of the theatre can’t be held wholly responsible for all the societal ills in which Rousseau lays at its feet. In fact, the enlightenment’s allowance for the continued practice and expansion of art in society is a necessary quality, especially so for whom drama, writing, etc, is a vocation. There is nothing new in this argument, but even a little of Rousseau’s thinking does present a twist.

Without a societal basis in Rousseau’s ideals of Spartan living, much of his warning is ill-placed and inconsistent with the foundation of our society, rooted in the enlightenment. As mentioned concerning the Soviet Union, any government control and manipulation of artistic endeavors is rightly viewed with great suspicion, with the free practice of art now believed to be one of the hallmarks of a healthy democracy. Still, Rousseau’s warning of artistic indulgence through the medium of the theater was as pressing for 18th century Geneva as it is for our 21st century world, whereby the unregulated spread of artistic amusements can be seriously detrimental to our work as citizens, which according to Rousseau should demand our complete attention. As the foundation of Rousseau’s ideal world is in no way applicable to our own, perhaps an understanding of the dangers inherent in both political theories is the wisest course of action in helping to define the greatest measure of freedom in a society.

While Rousseau’s protest of the theater was a way of allowing the complete and total attention of a population towards their civic duties and strengthening of a greater

good, the control required to do this, presumably from a governing body, has been timelessly proven to be a dangerous path. That being said, the unbridled production of amusements realized through the forward progress rooted in the ideals of the enlightenment can prove equally detrimental, albeit in much more subtle ways. As Rousseau said, we lose our desire to complete the work which is required of us, the help we can give to one another, and perhaps even a total dulling of the human ability required to achieve these ends, destroying the very capacity for our own potential. The extremes inherent in both theories have the capacity to make us less as human beings, and thus are both suspect. Perhaps, however, owing to our society's foundation in the enlightenment, we should be more vigilant towards the dangers that Rousseau so eloquently described in the *Letter to d'Alembert*.

References

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