On Civic Republicanism

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As the introduction to this volume reminds us, the term republic is fraught with ambiguity in the modern world. It is used to describe regimes as diverse as the theocratic Islamic Republic of Iran and the militantly atheistic People’s Democratic Republic of North Korea. Both of these contemporary manifestations of republics are a far cry from the classical ideal of citizenship long associated with republicanism. I will argue that Jean-Jacques Rousseau is a modern who provides a unique glimpse into the morality and psychology of the classical republics.

Rousseau is typically seen as one of the most prominent early modern critics of the Enlightenment. His frequent appeals to the classical republic as the peak of political possibilities for human flourishing are central to his apparent rejection of modern times. I propose, however, to reconsider Rousseau’s stance towards modernity by re-examining his account of the complex relation between civil religion and civic republicanism. As Jonathan Israel demonstrates in his recent works on Enlightenment philosophy, the critique of Christianity was integral to the radical Enlightenment project. I will argue that Rousseau’s endorsement of civil religion as an alternative to, and correction of, traditional Christianity thus, in a crucial respect, aligns his version of republicanism with the secularizing tendencies of the Enlightenment.

This study builds upon the insights of others who identify Rousseau’s understanding of the dilemma confronting religion in modernity. On the one hand, Rousseau excoriates the pernicious universalism of Christianity, but acknowledges its edifying moderation and humaneness. On the other hand, Rousseau extols the civic virtues produced by the ancient pagan cults, while deploring their tendency towards superstition and xenophobia. In this light, the logical solution to the problem
of modern religion appears to require combining classical republican particularism with significant elements of humane Christian moralism. It seems natural then to turn to Rousseau’s discussion in the *Social Contract* of the simplified theology he endorsed and found embodied in an idealized version of Geneva, one of the few glimmers of ancient virtue left in modern Europe. However, I will argue that Rousseau’s commitment to principles of civic republicanism does not support accommodation with reformed Christianity in Geneva. Rather, what we see in Rousseau’s treatment of classically inspired public entertainments, social customs, and practices he insists were “born” in the republics of antiquity is a sustained critique of Christianity that seeks to replace theology and traditional piety with a new cultural orientation towards a secular and ahistorical conception of communal life.

Indeed, Rousseau’s celebrated criticism of the proposal to establish a professional theatre in Geneva may have less to do with the corrupting effects of Enlightenment high culture than it does with his awareness of the serious challenges involved in transforming even Geneva into a true civic republic. With his analysis of the complex relation between public entertainments and civil religion, Rousseau thus employs classical concepts not only to critique liberal modernity, but also, perhaps paradoxically, to advance the Enlightenment project of establishing post-Christian and post-feudal republican polities.

1. Civil Religion

In order to understand how Rousseau viewed the relation between republicanism, on the one hand, and religion, on the other, it is important to consider the main elements of his key treatment of civil religion in book 4 of the *Social Contract*. Here Rousseau asserts that polytheism is the primal religious fact: “At first men had no other kings but the gods, and no other government than a theocratic one,” and thus in the early stages of society “there were as many gods as there were peoples.” In this context, the rise of Christianity can be explained as a consequence of Roman imperialism insofar as the “theological and civil intolerance” inherent in polytheism meant that “there was no other way of converting a people except by enslaving, nor any missionaries than conquerors.” Historically speaking, Christian universalism was thus in some sense a predictable outcome of paganism.

However, Rousseau’s account of civil religion also identifies a taxonomy of religion based on three categories: the “religion of man,” the
“religion of the citizen,” and a third arrangement dividing political and religious authorities into two distinct sovereign jurisdictions. Rousseau dismisses the latter form, which he identifies with Roman Catholicism, as “bizarre” and productive of a “perpetual jurisdictional conflict that has made good polity practically impossible in Christian states,” for “whatever breaks up social unity is worthless.” The religion of man, or “natural divine law,” is a humane rationalist teaching about the true duties of morality based on the “pure and simple religion of the Gospel,” while civic religion, or “positive divine law,” Rousseau identifies with the “early peoples” who viewed every other nation as “infidel, alien, and barbarous.” According to Rousseau, civil religion of the pagan cults has the salutary effect of melding service to the state with worship of the gods, and thus “unites the divine cult with love of the laws.” However, it also was based on outrageous lies that made the people superstitious, bloodthirsty, and intolerant, a condition which is “harmful” to the long-term security of the state. Natural theology, by contrast, is a truer account of “eternal moral duties.” However, insofar as natural divine law establishes no particular relation to the body politic, “one of the great bonds of a particular society remains ineffectual.” The homeland of the true Christian, Rousseau insists, is “not of this world.”

The problem of civil religion is then the conflicting tendencies of natural and civil theology. Rousseau does not see an inverse relation between the metaphysical truth of a religion and its political utility, for he acknowledges that the ultimate political usefulness of pagan civil religion was fatally undermined by the parochial and superstitious character of these civic cults. Rousseau’s ideal civil religion would be one that combines the rationalist and moderate tendencies of natural theology with the strong nativist impulse and emotional connection of classical civil religion. He indicates that some form of civil religion is indispensable for a healthy regime: “For it is of great importance to the state that each citizen has a religion that causes him to love his duties.” However, the dogmatic core of such a civil religion should, according to Rousseau, be reducible to a few simple beliefs such as the existence of God, divine judgment, and the sanctity of the social contract and a single negative prohibition on intolerance. While Rousseau insists that the sovereign power has the right to regulate all religious beliefs, he maintains that its primary responsibility is to encourage “sentiments of sociability,” and not to advance a specific set of theological propositions. Civil religion is then a fundamentally political response to a religious problem.
The intersection of Rousseau’s account of civil religion and his commitment to civic republicanism lies in the cobbled streets of his native Geneva, a regime characterized by both egalitarian republican politics and an influential version of reformed Christianity. Geneva represents the possibility for establishing a civil religion that is at once patriotic and non-sectarian, socially edifying and intellectually respectable. That is to say, Geneva’s combination of classical virtue and reformed theology will demonstrate the limits and possibilities for addressing the problem of civil religion in modernity.

2. The Problem of the Theatre

Rousseau’s most important discussion of Geneva’s republicanism emerges in the context of the controversy surrounding the suggestion by the doyen of French intellectuals, Jean le Rond d’Alembert, that the freedom-loving, but parochial and unsophisticated, Genevans would benefit from the establishment of a Parisian-style professional theatre in the city. Notably, Rousseau practically begins his response by expressing outrage about d’Alembert’s characterization of the clergy in Geneva as covert socianian rationalists who only maintain a public appearance of orthodox Calvinism in order to avoid scandalizing their more traditional flock. At least initially, then, Rousseau presents austere Calvinism, effectively the civil religion of Geneva, as the antithesis of the enervating cosmopolitanism of the theatre. Indeed, far from being a marginal event with interest only for aficionados of the stage, Rousseau contends that the introduction of Enlightenment high culture would produce “a revolution in our practices” that has the potential to completely undermine Geneva’s republican institutions.11

In part, Rousseau’s opposition to the theatre is a function of the natural conservatism he associates with small polities concerned to preserve their distinct, but delicate, social structures, for “in a state as small as the republic of Geneva, all innovations are dangerous and ... ought never to be made without urgent and grave motives.”12 However, the more specific problems he identifies are threefold. First, Rousseau warns about the socio-economic inequality and desire for luxury associated with high culture. Inequality is both a spur to the arts and a product of the desires enflamed by the theatre, especially the vain desire to be recognized as sophisticated and glamorous by one’s fellows. Second, Rousseau inveighs against the corrupting effects the theatre has on public morality both with respect to the dissipated example of actors,
and especially actresses, but also regarding the content of the plays, especially comedies, which Rousseau claims either present virtue as an object of derision by making the good man “a ridiculous figure” (un personnage ridicule), or at the very least makes “fun of the vices without ever making virtue loved.” Unable to make virtue a beautiful spectacle, the theatre can only corrode the virtue it has no part in cultivating.

The third and most important problem of the theatre has to do with the potential transformation of the subjective life of the citizens with the introduction of a seductive new realm of emotional interiority that has a disturbing solipsistic effect among the citizens: “People think they come together in the theater, and it is there that each is isolated. It is there that they go to forget their friends, neighbours and relations in order to take interest in fables, in order to cry for the misfortunes of the dead, or to laugh at the expense of the living.” Whereas the citizen should experience the immediacy of civic life in the propinquity of flesh and blood relations, Rousseau claims that the theatre operates on its own principles of representation which eviscerates what he takes to be the authentic moral life of the citizens.

The theatre is a threat to Geneva’s republican government. However, this threat manifests primarily in public opinion. All governments, Rousseau claims, are creatures of public sentiment: “Opinion, queen of the world, is not subject to the power of kings; they are themselves her first slaves.” For Rousseau, the conceptual link between the operation of opinion, on the one hand, and the political principles of the regime, on the other, is his notion of taste (le goût). Taste, he insists, “stems from several things” such as mores, religion, and socio-economic class, but its principal effect is to act as an unofficial, extra-legal determinant of right. While the theatre would be a cause of corruption in republican Geneva, Rousseau suggests that it is relatively benign in Paris, where mores are already so corrupt that the performances are a mild distraction from the sophisticated capital’s many criminal attractions. The real danger for Geneva, however, lies in the possibility that once tastes change as a result of exposure to high culture, “our innocent pleasures will have lost their charm[;] the theatre will have taken away our taste for them forever.” By this measure, institutional change is at best a lagging indicator of fundamental shifts in the public’s perception of what is and is not laudable, and even acceptable, conduct.

Rousseau’s conjecture about the corrupting effects of the theatre on the egalitarian mores and coarse, simple tastes of Genevans is intended to be a lesson about the limits of government control over society. That is
to say, government controls morality not primarily through laws and coercive instruments, but rather indirectly by shaping public opinion: “There is no well constituted state in which one does not find practices which stem from the form of government and help to maintain it.” 18 The two examples Rousseau adduces to illustrate the awesome, but indirect, power of opinion and taste are the inability of the French government to stop duelling, and the ascendancy of women as the arbiters of taste in the modern world.

Rousseau’s discussion of duelling is a reminder that the unofficial laws of taste operate in all manner of regimes, even if they operate somewhat differently in monarchies than republics. He attributes the failure of the French monarchy’s attempts to change public opinion about duels to its insensitivity towards the power of opinion. For Rousseau, the key to understanding the French public’s attitudes towards duelling is to recognize the pivotal role of honour in establishing French tastes. Laws bearing the severest penalties for duelling were ineffective because they left men’s assumptions about courage and honour largely unchallenged: “Thus it was wrong to begin by condemning all duellists indiscriminately to death; this created straight off a shocking opposition between honour and law; for even the law cannot oblige anyone to dishonour himself.” 19

The subtle, but awesome, power of opinion makers is perhaps most clearly demonstrated for Rousseau by the ascendancy of women as the arbiters of taste in modern society. In contrast to the martial spirit of the ancient republics such as Sparta and Rome, Rousseau sees in modernity the gradual feminization of taste. This is the central truth of the time that the French tribunals trying to eradicate duelling failed to appreciate. Indeed, Rousseau declares that any attempt at large-scale social change can only succeed by enlisting the active support of women “on whom depends in large measure men’s way of thinking.” 20 Duelling will sooner cease when it displeases women in France than it ever will out of fear of severe punishment.

The specific issues raised by the theatre in Geneva cast in sharp relief the role of women in shaping public opinion. According to Rousseau, the modern theatre is designed to reflect the tastes of women, as especially witnessed in the literary fixation with romances. Love, he insists, “is the realm of women. It is they who necessarily give the law in it.” 21 The effect on society is a vicious circle in which women (and men trying to please them) fill the theatres to see romances, while simultaneously the cultural celebration of romantic themes further extends “the empire
of sex, to make women and girls the preceptors of the public." Rousseau sees the political implications of this feminization of taste heavily favouring monarchy with its encouragement of delicacy and luxury over the austere, manly virtues of the classical republic. To this end Rousseau strikingly contrasts the paragon of Parisian high society – the aristocratic lady in her salon – surrounded by a “harem of men more women than she” with the rugged entertainments of the hardy warriors of antiquity who established the standards of taste for their entire society.

3. Republican Political Culture

Rousseau insists that contrary to the assertions of Parisian snobs like d’Alembert, the professional theatre would not in fact fill a cultural vacuum in Geneva. Indeed, one vital source of the cultural life of the republic is the male and female circles, which Rousseau claims still preserve “some image of ancient morals among us.” The classical bona fides of these “decent and innocent institutions” suit austere republican morals and simple tastes, however the theatre makes the circles appear antiquated and boring: “The moment there is drama, goodbye to the circles.” What is at stake with respect to the status of the circles is, according to Rousseau, nothing less than the moral foundation of republican freedom as he warns: “Let us not flatter ourselves that we shall preserve our liberty while renouncing the morals by which we acquired it.” But why do the circles have such importance?

In Geneva, the classical republican goal of weaving the rulers and ruled into a seamless whole rests upon the institutionalization of gender difference. The male circles are private associations of twelve to fifteen men who rent “comfortable quarters” at “common expense” at which they all meet every afternoon for companionship and conviviality. That these glorified frat houses are often dens of gambling and inebriation, Rousseau does not deny. He is quite candid that the male circles often encourage personal vices and hurt domestic family life. However, the great virtue of the circles, which outweighs all other disadvantages, is that by excluding women the circles allow men to be men. The great service of the circles to republicanism lies in their capacity to promote a classical ideal of male friendship: “These decent and innocent institutions combine everything which can contribute to making friends, citizens, and soldiers out of the same men, and, in consequence, everything which is most appropriate to a free people.”
In their circles men develop their civic personality in a milieu where they can “speak of country and virtue without passing for bores.”

Rousseau identifies speaking and acting coarsely, or at least with little concern for the opinion of women, as a hallmark of the republican simplicity “which preserves a good constitution as well as good morals.”

The female circles are less formal gatherings in which women and girls “meet in societies at one another’s homes.” Men are not “severely excluded,” but few ever attend. Rousseau concedes that these female gatherings are hotbeds of gossip, but he defends them primarily as a device to encourage a climate of surveillance among women. Both versions of the circles address the particular needs and inclinations of the gender to which they apply. Nature, by giving “different tastes to the two sexes,” dictates that they “ought to come together sometimes and live separately ordinarily.”

Rousseau provides the example of England as a society “in which the morals of the two sexes appear at first glance to be most contrary,” and yet it manages to combine a social practice of sexual differentiation with a considerable degree of political liberty. For Rousseau, the role the circles play in encouraging modesty in women is at least as important as providing a female-free zone for men to develop civic and fraternal bonds. Surveillance in the circles, and society more generally, reinforces notions of female modesty, and provides its own formidable sanction in the form of reputation and opinion. It is with respect to female modesty that Rousseau intones: “Never has a people perished from an excess of wine; all perish from the disorder of women.”

Rousseau identifies female modesty as the virtue laying the foundation of the private family. Modesty is central to his notion of gender roles: “Man can be audacious, such is his vocation; someone has to declare. But every women without modesty (sans pudeur) is guilty, is depraved because she tramples on a sentiment natural to her sex.”

However, it is the needs of society rather than nature strictly speaking which establishes the moral urgency of female modesty: “If the timidity, chasteness, and modesty which are proper to them are social inventions (des inventions sociales), it is necessary for society that women acquire these qualities; they must be cultivated in women, and any woman who disdains them offends good morals.” Thus, the circles clearly are not a celebration of the naturalness of the private family. Rather Rousseau saw them as elements in the classical project of denaturing, by which the family is subordinated to the republic. Indeed, it is the inherently public character of the circles which draws Rousseau’s
approbation: “Of all the kinds of relations which can bring individuals together in a city like ours, the circles form incontestably the most reasonable, the most decent, and the least dangerous ones, because they neither wish nor can be hidden, because they are public and permitted.”

The circles thus are simply irreplaceable in Geneva because they institutionalize on the level of opinion – more formidable than laws – the subjection of the private sphere to the public interest.

4. Republican Entertainments

The circles represent the conservative aspect of Rousseau’s response to the introduction of the theatre in Geneva. They are what Genevans already have and need to protect. However, his discussion of republican “entertainments” (les spectacles) such as open-air festivals and publicly sanctioned balls signifies the innovative dimension of Rousseau’s reflections on republican culture. In contrast to the segregationist logic of the circles, republican entertainments operate as unifying forces in society. The central premise of Rousseau’s treatment of republican alternatives to the theatre is the notion that civic virtue is not antithetical to pleasure. Pleasure was not the object of the circles. Rousseau admits that the replacement of the older and more boisterous “dining societies” held in taverns by the smaller and more sedate circles came about as a response to the “civil discords” of the past (nos discords civiles); that is to say, the circles represent an effort to dampen passions in the city.

However, Rousseau insists that entertainments are not only permissible in republics, but that “they were born” in, and are the product of, popular genius. He thus explicitly associates the republican alternatives to the theatre in Geneva with the classical tradition. In ancient Sparta and Rome, the forms of entertainment that “flourish with a truly festive air” were not works of literature, but rather open-air festivals and contests of skill and strength. The activities Rousseau associates with the origin of entertainments are not dependent on literary expression. Rather, Rousseau suggests that the ancient theatre originated as a reflection of real life; that is to say, the truest art is the life of a people.

Rousseau’s inclination towards the simple entertainments of the classical republics gives his reading of the relative virtues and vices of ancient theatre a particular focus. While his aim in the Letter to d’Alembert is clearly not to present ancient theatre as an alternative to the modern form, Rousseau does contrast contemporary French theatre unfavourably with that of classical Greece. His central claim in this
respect is that ancient theatre reflected a kind of sociological realism rooted in the vital national traditions of a people. This realism served the distinct moral or political purpose of encouraging civic virtue: “The ancients had heroes and put men on their stages; we, on the contrary, put only heroes on the stage and hardly have any men. The ancients spoke of humanity in less affected phrases, but they knew how to exercise it better.” Rousseau emphasizes the ancient insistence on the connection between art and practice when he compares modern theatre to the sophisticated youths in Plutarch’s famous story who taunt the old man in the crowded amphitheatre rather than offer him a seat. Ancient drama, Rousseau analogizes to the plain-spoken Spartan who actually practises virtue – surrendering his seat – rather than simply speaking about it.

The important civic dimension of ancient theatre gave it, according to Rousseau, a relevance that transcended even conventional morality. For instance, insofar as ancient tragedy constituted, on one level, a celebration of the national traditions and political life of a people, then Rousseau feels it is possible to explain why the public display of terrible deeds such as parricide, infanticide, and incest performed by Orestes, Agamemnon, Medea, and others did not have the deleterious impact on public morality that one would expect, particularly among modern audiences. As Rousseau relates: “If the Greeks put up with such theatre it was as representative of their national traditions, which were always running among the peoples, which they had reasons to recall constantly; and even its odious aspects entered their view.” In contrast to the cultural uniformity he identifies in modern Europe, the ancient Greeks were able to integrate universal questions of justice – even in shocking examples – into distinct founding narratives of self-governing peoples.

For Rousseau the peculiar genius of ancient theatre was that it did not facilitate the withdrawal of the individual from his or her community. Rather art at its best helped to anchor the individual in civic life. It is precisely the experiential and participatory aspect of ancient entertainments that Rousseau contrasts sharply with the pernicious effects of the modern theatre. Republican entertainments are bounded neither by literary form nor by physical space: “It is in the open air, under the sky, that you ought to gather and give yourself to the sweet sentiment of your happiness.” The essence of these republican festivals is simplicity: “Plant in the middle of the square a stake crowned with flowers, gather the people together there, and you will have a festival.” Rousseau contrasts
the simplicity and informality of republican spectacles with the “exclusive entertainments” in the theatre “which close up a small number of people in a melancholy fashion in a gloomy cavern.” The implicit identification of the modern theatregoer with the unfortunate denizens of Plato’s cave in book 7 of the Republic is more than just a shot against the Enlightenment pretensions of d’Alembert. Rousseau’s more fundamental point is that open-air festivals filled with a variety of activities are a more authentic form of human leisure than the arts as they have developed into high culture. Republican entertainments thus embody the experience of communal living out of which the literary arts are never more than a deeply distorted reflection.

A number of key principles emerge in Rousseau’s treatment of republican entertainments. First, we see Rousseau’s willingness to embrace theatrical devices even as he rejects the theatre. Whereas the circles signify a Rousseauian equivalent to reality television, the republican festivals are the essence of performance art. He practically effaces the distinction between performer and audience: “Make the spectators an entertainment to themselves; make them actors themselves; do it so that each sees and loves himself in the others so that all will be better united.” It is community building through participation. Second, there is also Rousseau’s lack of concern for the content of these festivals. It is the mere act of gathering the people that constitutes a festival. These events should avoid celebrating the symbols of authority, the “prisons, lances, soldiers, and afflicting images of servitude and inequality” that inhabit modern drama. Rather than prescribed content, Rousseau advocates a depoliticized event filled with competitions. The effect of such contests is not only to provide a pleasant distraction for the audience, but also to animate the contestants in all manner of skills, trades, and sports. But is there not considerable tension between Rousseau’s praise for competitions and his republican commitment to the principle of equality? Indeed, we know that this was a very real concern of Rousseau’s from his claim in the Second Discourse that competition among singers and dancers ended the golden age of humanity by producing the first sparks of vanity (amour-propre), which “eventually produced compounds fatal to happiness and innocence.” From the Letter it seems that Rousseau’s amendment to his treatment of vanity in the earlier work rests on the realization that the age of natural innocence is unrecoverable. In modernity vanity can only be managed not eradicated, and thus at best may be channelled into publicly sanctioned events. Only in this way can the community
capitalize on this potentially dangerous subjectivity and place it in the service of deeper social bonds.

The third element of Rousseau’s account of republican entertainments is the central role of pleasure. The contours of Rousseau’s argument about pleasure are complex. On the one hand, he identifies a hedonic root to social order. Not only must people in a republic “live in their stations,” they “must live in them pleasantly (agréablement).”55 Equality and civil peace, then, presuppose a sense of contentment among the public: “Deceit and the spirit of intrigue come from uneasiness and discontentment, everything goes badly when one aspires to the job (l’emploi) of another.”56 This idea of contentment represents the transformation of Genevans at play: “they are no longer that steady people which never deviates from its economic rules.”57 Festivals thus supply part of the hedonic correction to Geneva’s natural austerity insofar as they provide respite from the drudgery of commercial life. It is in this sense that we can interpret Rousseau’s famous claim that “there is no pure joy other than public joy.”58 Pure joy is not dependent on contingent extrinsic goods such as family, wealth, or status; that is to say, it is necessarily public because true pleasure presupposes that private interest is indistinguishable from the public good. It is only in their festivals that Genevans truly embrace the public: “All the societies constitute but one, all become common to all.”59 Pleasure then is the unifying principle that holds the differentiated elements of republican society together.

The connection between pleasure and republican spectacles is nowhere more apparent that in Rousseau’s proposal for the institution of balls and dances in the winter season. This is the major innovation that Rousseau puts forth in the context of his attack on the theatre. In fact, the balls constitute a criticism of what Rousseau takes to be the excessively dour moralism of Geneva. As Starobinski astutely observes, this section of the Letter is saturated with the phrase “je voudrais” (“I would like”), Rousseau’s most personal expressions of wish, preference, and imagination in the entire Letter.60 Rousseau suggests that Geneva needs to do more to strengthen the hedonic foundation of the republic. His proposal is to introduce balls open to all marriageable young people. There should be a public figure who attends these balls in the person of a lord commissioner representing the governing council. There should also be a box of honour set aside for seniors. Married women can attend, although for modesty’s sake they would be forbidden from dancing themselves. Finally, Rousseau encourages
competition for a queen of the ball title going every year to the young woman “who during the preceding one has comported herself most decently, most modestly, and has most pleased everyone.”

Perhaps the most striking feature of the balls is Rousseau’s attempt to replicate the participatory form of the open-air festivals in the highly charged erotic environment of the dances. The balls occupy a middle ground between a family wedding and a coronation as they blur the distinction between the private and the public realms. The predisposition towards surveillance that characterized the female circles dominates the balls as well. Transparency produced by public scrutiny is the key for innocent courtship, much as “vice is a friend of the shadows.” The public character of the balls also ensures that an egalitarian spirit prevails in them. Open to all marriageable youth, the balls are not solely for privileged debutants. Indeed, the free operation of personal preference and erotic attraction will, Rousseau suspects, break down the twin pillars of aristocracy, namely, traditional patriarchy and dynastic marriages. The democratizing effect of romantic love would be profound: “The relations becoming easier, marriages would be more frequent, these marriages, being less circumscribed to the same rank, would prevent the emergence of parties, temper excessive inequality, and maintain the body of the people better in the spirit of its constitution.”

Even if the prize degenerates into a beauty contest, Rousseau prefers that the community defer to nature by celebrating the most beautiful women, rather than the richest.

The balls represent the theoretical peak of Rousseau’s treatment of republican entertainments. Whereas the circles divide on the basis of gender, the open-air festivals and especially the balls would periodically reconstruct the social whole by bringing together the two sexes and the multiple generations of the polity. The fact that Geneva does not already have some version of the balls is a problem. Rousseau implies that a misguided cultural and religious predisposition towards excessive distrust of pleasure, combined with the public authority’s neglect to attend properly to the erotic and familial attachments of their people, has left Geneva dangerously exposed to the harmful effects of the theatre. In other words, Rousseau feared that Geneva’s civil religion and its republican culture were in deep tension.
5. How to Solve a Problem like Geneva?

Rousseau presents Geneva in the Letter as both an inspiration and a problem. It is an inspiration for republicans because of its political institutions and egalitarian mores. But it is a problem inasmuch as its religious beliefs and social customs only imperfectly support republican culture. The Letter thus in a generic sense demonstrates the interdependence between political culture and political institutions, or perhaps even the priority of culture over institutions in Rousseau’s thought. Geneva also, however, plays a more specific role in assessing Rousseau’s stance towards the Enlightenment. Geneva embodies the problem of civil religion in modernity. It is a regime that tries to combine classical republican practices such as gender differentiation and promotion of civic virtue with a theological core derived from Calvinist Christianity. The uneasy relationship between these two constituent parts of Geneva’s civic identity dominates Rousseau’s account of his native city. We will conclude by suggesting that Rousseau’s advocacy of classically inspired entertainments in Geneva signifies his commitment to the creation of a broadly secularized republican political culture to replace traditional Christianity. For Rousseau, modern republican civil religion is a product of a process that is practically indistinguishable from Enlightenment secularization.

From Rousseau’s account of the circles, open-air festivals, and balls a few key features of republican political culture emerge. First, there is the pivotal role of gender differentiation, which involves the normal separation of the sexes in the circles and their periodic reintegration on a general scale in the festivals and balls. Contrary to the suspicions of the dour Calvinist moralists in Geneva who see only vice and anarchy in pleasure and thus oppose dancing in any form, Rousseau contends that the desire for pleasure properly channelled into publicly sanctioned activities can be an important source of social stability. Connected with this idea of pleasure is Rousseau’s emphasis on the participatory character of healthy republican entertainments. A republican people should become an object to themselves, an object of enchantment to the individuals who identify themselves with the civic whole. With this blurring of the distinction between audience and performer, republican entertainments contribute to the construction of the general will of society by politicizing leisure, while simultaneously injecting patterns of theatricality into practically all aspects of public life.
The common idea running through the various aspects of republican entertainments is the notion of spontaneity. By spontaneity Rousseau does not primarily mean a temporal phenomenon as in something unplanned or ad hoc. Rather the political significance of spontaneity operates on the level of sentiment. Spontaneity in the Rousseauian sense reflects an existential condition approximating naturalness, and is thus inseparable from equality. Expressions of spontaneity are reminders of a vestigial sense of natural equality that survives dimly even in grossly unequal civil societies. Rousseau’s assumption is that social inequality is conventional and the spontaneous sentiments of the heart always lead to some form of solidarity with others. The opposite of spontaneity is not calculation, but rather “dignity” that “daughter of pride (l’orgueil) and mother of boredom (l’ennui).” For Rousseau, dignity is not a personal virtue, but rather a pernicious artifice created by political inequality and socio-economic class differences. Thus, an important aim of Rousseau’s defence of spontaneous republican entertainments against the dignified arts is to encourage the taste for equality among republican peoples.

One story near the conclusion of the Letter perfectly encapsulates this Rousseauian ideal of spontaneity. It recounts the young Jean-Jacques’s impressions of the impromptu dance of the men of the St Gervais militia regiment at the end of their manoeuvres. This “rather simple entertainment (spectacle assez simple)” is a combination of the circles and the balls, in which the women and children at home at the start of the dance eventually join their husbands and fathers on the square. The patriotic and martial spirit of the dance displays a remarkable melding of national-security needs and personal pleasure. However, the most important feature of the dance as Rousseau presents it is its spontaneity. In principle this event is inimitable insofar as a contrived simulation would never be a genuine reflection of the spontaneous sentiments that produced the dance. This is not to deny the highly conventional character of the distinction between Genevans and non-Genevans, which ostensibly grounds the patriotism that occasioned the militia manoeuvres in the first place. Spontaneity, Rousseau suggests, flourishes perhaps only in a limited social and political horizon.

The episode with the St Gervais regiment serves a double duty in the Letter both as an illustration of what Rousseau’s republican political culture includes, as well as an implicit indicator of what is alien to it. In particular, it is striking that Rousseau’s spontaneous republican entertainments are neither religious nor antiquarian. The republican
festivals and events in Rousseau’s idealized Geneva are not organized around the Christian calendar. There is never the slightest suggestion that republican entertainments are anything but secular. Why would this be the case, given the venerable tradition of festivities such as Easter and Christmas? On the one hand, there is Rousseau’s denunciation of what he takes to be the enfeebling universalism of Christianity. Republican entertainments therefore must be secular in order to connect individuals on an emotional level to each other and to their society. The otherworldliness and transnational character of Christianity estranges the individual from authentic civic life and communal identity. As a general philosophical proposition the particular attachments and civic bonds that republican customs are meant to solidify are inevitably undermined by the permanent presence of Christian holidays and sacred days in a people’s calendar.

The other problem with religion is more specific to Geneva’s origins in the Reformation. The city of Calvin was undoubtedly founded as a theocracy and Rousseau admits that Genevans historically have in fact tended to define themselves on religious rather than republican terms. He observes that in the past Genevan cultural life was so immersed in the imagery of Reformation era theology that it would have been impossible to craft an indigenous form of tragedy on a Genevan stage without crudely demonizing the House of Savoy (with whom Geneva in the 1750s was then at peace) or even peopling the stage with stock pantomime versions of the “Devil and the Antichrist [i.e., the pope].”

While Rousseau indicates a certain embarrassment about Geneva’s religious heritage, the reason why republican entertainments should avoid this heritage seems to have to do principally with political considerations in the present. Secular entertainments are unlikely to become a source of theological dispute and may even provide a locus of authority to rival that of the clergy in Geneva. For example, it is worth noting that the lord commissioners of the balls represent the council, not the churches. More importantly, the implicit criticism of Geneva in Rousseau’s proposal for the balls is that the legacy of austere Calvinism is an unhealthy hostility to pleasure. In this respect at least, Rousseau shares the Enlightener d’Alembert’s concern to alter Genevan mores by rehabilitating pleasure, albeit through simple entertainments rather than the theatre.

Rousseau’s republican entertainments are also manifestly not antiquarian. While these festivals are undoubtedly classically inspired, they do not celebrate national history or commemorate past events.
Spontaneity it seems requires liberation not only from social class, but also from the burden of tradition. This is shown indirectly by Rousseau’s efforts to avoid discussing the celebrations associated with the Escalade, a holiday commemorating the 1602 victory of the Genevans over the Savoyards. As d’Alembert observed in his original article for the *Encyclopédie*, this Genevan victory “marked the beginning of this republic’s tranquility” and the de facto security of its political independence.\(^7^1\) Why does Rousseau discuss republican entertainments in Geneva at considerable length but mention this seminal event and annual celebration only in passing? Coleman suggests that Rousseau wished to de-emphasize this holiday because it stirred up primitive, nativist passions among Genevans.\(^7^2\) While there is perhaps much truth in this suggestion, it is also likely that Rousseau’s concerns about antiquarianism are in service of his larger point about the nature of political founding. Republics, unlike monarchies, do not require deeply rooted traditions. While republics need founders, these founders need to disappear from the cultural life of a people. The problem with the Escalade is the inherent sadness involved in commemoration; that is to say, the inevitable estrangement experienced by the present generation which cannot participate in, and thus feels no real ownership of, these past events. Herein Rousseau points to a tension between the progressive dynamic of a democratic society, on the one hand, and the perceived need for reverence of republican political institutions, on the other. Will a free people revere institutions of their own creation if they experience them as their own products rather than as an inheritance from a hallowed past?

In this respect, Rousseau’s analysis of the problem that history and tradition poses for democracy recalls Pericles’s statement of the problem in his celebrated “Funeral Oration” to the Athenian people in the opening phase of the Peloponnesian War. According to Thucydides, Pericles expressed ambivalence about his role as keynote speaker at the traditional mass burial of the Athenian war dead. The premier Greek statesman’s praise of Athenian democracy and the valour of the war dead stands in considerable disjunction with his reservations about the customs handed down by the ancestors, which require a public eulogy. Pericles expresses his concern that the custom cannot properly fulfil the goal for which it was intended, namely, to honour the dead, because the weakness of mere words can never do justice to the sacrifices of the fallen. His indirect criticism of the “ancestors” is unmistakable: “For myself, I should have thought that the worth which had displayed
itself in deeds would be sufficiently rewarded by honors also shown by deeds ... And I could have wished that the reputations of so many brave men were not to be imperiled in the mouth of a single individual, to stand or fall according as he spoke well or ill.” Indeed, one of the underlying themes of Pericles’s oration is a certain democratic irreverence towards the past. While praising “our remote ancestors” who first founded Athens, as well as “our own fathers,” who added to this inheritance the “empire we now possess,” Pericles seems to give pride of place to the present generation – “those of us here” – who have augmented the empire and made Athens capable “to depend on her own resources whether for war or for peace.” For Pericles, insofar as freedom is an inheritance, it is not properly a subject of ritualistic devotion, but rather a celebration of a spirit of tolerance and self-expression. In Athens, he boasts, “we live exactly as we please.”

Rousseau’s treatment of Geneva imbibes this wisdom of the ancients, albeit in a form distinct from its original. The civic traditions of Christian Geneva will never be more than a very rough approximation of the classics. For instance, a Genevan Pericles is almost inconceivable in a society dominated by the churches. However, Rousseau’s dismissal of public entertainment as political or historical commemoration still reveals a dimension of his political thought that is at once both classical and profoundly progressive. A republican society is by definition not captive to its own past. This presumably is the great danger the Escalade poses in Geneva, not to mention reverence for the original theocratic order established in the city by Calvin. Rousseau’s concern is that natural sentiments and the desire for pleasure must be directed away from investing an excessive emotional attachment to institutions. The reification of consent in political institutions is perhaps the most pernicious disease afflicting republics as the public forgets that institutions only acquire legitimacy from active support of the people. In this sense, the self-generating and spontaneous entertainments of the people parallel the radically democratic foundations of the social contract by replicating on the social level the formal structure of the general will. That is to say, a people trained in its habits and taste to revere the past are unlikely to follow Rousseau’s recommendation that every assembly open each new session by voting on the question: “Does it please the sovereign to preserve the present form of government?”

Rousseau fears that Geneva is in some respects captive to its past, especially to its religious heritage. The Escalade restricts Genevan political imagination to the parameters of a Reformation era context
that casts an austere and gloomy aspect over modern republicanism. Spontaneous, secular republican entertainments offer emancipatory possibilities for Genevan society. Even just the introduction of the balls would, Rousseau suspects, produce a great transformation in the quality of life for Genevans. Towards the conclusion of the Letter Rousseau admits that the Genevan “inclination to travel” means that “half of our citizens, scattered throughout the rest of Europe and the world, live and die far from their country.” While Rousseau claims that the poverty of the soil requires this heavy emigration, his account of republican entertainments suggests that Geneva has also been deficient in providing the entertainments that make an individual “like one’s station and prevent him craving a sweeter one.” The prospects for Geneva are thus problematic because republican institutions in the city cannot rely upon the enduring taste for equality among the citizens. The dour moralism of Geneva’s heritage makes it vulnerable to the allure of the theatre precisely because the theatre appeals to a deep and long suppressed yearning in the Genevan soul for pleasure and beauty. It is to remedy this condition that Rousseau’s classically inspired entertainments are directed.

Conclusion

Rousseau’s account of Geneva represents the stark challenges confronting any effort to establish authentic republican polities in modernity. The tension between the particularistic needs of the civic republic and the universalistic pretensions of monotheistic religion is, according to Rousseau, perhaps ultimately irremediable. Insofar as Rousseau’s treatment of civil religion rests on the assumption that modern republicanism is inseparable from the political management of religion, then it is reasonable to conclude that at least in this crucial area of politico-religious affairs Rousseau’s beliefs align him with some of the most radical elements of the Enlightenment he publicly claimed to despise. Central to this reconsideration of Rousseau’s relation to modernity is his use of classical concepts to challenge some of the prevailing prejudices of modern political theology. This is not to suggest that Rousseau’s orientation was either wholly classical or wholly modern. Rather I mean to assist in the process of rediscovering Rousseau’s relationship to the Enlightenment by observing the possible underlying intellectual thread uniting his classically inspired public entertainments for Geneva and the revolutionary Festivals of Reason in Year II.
NOTES


7 This and all prior quotations in this paragraph are from Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 98–9.

8 Ibid., 100.

9 Ibid., 102.

10 Ibid.


12 Ibid., 230.

13 Ibid., 163, 96, 94.

14 Ibid., 66.

15 Ibid., 154.

16 Ibid., 119.

17 Ibid., 232.

18 Ibid., 192.

19 Ibid., 146.

20 Ibid., 151.

21 Ibid., 113.
22 Ibid., 113.
23 Ibid., 197.
24 Ibid., 202.
25 Ibid., 202, 194.
26 Ibid., 214.
27 Ibid., 193.
28 Ibid., 206.
29 Ibid., 203.
30 Ibid., 202.
31 Ibid., 214.
32 Ibid., 194.
33 As Rousseau wryly remarks: “Combien scandals publics ne retient pas la crainte de ces sévères observatrices?” (ibid., 204).
34 Ibid., 205, 195.
36 Ibid., 209.
37 Ibid., 171–2.
38 Ibid., 175.
39 Nicole Fermon, Domesticating Passions: Rousseau, Woman and Nation (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 120.
40 Rousseau, Lettre, 207.
41 Ibid., 193.
42 Ibid., 233.
43 Ibid., 233. As Brent Edwin Cusher describes in the previous chapter in this volume, the Athenian Stranger in Plato’s Laws also contends that the philosophic lawgiver must establish public festivals in order to train the sentiments and inculcate the proper qualities of citizenship.
44 Famously, in the Discourse on the Arts and Sciences Rousseau identified the emergence of the theatre as one of the major stages of corruption in Athens, and an important reason for its inferiority to Sparta, which thrived in its “happy ignorance” (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The First and Second Discourses, trans. Roger Masters [New York: St Martin’s Press, 1964 (1754)], 43–4). Thus, we must recall that from Rousseau’s perspective any form of drama is a product of, or contributory to, alienation of individuals from an authentic human life. However, the narrower claim that Rousseau believed modern theatre much inferior to ancient drama still holds.
45 Rousseau, Lettre, 89–90.
46 Ibid., 91.
47 Ibid., 233.
48 Ibid., 234.
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49 Ibid., 233.
50 Ibid., 235.
52 Rousseau, Lettre, 234.
53 Ibid., 233.
54 Rousseau, Second Discourse, 149.
55 Rousseau, Lettre, 234.
56 Ibid., 234.
57 Ibid., 235.
58 Ibid., 249.
59 Ibid., 236.
62 Ibid., 238.
63 Ibid., 241–2.
64 Wingrove, Sexual Performance, 605.
65 Daniel Cullen, Freedom in Rousseau’s Political Philosophy (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1993), 128.
66 Rousseau, Lettre, 249.
67 Ibid., 248.
68 Coleman, Political Imagination, 138.
69 Rousseau, Lettre, 226.
70 Cullen, Freedom in Rousseau, 135.
72 Coleman, Political Imagination, 131.
73 Thucydides, The Peloponnesian War in The Landmark Thucydides, ed. Robert Strassler (New York: Free Press, 1996), 111. As Timothy Burns astutely observes in chapter 1 of part 1 of this volume, Pericles’s political purpose is not only to criticize custom, but rather it is also fundamentally a secularizing project that celebrates Athenian intelligence and
resourcefulness over and against the traditional idea of divine care for the
polis.
74 Pericles does not hereby contradict Rousseau’s point about the traditional
or customary appeal of Greek drama. The ownership Greek audiences
felt about their own national arts signified a kind of horizontal ownership
distinct from that of other peoples. What Pericles is describing is the
problem of generational or vertical ownership, which can stand in real
tension with inherited national traditions. Rousseau, I would argue like
Pericles, sees a conception of generational fidelity to certain principles –
fluid with regard to structures but strong in its commitment to the general
idea of republicanism – as the most promising way to reduce this tension.
75 Thucydides, Peloponnesian War, 111–12.
76 Ibid., 113.
77 See for example, Rousseau, Social Contract, book 1, chapter 7. See also
Victor Gourevitch, “Rousseau on the Arts and Sciences,” Journal of
Philosophy 69.20 (Nov. 1972), 743.
78 Rousseau, Social Contract, 79.
79 Rousseau, Lettre, 243.
80 Ibid., 234.