

Kapossy shows that the core of the Rousseau and Iselin dialogue consisted of their respective assessments of whether Swiss republican city states should or should not adjust to the changing economic and political realities of Enlightenment Europe. Like other Swiss reformers, Iselin feared that Switzerland would be left behind in the race to modernise unless the Swiss could find ways to benefit from the positive side of recent developments of the European economy and to avoid its drawbacks. These reformers were sympathetic to Rousseau's moral critique of commercial society but failed to appreciate, or even to comprehend, his vision of Switzerland's future. Iselin himself considered Rousseau as a corrosive sceptic and rejected his theory of the general will as a Hobbesian idea and impractical to boot. Iselin's first book, *The Patriotic and Philosophical Dreams of a Friend of Mankind* (1755) laid bare the contradiction between Rousseau's denial of the natural sociability of man and his enthusiasm for republican patriotism. The more influential sequel, *The History of Mankind* (1764) was the most comprehensive republican response and refutation of Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* published in the eighteenth century, providing an important and wide-ranging alternative paradigm. Primarily, Iselin presented a new philosophical or conjectural history of human sociability, demonstrating the plausibility of a commercial society based of foundations other than mere institutionalised egoism.

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Béla Kapossy

Iselin contra Rousseau

Sociable Patriotism and the History of Mankind

SCHWABE PHILOSOPHICA

IX

HERAUSGEGEBEN VON
HELMUT HOLZHEY UND WOLFGANG ROTHER

SCHWABE VERLAG BASEL

BÉLA KAPOSSY

ISELIN
CONTRA ROUSSEAU

SOCIABLE PATRIOTISM
AND THE HISTORY OF MANKIND

SCHWABE VERLAG BASEL

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Introduction

In a number of influential essays published in the 1970s, the German historian, Reinhart Koselleck, traced the origins of 'Modernity' back to the second half of the eighteenth century and, in particular, to the development of a new 'political' understanding of time and history.¹ Koselleck claimed that this development was reflected in a semantic shift in the German use of the term *Geschichte*. Until then, the term history had been used exclusively in the plural, as *Geschichten*. *Geschichten* described specific, temporally limited, events in the past: battles, the politics of particular rulers and dynasties, or the fate of entire cities and people. History, traditionally understood, established a *fundus* from which statesmen and their political advisers could extract an understanding of how best to master the difficulties of the present. History was the *magistra vitae*; it taught men, by analogy, how to act to avoid past mistakes and how to repeat former successes.

From the 1760s onwards, Koselleck argued, political thinkers increasingly stopped considering specific events of the past as models for mastering the present and stopped regarding history simply as a source for practical knowledge. Instead of being an accumulation of particular 'histories', history now became *Geschichte*, in the singular. It became a philosophical history of the entire human species, an apparently secular historical eschatology. History no longer described (potentially repeatable) concrete realities in the past; instead, it revealed the historical and economic dynamics that structured human cultural development, thereby providing philosophical historians with a knowledge of the future. This new *History of Mankind* was predicated on a further set of claims about man's fundamental goodness and malleability; it recounted man's ascent from a state of near-animal

¹ *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*, Frankfurt a. M. 1989; see especially the first four essays.

existence to the state of perfection and real freedom, where man would be both liberated from, and reconciled with, nature. The future thus became very much part of the present.

According to Koselleck, the eighteenth-century 'philosophies of history' were the poison that infected the entire nineteenth century. By making political philosophers focus on the attainment of future ends, rather than on the preservation of present realities, they helped to marginalize older-style political thinkers like Burke and cleared the way for Hegel and Marx. Koselleck's argument about the 'pathogenesis' of the modern world relied heavily on the analytical framework underlying the work of a number of prominent conservative German jurists and historians including, in particular, Carl Schmitt, whose critique of the inherent weakness of the liberal state was, in turn, indebted to a well-established anti-revolutionary polemic that ran through the nineteenth century and can be found already in the works of thinkers such as Louis de Bonald and Karl Ludwig von Haller. Although Schmitt and Koselleck rejected the politics of early nineteenth-century anti-liberals like Haller, they largely shared their post-revolutionary view of the 'Enlightenment' as the seed-bed of the kind of revolutionary idealism in which politics had been steadily eroded by the relentless moral critique of freemasonry, philanthropy and millenarian Pietism.

Historians who have relied on the interpretative framework of this kind of nineteenth-century German *Kulturkritik* have commonly agreed on the crucial role of eighteenth-century 'philosophies of history' for the development of nineteenth-century political (or, rather, anti-political) thought. Special attention has therefore been paid to Rousseau's *Discourse on the origins of inequality* of 1755, not only because of its pioneering role in the development of *Geschichtsphilosophie*, but also because of its (allegedly) direct influence on many subsequent works of this genre.

The message of Rousseau's *Discourse on the origins of inequality* is clear enough. If modern Western states are built on the foundation of private property, the ensuing inequality would undermine their political order. Inequality would cause class warfare, the rise of a despotic state and finally revolution and anarchy. Rousseau's political message rested on a history of mankind which framed his theory of the state. It was primarily a history of 'society', and hence human sociability. It presented a highly sceptical view of the human capacity for morality. Rousseau's argument was twofold. First,

he stated, humans were not naturally sociable, or only very minimally so. Second, when humans nonetheless formed society, they did so only outside their original African habitat and only when spurred on by economic necessity. For Rousseau, society was created by the division of labour; his 'utopia' or 'golden age' was not a fully fledged set of social arrangements, but an early stage of commercial society, framed by the extended family of the local economic household.

The *Discourse on Inequality* lamented the fact that by not stopping at that early stage of human cooperation mankind had rushed into a fully fledged commercial society, with all its explosive political consequences. Rousseau's message is standardly construed as republican ideology. When integrated with his history of mankind, it is taken to be the foundation of his doctrine concerning the "natural goodness of man".

Koselleck insisted that Rousseau, unlike many of his contemporaries, was an eminently political thinker who firmly rejected any idea that the fall of the absolutist state would lead to the realisation of a moral society. And yet, by invoking the utopian image of a peaceful, natural man who lived in harmony with himself, Rousseau's political critique acquired some strong moral dimensions. According to Koselleck, it was precisely this moralising element within Rousseau's critique, not his political understanding of crisis, which his readers recognised and latched on to.² It was also this Rousseauian vision of man's natural innocence, together with his history of society, which served as the blueprint for subsequent *Histories of mankind*. *Geschichtsphilosophen* who wrote during the 1760s and 1770s, hence, discarded Rousseau's fear that the prognosticated revolution would also lead to the dissolution of society. To them the present crisis was both an inevitable and welcomed prelude to an ultimate showdown between politics and morality in front of a *Weltgericht*. The historical function of these post-Rousseauian *Histories of mankind* was to provide the evidence that the coming judgement would be in favour of morality.

My study aims to question this reading of the post-Rousseauian *Geschichtsphilosophie* by looking at the early work of Isaak Iselin, author of the first German history of mankind, the *Philosophische Muthmassungen*:

² *Kritik und Krise. Eine Studie zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt*, Frankfurt a. M. 1973, p. 142.

ueber die Geschichte der Menschheit (1764). Rather than trying to read backwards, so to speak, and evaluate the extent to which Iselin's *Geschichte der Menschheit* might have contained the seeds of nineteenth-century Communism, Socialism or Christian Liberalism, my study aims to look at Iselin's work within the historical and intellectual context from which it emerged. Iselin's *Geschichte der Menschheit*, was widely read within German-speaking Europe and served as a textbook at various German universities right up to the end of the eighteenth century. Leading German Enlightenment figures, like Moses Mendelssohn, praised it as a crucial contribution to German reform thinking; even Herder, not usually known for bestowing compliments upon other thinkers, conceded that Iselin's work should be read as a precursor, not only of his own writings, but even of those of Kant. Not surprisingly, perhaps, Iselin has often been portrayed as a quintessentially German writer while his *Geschichte der Menschheit* has been described as a typical example of the kind of optimistic, quasi-millenarian treatises which were popular within German Pietist circles at the end of the century. Iselin, however, was nothing of the sort. He was a chancellor of the city of Basel, a self-conscious republican and one of the most influential and forward looking members of the Swiss reform movement. He was also Rousseau's most theoretically interesting Swiss interlocutor. His *Geschichte der Menschheit* was not a simple-minded German rendition of the second *Discourse* but a sophisticated engagement with Rousseau's moral premises and politics. The aim of this book is to show that it is impossible to understand the full message of both Iselin's *Geschichte der Menschheit* and Rousseau's second *Discourse* without knowing its Swiss republican context.

The politics of Rousseau's second *Discourse*, originally submitted for a French prize essay competition, attracted a critical response in France and in the other large monarchies of Europe. Rousseau's prediction of revolution and anarchy undermined the confidence of modern European monarchies in their ability to reform themselves. Unlike his critics in the large nations of Europe, republicans like Iselin might have welcomed Rousseau's scathing dismissal of emerging capitalism. As we shall see, however, this was not the case. The most intense criticism of Rousseau came in fact from fellow republicans in Switzerland. The critique of commercial society in Europe had always been based on the idea that markets made man unsociable. The idea of natural sociability was the cornerstone of Christianity and republican

communitarianism. Republicans agreed with Rousseau that modern monarchies were unsociable and unstable. Rousseau, however, destroyed the traditional republican alternative based on the moral sociability of man. In addition, many of the Swiss republicans of Iselin's generation saw cultural and military benefits in commercial progress. They hoped to adapt republican politics to these developments by showing how natural sociability (and the moral capacities that it presupposed) were able to arrest and dissolve the dangerously 'unsocial' tendencies of commercial states.

In Switzerland there was a fascinating and heated debate about the compatibility between the Swiss republican city states and the changing commercial and military realities of Europe. It was premised on a recognition that there was a danger that the Swiss republics would be left behind unless they managed to find a way to benefit from Europe's commercial wealth. Switzerland, Iselin and other reformers argued, could not continue to exist outside the new European commercial economy. For those who wanted to play catch-up with European commerce, Rousseau's second *Discourse* presented a tremendous threat because it raised a massive question about the likely future of any state that committed itself to the property-based dynamics of modern commercial societies. Swiss reform republicans, however, were also Christians, and it was their post-Calvinist moderate Protestantism that represented modernity in eighteenth-century Switzerland. Thus Rousseau's critics also had a Christian axe to grind. Rousseau raised a question mark against both their projects for political reform and the moderate Christianity that supplied their politics with a moral force.

Rousseau's republican critics in Switzerland thus needed to overturn the philosophical foundation of Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*. This was precisely what Iselin tried to do in his *Geschichte der Menschheit*. According to Iselin, Rousseau's history of mankind was mistaken and dangerous. Rousseau's sceptical, quasi-Hobbesian theory of the general will was unacceptable as a republican treatise. It was also both unrealistic and incompatible with the moral requirements of Protestantism. Man, he claimed, had sociable (or moral) resources which, in the light of a fuller understanding of the course of human history, could be developed to support a new republican state form.

There has been some contextual work done on the reception of Rousseau's second *Discourse* in Europe. Most of it has been centred on the analysis of

the reception of Rousseau in France. There is also some important work done on Rousseau's immediate context in Geneva, demonstrating the origins of some of his ideas in moderate Genevan Calvinism. There has, however, been very little work on the debate between Rousseau and Swiss republicans outside Geneva. Switzerland, however, was not just Geneva, but also Berne, the paragon of aristocratic financial rectitude. As Rousseau described it, Geneva was a city of watchmakers. It lacked the military-republican culture so characteristic of many other Swiss city republics. The political controversies about Rousseau in Switzerland reproduced much of the theoretical richness of the broader European discussion of his thought, but all the participants in the Swiss discussions were genuinely republican.

What makes a comparison between Iselin and Rousseau so interesting is that they both came from comparatively similar backgrounds. Both were proud citizens of small commercial republics and both of them identified with the communitarian ethos of republican society. Iselin put every theoretical statement of Rousseau under the magnifying glass and dissected them all, without attacking him for his republicanism. According to most Swiss contemporary observers, it was Iselin, rather than Rousseau, who was the saviour of republicanism and who offered Swiss reformers a vision of a modern Switzerland that would be able to compete with the large, neighbouring monarchies *and*, at the same time, maintain the distinctive qualities of republican politics.

Iselin discussed Rousseau in virtually all his works. His intellectual development, hence, can be understood only when read against the background of Rousseau's own literary career and in conjunction with the first and second *Discourse* and the *Social Contract*. My book is, accordingly, divided into four chapters.

Chapter One: The Patriotic Dreams of a Friend of Mankind. Rousseau's second *Discourse* cannot be understood without the first. The *Discourse on the arts and sciences* had attacked the entire notion of civilisation and created its own controversy even before the second *Discourse* generated further debate. Many Swiss readers in fact anticipated the argument of the second *Discourse*. Iselin met Rousseau in Paris in 1752 and debated with him the content of the first *Discourse*. Like many republican Protestants, he agreed with Rousseau's critique of modern civilisation. However, he could not discern Rousseau's positive alternative. For him, Rousseau was

simply a modern sceptic, a harbinger of destruction rather than a purveyor of hope. A number of important Swiss and European critics suspected that behind Rousseau lurked the long shadow of Hobbes (as Rousseau seemed to confirm in *Emile* and in the *Social Contract*). Iselin's first book of 1755, entitled *Patriotic Dreams of a Friend of Mankind*, was his critique of the first *Discourse*. In it he already criticised Rousseau's denial of sociability. As an alternative he proposed a new theory of republican patriotism which was commercial and cosmopolitan but nonetheless anchored in the Christian sociability of the republican city state. Modern citizens, Iselin argued, did not necessarily have to opt for Rousseau's Spartan vision of pure politics; nor did modern corruption require the complete disengagement from commerce and the establishment of small, self-sufficient communities of Christian-republican fellow-believers.

Chapter Two: Economic Patriotism. By the time the second *Discourse* started to be discussed the eruption of the Seven Years War had transformed Europe's political landscape. These dramatic changes were also felt in Switzerland. They forced Iselin to adjust his dream of a virtuous Christian society and tie his notion of patriotism to the economic development that was a prerequisite for Switzerland's national security. Iselin debated some of these ideas in the Bernese *Economic Society* and, especially, the *Patriotic Society*, where he took a leading role. Iselin's contribution to the Bernese debates concerned the acceptance of the inequality that was an inevitable consequence of advanced commercial activity. The new kind of patriotism should be based, not on the austere virtue of the Bernese military republic but on a republican reworking of honour, which Montesquieu claimed was the principle of monarchies. This attempt to fuse the ideas of republican virtue with honour was strongly opposed by a group of fervent Rousseau supporters from Zurich who used Rousseau's first and second *Discourses* to support their vision of an isolationist, luxury-free, and quasi-Spartan Swiss Confederation. They feared that the utilitarian foundations of honour would destroy the remnants of Swiss republican egalitarianism and transform their city states into full-blown commercial societies. Iselin's key move, in his answer to these Zurich Rousseauians, was to show how the unacceptably utilitarian quality of Montesquieu's notion of monarchical honour could be defused by demonstrating that 'real' honour depended less on the approval of others than on self-approval.

Chapter Three: Iselin's critique of Rousseau's second Discourse. Iselin's controversy with Rousseau's Swiss supporters over the issue of meritocratic honour and Swiss economic reform forced him to confront Rousseau's *Discourse on inequality* head-on. Rousseau's political and moral thought had also become a matter of dispute among Bernese reformers. Following Rousseau's expulsion from France and his arrival on Swiss soil, several members of the *Patriotic Society* tried to enlist his support for their own project on moral legislation. Iselin firmly opposed this move, and in his *History of Mankind* he gave a lengthy explanation of why Rousseau's position remained strictly incompatible with the *Patriotic Society's* notion of sociable patriotism. Iselin focused on Rousseau's account of the state of nature in Part One of the second *Discourse* and, in particular, on his attempt to derive the principle of justice from pity. While he agreed with Rousseau that society could not be derived from human neediness in the state of nature, Iselin rejected the idea that pity could serve as a non-utilitarian basis for morality. The originality of Iselin's reply, his contemporaries believed, was that, instead of simply reiterating a Hutchesonian argument in favour of natural sociability, he proceeded to rework the idea of human sociability through Rousseauian categories. A stringent application of Rousseau's analytical tools, Iselin argued, revealed that man, even prior to his ability to feel pity, was in fact endowed with a disinterested principle of general sympathy based on his ability to appreciate others' pleasure and pain.

Chapter Four: The History of Mankind. While Iselin's rebuttal of Rousseau's account of pity received a positive echo, some of his readers complained that he had failed to properly address Rousseau's more fundamental question, namely whether it was possible to reconcile the idea of human freedom with the idea of an intelligent cause orienting the development of the human race. As a result, Iselin had merely replaced Rousseau's dangerous pessimism with optimism. A close reading of Iselin's *History of Mankind* however shows that it does indeed contain a proper theory of liberty. According to Iselin, the history of the entire human species revealed that it was the intention of nature to make man become a self-governing being. Human liberty did not require the union of wills as Rousseau had advocated in both the second *Discourse* and the *Social Contract*. Iselin detected the driving force behind man's ascent to a state of freedom in his sociable and unsociable tendencies both of which, for a set of external reasons, had led to

the formation of two very different types of society: the sociable, civilised agrarian kingdoms of the East and the unsociable, quasi-republican warrior societies of the North. Iselin saw the rise of modern liberty in Europe as the result of the interplay between these two opposite forms of societies. Real liberty would be established only when the civilising element of sociability and the republican element of unsociability had been fused together into a new kind of society and which, he believed, should take the form of an English-type republican monarchy.