

Considering Rousseau's notion of the Common  
through Rancière's concept of *La Mésentente*

Jean-Jacques Rousseau is often regarded as one of the founding fathers of modern democracy, as well as one of the founding fathers of modern totalitarianism. It seems that the concept of the common, found at the heart of his philosophy, is a central concept in both political courses. Rousseau's writings indeed use the same ideas, including that of the common, in contradicting manners. I wish to argue that a reading of Rousseau's political philosophy through the conceptual prism of Jacques Rancière can undo this knot, and therefore provide not only a new understanding of the concept of the common in the philosophy of Rousseau, but also a new understanding of some of the most basic and essential features of modern-day democracy in general.

One of the central concepts in Rancière's political thought is that of political disagreement (*La Mésentente*), in which one interlocutor both understands and does not understand the other interlocutor, since the latter introduces a new rationality into the discourse in addition to the existing one, a rationality which is not recognized (or acknowledged) by the first. According to Rancière, *La Mésentente* – dealing with the difficulties and limitations imposed by the common and shared sense – is first and foremost political. I wish to assert that this concept is highly relevant to a proper understanding of Rousseau's ideal political regime.

According to Rousseau, man's nature is free; as a result, the only proper political regime for him is that of self-sovereignty. However, since the natural liberty is profoundly anti-social, it has to be forsaken and replaced with a higher form of liberty, i.e. moral liberty, as he leaves the state of nature. Moral liberty, manifested as the general will, means rejecting all kind of private interests, and embracing the interest of the community. In other words, a political regime that wishes to include everyone, has to exclude any aspect of that "everyone", other than the common. The common is therefore founded, at least to a certain extent, on an act of self-alienation.

I wish to argue that this alienation can be understood in terms of political disagreement, as the internalization of political disagreement. Once internalized, it ceases to be a speech situation concerning two interlocutors or more, and is transformed into an *inner-discord*, found in each political subject. As a result, the

potential conflict between interlocutors (which, according to Rancière, is an essential feature of political disagreement) becomes an intrinsic state of the political subject.

It is my claim that this understanding of the Rousseauist political subject not only manifests the oppressive power of the democratic concept of the common, but also points out the possible courses for political emancipation in today's democracy.