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Théophile Pénigaud

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# The political opposition of Rousseau to Physiocracy: government, interest, citizenship

*Théophile Pénigaud*

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## 1. Introduction: an internal opposition

It has long been assumed that Rousseau<sup>1</sup> was unfamiliar with economics and that he failed to notice the specificity of this evolving science (in particular, Quesnay's publication of the entries "farmer" and "grain" in the *Encyclopédie*). Over the last 15 years, this has been widely disputed: it has thus been argued that, *at the very least*, Rousseau knowingly rejected the assumptions of the nascent economics (Mathiot 2000, Eyssidieux-Vaissermann 2001, Spector 2003), and that, *at the other extreme*, his approach may offer an alternative economic philosophy (Fridèn 1997 and, in another register, Spector 2007). Despite this renewed interest in Rousseau's relation to the economic theories of his time, researchers have granted little more than anecdotal status to his letter to Mirabeau dated 26 July 1767. This letter demonstrates Rousseau's explicit critique of the manifesto of Lemercier de la Rivière which Mirabeau had sent to him.

This document, however, Rousseau's sole written confrontation with the theses of the Physiocrats, has greater theoretical depth than is commonly believed. The letter has nearly always been reduced to a sarcastic attack on "legal despotism." Supposedly, like many of his contemporaries (including Mably), Rousseau categorically rejected the idealism of the Physiocratic system with its reliance on the goodwill of a "despot" to restore the natural order of societies. In this rather incomplete interpretation, it is as if the *Letter to Mirabeau* were a pure *reaction* resulting from a previously stated,

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### Address for correspondence

Ecole Normale Supérieure de Lyon, Triangle (UMR 5206), 15 parvis René Descartes, BP 7000, Lyon 69342, France; e-mail: [theophile.penigaud@ens-lyon.fr](mailto:theophile.penigaud@ens-lyon.fr)

1 Schumpeter's harsh, purely negative, judgement may be considered as an exemplary one: for him, Rousseau belongs to the history of neither socialism nor economics. See his *History of economic analysis* (1955, p. 139): "his article on political economy in the *Encyclopédie* contains next to no economics. His essay on inequality (1755) is not a serious effort to account for the phenomenon."

well-defined position (that of the *Social Contract*) which attested to the incommensurability of Rousseau's point of view with that of Lemercier de la Rivière. A novel reading of this document, based on three methodological decisions, seems necessary.

- (i) The first one consists in *considering the Letter to Mirabeau as a programme for further study rather than the expression of a definitive position*. It is definitely worth noting that Rousseau's retorts to Lemercier de la Rivière are not formulated using the terms of a thesis but rather those of an objection, even of an aporia. Interpreted as a program, however, the letter appears much less polemical and ironic and much more concerned with posing a real challenge. The need to take the position expressed by Rousseau in this letter seriously is further reinforced by the fact that the tensions and aporias it reveals persist in his later work. The major difficulty in politics, which Rousseau compares to the geometry problem of squaring the circle, namely, "to find a form of government that might place law above man," (Rousseau [1767] 1997, p. 270), is inscribed in the very first pages of the *Considerations on the Government of Poland* (Rousseau [1771] 1997, p. 179). Similarly, the second aporia, dealing with the succession of the Prince,<sup>2</sup> appears sibylline at first reading yet becomes clear upon reading the chapter devoted to the election of the king in the *Considerations*. It is obvious that the *Letter to Mirabeau* should not be considered as a mere reaction, but rather as the inauguration of a conscious divergence of points of view. One should bear in mind that the drafting of the *Considerations* provided Rousseau with the opportunity of a second encounter with the Physiocratic theses. In the year 1771, Rousseau is known to have read the "*Avis économiques*" which Baudeau communicated to the confederates (Baudeau 1770).<sup>3</sup> In the chapter about "the economic system," which he recommends for Poland, he writes: "The papers I have been sent unquestionably contain sound economic views. The flaw I see in them is that they are more partial to wealth than to prosperity" (Rousseau [1771] 1997, p. 225). "Sound views" because Rousseau supports the Physiocratic solutions recommended for Poland on at least two points: placing agriculture at the centre of the productive system and establishing a single tax on land. However,

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2 "To find in arbitrary despotism a form of succession that is neither elective nor hereditary, or rather which is both at once, and by which one makes sure, as much as possible to do so, to have neither Tiberiuses nor Neros," (Rousseau [1767] 1997, p. 270).

3 See Jean Favre's annotations to the *Considerations* (Rousseau, *Oeuvres Complètes* 1964, p. 1783).

this support remains circumstantial and coincidental. When he justifies the single tax, he is appealing to the point of view of the Abbé de Saint-Pierre (Abbé de St Pierre 1713), not that of the Abbé de Baudeau. The meaning of his agrarian ideal is not the same as that advocated by the Physiocrats: for Rousseau, the aim is not so much to enrich farmers, “which would only incite them to leave their condition,” as to make farming “honourable and pleasant” (Rousseau [1771] 1997, p. 229). The *social* relationship to work and the virtues of the rural system outweigh the economic productivity issue: “it is better when land produces a little less and when people are more orderly” (Rousseau 1964, p. 924). However, the “flaw” with which he credits their doctrine is relevant: it echoes the alternative, which is eloquently developed in the beginning of the same chapter, between two completely incompatible economies, one aiming at wealth and power<sup>4</sup> and the other at peace and freedom. Two conclusions must be drawn: on the one hand, *there is* a choice between these two “systems”; on the other hand, this choice is not economic but rather *political*. In other words Rousseau does not deny the Physiocrats’ discovery of a system to increase the wealth of a nation, instead he denounces the *form of society* this growth imposes. This helps to explain Rousseau’s paradoxical lack of reserves from the epistemological point of view, a lack which should not be understood as indifference or ignorance. If Rousseau failed to “overcome” the *Rural Philosophy* that the Marquis had first sent him,<sup>5</sup> he had at least read the latter’s arguments, and it seems that he disputed neither the contents (“your economic system is admirable,” Rousseau [1767] 1997, p. 271), nor the ambitions (“it covers everything, the field is vast.”). In a way, he credits the Physiocrats with the validity of their economic theory: the entire object of his criticism lies in the *transition* from economics to political doctrine. His doubts are of a clearly political register: in Rousseau’s own words, “I am afraid that [your positions] will lead to countries quite different from those toward which you claim to go” (Rousseau [1767] 1997, p. 271).

- (ii) Nevertheless, Rousseau’s criticism does not take the form of a series of objections and antitheses derived from his own system (contrary to Mably 1768). The thesis supported in this article – representing our second theoretical position – is that *it is from within the Physiocratic*

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4 This is indeed the case in the *Avis économiques* by Baudeau, as a reading of the *avant propos* will illustrate: the objective of increasing public income is subject to the maintenance of military power, to the development of landed property and consequently of commerce, industry and, finally, arts.

5 See the letter to Mirabeau dated 24 June 1767 (Rousseau 1979, p. 182) and Mirabeau (1763).

*theses and phraseology* (revealing its inadequacy and its contradictions) that Rousseau's criticism develops, and not from the outside, as it was long assumed given his supposed ignorance of economics and his devotion to the republican tradition. Paradoxically, the *Letter to Mirabeau* contains very few technical references to the *Social Contract* or to the *Second Discourse*, which are the works containing the main theses targeted by Lemercier de la Rivière in the *Natural and Essential Order*.<sup>6</sup> The *Letter to Mirabeau* does not deal with the natural or unnatural character of sociability and of property rights or even with the sovereignty of people and the nature of legislation. Rather, it deals with government, publicity, interest, passion, and population – the issues Rousseau shares with the Physiocrats.<sup>7</sup> Our thesis is that the full comprehension of Rousseau's reserves in the *Letter to Mirabeau* actually depends on the identification of certain problems and common terms which enlarge the divide separating him from the economists.<sup>8</sup>

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- 6 Rousseau thus refuses to join in the dispute about principles given the obviously provocative dimension of certain passages in Lemercier de la Rivière's book ("chapters in which the Author speaks his mind bluntly," Rousseau 1767, p. 268). Let us quote at random: Book I, Chapter 1 (asserting, opposing the *Second Discourse*, man's natural sociability and the natural right to personal property, both land and goods); Book I, Chapter 8 which denounces the project of "changing men" and of distorting their passions, a reference to the role with which Rousseau endows the legislator; and Book II, Chapter 16 (in which Lemercier de la Rivière violently tackles the idea that sovereignty should be conferred upon the people). It is not unlikely that the strategy of the authors of the *Ephemerides* was to involve Rousseau in a controversy to guarantee strong publicity for the debate; something Lemercier de la Rivière would consider essential to the development and hegemony of the "new science."
- 7 When seen from the perspective of the history of ideas, there is an obvious porosity of lexis between Rousseau and the Physiocrats: Reinhard Bach (1999) has indeed indicated the "contradictory cohabitation" of the themes of the Physiocrats and Rousseau until the Revolution. Schumpeter had already stressed "some superficial similarities in phrasing" (Schumpeter 1955, p. 139). On the contrary, the critical signification of the competitive mobilisation of a same system of notions by Rousseau and the Physiocrats has rarely been pointed out.
- 8 Michael Sonenscher had already noted that "the distance between the system that the marquis de Mirabeau came to espouse after his self-styled "conversion" by Physiocracy's intellectual founder, François Quesnay, and the shadowy outlines of a federal republican system at which Rousseau hints in both his *Social Contract* and his *Emile* was actually not quite as large as it may have seemed. The goal toward which their respective conceptions of political pointed was a world of largely self-sufficient states, able, for this reason, to avoid the moral and political dilemmas arising from an interdependent international system" (Sonenscher 2009, p. 176). Nevertheless, his analysis is essentially circumstantial and historical, whereas I intend to emphasise the conceptual differences Rousseau and the physiocrats have on the same issues in almost the same language.

- (iii) The topography of these thematic connections finally leads to a third methodological choice. In order to restore full intelligibility to the *Letter to Mirabeau*, we refer to a wide corpus, including texts considered as minor (and less frequently surveyed<sup>9</sup>) namely the *Discourse on Political Economy*, the *Constitutional Project for Corsica* and the *Considerations on the Government of Poland*.

Therefore, we propose to consider the *Letter to Mirabeau* as a prism which allows us to spot the common points between theories of Rousseau and the Physiocrats. We will mainly identify three common concerns leading to opposite and even antithetical theoretical decisions: the “science of government,” the “definition of interest,” and the nature of the link between public opinion and citizenship. In each of these fields, we will try to reconstruct, in a systematic form, Rousseau’s opposition to the theory of Lemerrier de la Rivière. Both the radicalism and theoretical coherence of Rousseau’s position towards the Physiocratic ambitions will eventually lead us to describe his attitude as that of an anti-economist.

## 2. Three internal limits, three open problems

In addition to defying legal despotism, conjuring up the ghosts of Nero, Scylla, Tiberius, and their emulators, the objections Rousseau expressed in the *Letter to Mirabeau* are found across three conceptual tiers.<sup>10</sup> The first is the well-known “science of government”: *even if* the “natural and essential” laws which are revealed by economics, are as obvious as the Physiocrats claim, they would still be powerless to direct the action of the government, destined to adapt to a *particular* context. Thus, the question raised is that of ascertaining which type of knowledge must be used by such a “particular government,” this knowledge cannot be reduced to political economy. The second level is the theory of interests: *even if* the “natural and essential” laws were valid for every nation and every case, they would not always be effectively implemented: the calculation of interest expected by the Physiocrats could not counterbalance passions, starting with those of the despot (“you attribute too much force to your calculations, and not enough to the inclinations of the human heart and the play of the passions,” Rousseau [1767] 1997, p. 268). Rousseau thus redefines the

9 The vast majority of the studies on Rousseau’s economic views preferably refer to the *Second Discourse*, the *Emile* or the “model of Clarens” in the *Nouvelle Héloïse*.

10 Mirabeau’s answer to Rousseau in his letter dated 30 July 1767 confirms this reading.

concept of interest in a non-reductionist way, posing anew the question of how passion may intervene in order to facilitate the understanding of the common interest. This redefinition leads to a new conception of the interaction between public opinion and citizenship (the third tier). The Physiocrats rely on the moulding of opinion (which has become “public opinion”<sup>11</sup>) to guarantee agreement to the natural and political laws of society: citizenship thus consists in acknowledging subservience to the laws and to the authority of the sovereign who implements them; Rousseau argues that *even if* the laws of economics were self-evident, invoking these laws would not be sufficient for a government legitimise its actions (“the public will never be able to perceive with evidence the relation and the interplay of all this,” Rousseau [1767] 1997, p. 269). Through the expression of a strong idea of citizenship, Rousseau states that only the participation of citizens in the process of deliberations can legitimate the laws and control the action of the government which applies them.

### *2.1 The science of government*

The *Letter to Mirabeau* is above all a letter about government; not government according to the technical and normative definition found in Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, but rather according to a more concrete and empirical meaning of governmental *practice* or *technique*. This use of the term government raises the question of what kind of knowledge may be required (hence the appearance of the expression “science of government,” a rather unusual expression for Rousseau). It is known that for Lemer cier de la Rivière, knowledge of the natural order is sufficient to remove any uncertainty about governmental practice. Political power, in both its executive and legislative branches, is thus concentrated in the hands of a “supervisory authority” whose function consists in the “management of a social and physical force (...) to ensure property and freedom among people in keeping with the natural and essential laws of society” (Lemer cier de la Rivière 1767, p. 258). We thus witness the double disappearance of politics in its traditional meaning: laws are no longer enacted but deduced (“positive laws should only be resulting from order, but sealed with the seal of public authority,” Lemer cier de la Rivière 1767, p. 127); government action is no longer decided or deliberated upon by a man or an assembly of men, but it is dictated by the same necessity that rules in geometry (“for centuries the despot Euclid has reigned without contradiction over the enlightened nations, and he will continue to exercise over them the same despotism, as long as he will not meet a

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11 Habermas [1962] 1991, p. 95.



contradiction coming out of ignorance,” Lemer cier de la Rivière 1767, p. 311–312). Pierre Rosanvallon rightly points out that for Lemer cier de la Rivière “politics as the art of government (...) becomes moot” (Rosanvallon [1979] 1999, p. 52). And he adds that;

Lemer cier de la Rivière accepts, at the utmost, to reduce it to the origin of society, when he distinguishes the concept of” nascent society “from the one of” achieved society. “For him indeed, once a society is achieved, it can do nothing but comply with the physical order. Politics, in its traditional meaning, is only conceived as a holdover from the barbarous age of humanity. (Rosanvallon [1979] 1999, p. 52)

To relegate the difficulties and depravities of the abuse of political power to the past (given a humanity now finally enlightened as to its true interests) naturally appears utopian to Rousseau. He objects in the *Letter to Mirabeau* that *even if* natural and political laws did manifestly force themselves upon all minds, as claimed by the Physiocrats (which he fundamentally denies<sup>12</sup>) it would in no way mean the end of politics. There would still remain a gap between these theoretical evidences and the reality of particular government, or, in other words, between political economy and economic policy.

It seems to me that evidence can be in the natural and political laws only when they are considered by abstraction. In any particular government, which is a composite of so many diverse elements, this evidence necessarily disappears. For the science of government is nothing but a science of combinations, applications and exceptions, according to time, places, circumstances. (Rousseau [1767] 1997, p. 269)

For Rousseau, to believe that a government can be based on a corpus of readily available natural laws is to ignore the limits of a real government, which is expected to take into account local proprieties and suitability, and to adjust to the uniqueness of each situation before acting. The formal law only lies in the abstract relationships revealed by reason,<sup>13</sup> while the reality that the government is faced with is concrete. This reality is composed of “so many diverse elements” that it would be a never-ending task to analyse the entirety. Moreover, the result could only be of limited validity. In this respect, we should not fail to notice the irony of Rousseau’s definition of the science of government, almost an oxymoron (“a science . . . of

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12 Rousseau [1767] 1997, p. 268–269: “I have never been able to understand just what the evidence is on which legal despotism is supposed to be based; and nothing seemed to me less evident than the chapter devoted to all this evidence.”

13 The “political laws” (Book II, Chapter XII) which the *Social Contract* deals with belong to this type of relation.

exceptions!”). It would be a mistake, however, to overlook this ad hoc definition. It informs us about the status which Rousseau gives to governmental practice, which the *Social Contract* hardly mentions. The definition implies at least two theses.

The first thesis is a polemical denunciation of the Physiocrats’ claim to move from economics to politics without an intermediary step. Government requires quick decisions to be taken in often unpredictable and unprecedented circumstances (Hurtado 2007). So it can be imagined that if an “extraordinary calamity” occurs (the draft of the letter mentions “wars, famine, epidemics”<sup>14</sup>) the “sacred rights of property” may be temporarily denied by the despot and requisitioned for the common good which under these circumstances, the “available values” would be unable to secure. It is precisely because such events disrupt the normal course of things that a government is necessary. Otherwise, the law would be self-sufficient (which is indeed the Physiocrats’ dream<sup>15</sup>). In Rousseau’s political theory, the government has the precise task of making the law (general by nature) applicable to a particular and complex reality through an act of interpretation called *decree* (Rousseau, *Social Contract*, Book II, Chapter VI). The Physiocrats thus disregard an essential part of the policy that they naively consider to be dispensable.

The second, more positive, thesis suggests that the local characteristics of the country ought to prevail, a situation to which the government is expected to acquiesce. This is reminiscent of the following thesis from the *Social Contract*, Chapter VIII, Book III: “that not every form of government is suited to every country,” a thesis explicitly derived from Montesquieu. It must be noted that a little further in the letter, Rousseau denounces Lemercier de la Rivière when he briefly considers the question of the best form of government. But it is mainly the first pages of the *Project of Constitution for Corsica* and the *Considerations on the government of Poland* which provide an enlightening application of the principle of the suitability of the government to the nation: Rousseau proposes to the people of Corsica and Poland a type of governmental organisation which is in keeping with their aspirations and character, which takes into account the resources of the country and its geography, which gauges the current power of its institutions and respects its physiognomy (the “*pièves*” in Corsica, the “confederations” in Poland). In these works, the influence of Montesquieu

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14 Rousseau 1979, p. 245.

15 See the letter from Mirabeau to Rousseau dated 30 July 1767: “from the moment when natural order and its basic laws are commonly known and taught, *they* will become despotic and the consent of all the people will ensure their implementation” (Rousseau 1979, p. 260, our italics).

is overshadowed by a republican consideration: the first issue is to regenerate the nation itself<sup>16</sup> and to put government at the service of the nation's specific needs by integrating economics into an altogether more global calculation, in which other constraints counterbalance it. Rousseau is unwillingly to believe that a booming economy is always preferable, for all countries under all circumstances. Therefore, in reaction to the Physiocratic thesis that a universal order may be imposed upon any social organisation, he asserts that every society has its own standard or norm. It is in this tension between the standards inherent in political economy and those that remain specific to a given society, that we can identify a first antinomy between the Physiocratic conception of the government and Rousseau's own conception.

This antinomy cannot be fully apprehended solely in the light of the *Discourse on political economy*.<sup>17</sup> We find in this work the conceptual source of the claim that any given society offers its own norm of organisation, related to the new-born concept of "general will." In fact, the government is assigned the task of ensuring the conditions for self-organisation of society. Rousseau calls the form of expertise required for the implementation of such a goal: "public economy" (Rousseau [1755b] 1997, p. 8) which can reasonably be considered as a critical alternative to political economy. The government will be required to have and strive to construct a sufficiently exact knowledge of the distribution of interests in the social body, of the disproportions and inequalities between city and countryside, of the increase in needs, of the distribution of labour, of the gap between the rich and the poor, in order to maintain the *objective* conditions "according to time, places, circumstances" required to allow freedom and equality to emerge (Senellart 2002), as well as to prevent any flaw in the foundations of civil association.<sup>18</sup> Insofar as population growth is a result of this combination of factors, Rousseau considers it to be the *sign* of a good government (Senellart 2004): a sign and not an objective (as in the mercantilist theory). Rousseau's theory of "suitable" rather than intrinsically "good" government is deeply rooted in natural facts.<sup>19</sup> Visibly he does not so

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16 See especially the very beginning of the *Constitutional project for Corsica*: the point is now less to form the government for the nation than to form the nation for the government.

17 Let us remark that it was written in 1755, that is to say, before Quesnay's first articles in the "Encyclopedia."

18 *Social Contract*, Book II, Chapter XI.

19 Although, in Rousseau's work, there is a criteriology of *legitimate* government (scrutinised using the transcendental principles of the *Social Contract*), there is no such criteriology for *good* government, which as we have seen, only designates *appropriate* government.

much miss as engage with the Physiocrats' point of view about population, taken as a natural phenomenon.<sup>20</sup> It is worth repeating that there is no point in believing that Rousseau fostered any a-priori distrust of the project of building an economic science. Moreover, he is deeply concerned with quantitative data, particularly demographic data (Rousseau, *Social Contract*, Book III, Chapter IX). It is also worth noting that some of his concerns are very close to those of the Physiocrats, such as the link between city and countryside, or public opinion as a new governmental concern. What Rousseau condemns – from the perspective of his definition of the role and status of government – is only the reductionist perspective of the “new science”: the subordinating of political organisation to a one-sided demand for economic growth, which, alone, permeates all social interest. On the contrary, the constructive “knowledge” of a good government would be the awareness of the political and moral relationships adapted toward a particular nation. This *includes* economic relationships (their “social cost” would now be called “negative externalities” and would be taken into account when determining the public interest), without challenging their autonomy.<sup>21</sup>

It would most definitely be a mistake to hastily classify Rousseau's opposition under a pre-defined category of the history of ideas: namely, the reaction of an old conception of politics (drawing its inspiration from Antiquity), against the rise of the liberal technology of government that Foucault called “governmentality” (Foucault 2004).<sup>22</sup> In reality, we cannot fully apprehend the extent of the antimony between the theses on government of Rousseau and the Physiocrats without starting from what they have in common. Both sides seek a mode of government to *replace* that of the administrative monarchical State, which uses law as its main instrument and which exercises its power in a host of edicts, regulations, and prohibitions and holds a monopoly on the definition of what is good or not.<sup>23</sup> This

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20 “The infallible and natural effect of a free and just Government is population” (Rousseau [1771] 1997, p. 229)

21 Christophe Salvat (2007) fully established this in an analysis of the case of exchange case. See: “L'échange et la loi. Le statut de la rationalité chez Rousseau”, in *Revue économique*, n°2.

22 On this matter, see, in particular, the lectures by Foucault at Collège de France, dated 1 February and 5 April 1978 (Foucault 2004).

23 In the beginning of the *Discourse on Political Economy*, Rousseau points out the failure of this form of rule. The separation between political and domestic economics is derived from the fact that, unlike the head of the family, the head of state may not “see everything by himself” (3). He has neither the ability, nor the power nor the talent to legitimately make the well-being of his subjects dependent upon his political action: to achieve this “the soul of a powerful monarch would have to be in proportion to an ordinary man's soul as the extent of his

rejection seems to be particularly linked to the emergence of a new phenomenon in political analysis: civil society. The role assigned to the government results from this: it should liberate society, ensure the conditions for self-organisation, and no longer shape or rule it from the outside. The phraseologies used by Rousseau and the Physiocrats are surprisingly similar on this point. From both perspectives, the force of constraint only appears to be a crude tool, a temporary and obsolete means which the best government could avoid using entirely. The government must aim at its own disappearance in order to promote an ideal of a self-governing society: thus, Mirabeau writes “from the moment when natural order and its basic laws are commonly known and taught, they will become despotic and the consent of all the people will ensure their implementation” (letter from Mirabeau to Rousseau dated 30 July 1767, *Correspondance Complete*, 1979, p. 260), while Rousseau writes about government that “the masterpiece of its labour would be to be able to remain idle” (Rousseau [1755b] 1997, p. 11). In opposition to State interventionism, the government should adopt liberty as its aim and means: “respect freedom and your power will increase daily” (Rousseau [1755b] 1997, p. 19), “administration is good, but freedom is better” (Rousseau [1771] 1997, p. 205); Lemer cier de la Rivière also considers that society’s only catalyst should be freedom: “Do you want a society to reach its highest degree in wealth, in population, and consequently, in power? Confide its interests in freedom” (Lemer cier de la Rivière 1767, p. 58). The government’s duty no longer consists in regulating and ruling society, but in ensuring the conditions for self-determination and the form of citizenship which allows it. This explains Rousseau’s deep concern about the public education issue (“fundamental maxim of popular or legitimate government,” [1755b] 1997, p. 21), and Lemer cier de la Rivière’s interest in public instruction (Lemer cier de la Rivière 1775). The parallel conceptions of government held by Rousseau and the Physiocrats are rooted in their common hope of organising society non-violently around a unifying principle. These principles are known to be unrelated to each other, even mutually exclusive: one is economic (the market: leading to the best allocation of resources and establishing consensus concerning the interests of each individual in enjoying a maximum of material property); the other is political (the assembly, in which the general will is determined with the

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empire is to a private person’s inheritance” (Rousseau [1755b] 1997, p. 3). Here, caustic irony is more useful than any argument to sweep away the any pretension a government might have act without an auxiliary source of knowledge. General will is introduced in the *Discourse of political economy* in response to this problem: it becomes “the fundamental rule of government” (8). For the Physiocrats, economic science will prescribe to the monarch what is in the general interest and teach him how and how far to govern.

consensus derived from the procedure of deliberating and voting the laws aiming for the common interest). Nevertheless, on both sides, the same shift is initiated: from a policy of state to a policy of society. Political economy aims at promoting self-organisation of society through market mechanisms, whereas public economics aims to ensure the conditions for a self-governing democratic system. On the physiocrat's side, economic governmentality, thoroughly analysed in the work of Foucault and, on Rousseau's side, something we could call "democratic governmentality, as of yet unexplored".

## *2.2 Definition of interest*

The first argument of Rousseau focused on the theoretical limit of economic evidence, which is powerless to guide a particular government. The second argument points to its practical limit.

How can philosophers who know the human heart grant so much authority over men's actions to this evidence as if they did not know that one very rarely acts by one's light, and very frequently by one's passions? One proves that the despot's most genuine interest is to govern legally; this has been recognized at all times: but who conducts himself according to his truest interests? Only the wise man, if he exists. (Rousseau [1767] 1997, p. 269)

Legal despotism is absurd not only because "natural law" provides no reliable support to a particular government, but also because it remains despotism. The rationalist euphoria of the Physiocrats leads to yet another serious political blunder: to entrust the despot with all public power is virtually to make him the first enemy of the laws with which he is presumed to identify ("The Caligulas, the Neros, the Tiberiuses!... My God!... I writhe on the ground, and bewail being a human being!", Rousseau [1767] 1997, p. 269). And to make him the co-owner of all the products of every land under his rule will not change anything: "the prodigal who eats his capital knows perfectly well that he is ruining himself, and nevertheless keeps going ahead; what is the use of reason's enlightening us, when passion leads us?" For once, Rousseau reproaches the economists with utopianism: "Your system is very good for the people of Utopia, it is worthless for the children of Adam." The despot, if a man ("I would wish he could be God.") will inevitably override the supposedly universal and self-evident laws of well-considered interest.

This does not conceal, but emphasises the aporia: how can a political power best serve the interests? We know Rousseau's clear-cut response in the letter: an openly arbitrary despotism is still preferable to an insidious,

self-styled “legal” despotism. In opposition to Lemercier de la Rivière (“between the unmistakable obvious and the arbitrary, there is no midpoint”<sup>24</sup>), who identifies off-hand politics with rationality, Rousseau proposes a purely political alternative: “I see no tolerable mean between the most austere Democracy and the most perfect Hobbesism” (Rousseau [1767] 1997, p. 269). Which is to say that the only way to replace the rule of a monster (Leviathan) with the rule of laws is to have them voted and applied by the same people who are subjected to them (leading to “a government without a government,” Rousseau, *Social Contract*, Book III, Chapter IV). But this provocative dilemma between arbitrary despotism and pure democracy is actually the result of our inability to “find a form of government that might place law above man.” This aporia consists in the reconciliation of passion (man) with interest (defined by the law). Rousseau and the physiocrats’ opposing positions can be best understood as two contrasting solutions to a common set of problems. This is the interaction of passion and interest. Hirschman has shown how this has contributed to the development of capitalist society (Hirschman 1977). That a government ought to assess, identify, and act upon interest is a common thread between Rousseau and the Physiocrats’ governmentality.<sup>25</sup>

It is important to note that Rousseau does not reject the concept of interest – on the contrary the *Social Contract* constantly refers to it (Bernardi 2002) – but only the reduction of interest to a mere “pecuniary” interest.<sup>26</sup> This is explicit in the *Considerations*:

Men can be moved to act only by their interest, I know; but pecuniary interest is the worst of all, the vilest, the most liable to corruption, and even, I confidently repeat and will always maintain, the least and weakest in the eyes of anyone who knows the human heart well. (Rousseau [1771] 1997, p. 226)

Rousseau reproaches the Physiocrats, and others before them (e.g. Hobbes<sup>27</sup>), with grounding their anthropology in their own society. For Rousseau, political economy is a self-fulfilling prophecy: the facts considered are its own effects. Thus, the pecuniary interest is the only one to

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24 Lemercier de la Rivière 1767, p. 85

25 About “Physiocratic governmentality,” see Herencia (2011).

26 Let us point out that by expanding the conception of interest, Rousseau subverts a terminology which, as Hirschman (1977) showed, was becoming a standard: the sin of avarice transmuting into reasonable and inexorable interest. Lemercier de la Rivière does not avoid the tendency which consists in considering interest as the means of exploiting the power of passions.

27 “I have said before and I cannot repeat too often that the error of Hobbes and the Philosophers is to confuse natural man with the men they have before their eyes” (Rousseau 1997b, p. 164).



remain when all the others have been subtracted (Rousseau [1771] 1997, p. 226) (an effect resulting from the process of corruption of *mores*, that Rousseau first denounced in the *Discourse on science and arts* and later theorised in his *Constitutional project for Corsica*, under the name of “finance system” (Hénaff 1989)). The monetary interest is essentially a private interest, an isolated interest. Thus, money (the emblematic illustration of the interest of possession) provides a resource, which is doubly private (as for its origin and its use), as opposed to “consideration,” for example, which may offer an alternative resource to the public authority: the “treasury of honours” (Rousseau [1771] 1997, p. 227). But, according to Rousseau, monetary interest should not be expected to organise political behaviours.

Indeed, because pecuniary interest is private, it is therefore apolitical. And *an accumulation of apolitical interests does not result in common or public interest*. To understand this, it is useful to refer to the first version of the *Social Contract* which, unlike the final version, following the insights of the *Second Discourse*, shows the theoretical necessity of switching from a system of needs to a genuine social contract. We know that for Rousseau the interest of possession coincides with the passions derived from *amour-propre*, that is to say, with preferential passions (Rousseau [1755a] 1997). It could not, as Lemerrier de la Rivière would assume, be understood as an immediate consequence of *amour de soi* (translated in terms of a “self-conservation right”<sup>28</sup>). In opposition to Lemerrier de la Rivière who relies on the calculation of interest to politically unify people over the natural order, Rousseau pragmatically argues that the interest of possession makes people all the more dependent on each other, through the system of needs. At least to a greater degree than it disunites through the division of passions arising from interest: “our needs unite us in proportion as our passion divide us, and the more we become our fellows’ enemies, the less can we do without them” (Rousseau 1997a, p. 281). While true that the state of dependence, brought about by the division of labour and the commercial links, connect individuals’ lives irreversibly, these connections exist only extrinsically. The interest of possession cannot tie men to one another insofar as it pushes one to pursue his or her own interest at the expense of that of others: “far from there being an alliance between particular interest and the general good, [these two] exclude one another in the natural order of things, and social laws are a yoke which everyone is willing to impose on others, but not to assume himself” (Rousseau 1997a, p. 156). And, of course, this rule first applies to the despot: his private interest appearing to himself *as such*, will inevitably lead him to violate the “natural

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28 Lemerrier de la Rivière 1767, p. 18.



and fundamental law” that only deals with the “interest of all.” This helps to explain Rousseau’s point of view that the conflict between interest and passion still remains, despite Lemer cier de la Rivière’s claim to have resolved it. Referring to the role that Rousseau assigns to the legislator, in the creation of societies, Lemer cier de la Rivière writes “don’t believe that to install this essential order, you must change people and denature their passions, on the contrary you should rivet their passion, associate them with that installation” (Lemer cier de la Rivière 1767, p. 83). Refuting this, Rousseau argues that the dividing passions, at the centre of Lemer cier de la Rivière’s political system, will never create social links and will never establish any sort of “order.” The analysis found in the *Manuscript of Geneva* suggests that the system of needs does not exhaust the concept of society.<sup>29</sup>

Political society still requires an ability to relate its personal interest to the common interest, a notion quite different from Lemer cier de la Rivière’s “general interest.” This is a crucial point: general interest and common interest define two completely opposite approaches, with regards to both the objective content and the subjective appreciation of political interest. Lemer cier de la Rivière refuses to admit that any interest could be common to all the members of a nation. When “common interest” is mentioned, it is only in terms of a result (accessible to understanding, through economic theory): it is “this sum of individual interests, which together form what may be called the general interest of the social body, or the common interest of the leader and of each member who compose it” (Lemer cier de la Rivière 1767, p. 58). “General interest” is an expression that Rousseau hardly ever uses: a *hapax* in the *Discourse on political economy*, to designate an interest which “is no longer that of anyone,” (Rousseau [1755b] 1997, p.14). As we know, “general interest” is to be found in the increase of the “net product” which gradually profits each unequal class composing society. There is therefore only contiguity, but never agreement or identity of interests: thus, “all the interests of all the different ranks of citizens,” are mixed in the hands of the despot “without being intermingled” (Lemer cier de la Rivière 1767, p. 239). Rousseau writes, in contrast: “for while the opposition of particular interests made the establishment of societies necessary, it is the agreement of these same interests which made it possible. What these different interests have in common is what forms the social bond, and if there were not some point on which all interests agree, no society could exist” (Rousseau [1762] 1997, p. 57). This

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29 Although it is impossible to abolish the relations of economic dependence, it seems absurd to claim that these relations generate their own principles of harmony: that may be true from an economic point of view (Rousseau never openly contested it), but it may not be true from a political one.

extract very clearly sums up the analysis of the *Manuscript of Geneva*. It provides information regarding how Rousseau conceives his concept of interest and as to why he gives it a larger meaning than that of the economists, a meaning which, in contrast, seems completely abstract.

For Rousseau indeed, interest first has a sociological meaning and implication. Thus, “all the individuals united by a common interest” will form authentic “societies, (...), permanent or transient, (...), whose various relations, well-observed, constitute the genuine knowledge of mores” (Rousseau [1755b] 1997, p. 7). If the monetary interest a fortiori identifies with the *private* interest, this is because there are many other interests (family interest, the interest of identified or unidentified social groups, corporate interest, and public interest) of which it is as a *residue*.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, Rousseau is justified in believing that his conception of interest is more in keeping with human nature than that of the Physiocrats, as it is deeply rooted in the structures of *amour de soi* (it is not property which provides the socialised man means of subsistence, but it is the links he establishes with his fellows, upon whom he is actually dependent). The interest of the economists is not only a moral scandal, it is also an abstraction that is never recognised as such. Perfectly isolated interests can only be fictitious and interpreted as borderline cases. The “particular interest” will always be, before all else, a collective or group interest. As we know, this is the root of its danger: partiality due to its double aspect; either subjective (corruption) or objective (the “factions”). That does not mean that “personal interest” does not exist: on the contrary it is the personal interest of each member that is included in the common interests which characterise any society.

The problem lies in the appreciation of this interest, of “what matters.” For if the individual participates in several levels of integration, he always tends to privilege his particular interest over his best interest: “since particular societies are always subordinate to those that contain them, one ought to obey the latter in preference to the former (...) but unfortunately personal interest is always inversely proportional to duty, and increases in direct proportion as the association grows narrower and the commitment less sacred” (Rousseau [1755b] 1997, p. 7–8). The challenge will thus be to prevent the short-sightedness which makes man prefer narrow links that he has experienced to wider links he does not apprehend though which nevertheless include him. But how can one bring the individual to feel the innumerable relationships established jointly with the other members of the state? Lemercier de la Rivière’s response is to advocate the self-

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30 It is obvious that my interest is not separable from the interest of my family, of my company, of my parish, of my village, of my country.

evidence of economic laws. Rousseau retorts that *even if* economics could define the conditions for general enrichment, the narrower definition of interest which it appeals to would still not enable us to move out of the logic of private interest, leading to social disintegration as opposed to solidarity: at most, it can lead to a “will of all” (Rousseau [1762] 1997, p. 60), but never to the common interest which is the basis of the social bond. In staunch opposition to Lemercier de la Rivière’s doctrine, Rousseau’s purpose is to lead the individual, the member of the state, to acknowledge the inclusion of his own personal interest in the common interest, which means to teach him to “generalize” his ideas (Rousseau 1997a, p. 286).<sup>31</sup> However, the recognition of this interest cannot be derived from its simple rationalisation, otherwise Rousseau would become the target of his own criticism. It results rather from its *generalisation*<sup>32</sup> (cognitive and collective): both procedural and emotional. It is procedural because the common interest emerges out of the very act of deliberating and voting. It is in the process of the generalisation of wills, in which all the members of the body politic are involved through deliberation and voting, that the law is justified, as the political expression of the common interest: “what generalizes the will is not so much the number of voices, as it is the common interest which unites them: for in this institution, everyone necessarily submits to the conditions which he imposes on others” (Rousseau [1762] 1997, p. 62). In opposition to a model of possession-based interest, which is amenable to calculation and which lies at the core of economic science, Rousseau advocates a model of the interest of the whole being, which can only be determined through deliberation and then agreement.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, it is not enough to respect the law (representing the common interest): the

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31 Thus general will does not exclude particular interests; it is, on the contrary, formed with what they have in common. Consequently, for Rousseau, personal interest is never sacrificed for an uncertain “general interest”: “why will the general will always be upright, and why do all consistently will each one’s happiness, if not because there is no one who does not appropriate the word each to himself, and think of himself as he votes for all?” (Rousseau 1962, p. 61).

32 In some ways, this generalisation is indeed a rationalisation: Rousseau initially identified “general will” and “public reason” (Rousseau 1755b, p. 5). But for him, reason only plays an auxiliary role and not a role of arbitration.

33 For this point, we are indebted to Bruno Bernardi and the analyses he developed in the previously mentioned article devoted to the notion of interest. “What is required of the “independent man” for him to conceive of his own properly understood interest is for him to move from the logic of interest [based] upon possession, the object of calculation, to the logic of the interest of the whole being devoted to what is important to him. The former is calculated in [terms of] profit and loss and results in a balance, the latter can only be conceived as an agreement,” (Bernardi 2002, p. 172).

challenge is to make it “beloved.” On this point, the Physiocratic doctrine is defective in presuming that submission to laws will be the result of public instruction and that the knowledge of the natural order (ensuring optimal alignments of competing interests of society), is sufficient to establish the sense of community. This is our third point.

### *2.3 Public opinion and citizenship*

This way of conceiving interest and the role played by rationality in the recognition and approval of the political order naturally affects Rousseau’s and the Physiocrats’ respective conceptions of citizenship and of the conditions of its formation.

For Lemercier de la Rivière, the citizen is only naturally interested in laws insofar as they ensure him the maximum acquisition of property, and, consequently, the greatest possible degree of material pleasure. Lemercier de la Rivière thus relies on a calculation of interest to ensure the authority of natural laws and the legitimacy of the actions of the despot who enforces them. In Physiocratic governmentality, the first issue would be to shape the citizen into an economic agent. To use Rousseau’s terminology (*Social Contract*, Book I, Chapter VI), the citizen, as defined by the Physiocrats, has the political status of subject. The declared aim of Lemercier de la Rivière in writing his manifesto is the *subjection* of all classes of citizens to the “natural laws.” From this point of view, the Physiocratic contract is rather conservative. Its innovation consists in the strategy chosen to establish the “public” knowledge of natural order and to ensure its sustainability. Indeed, what they propose is to export the model of reasoned scientific debate into the political arena, gradually replacing opinion (“queen of the world”<sup>34</sup>) with the proofs of the “new science,” through the practice of well-argued and public debate.

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34 In the works of Lemercier de la Rivière, the opinion retains the meaning it has in the eponymous article of the *Encyclopédie*: deprivation of science.

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This conquest of public opinion, by means of the overt promotion of rational debate, certainly develops the conditions of a “public sphere.” Habermas identified in this process the first outlines of the formalisation of *public opinion*, defined as “the enlightened outcome of common and public debate [and] reflection on the foundations of social order” (Habermas [1962] 1991, p. 96). Indeed, the way Lemerrier de la Rivière considers the “clash of opinions” about the true foundations of society seems to corroborate – fairly satisfactorily – this broad definition. But, rather, this should be seen – at least in the form of Lemerrier de la Rivière’s own concept – as the first draft of the technocratic government, which delegates the decision-making to a knowledgeable elite; and which delivers its reasons to the public in a didactic form. Lemerrier de la Rivière aims at stimulating the debate, only because he intends to “close it down” (Lemerrier de la Rivière 1767, p. 92). Once the order is “perfectly known,” that is to say, known as self-evident, it is reproduced through a genuine economic catechism.<sup>36</sup> Elsewhere, in a republican context (addressing the Polish people fighting against Catherine II), Lemerrier de la Rivière rather opportunistically glorifies the “citizen science” (Lemerrier de la Rivière, *L’intérêt commun des polonais*, in Jaubert 1941, p. 54). Rousseau, however, points out that this form of legitimating “from the top” would never win opinion over, even if accompanied by the pretension of logical argumentation. The legitimacy and effectiveness of governmental actions may not be based on earlier and prior knowledge (that of the natural order) from which they would emerge self-evidently. No matter which institutional means are used in order to educate the citizens, political interest does not belong to the corpus of “truths based on patent demonstrations”

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35 In the works of Lemerrier de la Rivière, the opinion retains the meaning it has in the eponymous article of the *Encyclopédie*: deprivation of science.

36 Lemerrier de la Rivière 1767, p. 333: The natural and political laws “are becoming as many articles of faith, for which we feel in our hearts rising that love, that enthusiasm which men have always fostered towards their religion.” It is interesting to notice that Rousseau and Lemerrier de la Rivière both seek for new principles of social organisation in order to replace religion as the foundation of society. Hence, in Rousseau’s works, the civil religion.

(Lemercier de la Rivière 1767, p. 92), and may not be founded on reasoning alone.

That is how Rousseau appears to have identified the main flaw in the Physiocratic undertaking, its belief in the progress of reason and in public instruction. This is plainly visible in the first lines of the *Letter to Mirabeau*. Rousseau straightway rejects that evidence can spread throughout the public space and succeed in converting all minds thus achieving a social consensus. Rousseau denounces the belief in the historical progress of reason, as conceived by Lemercier and the Abbé de St. Pierre alike, as a linear and cumulative development, an almost eschatological view.<sup>37</sup> Thus he writes:

The scope of human understanding is always one and the same, and very narrow, that it loses at one end as much as it gains at the other, and that ever recurring prejudice deprive us of as much enlightenment as cultivated reason might replace. (Rousseau [1767] 1997, p. 269)

In his first two discourses, Rousseau replaces the reductive antagonism between science and opinion with the process of perfectibility (which does not name a tendency toward perfection, but rather denotes a pattern of never-ending development of virtues and vices simultaneously). In so doing, he implicitly rejects both the awareness of order as the accomplishment of citizenship, and public education as a means of achieving it. Rousseau's deepest intention is to undermine Lemercier de la Rivière's point of view, not the details of his thesis. He denounces the idea of implementing a political revolution, grounded in a gnosiological revolution. Rousseau further rejects that public opinion could be brought into line by means of lawful reasoning. Rousseau is therefore in direct opposition to the Enlightenment ideal of grounding emancipation in the widespread use of reason.

Habermas held that Rousseau failed to grasp the critical meaning of "public opinion," reducing it to "common opinion." We hold that for Rousseau public opinion is given a real place in his philosophy, but it does not enter into Habermas's investigation. Rousseau defines a strong citizenship which, as has been previously stated, is shaped, not in education, but in the acts of deliberation about and voting for laws which show the common interest. Because Habermas identifies Rousseau's "general will" with his "public opinion,"<sup>38</sup> both concepts intermingle into a "consensus of hearts more than of arguments" (Habermas [1962] 1991, p. 98), a sub-rational adhesion with a potential for being manipulated, Habermas fails to grasp the meaning of either concept. First, concerning general will, Rousseau

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37 *Natural and Essential Order*, Book II, Chapter XX.

38 According to Habermas, Rousseau "linked the *volonté générale* to an *opinion publique* coinciding with unreflected *opinion*," (Habermas [1962] 1992, p. 96).

defines the citizen as the man who generalises his will through deliberating and voting, and out of these procedures, becomes aware of his genuine interest – not contrary to the interest of others but integrated with those of all the members of the politic body, on which his existence depends. “Public reason” indeed plays a major role in rallying citizens to the guiding principles on which society is founded: from a genetic point of view, however, not as a simple retrospective justification (the citizen recognising his own will in a presumed “rational” decision). But, once again, the law only indicates to the citizen where his political interest lies. The law, on this view, is powerless against the inertia of *mores*. This is a blind spot in the Physiocratic thinking, as well as in the Enlightenment theories in general.

In Rousseau’s system, the role of public opinion is to serve as interface between laws and *mores*: “by what means then can government have an influence on mores? I answer by public opinion” (Rousseau [1757] 1767, p. 96). Opinion, which defines the “objects of esteem” (*Social Contract*, Book IV, Chapter VII) appears, in Rousseau’s political theory, as the meeting point between passion and political rationality.<sup>39</sup> Insofar as it defines the principle from which moral judgements are derived, opinion forms the fundamental motive of human actions, based on the dynamics of *amour-propre*. Contrary to Lemerrier de la Rivière’s reductive anthropology, Rousseau argues that man is not only led by the search for pleasure, but he is first led by the search for recognition: “nothing appears right or desirable to individuals but what is adjudged so by the public” (Rousseau [1757] 1767, p. 96). The nature of public opinion is emotional because it affects *amour-propre*, that is to say, the principles by which man, in society, draws the feeling of self-worth. It is rational as well since it stands as the principle of any social organisation. In this sense, it may appear, in relation to the law, either as an adjuvant or as an obstacle. It is an obstacle when it arouses feelings of distinction, conflict, impunity, or indifference (the sense of honour in the *letter to d’Alembert*, that “barbaric opinion” which requires that “every social duty be supported by bravery,” (Rousseau [1757] 1767, p. 105). It is also an obstacle when it arouses the love of money, in the *Considerations*, the pecuniary interest being, repeatedly, “the worst of all, the vilest, the most liable to corruption”: consequently, the law begins to be hated and naturally eluded. It may be an adjuvant when it arouses the feelings of cohesion and identification which are necessary for melding one’s personal interest with the common interest (the love of liberty, of equality and of one’s country

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39 So that Rousseau finally appears shrewder than Lemerrier de la Rivière about the political phenomena of opinion: the latter considers them as a provisory resistance (ignorance) that should be extinguished by enlightenment, whereas the former sees in them the relentless passionate dimension of political life.



belong to this category). This public opinion makes a citizen love his true interest, that which the law only indicates to him.

Thus, in Rousseau's thinking, public opinion intervenes not as a duplicate of general will, blurring its place in political right, but rather as a source of heterogeneous and distinct normativity; consequently, it *may* be the support structure. It thus represents the socio-emotional counterpart of rational adherence to the foundations of political organisation, as well as its condition: the social sentiments and the interest in common matters provoke and facilitate deliberations (Bernardi 2012). We should add in passing that this "socio-emotional" normativity which constitutes public opinion is not, strictly speaking, an object of government (Melzer 1990). If this was the case, it would mark a rather surprising return of the *arcana imperii*, which was very clearly dismissed in the *Discourse on political economy* (Rousseau [1755b] 1997, p. 14). As early as his *Letter to d'Alembert*, Rousseau notes that "nothing is more independent of the supreme power than opinion" (Rousseau [1757] 1767, p. 98): an extract which details another way, a political way, of denying that education could ever "submit" opinions to theoretical demonstrations. It is an *independent* court, with a censorial function, a court which is above the decrees of the king himself, which will be entrusted with the task of imperceptibly modifying opinion about duels. Moreover, there are places and practices for the self-forming of public opinion: the *Letter to d'Alembert* mentions the Geneva "circles," paving the way for an open and informal judgement on particular cases (when general will formally decides on general objects). Thus, the late introduction of the issue of public opinion into Rousseau's political system does not open the door to an unlikely and disturbing "government of passions." Rousseau simply shows great concern for emotional conditions in recognising one's own interest within the common interest; which by no means implies the reduction of the former to the latter.

Public opinion is therefore the foundation for the conditions required for an interest in public matters, an interest which cannot be reduced to a "calculation of interest" (the gain being unilaterally expressed in terms of private property) and which ultimately consists in a more acute interest because it is more deeply embedded in the structures of *amour de soi*. A thorough reading of the *Considerations on the government of Poland* confirms this analyse (see Pénigaud 2014).

### **3. Conclusion: an anti-economist posture?**

From our perspective, this oblique approach to Physiocracy based, on the one hand, on the study of its impact on the form and status of government,



and on the other hand, on the issue of citizenship, appears to be of major importance. Indeed, far from limiting itself to the register of political economy, Physiocratic science supports and is supported by the development of an entirely new technology of government (Foucault 2004) as well as by public education projects (especially with Lemercier), or by the conquest of opinion (in particular throughout “Les Ephémérides du citoyen”). Rousseau disputes the presuppositions of the Physiocratic theories of government and citizenship. As has already been mentioned, his political system is fuelled by his opposition to the emerging liberal governmentality (based on the spontaneous harmonisation through the mechanisms of competition and market, leading to the formation of an insubstantial economic “citizenship” subjected to the laws of “natural order”) which is not only morally outrageous to his eyes, but above all *politically ineffective*. In listing the shortcomings of the Physiocrats’ doctrine in his *Letter to Mirabeau*, Rousseau reveals the real table of contents of his critique of political economy: the economy cannot be used alone to guide the government, it cannot produce the social bond itself, it cannot be imposed on opinion simply because of its presumed self-evidence. In opposition to the liberal model of governmentality, he advocates an outline of democratic governmentality, as being better suited to solve the same issues. Such a democratic governmentality, aiming at the maximal autonomy of the people, relies on the political agreement of interests. To this end, it involves the forming of an active citizenship, which requires the handling of the thorny problem of social passions needed to ensure fair deliberation and interest in common matters. The projects of applied policy, appearing after the *Letter to Mirabeau*, are rough illustrations of that project.

Considering these results, our interpretation of Rousseau’s position with regard to the economics of his time, thus appears to be at the midpoint between the minimalist and the maximalist approaches that we mentioned in the introduction. Opposing the minimalist approach, we object that it cannot be said that Rousseau’s opposition to the economics of his time is mere self-awareness. Rousseau reveals rather the contradictions contained in the physiocratic position which lie at the heart of its many unsolved problems. From this perspective, the study of Rousseau’s relation to the Physiocrats through his *Letter to Mirabeau* has confirmed Bruno Bernardi’s thesis (2009), asserting that “divaricating is the basis of Rousseau’s theses,” emphasising its status as a “self-criticism of the Enlightenment.” Nevertheless, opposing the maximalist approach, we deny that Rousseau attempted to create an alternative in terms of political

economy.<sup>40</sup> Rousseau's opposition strikes at the core of his opponent's arguments but remains, however, a purely *negative* account. Rousseau's entire relevance is to seek, in the emerging economic discourse, the contradictions that are inherent to it and those which are reflected in the political sphere. Rousseau is not an economist and on this point we fully support Catherine Larrère's argumentation (2007). On the other hand, challenging the claims of the economists on their own field, we may say that he advocates a posture which, because of its radicalism and consistency, might be described as anti-economist. Indeed, as he rejects a universal order organising economic relations and ensuring the conditions for growth, he puts forward the hypothesis of a plural governmentality, according to which each country organises its relationships of production and exchange under conditions which it finds suitable. As he objects to the primacy of the monetary interest over all the others, he refuses the postulate of a science with a normative potential (which refers to facts that are its own effects). In rejecting the idea that the solution to the political problems lies in didactics alone, Rousseau demonstrates the blind spot in our own conception of the relationship of government to public opinion, and of the role played by the latter in political decisions. Finally, in denying the subordination of politics to economics, while safeguarding economics within a higher level political rationality, Rousseau provides the theoretical means for a choice that, even today, we do not believe we are able to make.

The antimony of Rousseau's and Lemer cier de la Rivière's conceptions of citizenship has remarkable contemporary relevance. Their debate brings to the surface the struggle between technocratic requirements and the democratic yearnings. Rousseau's position highlights the failure of these occult, yet self-evident laws to offer sufficient force to assure the adhesion to public policy of the citizens otherwise excluded from government decisions. Needless to say that neither the technocracy nor the democracy offers a solution to this stalemate. On the one hand, public opinion proves incapable of enlightening itself concerning a set of reputedly technical issues (it remains relegated to emotional reaction, or left to political didactics), on the other, governments prove unable to fully legitimate their decisions, however necessary they may seem. The genealogy of the writings of the Physiocrats on the one hand, and those of Rousseau on the other dedicated to the issue of citizenship and the corresponding necessity to form opinion, may be useful to elucidate this tension, which lies at the heart of our political modernity.

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40 This is not to suggest that Rousseau has no "economic philosophy." Indeed, recent works (Hurtado 2010, Pignol 2010) show that there exist deep and intricate economic views in Rousseau.

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**Abstract**

Rousseau's relation to the Physiocrats has long been described as a "missed encounter" of which the Rousseau's letter to Mirabeau would serve as evidence. In opposition to this statement, I show in this article that this letter may offer a reliable prism which sheds light on Rousseau's meaningful opposition to physiocratic views. This opposition can be analyzed along three distinct conceptual lines, each interesting in its own right, and with regard to the birth of our political modernity. These are the theory of government, the definition of interest, and the interaction between public opinion and the formation of citizenship.

**Keywords**

Rousseau, Physiocracy, governmentality, interest, citizenship