Rousseau and Constant: Two Competing Visions of Liberty

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In the works of Rousseau and Constant, an inter-temporal battle is fought between two competing visions of liberty. While one might not go as far as to see them as diametrically opposite they are at the very least distinctively different. Although writing only half a decade apart from each other, Rousseau and Constant exhibit a very different view of the modernizing society that was unfolding before their eyes. Each were writing at two different cusps of change in which tensions between the ancient and modern worldviews were seething – Rousseau was writing as France was nearing the tipping point that triggered the French Revolution, and Constant did so in the aftermath of the revolution. What emerged from this tussle were two visions of freedom set within two opposing historical models of society: in Rousseau one understands liberty in terms of political liberty achieved only by upholding absolute sovereignty; in Constant we see individual liberty prized above community and society, modern commercial society celebrated rather than despised.

This paper seeks to flash out the distinct visions of liberty that Rousseau and Constant articulated by unpacking and discerning the central premises of each argument, pitting them against each other through comparing and contrasting. This exercise draws upon an array of texts, chief among which are Rousseau’s On the Social Contract and Constant’s collection of political writings, including The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation and The Liberty of the Ancients compared with that of the Moderns. The purpose of this project is not only to question how these two visions compete as they do, but to shed occasional light on
why they compete by drawing upon biographical studies of the both Rousseau and Constant and setting their texts in their respective contexts.

**Rousseau’s vision of liberty**

While it may be true that Rousseau’s central ideas in the *Social Contract* needs little exposition given how it has been well-expounded upon by a wealth of scholars over the past 200 years, this paper will nonetheless begin by briefly discussing these ideas so that Constant’s later criticisms may be put in clearer juxtaposition in relation to Rousseau’s ideas.

The “holy grail” that Rousseau sought in his *Social Contract* was a form of political association which will presumably “defend and protect with the whole common force of the person and goods of each associate, and in which each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone, and remain as free as before...” The ideological pillar of Rousseau’s *Social Contract* is the prevailing idea of a social compact and the general will, which he explicates in clear albeit abstract terms:

> “Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will, and, in our corporate capacity, we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole”

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1 The Social Contract, Book 1, Chap 6
By Rousseau’s reckoning, this creates a moral and collective body composed of as many members as the assembly contains voters, and receives from this act its unity, common identity, its life and its will. For this formula to work, the subjugation of individual liberty to a higher political liberty is necessary and Rousseau does not hesitate to argue that an individual can therefore be “forced to be free” \((\text{on le force d’être libre})\) by giving himself to his country which presumably secures him against all tyranny.

In such a formulation, a crucial distinction is made between *natural liberty* and *civil liberty* – the former seen as licentiousness and the latter a kind of collective freedom actuated by the general will. It is the latter that he perceives to be the goal of society, and by deduction concludes that “the general will alone can direct the State” according to the common good which forms the sole basis of governance. As if in a bid to concretize something as abstract and unfathomable as the general will, Rousseau suggests that it is the aggregation of particular wills:

> There is often a great deal of difference between the will of all and the general will: the latter considers only the common interest, while the former takes private interest into account, and is no more than a sum of particular wills: but take away from these same wills the pluses and minuses that cancel one another, and the general will remains as the sum of the differences.”\(^2\)

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\(^2\) In Book II, Chapter III of *The Social Contract*
The implications of this central premise is far reaching – what appears at first glance an abstract principle can be interpreted to mean, among other things, that the state is the presupposed guarantor of proprietorships and ownerships, the sole guardian of property of the individual which has the right to take over individual property in the name of the collective good. In his chapter concerning life and death, he further declares that an individual owes his life to the State – “... when the prince says to him: ‘it is expedient for the State that you should die’ he ought to die”. Liberty in Rousseau’s conception is a form of political liberty that demands the individual to surrender his private interests, property and life to the common good that finds expression in the “general will”. Rights of individuals are alienated to the community without reservation; the sovereign, known also as the body politic, draws its being from the sanctity of the social compact and is “absolute, sacred, inviolable”.

While this seemingly reduces the body politic into a faceless crowd devoid of individuality, Rousseau actually conceives of man as naturally possessing an independence of thought, but insists that it is too susceptible to influence from factions and associations with partial interests to be a good judge of the public good. Therefore, he continually returns to his persistent argument that the general will trumps all, and by extension the body politic holds absolute power over all its members:

“As nature gives each man absolute power over all its members, the social compact gives the body politic absolute power over all its members also, and it is this power which,
under the direction of the general will, bears, as I have said, the name of Sovereignty”  

Certainly Rousseau had the ancients in mind when he spoke of the liberty he championed. Rife in the *Social Contract* were case-in-points drawn from societies of old. In particular, he was impressed by the “sublime and unique system established by the great Lycurgus” and cited examples frequently from Solon, Numa and Servius which he takes to be role models. The recurrent harkening back to teachings of antiquity betrays a fervent admiration for the ancients, a sort of faith that Constant will later criticize as seriously misguided.

**Constant’s criticism of Rousseau’s theory**

It was not uncommon at the end of the eighteenth century for authors to imitate the virtues of the ancients⁴, and it took someone as astute as Benjamin Constant – somewhat underappreciated to the intellectual scene as he still is – to elucidate doubts over the merits of such imitations within what he sees as a distinctively modern context. While Constant sees admirable qualities and merits of ancient virtues and teachings, he is also patently wary of their drawbacks and irrelevance in the modern context. A prominent question of inquiry in his political

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³ *The Social Contract*, Book I, Chapter 4
⁴ See: "De de in De la libertéchezlesmodernes Plu l'esprit l'usurpation" (Paris:riel, 1980), 2, chaps. 6-7, 86-196
writings has been this: What would happen if Rousseau’s conception of liberty were applied to modern conditions?

The answer Constant provides throughout his political writings has been an unambiguous one uttered with great conviction: Rousseau’s theory leads invariably to tyranny and despotism, quite contrary to the sort of liberty he himself champions in his *Social Contract*. Unlike French reformers of his time who held great reverence for Rousseau’s theory, Constant saw Rousseau’s argument as “the most formidable support of all kinds of despotism”\(^5\). In his *Principes des politique* and *The Liberty of Ancients Compared with that of Moderns*, direct criticisms of Rousseau’s argument were made in the most pointed and incisive ways, working on two levels: the theoretical and the sociological.

On the theoretical level, Constant’s starting point was less to debunk Rousseau’s theory in its entirety than to flash out the truths it overlooks. We see that Constant does not refute Rousseau’s theoretical idea of the general will, but sought to better define what Rousseau had laid out in exceedingly abstract terms – concepts like the ‘general will’, ‘sovereignty of the people’, ‘social contract’ had to be understood in their exact natures and determined more precisely lest they lend themselves to convenient abuses of reformers – a commonplace phenomenon during Constant’s time, much to his ire.

“*Without a precise and exact definition,*” argues Constant, “*the triumph of the theory could become a calamity in its application.*” On a theoretical level, Rousseau’s conception of the social contract as the ultimate bastion of liberty falls

\(^5\) See *Principes des politque*.  

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short – at least in Contant’s view – because of the abstract nature of many underlying premises, which renders it dangerous when brought down to practical application. The realist streak in Constant is constantly battling itself against the idealistic and metaphorical tendencies of Rousseau. For Constant, the abstract recognition of the sovereignty of the people does not in the least increase the amount of liberty given to individuals. On the contrary, affording an abstract sovereign absolute power is an open invitation to a declension into despotism and tyranny. A persistent thread in Constant’s writings is the keen awareness of the acute dangers of unlimited, absolute power, a point he expresses most pointedly and precisely here:

“...when you establish that the sovereignty of the people is unlimited, you create and toss at random into human society a degree of power which is too large in itself, and which is bound to constitute an evil, in whatever hands it is placed. Entrust it to one man, to several, to all, and you will still find that it is equally an evil”.

The key problem, according to Constant, was not so much the form of government, or where the real power lies, but the very degree of power. Unlimited power poses great threats to liberty both on the individual and societal level. Liberty is secured only when institutional safeguards are present for the precise purpose of limiting power of authorities. Even laws, which Constant acknowledges as “merely the expression of the will of the people or of the prince, according to the form of
government”, must be circumscribed within precise limits that ought not be trespassed.

Rousseau, it appears to Constant, has mistaken liberty for authority and despite his love for freedom was spelling out a formula antithetical to liberty. That absolute political authority was placed in the hands of all citizens does not change the fact that it is absolute, and the old adage that “absolute power corrupts absolutely” remains in order. “It is in vain”, says Constant in a scathingly incisive tone, “that you pretend to submit governments to the general will. It is always they who dictate the content of this will, and all your precautions become illusory”. One cannot help but sense the grounded realism of a political figure who has has seen with his own eyes how power is exercised not by a faceless “body politic”, but by a group of associates whose interests do not necessarily align with that of the public.

Implicit in Constant’s criticisms was a disdain for metaphysics operating in a vacuum distanced and detached from reality. His experience as a leader in the parliamentary block of the liberals made him recognize the gulf between abstract metaphysics and hard truths observed in the real world. At the back of Constant’s

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6 Further, how exactly should the abstract notion of “general will” – which Rousseau sees as a lynchpin in the pursuit of liberty – be understood? While Rousseau uses an admittedly crude calculus to derive the ‘general will’ through simple addition and subtraction of particular interests, Constant sees a much more complex calculus. For him, the general interest cannot be seen as a simple aggregation of particular individual interests. “What is after all the general interest,” explains Constant, “if not the negotiation that takes place between particular interests? What is general representation but the representation of all partial interests which must reach a compromise on the objects they have in common?” The general interest is certainly different from particular interests, but it is by no means opposed to them, hence it should not be seen as a zero-sum game.
head were the horrific images of the Reign of Terror, where enthused reformers delivered their innocent enemies to the executioners and opinions in opposition to the ruling authority violently silenced. All these seem a far cry from Rousseau’s ideal vision where the “advantageous exchange” of individual liberties would lead to more security, greater liberty, and an invincible social union that constantly protects them\(^7\). Therefore, the conclusion that Rousseau makes – that it is solely on the basis of the sovereign that society should be governed, and that this sovereign bears absolute power – is based on a tight string of logic that might be deductively valid, but ultimately self-reinforcing and misses a greater truth that is written on the face of reality.

Constant notes, not without a touch of irony, that this is a reality Rousseau himself was cognizant of, and appalled by\(^8\); yet in his love of liberty he had committed the fatal theoretical error by inadvertently writing the script for tyranny. What was more paradoxical had been the way in which Rousseau declares that sovereignty could not be “alienated, delegated or represented”, which in effect means it is a principle that cannot be exercised, and therefore empty.

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\(^7\) This is another central idea in Roussau’s Social Contract, and is best summarized by the author himself: “Instead of a renunciation, they have made an advantageous exchange: instead of an uncertain and precarious way of living they have got one that is better and more secure; instead of natural independence they have got liberty; instead of the power to harm others security for themselves, and instead of their own strength, which others might overcome, a right which social union makes invincible. Their very life, which they have devoted to the State, is by it constantly protected... do we not gain something by running, no behalf of what gives us our security, only some of the risks we should have to run for ourselves, as soon as we lost it?” (Social Contract, Chapter 4)

\(^8\) He notes, in his “Principles of Politics Applicable to All Representative Governments” that Rousseau himself was appalled by the consequences of his own theory. “Horror-struck at the immense social power which he had thus created, he did not know into whose hands to commit such monstrous force, and he could find no other protection against the dager inseparable from such sovereignty, than an expedient which made its exercise impossible.”
Here, as in many where else, Constant exhibits a strikingly empirical approach in countering Rousseau’s comparatively more metaphysical and abstract theoretical approach.

True to this spirit was Constant’s disdain and skepticism for maxims\(^9\), which in his time was used so excessively it seemed almost a fad to build one’s system of political philosophy upon maxims of thinkers and ancients. As France slid inevitably into terror and then into the despotism of Bonapartist rule, the ruling “conventional wisdoms” shifted from having a balanced constitution and balance of power to seeing despotism as indispensible in the pursuit of liberty. Montesquieu became less frequently quoted, while Rousseau – especially when his words were taken out of context – provided a wealth of maxims in support of absolute power and despotism which the French reformers opportunistically exploited.

To Constant, the inexplicable fever for despotism that spread throughout France was a terrible path to liberty. It was the full expression of selfish passions under the blunt and brute disguise of liberty and patriotism, and this he fervently deplored in his political writings, with much eloquence and wit. Liberty derived from recourse to despotism was a dangerous paradox and it was unthinkable how

\(^9\) As Constant argues with great eloquence, “There are axioms that seem clear because they are short. Cunning men throw them out like food to the crowd, fools take them up, because they spare them the trouble of thinking, and they repeat them to give the impression that they understand them. In this way, propositions whose absurdity amazes us, when analysed, insinuate themselves to a thousand heads, are repeated by a thousand mouths, and one is constantly compelled to demonstrate what is obvious.” (Chapter 8, Usurpation)
the latter could truly lead to the former. The end result, to Constant, is necessarily futility:

“Liberty is of inestimable price only because it gives soundness to our mind, strength to our character, elevation to our soul. But do not these benefits all depend on the existence of liberty? If, in order to introduce it, you resort to despotism, what will you have established in the end? Only vain forms: the substance will always escape you.”

It is for the same reason that Rousseau’s dictum “on le force d’etre libre” – that men should be forced to participate in a despotic political system in the pursuit of liberty – is a dangerous contradiction. The means employed have the power to destroy the end-goal one aspires towards.

Whatever theoretical criticisms that can be or has been made directed to Rousseau’s political theory, there is little doubt that the debates surrounding the composition of the Constitutions of 1791 and 1795 demonstrated Rousseau’s influence. Notions such as the “general will” and “absolute sovereignty” dominated the language of the day and were very real concepts that needed to be institutionally organized. But we return to the central question of Constant’s inquiry: What would happen if Rousseau’s conception of liberty were applied to modern conditions?

Over and above the theoretical criticisms discussed above, there exists an interesting “sociological” argument that deals to Rousseau’s vision of liberty a

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10 Chapter 8, Usuraption.
much greater blow, and which sets apart the two competing visions in stark contrast. The most eloquent and complete articulation of this argument is to be found in Constant’s most famous 1819 address, “On the Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns”, though it features not infrequently in his other political writings after 1806.11

Central to this argument is the key distinction of two kinds of liberty: that of the ancients, and that of the moderns: to Constant, the conflation of ancient and modern conceptions of “liberty” has been the seed of France’s futile experiments in constitutional-making and declension into post-revolution despotism. Positing that these two conceptions of liberty are fundamentally different, the imposition of “ancient” political liberty was inappropriate and in fact dangerous in the modern age, not least because historical, social and economical conditions of the two ages are radically different. By extension, Rousseau’s political theory – which rests largely on ancient conceptions of liberty, has furnished what Constant calls “deadly pretexts for more than one kind of tyranny”.

Like Rousseau, Constant developed a keen interest in the history of ancient societies (in particular ancient Greece12); having undertaken a comparative study in his earlier years as a political thinker, he was familiar with the ancient societies that Rousseau cited in his work. Such a comparative approach, as a

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12 In 1787, Constant published the Essai sur les moeurs heroiques de la Grece (Paris), a translation of part of John Gillies, The History of Ancient reece, its colonies and conquests, from the earlier accounts till the division of the Macedonian Empire in the East (London, 1786)
foremost Constant scholar Bancamaria Fontana notes\textsuperscript{13}, was popular with many writers of the Enlightenment, including Rousseau, Montesquieu, Smith, Hume and Gibbon. It is in their works that Constant found an imposing mass of historical and quasi-anthropological information, which he successfully distilled to derive fascinating insights of the modern condition.

According to Constant, ancient liberty was modeled on the small city-states of antiquity where slaves did essential work to sustain the economy, thereby allowing citizens to divert their energies to political deliberation. States were relatively small, and in many republics direct democracy was practically feasible, enough for individuals to feel they had a significant stake in the fate of their state, and vice versa. Modernity, on the contrary, ushered in an age of commercialism in which the majority of citizens were directly involved in the production of material wealth, and while they were desirous of protection from foreign invasions, they have withdrawn into the private sphere and become less involved in politics. Frequent warfare had been replaced with commerce and trade as the mode of acquisition – though of course this prediction proved quite wrong, as the onslaught of the First World War has brought to bear– and this led to a “vast softening in manners... and an exceeding love of individual freedom”\textsuperscript{14}.

These sociological factors spawn two very different conceptions of liberty, and Constant was inclined to categorize Rousseau under champions of the “ancient liberty”. His own vision of liberty in turn took the place of “modern

\textsuperscript{13} See Foreword to Cambridge Texts in Historical Thought
\textsuperscript{14} Benjamin Constant. Principles of Politics, 1806
liberty”, one that he believed took into account the modern conditions and spirit of the times.

For the ancients, freedom and liberty consisted in exercising collective political rights by deliberating in the public sphere over matters of government. By prioritizing public interest and “general will” well above private interests and “individual will”, the complete subjection of the individual to the authority of the community was completely acceptable. Nowhere does the notion of individual rights feature, and any exertion of such rights was in fact sacrilegious and criminal, leading Constant to conclude that “among the ancients, the individual, almost always sovereign in public affairs, was a slave in all his private relations”. Men were machines whose gears and cog-wheels were regulated by law. The individual was lost in the nation, the citizen in the city.

On the contrary, the modernist conception of ‘liberty’ is diametrically opposite – true liberty is in essence individual liberty, which consists of freedom of expression, associations, the liberating freedom to pursue private interests and to occupy their days in a way most compatible with their whims and inclinations. With the advent of commerce, “collective sovereignty” gave way to greater individualism: “[commerce] inspires in men a vivid love of individual independence...supplies their needs, satisfies their desires, without the intervention of authorities.” This sets for people a new sociological backdrop, against which ancient principles of antiquity proves incongruous.
Constant, of course, was not the only one who remarked that the advent of commercialism was accompanied by a sort of “withdrawing into the self”. Tocqueville, in his observation of an increasingly mercantilist post-revolution America, describes a similar shift from public and communal concerns to private and personal interests. Both were describing the same phenomenon of profound social individualism, in which people see themselves as individuals in a Lockean state of nature, as self-creating, self-realizing, free and equal agents. Devoting so much energy to being the author of their selves, they have little left for public life. They are active and busy, but as private, self-centered individuals not as participatory citizens – “the passions which stir the Americans most deeply are commercial not political ones” The same could be said of the French in Constant’s time.

It is unsurprising to realize, therefore, that the ancients’ and moderns’ pursuit of liberty is not one and the same. Neither does it take on the ‘universal’ dimension that Rousseau was fond of expounding. The word ‘liberty’ has to be read according to shifting contexts, and this necessarily spawns differing aims and ideals:

“The aim of the ancients was the sharing of social power among the citizens of the same fatherland. The aim of the moderns is the

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enjoyment of security in private pleasures, and they call liberty the guarantees accorded by institutions to these pleasures.”

Therefore, Rousseau’s theory which prides itself on abstract notions of “common interest”, “general will” becomes increasingly difficult to define, and its relevance philosophically questionable. Rousseau, “in transposing into the modern age with an extent of social power, of collective sovereignty, which belonged to other centuries,” has written the script for French reformers who were seeking for themselves pretexts to reinstall tyranny and arbitrary power, much against the wishes of the prevailing zeitgeist:

“The fact is that social power injured individual independence in every possible war, without destroying the need for it. The nation did not find that an ideal share in an abstract sovereignty was worth the sacrifices required from her. She was vainly assured, on Rousseau's authority, that the laws of liberty are a thousand times more austere than the yoke of tyrants. She had no desire for those austere laws, and believed sometimes that the yoke of tyrants would be preferable to them. Experience has come to undeceive her. She has seen that the arbitrary power of men was even worse than the worst of laws. But laws too must have their limits.”

This sociological argument betrays a deeply empirical approach in making distinctions and conceptualizations between the ancients and the moderns. More

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17 Ibid.
profound, in this author’s view, is his sensitivity to the complex relationships among institutions, culture, and the “character” of citizens which is historically contingent.

Having discussed Constant’s fascinating and incisive rejoinder to Rousseau at great length, there remains much to be said about Constant’s vision of liberty.

It is to this we now turn to.

**Constant’s Vision of Liberty, Conceptions of Human Nature**

Through and through, Constant’s vision of liberty is a modern conception that has to be understood in the context of modern conditions – an age of commerce, enterprise, exchange and atomization of society. In the bustle of private individual activities, the saliency of public political life gives way. Constant’s vision rests on the very observation that modern society is no longer characterized by the narrow field of institutionalized political life. In its place is a range of choices and opportunities – provided for by commerce and private enterprises rather than by institutions and governments – that open individuals to a form of individualistic self-expression that was simply unthinkable in previous historical ages.\(^\text{18}\) Gone were the days where the individual’s role and place is defined solely by his involvement in the public and political sphere; the

\(^{18}\) “Commerce inspires in men a vivid love of individual independence. Commerce supplies their needs, satisfies their desires, without the intervention of the authorities.” (*The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns*)
modern human being, in Constant’s vision, is defined by his free will, self-awareness and individual freedom.

Even the most well-contrived systems of political representation could not - and therefore should not attempt to – solve problems of individual identity, which are inherently private, a complex byzantine best left to the individual to meander through. Implicit in this belief was also a natural distrust of the government’s encroachment into the private sphere:

“Every time collective power wishes to meddle with private speculations, it harasses the speculators. Every time governments pretend to do our own business, they do it more incompetently and expensively than we would.”19

Because society is increasingly driven by wealth and material interest, “freedom” in the modern context consists of “peaceful enjoyment and private independence” rather than active politicking to direct an abstract “collective destiny”. Therefore, for majority of citizens, political participation is largely an extraneous matter against other more immediate private concerns, and the exercise of political rights an obligation that is perfunctorily met. For Constant, this does not necessarily portend a descent into public apathy and indifference. “Noble ideas and generous emotions” can have their place in commercial society, and values of modern society need not be narrowly individualistic, self-motivated,

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and instrumental. Such hopeful optimism marks a decidedly different perspective from that of Rousseau, who saw commerce as something that would erode the very noble ideals and values that form the bedrock of societal values.

To understand why Constant – who was known more for his cynicism than for his optimism – took the position he did, it is important to turn to his conception of human nature. After all, Constant’s rejection of an ancient republicanism and of Rousseau’s vision of political liberty was founded upon his analysis of modernity’s impact on human nature. In his view, human nature and identities are pulled in different disparate directions by an agonistic interplay of passions, reason and sociopolitical forces. Where Rousseau saw emotional health springing forth from quiet contemplation and isolation from others, Constant found emotional health in intense relationships, social interaction and emotional interdependence. In light of this, a more nuanced view on what Constant means by “individual liberty” is in order: the kind of liberty Constant championed for was one rooted in interdependence, as much as it does emphasize independence and individualism.

It is also important to recognize Constant’s vision of “liberty” as a relativistic and distinctly pragmatic one at heart. “Liberty” is an ideal but not a metaphysical concept – its conception necessarily undergoes evolution and

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20 His understanding of human nature, which underwent drastic changes in different stages of his life, had a lot to do with his own existential experience, and was in part what made many scholars to come label him a “romantic”. As noted in Biancamaria Fontana’s analysis, Constant’s existential experience was marked by a haunting sense of futility in public pursuits, of his inability to conform to socially acceptable standards of behavior, of the rift between private happiness and public expectations. The alternation between commitment, pessimism, idealism and skepticism decisively shaped his intellectual imagination.
changes with the historic context, and is borne out of an ongoing process of accommodation and compromise in what can be called “pluralistic politics”. The protection of private autonomy is not a transcendental, natural right, nor an essential moral feature of man, but merely what is realistically achievable and desired at every stage of human progress. Unlike Rousseau’s transcendental vision of a permanent, all-encompassing ideal of political liberty, Constant’s is modernist in how it embraces relativistic notions. Instead of subscribing to notions and assumptions of some immutable “human nature”, he seems more inclined to believe that in the Latin adage *Tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis* (Times are changed and we are changed in them). The ‘true’ meaning of the word ‘liberty’ changes with the changing priorities and desires of people that are in turn actuated by the constant flux of social and economic conditions.

**Concluding Remarks**

At its heart, Constant’s conception of liberty was a practical response to the abuses of this Rousseau’s theories by misguided French reformers. His real point of attack was not Rousseau. It was the deplorable means by which his contemporaries sought liberty, their temerity in imposing despotism in the bid for liberty, and because Rousseau had come to be their intellectual pillar he felt compelled to debunk this very pillar. He went head-on against Rousseau’s idea to offer a competing vision of liberty that he thought was more in tune with the spirit of modernity, the inevitable onslaught of individualism and the consequent
subjugation of public interests under private ones. In his world, the preservation of liberty is a much more delicate and complex challenge of aligning individual interests to public interests, not the simplistic aggregation of “happiness” that Rousseau espouses.

Would Rousseau have conceptualized freedom and liberty the way he did, had he written in the aftermath of the French Revolution? How crucial were the 50 years that separated the two theorists? And what might Rousseau say, if he was given the right of reply? Lingering questions like these makes one wonder whether the competing visions stemmed from starkly distinctive worldviews, or merely responses to a different set of social conditions.

It can be said, in the final analysis, that both Constant and Rousseau were responding to the same set of conditions, but pursuing very different ends. The riddle that Constant confronted, beneath the surface of political events, was that of modernity and the ways in which gold-gilded age shaped human experience. Rousseau, on the other hand, was seeking a political ideal, a social compact that was universal and transcendental across time and space. In light of these, the differences in the approach should be hardly surprising – that Constant’s conception of liberty grounded itself on a more empiricist mode of thinking where Rousseau’s was rooted in abstractions stems should come across as a logical outgrowth from their disparate motivations.

The debate is destined to outlast Constant and Rousseau. Tensions between Constant-style liberalism and Rousseau-style exertion of state authority remain
ever-present in the modern day, not least because the shadow that these two competing visions of liberty cast over the age-old debate is long and dark, but illuminating and edifying.
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