

Rousseau, Consumerism, and Rearing the Twenty-First-Century Achilles

Avi I. Mintz
The University of Tulsa

Grace Roosevelt juxtaposes Jean-Jacques Rousseau's and John Dewey's views on the relationship of the individual and society in order to argue that Rousseau provides a better framework for an educational response to the increasing reach of consumerism into children's lives. In my view, Roosevelt's readings of Rousseau and Dewey are careful and fair, and her discussion of the political context to which they responded in their works is particularly fruitful and insightful. Roosevelt claims that Rousseau was critical of the culture in which he lived and Dewey was ultimately more positive about his. Dewey viewed America at the time of his writing as "a benign, even a promising, context for the development of meaningful selfhood," whereas, for Rousseau, the context of *Emile* is "the French monarchical society...portrayed as a caldron of duplicity, phoniness, and moral decadence." Hence, Rousseau tries to keep negative, corrosive social forces away from *Emile*, while Dewey tends to see value in organic, dynamic connections between school and society.

Dewey did believe that students should be protected in some sense from society (he emphasized the importance of teachers making wise decisions in their selection of material to present to children) and, in his role as a public intellectual, he was often critical of American culture and democracy. Nevertheless, Roosevelt is right that Dewey was largely optimistic about the bridge between school and society. Roosevelt is well attuned to the relationship of political and educational theory and she demonstrates in *Reading Rousseau in the Nuclear Age* that political context is essential for understanding Rousseau's educational thought.¹ She points out in that book that Rousseau counsels protection from a corrupt society in *Emile* whereas he advocates a rather extreme patriotic education in more virtuous societies like those of *The Social Contract* and *Considerations on the Government of Poland*.²

Roosevelt, in her current essay, sees the culture of consumerism as a significant threat to children's psychological and moral health. We need, therefore, to appeal to the Rousseau of *Emile* who emphasizes the need for metaphorical fences around the souls of the young. While I believe that Rousseau presents a more compelling educational response to consumerism than does Dewey, I have some reservations about whether Rousseau's theory is adequate for the challenge of consumerism.

The illustration that Rousseau commissioned for the beginning of *Emile* depicts Achilles submerged in the River Styx by his mother Thetis.³ Rousseau believed that by carefully planning *Emile*'s early rearing, *Emile* would be as psychologically invulnerable as Achilles was physically.⁴ *Emile*'s education is designed to prevent exposure to opinion and social relations. Exposure prior to the development of reason, Rousseau argues, leads to an inflamed and corrupted *amour propre*.⁵ *Emile*

should not seek to be ranked first; he should be immune from the gaze of others and should gaze at others only in socially productive ways (for example, in order to know when others have been treated unfairly and are worthy of pity).

The fence metaphor is helpful if, in hoping to rear our modern Achilles, we believe that we can keep the barbarian that is consumerism at the gate. I wholeheartedly agree with Roosevelt that parents ought, like Rousseau, to limit their children's access to consumerism and to limit consumerism's access to their children. In the case of consumerism, however, the fence metaphor may be necessary but it is not sufficient. Despite parents' best efforts, a child's inundation by our consumerist culture can only be slowed; it cannot be halted. The barbarian is already inside the gate. A twenty-first-century Achilles, if we were to have one, cannot emerge out of the prolonged period of protection that Rousseau outlines for Emile because there exists no escape from it. Limiting a child's exposure to consumerism must be coupled with an education in resisting it.

Rousseau's fence metaphor was based in part on his belief that young children are prerational and premoral.⁶ Early protection, Rousseau believed, ensures that children will later be able to live differently than their cultural script might determine. However, if Rousseau is wrong, then children are capable of, and they will benefit from, learning to resist consumerism both in their homes and in their schools. Such education is not mutually exclusive with Roosevelt's wise recommendation that parents must limit access to consumerist culture; I believe that it is a necessary supplement.

Parents and teachers must call attention to the commercialized culture that surrounds us and seek opportunities for critical engagement with it. I understand why Roosevelt is pessimistic about whether resistance to consumerism could occur in a commercialized school system. Yet Trevor Norris has argued, from the same premises that lead Roosevelt to dismiss schools' ability to counter consumerism, that schools may engage students in critical media literacy and culture jamming (that is, creative countercultural manipulation of the products of consumerist culture such as advertisements).⁷ If Norris is right, schools can and ought to engage students in resisting consumerism. Even if one grants that commercialized schools will limit resistance to consumerism in schools (Norris describes legal action taken against teachers who encouraged students to resist corporate influence in schools), it seems to me that parents must help cultivate critical media literacy at home. And teachers ought to do what they can, when they can, to help students recognize and resist consumerism.

In addition to critical media literacy and culture jamming, Roosevelt's own work suggests another way that schools foster resistance to consumerism. Roosevelt has argued elsewhere that a liberal education is extremely important in higher education as both for-profit and non-profit institutions are increasingly commercialized. She persuasively contends that the existence of liberal politics depends on the "political imagination and broad-based critical thinking that liberal education nurtures."⁸ While elementary and middle school students might not be ready to read

Aristotle, Rousseau, and Karl Marx (three thinkers whom Roosevelt discusses as examples that would help students critically examine our commercialized culture), there is a strong case to be made that the humanities in general must be protected in K–12 schooling. That the current accountability and testing culture diminishes the role of the humanities is beyond doubt. Yet confronting literature that cultivates political imagination and critical thinking in humanities courses is surely another way that consumerism can be resisted in schools. Unlike critical media literacy and culture jamming, study in the humanities might be a less direct (and, therefore, a less threatening means to confront the corporations controlling key aspects of commercialized schools) but similarly vital means of resisting consumerism.

In closing, I side with Roosevelt in identifying Rousseau's pessimism about eighteenth century French culture as more appropriate for today's consumerist culture than is Dewey's optimism. I am more optimistic than Roosevelt, however, that (a) young children may genuinely begin to resist consumerism and (b) that teachers might succeed in making spaces in their classrooms for student resistance to consumerism. I sincerely hope that the latter contention is not simply wishful thinking.

1. Grace G. Roosevelt, *Reading Rousseau in the Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1990).

2. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Considerations on the Government of Poland and on Its Projected Reformation" and "Of the Social Contract," in *Rousseau: The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 177–260; 39–152.

3. Bloom reproduces this illustration (along with the others Rousseau commissioned) in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile: Or, on Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979). In Book V, Jean-Jacques refers to Achilles when chastising Emile for his unrestrained desires: "Dear Emile, it is in vain that I have dipped your soul in the Styx; I was not able to make it everywhere invulnerable...now you are bound to all the attachments you have given to yourself. In learning to desire, you have made yourself the slave of your desires" (Ibid., 443). Like Achilles, Emile's invulnerability is not absolute and, perhaps, Rousseau suggests that no education can be complete. He seems to return to the incompleteness of Emile's education periodically through *Emile* and again in his unfinished sequel to it, in which Emile falls into despair from the outset, testing the fortitude that resulted from his education. "Emile and Sophie, or the Solitaires," in *Emile: Or on Education (Includes Emile and Sophie, or the Solitaires): The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, ed. and trans. Christopher Kelly (Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth College, University Press of New England, 2009).

4. While Achilles was nearly invincible physically, he was quite weak in the realm of opinion. Homer's *Iliad* is premised on Achilles' *mēnis*, the rage that results from a social slight. Rousseau hopes to develop Emile's hardiness but he is principally concerned with Emile's invulnerability to social forces.

5. Rousseau, *Emile*, 92–93.

6. Ibid., 89–90. Rousseau's challenge to John Locke's maxim that one should reason with children demonstrates this idea.

7. Trevor Norris, *Consuming Schools: Commercialism and the End of Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 156–74.

8. Grace Roosevelt, "The Triumph of the Market and the Decline of Liberal Education: Implications for Civic Life," *Teachers College Record* 108, no. 7 (2006): 1418.