**Seeing the Climate Crisis through the Lens of Rousseau’s *Second Discourse***

The life-giving power of nature holds us up and hides from us like the beating of our own hearts. At least until recently, the biosphere seemed to possess a deathless capacity to balance and regenerate itself. For nearly all of human history, humans took this capacity as a given; nature (the self-balancing, self-regenerating system that provides the stable atmospheric and material conditions necessary for our existence) was simply *there*—a source that would absorb and neutralize even our most aggressive advances. But now we have worked nature to its limit; we sense a murmur—perhaps impending failure—in the formerly steady beat of nature’s biotic and climatic rhythm. Only now that these processes break down do they begin to reveal their existential importance to us. Consequently, only now have we begun to act, and only in small degrees. The trouble is that, by the time natural-system failures show themselves with undeniable clarity, the time for such action will likely have passed. Yet just such a degree of obviousness appears the necessary condition for meaningful mitigative action to be taken by human beings.

How do we generate the political will to enact the “unprecedented,” “rapid,” and “far-reaching transitions in energy, land, urban and infrastructure…and industrial systems”[[1]](#footnote-1) required to evade the most devastating effects of climate change? How do we even begin to carry out the “transformative changes across economic, social, political and technological factors”[[2]](#footnote-2) necessary to halt the ongoing mass extinction of species and the collapse of natural ecosystems?

The mainstream approach to climate change mitigation tends to isolate climate change as a problem of greenhouse gas emissions rather than treat it as one part of our comprehensively wrong relationship with the natural world. As such, the mainstream approach generally seeks to maintain the status quo of economic growth as much as possible by opting for technology-based solutions and mostly setting aside nature- and behavior-based solutions.[[3]](#footnote-3) In other words, the mainstream approach accepts human beings and political-economic systems as they are and opts to work around these seemingly fixed features of society using technology.

Political scientists working on climate change mitigation largely adopt this mainstream framework. They focus on one key question: How do we initiate a transition away from fossil fuels and lock inrenewable energy? According to Matto Mildenberger, to achieve this end, we must stop treating climate change like a collective action problem and start treating it like a domestic distributional conflict.[[4]](#footnote-4) What stands in the way of meaningful climate action is not the absence of a binding international agreement but the stubborn presence of powerful, pro-carbon actors in domestic policymaking spaces.[[5]](#footnote-5) Political scientists should select a given country and ask: “What political coalitions can disrupt entrenched incumbents and under what conditions will such political coalitions arise?”[[6]](#footnote-6) Based on his own country-level analyses, Mildenberger determines that, in the political context of the United States, *public climate movement-building* is essential to counteracting and overthrowing entrenched carbon-dependent interest groups.[[7]](#footnote-7) But the United States finds itself in a particularly tricky position. Powerful, entrenched carbon-dependent interest groups (unsurprisingly) refuse to submit to their own demise; oppositional interest groups have waged a winning war in the public sphere, where voters (also unsurprisingly) express only tepid enthusiasm for an expensive journey to net zero.[[8]](#footnote-8) How can a sufficient public movement be launched in such a context? Can democracy solve this problem at all?

Some indeed float the merits of authoritarianism. Some place great faith in messianic, yet-to-exist technology. Others consider our situation hopeless. In this paper, I argue that Rousseau’s *Second Discourse* (*SD*)offers a new lens for viewing the climate change conundrum in the U.S.—one which reveals a deep political problem with the mainstream approach to climate change, and in its mode of revelation, presents a model for engendering the political will necessary to overcome strictly rational-material concerns and give rise to meaningful public support for climate action. I present my case as follows: First, I discuss (I.) *SD*’s *theoretical* insights into the relationship between human freedom and the natural world and (II.) their implications for the mainstream approach. Next, I discuss (III.) Rousseau’s *rhetorical* strategy, which played no small part in igniting the French Revolution. Of course, everyone should wish to avoid violent revolution. Even so, and even *therefore,* I conclude that Rousseau’s method demonstrates how we might create the political will to adopt the rapid and drastic “economic, social, political and technological” changes required to preserve human freedom, as Rousseau understands it in *SD*.

1. Theoretical Insights

Standing at the precipice of modernity, Rousseau looked out over mankind and saw that it had ventured very far from nature. His contemporaries lauded this graduation from nature. Whereas life in the state of nature was nasty, brutish, and short, the founding of society brought human flourishing in the form of enlightenment, material comforts, and an ever-greater command over nature. It was ‘full steam ahead’ on a path of great progress for human society.

Rousseau flips this perspective on its head: contrary to popular understanding, Rousseau claims that man in the state of nature was *free*, whereas men in society are *enslaved*—even if, and indeed because, they do not even know it. This blindness on the part of his contemporaries lies in their failure to see what man in his original state was actually like. While others have tried to depict the state of nature, Rousseau declares, “none of them have reached it.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Instead, they bring man’s civilized faculties with him into the state of nature. They assume that civilized man is, at the fundamental level, the same as he has always been. But like the statue of Glaucus—weather-worn and disfigured by tempest and time—civilized man has distorted his original form beyond recognition. Responding to the “Know Thyself” of the Oracle at Delphi,Rousseau ventures to take us *all* the way back—further than anyone has gone before—to the true state of nature. Through an act of the imagination, reinforced by anthropological, ethnographic, and scientific modes of thinking, Rousseau “strip[s] this Being, so constituted, of all the supernatural gifts he may have received, and all of the artificial faculties he could only have acquired by prolonged progress,” considering man “such as he must have issued from the hands of Nature.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

At the outset, Rousseau full-well admits that his account of the state of nature is conjectural. “Let us begin by setting aside all the facts,” he writes.[[11]](#footnote-11) He asks us to imagine a state “which no longer exists, which perhaps never did exist, which probably never will exist...”[[12]](#footnote-12) Even so, I argue that Rousseau’s account provides theoretical insights into the relationship between the natural world and human freedom, as well as the transformative quality of human beings. I argue further that these insights reveal a deep political problem with the mainstream approach to climate change.

1. Nature’s Indifference and the Freedom from Domination

In *SD,* Rousseau presents us with two competing notions of nature: “Beneficent Nature,”[[13]](#footnote-13) and what I will call “Merciless Nature.” Beneficent Nature is arguably the most visible in *SD.* In this version, nature could have provided man everything he needed to allow him to remain forever free and without misery in the state of nature. Nature takes care to keep man from “all the miseries” which he is now subject, including by hiding key discoveries from him (e.g. fire and metallurgy).[[14]](#footnote-14) Here, natural pity exists, a sentiment which gives rise to the maxim of natural goodness.[[15]](#footnote-15) In this state, “man is naturally good.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

But we also find an implicit account of Merciless Nature present in Rousseau’s discourse. Rousseau writes, “Nature deals with [its children] exactly as the Law of Sparta did with the Children of Citizens; It makes those who have a good constitution strong and robust, and causes all the others to perish.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Nature culls the weak: only the strongest survive its harsh conditions. In this version, the laws of nature would never have allowed man to remain in its company. Instead, nature necessitates competition,[[18]](#footnote-18) which forces man, who lacks the instincts and natural protections all other animals possess in the state of nature,[[19]](#footnote-19) to acquire skills and develop new faculties—faculties that catapult him into civilization and enslavement.

There is a way to harmonize these two notions if we introduce a third conception of nature: Indifferent Nature. If we regard nature as fundamentally indifferent to man, the first two notions no longer contradict. Let us look at the competing claims Rousseau makes about man’s ability to stay in the state of nature. Rousseau says it is only by a string of chance events that man wound up in society, while the laws of nature show us the inevitability of this outcome. However, if we take ‘chance’ here to indicate *intention-lessness*, or *lacking a plan*, Rousseau’s various claims fit together. Certainly, the laws of nature render man’s exit from the state of nature inevitable. But, given that nature is *fundamentally indifferent*, man’s inevitable socialization is not a product of some conscious plan or divine decree. By attributing man’s current position to a string of chance events, Rousseau’s conception of nature as indifferent liberates man from the influence of any external will. Man is in the miserable position he is now not because God made it so, or because nature itself willed it, but because of the random arrangement of his natural conditions.

It is on the basis of nature’s indifference that Rousseau recognizes the freedom of man in the state of nature and the chains of man in society. Man in the state of nature is self-sufficient, or really, *nature-sufficient*. Nature provides him with everything he needs to survive: “I see him sating his hunger beneath an oak, slaking his thirst at the first Stream, finding his bed at the foot of the same tree that provided his meal, and with that his needs are satisfied.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Given that nature has no regard for man whatsoever, man receives the things he needs to live without owing anything to anyone. He is totally free from the arbitrary will of another.

In contrast, civilized man becomes ever more dependent on other human beings for his existence. To “feed his insane pride,” civilized man carves up mountains and lakes and seas and swamps; he clears forests, depletes topsoil, and turns fertile land into deserts.[[21]](#footnote-21) As men’s desires grow, they “consume enormous quantities,” straining nature and decreasing natural fertility[[22]](#footnote-22); men must increasingly rely on artifice to make nature produce what they will and meet their growing demands. Rather than relying on himself (and nature), civilized man relies on the artifice of other human beings for his existence. Rousseau argues that “the worst that can happen in the relations between one man and another is for one to find himself at the other’s discretion[.]”[[23]](#footnote-23) Having “subjected themselves to universal dependence and obligated themselves to receive everything from those who do not obligate themselves to give them anything,” this is exactly where men in society find themselves. In trading in his dependence on indifferent nature for dependence on willful men, civilized man forfeits his natural freedom.

1. Perfectibility and the Transformative Quality of Human Beings

Man in Rousseau’s state of nature lacks all of the faculties we would normally ascribe to human beings: reason, language, foresight, reflection. The only quality that distinguishes him from the animals around him is his *perfectibility*.[[24]](#footnote-24) According to Rousseau, human beings possess a unique capacity to transform themselves over the course of their individual lives. Whereas other animals remain the same throughout their mature lives, humans tend to acquire and then lose certain faculties as they age: “man alone” is “liable to become imbecile.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

Rousseau also recognizes this transformative quality in the human species as a whole. He observes that humans across the world come in an astounding variety, even though they are of the same species. He writes, “the difference between one man and another in the Savage and in the Domesticated condition must be even greater than that between one beast and another.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Tucked away in the footnotes (and about a century before Darwin), Rousseau further observes that several animals (namely bonobos and “orang-outangs”) share “striking conformities with the human species,” and exhibit “smaller differences” with man “than might be pointed to between one human being and another.”[[27]](#footnote-27) He suggests that, under greater study, “it will be found” that these animals “are neither beasts nor gods, but men.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Rousseau concludes from these observations that man has the capacity to perfect himself over time, both at the individual- and species-level.

Regarding man’s perfectibility, Rousseau writes:

It would be sad for us to be forced to agree that this distinctive and almost unlimited faculty, is the source of all man’s miseries; that it is the faculty which, by dint of time, draws him out of that original condition in which he would spend tranquil and innocent days; that it is the faculty which, over the centuries, causing his enlightenment and his errors, his vices and his virtues to flourish, eventually makes him his own and Nature’s tyrant.[[29]](#footnote-29)

It is important to note this is a hypothetical statement: “It *would* be sad.” Rousseau does not determine perfectibility is wholly to blame for drawing man out of the state of nature and into the slavery of society. According to Rousseau, perfectibility initially lay dormant in man in the state of nature. Had nature remained forever expansive and abundant, man’s perfectibility would have never been activated. But due to the competition inherent in the laws of nature and nature’s failure to provide man with instincts, man turns to perfectibility to raise himself, first, “to the level of the Beasts’ instinct,” and then “far above nature.”[[30]](#footnote-30) It would seem, then, that nature itself is to blame for initiating man’s eventual enslavement in society. However, as established above, Rousseau regards nature as *indifferent* in the final analysis: it has no will and therefore cannot be blamed.

Taken in conjunction with nature’s fundamental indifference, man’s perfectibility has significant emancipatory implications. Not only is man’s miserable condition in society a product of chance, but man can *do something* about it. Through Rousseau’s discovery of man’s perfectibility, he identifies the historical quality of man’s condition. Contrary to what others claimed before him, man in society is *not* fundamentally the same as he has always been. His characteristics and his relationship with nature have evolved over time, and they can evolve again—potentially with *conscious direction*. In writing *SD,* Rousseau certainly demonstrates his belief in the possibility, and in Part II., I show how he attempts to do so. But first, I consider the implications of Rousseau’s theoretical insights for the mainstream approach to climate change.

1. Implications for the Mainstream Approach to Climate Change

So far, I have drawn out two theoretical insights provided by Rousseau’s conjectural account: (A) The more humans depend on other humans (who have a will to dominate) as opposed to the nature (which provides the conditions necessary for life while asking nothing in return) for their means of existence, the less free they become. (B) Human nature is not fixed. Humans change dramatically over the course of their own lives, and the human species has transformed over the course of our time on Earth. And at least according to Rousseau, it is possible to consciously direct this transformative capacity. Both of these insights reveal fundamental flaws in the mainstream approach to climate change, but they also offer hope for a better way forward. I discuss the implications of each in turn.

1. The Stability of the Natural World and Freedom from Domination

As discussed in the introduction, the mainstream approach to climate change seeks, as much as possible, to maintain the status quo while curtailing emissions. It takes the continued growth of consumption, economies, and populations as a given and focuses on securing a transition to renewable energy. In addition, mainstream pathways to net zero carbon emissions nowadays acknowledge that, barring some sort of drastic change in the next decade or so, carbon capture technology (which remains unviable) will be necessary to avoid climate catastrophe.[[31]](#footnote-31) While the mainstream approach to climate change still largely rejects geoengineering as an option, it does so only on the pragmatic grounds that the technology is a long way off and may have unintended environmental consequences. Should geoengineering technology ever prove possible and safe, it seems likely the mainstream approach would include geoengineering on its menu of technologies.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Setting aside the political obstacles for a moment, let us imagine that we manage to implement the mainstream approach: using primarily technology-based solutions, humankind saves itself from catastrophic climate change without having to fundamentally change its mode of being. Growth persists as the mainstay of global and national economies; consumption perpetually increases, as it must, to sustain the capitalist economic model; and the human population continues to expand.[[33]](#footnote-33) Since technological innovation is able to solve the immediate problem by curtailing and capturing emissions, nature-based solutions to climate change, by which I mean efforts to conserve and restore natural carbon sinks (e.g. oceans, soils, and forests), remain lower-priority items. As a result, the degradation of natural ecosystems carries on unabated.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Perhaps this is the best we can hope for. But such a solution would perpetuate a longstanding pattern of compensating for the damage we do to the natural world using technology—a pattern we should find deeply problematic.

For according to the theoretical insights provided by Rousseau’s *SD*, this pattern indicates a grave threat to human freedom. From the lens of *SD*, the pattern appears thus: humans continue to replace nature—the indifferent life-giving source, a provider that asks nothing in return, with technology—which is created and commanded by human beings, *who have the will to dominate*. Perhaps a tech giant *would* be able provide a geoengineering technology that stabilizes the climate just as well as the biosphere itself used to do, but whereas the biosphere provided this free of charge, a tech giant has the capacity to demand *everything* in return. From this view, we should address climate change by seeking to restore, as much as possible, the self-sustaining, self-regenerative capacities of the biosphere as opposed to seeking out compensatory technologies that allow us to continue phasing out nature. This undoubtedly requires the use of renewable energy technology. In ceasing to pump GHG into the atmosphere, we allow thebiosphereroom to recover to normal levels and promote its self-balancing capacity. But this *also* requires pursuing nature-and behavior-based solutions to climate change. If we are to avoid total dependence on technology—and therefore other human beings—for a stable climate and the materials that feed our existence, we must address the underlying causes of ecological destruction (growth, consumption, etc.), of which climate change is only one symptom.

One may object that nature (understood as the self-sustaining, self-balancing system which provides the materials and stable conditions necessary for our existence) is already long-gone.[[35]](#footnote-35) Every single “natural,” “self-sustaining” process is now either artificially supported or else destroyed. At least in the United States, all of the conditions of our existence—our food, our water, our heat, our modes of communication and transportation, etc.—are comprehensively mediated by and dependent on technology. In receiving (or paying for) our most essential goods from society and not from the hands of nature, we have already placed control of our most essential means of existence in the hands of other human beings. And, so far, this reality has not resulted in the grave danger to freedom of which I speak. For the most part, governmental regulation has prevented those who control the means of our existence from exploiting this power.

But in fact, I argue first that our present conditions already reflect the concerns raised by *SD.* Take the myriad of instances of environmental injustice in the United States, by now a sickening list of toponyms (Flint (citation required), Anniston (citation required), the list goes on and on). As a *modus operandi,* the technology-wielding providers of the means of our existence challenge, circumnavigate, and even flagrantly violate laws designed to protect us so that they can squeeze as much profit out of every operation, out of every person, as possible. Consider also social media companies. What looks to the user like a neutral platform for communication and entertainment is to the creator a means of profit-by-manipulation. Social media platforms collect data as the user moves through her ‘feed’ and send her down algorithmic tunnels of content designed to bring about specific behaviors. ‘Feed,’ is really a perfect word: the platform feeds her full of desire- and opinion-inducing content and parcels her off to corporations and politicians. In this environment—an entirely artificial environment in which technology mediates all human action and interaction—human beings become total objects of manipulation and exploitation. While in the case of social media we maintain the power of exit, we remain *inextricably* bound to those who make it their business to sell to us the most essential means to life. In what sense, if any, can we call ourselves *free* under these conditions?

Second, I argue that, in dealing with a destabilized climate and ecological overshoot, humankind now crosses a *new threshold* of vulnerability to the arbitrary will of other human beings. We may currently depend on some level of technology (and those who wield and regulate it) for our daily necessities, but all of us (including the technology-wielders) alive today have always ultimately depended on the natural world as the driving source of our stable climatic background conditions and the ultimate generator of our material goods, or at least raw materials. But now we have entered a realm in which we have destabilized the biosphere to a degree that it is no longer self-balancing. We have overused, exploited, and wiped-out natural ecosystems to a degree that they are becoming incapable of self-regenerating. We have entered a new realm in which, if we fail to change course, total technological dependency will be our only option (if that option exists at all).

In this scenario—the scenario the mainstream approach to climate change has currently resigned itself to playing out—technology (if we are to perpetuate our current mode of existence) *must* at some point succeed in unseating the natural world as the primary life-giving source: the artificial must become the social whole. And if it does not succeed, we face ruin. This is a whole lot of power we place in the hands of technologists: on our current trajectory, the future of human civilization will be molded by their hands.

To return to *SD*, we must bear closely in mind that it is not the wholly free “state of nature” that Rousseau identifies as man’s happiest epoch, but rather what he calls the *Golden Age*.[[36]](#footnote-36) But ultimately, the idea here is not to try to return to some caveman-like state, nor to the Golden Age, nor any previous state of existence at all. According to Rousseau, to return to anything that came before is impossible. But we can try to draw out the underlying elements of our happiest age, which we ourselves unfold from a philosophical consideration of our own nature, and emulate them. For instance, the Golden Age sits at the midpoint on man’s path from the state of nature (self-sufficiency) to civilized society (dependence on artifice).[[37]](#footnote-37) In devising freedom-preserving (or perhaps freedom-restoring) pathways to addressing climate change, we would do well to strike a balance between nature-based and technology-based solutions.

1. The Human Capacity to Change

But surely this sounds too difficult. A large part of the reason the mainstream approach to climate change looks the way it does is that any efforts to shake up the status quo, even minimally, have been met with inflexible resistance. Yet the failure to redirect course itself portends an even greater vulnerability to the arbitrary will of those who increasingly come to control the levers of the conditions and means of our existence. Dismissing transformative climate action as impossible proves a fatal mistake when considering the implications for human *freedom*. It also likely proves a mistake on a *practical* level: although the mainstream approach largely sets aside behavior-based solutions to climate change, achieving (and *sustaining*) a stable climate may require more than just a change in technology. The mainstream approach itself acknowledges the importance of lifestyle changes, though it relegates this imperative to the periphery.[[38]](#footnote-38) Setting techno-utopian possibilities aside, it is hard to imagine that a plan for climate action that does not address human behavior will ultimately succeed in achieving carbon neutrality.

In *SD*, Rousseau shows us that human nature is not set in stone. Over the course of history, our behavior has been shaped and reshaped by our physical environment, by myriad institutions, and by ideas. Our conceptions of ourselves, of others, and the world around us have shifted radically over the course of human history. We are not *now* as we were *before*; we do not *think* as we have *thought*; we do not *act* as we have *acted*; in the future, we will undoubtedly be different than we are now. The question is whether we can direct the course of our inevitable change to achieve a future that is freer than the one that our current lack of political will to take meaningful climate action would portend. In writing *SD*, Rousseau lays bare his faith in the ability to direct the sails of man’s perfectibility. Considering the transformative effect this historic document had, and continues to have—on our conceptions of ourselves, as by nature free and equal—he may well have proved it.[[39]](#footnote-39) I move now to discuss how this is so, and what climate activists attempting to build and expand public movements in the U.S. can learn from Rousseau’s methods of persuasion.

1. Rhetorical Insights

As discussed earlier, to bring about substantive climate action (of the mainstream variety or otherwise) in the U.S. context, public movements must play a central role in overthrowing entrenched carbon interests. While several existing climate movements have had laudable victories, none has given rise to the degree of public political pressure necessary to force comprehensive climate action in the United States. Given the pivotal role of Rousseau’s *SD* in igniting the French Revolution, and given the relevant insights I have shown *SD* provides for our current context, it seems a valuable enterprise to consider what exactly about this text *moved* people.

Rousseau invented his complex form of rhetoric to correspond to his uniquely complex rhetorical task: namely, Rousseau wished to reveal to his readers both that they were by nature free, and at the same time, that despite or rather because of the increasingly comfortable, enlightened, modern society they found themselves in, they really were in chains. He sought to make civilized man, who was previously unaware of his chains, long to be free of them. I focus here on two elements of Rousseau’s rhetorical strategy: (A) Rousseau uses the most problematic parts of human beings against themselves; and (B) Rousseau employs imagistic language that bypasses reason and communicates directly to the *passions*. As I will argue alongside Rousseau, it is the passions, not reason, which serve as the motive force for human action.

1. Using Problematic Human Traits Against Themselves

Rousseau’s rhetorical approach in the *Second Discourse* does not fall back on appeals to altruism. While Rousseau speaks highly of man’s “Natural Pity” in the state of Nature, he pointedly explains that this sentiment is all but extinguished by the time man enters society.[[40]](#footnote-40) Instead, Rousseau appeals to what he deems the most deplorable of man’s faculties and passions. In the Preface to *SD*, Rousseau writes that “we must learn to bless him whose beneficent hand” strategically corrects and redirects the course of mankind, thus causing “our happiness *to be born from the very means that seemed bound to complete our misery*.”[[41]](#footnote-41) In writing *SD,* Rousseau’s “beneficent hand” does not attempt to eradicate man’s problematic civilized faculties and passions, but to use them to create a new path forward for man.

Rousseau spends a great deal of time during his hypothetical historical storytrying to get civilized man tolong for the political freedom he is not even aware he has lost. He does this, not by simply haranguing man that he ‘should’ cast off the most problematic of his civilized faculties—namely, his *amour propre*, or his ego-driven self-love—but by appealing directly to that egoistic passion. Just as *amour propre* is a passion rooted in man’s comparison of himself to others, Rousseau constantly compares civilized man to natural man. He strips them down and stands them side-by-side, so to speak, and proceeds to point out the many ways civilized man is inferior to his natural counterpart. Natural man is free, healthy, and strong. Civilized man is enslaved, sickly, “soft and effeminate[.]”[[42]](#footnote-42) At one point, Rousseau even goes so far as to say that natural man would give civilized man a good wallop in a fistfight.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Instead of confronting his reader with an argument that civilized man should stop being led around by his *amour propre*, Rousseau appeals directly to it. He shows civilized man he has been after the wrong things (e.g. wealth, power, prestige), things that, in actuality, make him weak—and most fundamentally, things that make him a slave. Even and especially the rulers among civilized men are slaves, says Rousseau.[[44]](#footnote-44) What civilized man should desire is *freedom*, specifically freedom from domination by other men. By appealing to man’s *amour propre*, he uses this passion against itself. Instead of seeking wealth, power, etc.—things that push man to go against nature—Rousseau directs man’s *amour propre* toward desiring the freedom from domination that nature provides.

Rousseau uses the same persuasive strategy with regard to all of man’s civilized faculties, not just man’s *amour propre*. On one hand, Rousseau criticizes man’s civilized faculties: Reason makes man cold and unfeeling[[45]](#footnote-45); imagination “wreaks such havoc among us”[[46]](#footnote-46); reflection (he “almost dare[s] to say”) “is a state against nature.”[[47]](#footnote-47) On the other, Rousseau employs (and asks his readers to use) each of these faculties as he reconstructs man’s true nature. Rousseau’s account of man’s history is an act of the imagination. Relatedly, Rousseau also uses reason, or “conditional reasonings,” to draft a story of man’s history that, though hypothetical, reveals some truth about human nature.[[48]](#footnote-48) As far as reflection goes, Rousseau “beg[s]” his judges “to reflect on how much time and knowledge it took” for man develop various skills and forms of knowledge.[[49]](#footnote-49) For Rousseau to be able to make an effective appeal to civilized man, he cannot just tell him to ‘be different’ or ‘be better.’ He must first understand what makes civilized man ‘tick,’ and enlist the help of the very aspects that he wishes to change.

1. Appealing to the Passions through Imagistic Language

To elicit a longing to be free in civilized man, Rousseau primarily relies on an *image—*i.e., that of natural man in the state of nature. To carry out his project, Rousseau constructs the image of a man in a state “which no longer exists, which perhaps never did exist, which probably never will exist, and *about which it is nevertheless necessary to have exact Notions in order to judge our present state adequately*.”[[50]](#footnote-50) In presenting civilized man with an altered reflection of himself, Rousseau brings civilized man to ‘see’ features of himself and his situation that were hitherto invisible to him; he makes the familiar *unfamiliar* by way of an uncanny image.

All the same, we note, Rousseau’s use of this image throughout *SD* does not appeal to the reader’s reason*.*[[51]](#footnote-51)In fact, at times it defies our reason.For instance, Rousseau insists that natural man was asocial—so much so that mating and child-rearing brought no familial attachment whatsoever, on the part of the man, woman, or child. Once each fulfilled its biological duty to the other, all parted ways never to think of, or even recognize the others again.[[52]](#footnote-52) Rationally speaking, this account of human reproduction seems ridiculous, but at the same time, the image of a purely asocial being speaks to something we feel is essential about ourselves: by nature, human beings do not belong to any sort of hierarchy—familial or otherwise; a human being is an entity complete unto itself. Regarding the image of natural man, it may be “impossible” to “*convince* human beings rationally that this vision of ourselves is true, but it is plausible that a writer like Rousseau might persuade us that its image says something ‘original’ about our human nature.”[[53]](#footnote-53)

According to Rousseau’s method, it is not *reason* but the *passions* that set human beings in motion. In making their message immediately felt, images speak directly to this mobilizing force.[[54]](#footnote-54) In *SD*, Rousseau constructs an image of natural man specifically designed to rouse civilized man’s *amour propre*. Through this image, Rousseau makes visible to man in society his chains. Rousseau presents his readers with an image they cannot ignore: in all their material comfort, in all their enlightenment, in all their distance from primitive nature, they have become *slaves* to the arbitrary will of other men.

1. Applying Rousseau’s Methods of Persuasion to the Climate Crisis

Based on the discussion of Rousseau’s methods of persuasion above, the two most obvious errors that climate activists make when attempting to engender public action are (1) listing the *facts and figures* of climate change and (2) appealing to *altruism*. As Rousseau shows us, just because someone *knows* something (e.g. human-caused climate change is real and terrifying) does not mean they will *act* on this knowledge. Reason does not set us in motion; the passions do. However, and sad though it may be, Rousseau demonstrates in his own method of persuasion that pity is now a mostly useless passion to appeal to, especially compared to ego-driven self-love (*amour propre*). It would seem, then, that climate activists who appeal to altruism—for instance, by imploring Americans to act because others who are not themselves (future generations, the Global South) will suffer most from the effects of climate change—are not speaking to the passion that commands our action switch. This is *not* to say that we *should* not care about groups that will be disproportionately affected, or that committed allies do not exist, or that vulnerable groups should not mobilize, ideally with the help of allies, and particularly in order to demand that necessary mitigation and particularly *adaptation* measures are taken in their countries and communities. But it is to say that, in attempting to generate a *meaningful public commitment* among Americans to push for the degree of change necessary to kick our country’s world-destroying fossil-fuel addiction and world-devouring consumption addiction (as opposed to just getting Americans to smile for photos at climate marches with signs that say things like ‘the poor will be hit the first and hardest’) by appealing to our *altruism*, climate activists are wasting precious time and energy appealing to the wrong passion.

What Rousseau’s *SD* reveals to us is the extreme need for a language that speaks to our ego-driven self-love. This is not the same thing as attempting to appeal to our rational self-interest (e.g. acting on climate change will be good for your pocketbook). For many, and for good reason (at least in the short run), this is a tough sell. I am referring, instead, to the need for a *political* language of climate change. By political, I do not mean *partisan*, but political in the sense that this language would deal primarily in the relations of domination and subjection between human beings that emerge as a result of climate change and our attempts to deal with climate change. Climate activists calling for climate justice, at times, speak this sort of political language.[[55]](#footnote-55) But even those calling for climate justice often revert back to apolitical language: for instance, they tell us we should care about the injustices arising from the climate crisis because they are deeply unfair—i.e., those most affected are those least responsible. While, on its face, this seems like political language because it deals with issues of fairness, it does not actually deal in the relationship between human wills. The crux of the environmental justice appeal is often that vulnerable populations will suffer most *at the hands of the various effects of climate change*, as opposed to at the hands of other human beings. To speak in truly political terms, we must reveal the *human wills* that hide behind the veil of “natural” disasters and droughts and rising sea levels. We must reveal the human wills that threaten to dictate our future, and our very means to life, as we come to lean more heavily on technology in the face of continued political inaction.

Climate activists who demonize fossil fuel companies and the politicians beholden to them come to mind here. The central idea in this messaging strategy is that climate change needs an enemy with a human face. This form of climate messaging seeks to reveal the greed and corruption of elite groups that pull the strings of the policymaking apparatus in America. Given that most Americans have yet to *really* experience the effects of climate change, this approach seeks primarily to elicit *moral outrage—*e.g., how could these people do this bad thing that *is going to* hurt people (maybe me), or that is hurting *other* people? Not: How could these people do this bad thing that is hurting *me* right *now*?

If climate activists are to generate a fervent public commitment to fighting for substantive climate action in the U.S., they must find a way to speak to the “me” and the “now.” Given the diffuse temporal and spatial effects of climate change, this has proven exceedingly difficult to do. Yet the theoretical insights revealed in Rousseau’s *SD* point us toward a way forward. If climate activists can come to make us see our own fast-disappearing freedom, if they can persuade us to see that each year of climate inaction moves us further down the conveyor belt toward total vulnerability to the arbitrary will of technologist-saviors, that making a change *only* in our technology will not be enough to restore our ability to live by our own hand and not the manipulative and exploitative hand of those who seek to profit from our ever-increasing dependence on technology, of those who prevent us from ceasing the destruction of our one truly benevolent—benevolent *because* it is gloriously, liberatingly indifferent—provider of the stable conditions that we need to live, and to live *free*, then they might be onto something.

Conclusion

I close with a challenge. In constructing his image of natural man, Rousseau found a way to speak directly to the *moving* mechanism in his contemporaries. The longer one meditates on the content and the execution of this image, the more one comes to admire Rousseau’s political, philosophic, and creative genius. Considering the impact of this image, both in igniting the French Revolution and on the political imagination of human beings *to this day,* there is perhaps “truth to Rousseau being a kind of political mythologist and prophet of the modern era.”[[56]](#footnote-56)

What might be our epoch’s image of persuasion and transformation? Can such an image exist any longer?

Bibliography Coming Soon

1. IPCC. 2018. “Summary for Policymakers,” in *Global Warming of 1.5°*, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Díaz et. al, “Summary for policymakers of the global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services,” May 6, 2019, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See, for instance, “Net Zero by 2050,” IEA, May 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A number of other political scientists subscribe to this view. See, for instance: Michaël Aklin and Johannes Urpelainen, *Renewables: The Politics of a Global Energy Transition*. Cambridge: MIT, 2018; Jonas Meckling, Thomas Sterner, and Gernot Wagner, “Policy sequencing toward decarbonization,” *Nature Energy, 2: 918-922, 2017.* Alexander Gard-Murray and Jeff Colgan, “Is the United States Underplaying the Threat of Climate Change? Reevaluating the National Climate Assessment.” Climate Solutions Lab White Paper, Brown University, October, 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Mildenberger supports his position by pointing out that, “Even as the international community failed to negotiate a robust climate treaty, domestic climate reforms were actively debated at the highest political levels in every advanced economy.” Though climate reforms “remain collectively insufficient to mitigate dangerous, human-caused climate change,” they “have been the primary focus of multiple national elections, they have shifted the political fortunes of parties and elected leaders, and they have consumed the time and resources of bureaucrats and politicians during contentious, multiyear policy debates.” In other words, even though (substantively) legally-binding international commitments do not exist, certain countries have still elected to take climate action. Therefore, it does not seem that concerns of free-riding are a key inhibiting factor to climate action. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 251. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This is due to the fact that the U.S. has was Mildenberger calls *pluralist* (and majoritarian) as opposed to *corporatist* (and proportionally representative) political institutions (18)*.* Whereas corporatist institutions (e.g. in Germany) “facilitate long-term policymaking by major economic stakeholders, often tripartite bargaining between labor, business, and the state,” pluralist institutions allow for immense competition between interest groups for policy influence, mediated by the policy interests of semi-autonomous state actors” (18). Importantly, corporatist systems, which are more insulated from the public, can impose more costs on consumers, whereas pluralist systems—as in the U.S. case—are much more responsive to public demands. In pluralist systems (as in the U.S.), problem actors shut down climate policy by convincing the public not to support such policies: “producers mobilize and often successfully kill these reforms by mobilizing conflict into the public sphere” (247). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. According to the Pew Research Center, “two thirds of Americans think government should do more on climate.” But support for doing more does not mean doing *enough.* A recent Reuters survey shows that, while 69 percent of Americans say the U.S. “should take ‘aggressive’ action to combat climate change,” just 34 percent “would be willing to pay $100 more per year in taxes to achieve this goal.” See Matthew Yglesias, “Is quiet climate policy enough?” *Slow Boring*, October 5, 2021. https://www.slowboring.com/p/is-quiet-climate-policy-enough [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Victor Gourevitch, *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018 [2nd ed.]), 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 137, emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., 127. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 172, 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. “*Do your good with the least possible harm to others”* (157). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. While Rousseau claims the state of nature was “abundant,” it is a fact in Rousseau’s version of nature (and in the natural world as we know it) that abundance *itself* leads to “competition” (165-166). He admits as much in the footnotes: “…if one thinks of the excessively large population that results from the state of Nature, one has to conclude that, in that state, the earth would soon have been covered with men thus forced to remain assembled” (227). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See 198 and 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. For instance, Rousseau argues that man’s efforts to make nature produce more, or to make it produce what he wills, renders previously fertile land useless 197-198. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. While Rousseau discusses natural man’s free agency as a potential distinguishing faculty, he says that, about this, “there is room for disagreement” (213). The only distinguishing faculty “about which there can be no argument” is his perfectibility (213). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid., 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid., 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. See the IEA’s emphasis on the role of currently nonexistent technology to fix climate change in its report, “Net Zero by 2050,” May 2021, 96. See also the IPCC’s determination that “All pathways” to climate stability “use Carbon Dioxide Removal (CDR),” particularly BECCS in the case of the latter two modeled pathways. “Summary for Policymakers,” in *Global Warming of 1.5°C*, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Again, the mainstream approach treats climate change as a problem of GHG emissions—whatever solutions can safely and effectively deal with this problem—and especially those that maintain the status quo—are on the menu. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. According projections by the IEA, 2050 will see “a global population that is nearly 3 billion people higher and a global economy that is over three-times larger.” “Net Zero by 2050,” IEA, May 2021, 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. So-called “clean” energy technology itself places a heavy burden on the natural world. The IPPC’s indicated need for reliance on BECCS in key pathways threatens mounting ecological destruction. See Heck et. al, “Biomass-based negative emissions difficult to reconcile with planetary boundaries,” *Nature*, 8:151-155, January 22, 2018. Under the IEA’s pathway to net zero, the total market for rare earth metals grows “almost sevenfold” by 2030 to keep up with demand for electric batteries: “Net Zero by 2050,” International Energy Agency, May 2021, 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Cf. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, in Robert Tucker, ed. *The Marx-Engels Reader, Second Edition*, p. 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid., 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. See, for instance, item *thirteen* in the Executive Summary of the UN’s Emissions Gap Report, 2020: “Lifestyle changes are a prerequisite for sustaining reductions in GHG emissions and for bridging the emissions gap. Around two thirds of global emissions are linked to the private household activities according to consumption-based accounting. Reducing emissions through lifestyle changes requires changing both broader systemic conditions and individual actions” (xiv). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. “The world in which we hold that human beings are naturally free and equal is the world in which we have been affectively—and effectively—swayed by the image that Rousseau provided in the Second Discourse, designed to persuade us that what we are by nature is not how we are in a corrupt and civilized state. There is, then, truth to Rousseau being a kind of political mythologist and prophet of the modern era.” Emma Planinc, “The Figurative Foundations of Rousseau’s Politics,” *Modern Intellectual History*, Cambridge University Press, 2022, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Victor Gourevitch, *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, 178. In society, natural pity lives on in only “a few great Cosmopolitan Souls.” [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Ibid., 131. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid., 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Ibid., 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid., 175. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Ibid., 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Ibid., 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Ibid., 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Ibid., 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Ibid., 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Ibid., 127. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. In my analysis here I draw from a brilliant soon-to-be-published essay by Emma Planinc, the sequel to the piece cited above; I thank Dr. Planinc for sharing the manuscript with me. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Victor Gourevitch, *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Emma Planinc, “The Figurative Foundations of Rousseau’s Politics,” *Modern Intellectual History*, Cambridge University Press, 2022, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Ibid., 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. See, for instance, climate justice messaging that draws out a link between colonialism and climate change: David Lammy and Manish Bapna, “There is No Climate Justice Without Racial Justice,” *Time*, May 3, 2021. https://time.com/6017907/climate-emergency-racial-justice/ [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Emma Planinc, “The Figurative Foundations of Rousseau’s Politics,” *Modern Intellectual History*, Cambridge University Press, 2022, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)