

BOOK REVIEWS

Not too many years ago, in simpler times, there were basically two kinds of books: highbrow and lowbrow. The distinction, derived from modernism in the arts, was based on the kind of audience an author intended to address. Highbrow books were the province of critics and *cognoscenti*; lowbrow books were intended for everyone else. Of the many hybrid varieties that have developed since, the eyebrow book, the book written solely to be reviewed, is surely the most curious.

The name is again derived from the author's intention, which in this case is simply to raise eyebrows, to attract attention to a particular point of view. Typically, the eyebrow book has no readership to speak of, save critics and reviewers (and one sometimes wonders about even them). Its purpose is to be reviewed and discussed in the appropriate magazines and newspapers so that its main points can ease, familiar but unexamined, into the intellectual debate, such as it is.

The federal government pioneered this field in the 1960s with its elaborate white-paper reports, written by a host of social scientists with good "name recognition factors" who nevertheless managed to commit a startling number of mistakes and misinterpretations, which were discovered only much later. In the last few years, however, the government has increasingly withdrawn from the eyebrow business and private foundations have moved in. Which brings us—take a deep breath—to the Report of the Carnegie Council on Children, *Small Futures: Children, Inequality, and the Limits of Liberal Reform*, by Richard H. deLone. The bookjacket copy fondly recalls that the Council's previous book, *All Our Children*, "was published to wide acclaim and front-page recognition," apparently an exercise in eyebrow greasing.

Kenneth Keniston, executive director of the Council, author of its previous book, and its main celebrity, quickly announces in his foreword to *Small Futures* an attack on "economic and political liberalism—not the 'liberalism' of one wing of the

SMALL FUTURES: CHILDREN, INEQUALITY, AND THE LIMITS OF LIBERAL REFORM

Richard H. deLone for the Carnegie Council on Children
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich / \$12.95

Steven Lagerfeld

Democratic Party, but that deep and largely implicit set of assumptions shared by both major parties and by the overwhelming majority of Americans, a world view whose origins lie in the thought of men such as Adam Smith and John Locke." DeLone goes on to claim that there is a fundamental contradiction in liberalism, between its affirmation of political equality and its failure to deliver economic equality, which cannot be resolved and is therefore displaced upon the young. Reformers, he says, have forever sought to achieve their goals in the next generation, by focusing on the improvement of the young. Their record, he argues, is one of consistent failure; inequality persists and can only be remedied through structural reform.

This amounts to something like intellectual forced entry into the issue, for the contradiction deLone sees in liberalism simply does not exist. Liberalism promises equal economic and political rights—the right to property and the right to vote, for instance—with the full expectation that inequalities will exist in the outcomes. That much, certainly, is explicit in the thought of "men such as Adam Smith and John Locke." And when deLone goes on to fault reformers for rejecting economic equal-

ity as a goal but also for accepting it and failing to achieve it, one begins to wonder whether the root of this muddled understanding of liberalism lies in confusion or convenience.

DeLone's depiction of the nature of inequality in a liberal society presents similar problems. His America is a rigid, highly stratified, "caste society" in which poverty is extensive and upward mobility for the poor is limited. Inequality is static in that the poor stay poor. Yet many of the scholars upon whom deLone relies in drawing this picture—for example, Seymour Martin Lipset, Stephan Thernstrom, and Christopher Jencks—will have difficulty recognizing the final canvas. As several reviewers, including Michael Harrington (in an otherwise favorable review), have noted, deLone's reading of his sources is selective and careless, or, I would again suggest, perhaps simply convenient. Inequality is not so static as deLone would have us believe, nor is mobility so limited; the people who were poor yesterday are not often found among those who are poor today.

Nevertheless, deLone formulates a "situational theory of child development" to explain why the poor stay

poor. He argues that the children of the poor are constantly bombarded by cultural signals and other evidence of the hopelessness of their plight, and realistically turn their backs on traditional avenues of upward mobility, particularly education. One could almost have made such a case regarding black children at one time, but the income of black families has been rising rapidly for almost two decades now. And if black youths feel they confront "small futures," they are certainly not acting like it. Between 1966 and 1976 black college enrollment, to take one example, almost quadrupled. In 1976, blacks made up 10.7 percent of the college population, as opposed to only 4.6 percent in 1966, and in some family income groups, such as the \$5,000 to \$9,000 range, a larger proportion of blacks (17 percent) were enrolled than whites (15 percent). If deLone detects cultural signals of hopelessness, it is probably because he and his colleagues are listening to their own broadcasts.

Finally, there are deLone's own proposals for "reform," including a full employment policy and improved, expanded services. His chief proposal, however, is for a program of redistributive taxation that would insure each family an annual income equal to one-half the median income for a family of its size (\$8,400 for a family of four)—hardly a radical idea given the polemic that precedes it and the programs already under consideration by all kinds of liberal reformers. But in the very last pages it turns out that this surely will not be enough, that perhaps the most important issues are "the basic content of day-to-day experience and human relations... that might well constitute the future themes of egalitarian policy." DeLone avoids describing the implications of such a program, but clearly the state would be called upon to direct his reform of everyday life. It is a frightening thought.

Small Futures is indeed a frightening book, and also a poorly argued, less-than-honest one. One can but wonder how the Carnegie Council on Children came to endorse this ominous work, but in undertaking to peddle it to the public, the Council would now seem to have an obligation to explain what "future themes of egalitarian policy" it intends to pursue, and how. □



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ROUSSEAU'S STATE OF NATURE: AN INTERPRETATION OF THE *DISCOURSE ON INEQUALITY*

Marc F. Plattner / Northern Illinois University Press / \$7.50

Alan J. Eade

In his *Treason of the Intellectuals*, Julien Benda thought it necessary to "repeat that throughout this work I am considering the teaching of Nietzsche (and Hegel's too) in so far as it has become the pretext for a great moral preaching, though I know perfectly well that in reality this teaching is something far more complex."

Students of Rousseau can easily applaud Benda's qualification; for few books "that in reality" are "far more complex" have occasioned more preaching and howling than have Rousseau's. Rousseau the apostle of unfettered individualism and Rousseau the precursor of totalitarianism—these are familiar rallying cries, not the conclusions of careful scholarship.

To be sure, Rousseau is not altogether guiltless for misreadings of his writings. He enlivens his prose but muddles his meaning with paradoxes and flamboyancies; and he never captures any prizes for consistency in terminology. Even at his most lucid, Rousseau is not above contradicting himself. That he wrote a great deal and in different modes—*Emile* and *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, for instance, are full-length romances—has only encouraged those who judge

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a banquet by the item or two they deign to taste.

Marc Plattner, no mere sampler, brings a healthy appetite to his study of Rousseau. Though *Rousseau's State of Nature* is subtitled "An Interpretation of the *Discourse on Inequality*," Plattner concerns himself with more than one book; for he contends that a proper understanding of Rousseau's doctrine about the state of nature, a doctrine most fully elaborated in the *Discourse on Inequality*, informs a proper understanding of Rousseau's later books. Thus, despite its shortness (137 pages) and its ostensibly modest project, Plattner's book elucidates a teaching that rightly "lies at the very heart of [Rousseau's] entire theoretical enterprise."

That enterprise consists in attaining knowledge of a legitimate political order, that is, an order in which men can be both genuine individuals and good citizens. For Rousseau, knowledge of such an order presupposes an analysis of the state of nature, of man before he took on the incubus of civilization. Studying "original man," Rousseau asserts, "is... the only good means one could use to remove those crowds of diffi-

culties which present themselves concerning the origin of moral inequality, the true foundations of the body politic, the reciprocal rights of its members, and a thousand similar questions as important as they are ill explained."

The central question remains, as Plattner aptly notes, just how a study of man in the state of nature pertains to "those crowds of difficulties." Rousseau's answer goes to the root: because natural man was a solitary wild beast that lacked language, reason, virtues, and vices, no man could exercise authority over other men; for authority has meaning only when men have dealings with one another.* In other words, Rousseau rejects both the traditional Aristotelian position that man is by nature a political animal and the supposedly radical Hobbesian view that the state of nature is a war "of every man, against every man." Neither Aristotle's assertion that some men are

by nature slaves nor Hobbes' argument that only a leviathan can overcome the strife of the state of nature withstands Rousseau's conclusion that no political order can point to nature for its justification. ➔

* Present-day analytic philosophers might argue that Rousseau's state of nature could never have existed: By definition, men speak and, therefore, reason; thus, before language there were apes, not men. Konrad Lorenz reaches the same conclusion by a different route: "All the tremendous neuro-sensory apparatus of human speech is phylogenetically evolved, but so constructed that its function presupposes the existence of a culturally developed language which the infant has to learn."

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