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‘No appearance, always reality’: Rousseau, transparency, and the international

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Abstract

This paper develops a new perspective on one of the key concepts of liberal global governance – transparency – by reflecting on its earlier role in the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rejecting the view that he desires ‘total transparency’, the paper argues that Rousseau provides an early example of a complex modern discourse in which transparency is closely connected to the emerging contours of the international. Transparency is an image used to describe global systems of power, the experience of encountering them, and the ways in which they might be transformed by an empowered citizenry. Twenty-first century liberal transparency is a particular idiom which has emerged from this more extensive language. Distinguished by the relative demise of the figurative and utopic aspects which shape earlier uses of transparency, it has considerable ideological power while also reflecting a sclerosis of political imagination.

Keywords

concepts, critical theory, global governance, Rousseau, transparency

Introduction

As the crisis of the so-called liberal order has gathered momentum, many of its constitutive ideals have been rapidly denuded of their commonsense character. Others, however, retain a degree of ‘obviousness’. One such concept is ‘transparency’, an idea with a prominent role in global governance and broad, commonsense appeal (Alloa, 2018: 37; Hood, 2006).

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'Transparency' usually denotes the 'visibility', to outside actors, of information about institutions in ways which will supposedly make them more trustworthy and accountable. 'Transparent' systems and regimes also promise to be more effective and efficient. Transparency has therefore been promoted by a range of international organisations. For the OSCE 'military transparency' between states is a source of peace while the IMF, WTO and World Bank point to transparency's role in promoting economic stability and development (Koivisto, 2016; OSCE, n.d.; Woods and Narlikar, 2008). Some of these organisations have responded to concerns about a global 'democratic deficit' with reforms aimed at increasing their own transparency to the public (Donaldson and Kingsbury, 2013; Grigorescu, 2007).

Transparency is also an effective rhetorical and ideological device, frequently presented by politicians as a distinguishing feature of liberal democracy and international order (G8, 2013; NATO, 2021; The White House, 2021.). It appeals to some critics of that order too, who hope that institutions will be transformed as the public are granted access to more information.

The specific term 'transparency' was little used before the 1970s but the role of the underlying imagery in accounts of the international is much older, providing a point around which struggles over its character, and especially the role of the public, have occurred. For example, Woodrow Wilson's call for diplomacy 'in the public view' was central to his liberal internationalism but this rhetoric echoed the use of similar language by a range of radicals and socialists (Knock, 1992; Manela, 2007; Mayer, 1964). Understanding transparency therefore promises insight into both the present ideological and institutional structures of liberal governance and the development of modern international relations itself.

Transparency has, unsurprisingly, been subject to productive scrutiny, but existing approaches display significant limitations. Two strands of literature are especially significant for understanding the connection between transparency and the international. The first, broadly policy-oriented, considers how transparency functions in different spheres of activity (Bianchi and Peters, 2013; Finel and Lord, 2002; Florini, 1996; Grigorescu, 2007; Gupta and Mason, 2014; Koivisto, 2016; Lord, 2007; Schultz, 2001) or in the maintenance of the liberal order as a whole (Ikenberry, 2001: 203). In this 'mainstream' literature, as among practitioners, 'transparency' usually has a relatively clear and obvious meaning, referring to the transmission of information within existing structures. Degrees of transparency might even be measurable (Hollyer et al., 2014).

This has generated valuable insights into international institutions and regimes. It is, though, a restrictive approach, which tends to ignore transparency's deeper role as a 'phantom concept' and, subsequently, 'master code' of modernity, deployed in wider efforts to shape subjectivity or define social and political structures (Geroulanos, 2017: 21). This code depends on the wider 'metaphorical set' through which knowledge, empowerment and progress have been described in terms of visibility and illumination (Geroulanos, 2017: 21; Blumenberg, 2011; Lakoff and Johnson, 2008). The idea that society might be in some sense opaque and that progress would involve its becoming 'clear' has played a significant role in modern politics. The apparently obvious definition of transparency as access to information depends on – is but one manifestation of – this underlying spectral code.[1]

This paper approaches transparency from this second perspective, inspired by works of critical social theory and conceptual history. In focussing on this second level, I engage with the wider conceptual and metaphorical constellation of which the present concept is but one product. In keeping with this critical tradition, my goal is not to offer direct proposals for the more effective pursuit of transparency but to reflect on the concept's role in struggles to define modern society and politics, particularly as they relate to the international. My assumption is that by better comprehending transparency we can better understanding 'how we got here' and, perhaps, 'how we might do things differently'. In terms familiar to IR scholars, this is an exercise in critical rather than problem-solving theory (Cox, 1981).

A rich 'critical transparency' literature has engaged at this broader level to capture many of the nuances of the idea, together with its inescapable contradictions (Alloa, 2018; Birchall, 2021; Geroulanos, 2017; Jay, 1993). The critical literature does not, however, always escape the tendency to reify transparency which is apparent in mainstream accounts. In foundational texts of critical theory, transparency usually denotes a desire for an unmediated relationship with society or self, and has been closely associated with flaws of Western metaphysics or the operation of disciplinary power (Derrida, 2016; Foucault, 1980: 152; Geroulanos, 2017; Jay, 1993; Laclau and Mouffe, 2013: xxii). In these influential accounts its role is socially and politically constitutive, but also negative. It is significant for critical theorists but also anathema, equated with surveillance, hostility to difference, and an impoverished Cartesian subjectivity.

Among critical theorists more generally, an attitude of reflexive hostility prevails with the unfortunate effect that transparency becomes a straightforward signifier of the worst aspects of modernity, rather than a trope with shifting significance or meanings which might reflect its role in political struggle. Recent research in transparency studies has presented a more nuanced picture (Alloa, 2018; Birchall, 2021; Fenster, 2015, 2021; Khawaja, 2018; Schneider, 2018), but has not focussed on transparency's role in the modern international imaginary.

While there are insights on both sides, then, mainstream students of transparency and critical theorists would each benefit from a richer account of transparency's role in the emergence of a modern, global politics. This would in turn support a better understanding of its present political and ideological function.

This paper begins this work by focussing on transparency's role in the work of one of its best-known proponents – Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The significance of Rousseau's conception of transparency has long been recognised and provides a key point of reference for transparency studies (Geroulanos, 2017; Khawaja, 2018; Schneider, 2018). However, this focus will no doubt seem unpromising to many critical theorists, for whom Rousseau's work is the epitome of the problems described above. It will perhaps also seem unnecessary to those concerned with transparency's role in policy, for whom Rousseau tends to appear (if at all) as an eccentric or dangerous forebear (Hood, 2006: 6–7; Peters, 2013: 556). I argue, however, that Rousseau's writing points to the existence of a complex modern discourse of transparency closely connected to the emerging contours of the international.

Rousseau's disparate, and in some respects unclear, notion of transparency is more complex than many critical accounts suggest and is essential to his diffuse but coherent

depiction of international relations. The difficulty in pinning down Rousseau's transparency is, I suggest, no accident; it is not a clearly defined philosophical concept or political principle but a trope which he extracts from the surrounding cultural milieu. I develop this argument by focussing on three interrelated aspects of transparency seldom noted in the literature but especially apparent in Rousseau's work: (1) its self-consciously *figurative* character; (2) its *utopian* connotations; (3) its *critical* import as means of depicting increasingly systematic and extensive exploitation.

To give transparency a clear definition would obscure its role in Rousseau's work, but we can summarise his conception in terms of what transparency usually portrays: the solidarity of empowered citizens in the face of a corrupt system. As we will see, there is good reason to doubt that Rousseau was engaged in the futile and obsessive pursuit of some unattainable state of 'total transparency'.

This account of Rousseau's transparency generates several insights. First, it indicates how transparency is important for efforts to comprehend a *global* or *international* politics. The connection lies not, in the first instance, in the effectiveness of transparency as a tool of governance, or even in the need to 'see' what is going on in governing institutions but instead in its use for describing the character of the public, on the one hand, and its relation to the prevailing social and political structures, on the other. Using the language of transparency, Rousseau depicts a simultaneously unified and fractured system in which the public is potential protagonist but more often a powerless spectator. He rejects the assumption that the rationalistic 'unveiling' of the facts alone will be emancipatory, using transparency primarily as a utopic image with which to depict the solidarity of ordinary citizens. His deft use of the language of transparency helps him to describe emerging systems of global power, the experience of encountering them, and the ways in which they might be transformed by an empowered citizenry.

Rousseau can thereby help us to shift the register in which transparency is understood and shed new light on its significance for modern international thought. Transparency is a figurative means of responding to global modernity via the depiction of a constitutive confrontation between the people and structures of power. This both points to a later, related radical discourse of transparency and suggests that twenty-first century liberal transparency is a particular idiom which has emerged from a more extensive language. The power of the latter lies in the way it has channelled some of the disparate and subversive elements apparent in Rousseau's transparency and the subsequent radical discourse into a concept conducive to governance.

This account of transparency also illuminates Rousseau's own fragmented international theory. In contrast with the tendency in International Relations to depict him as simply 'realist' or 'idealist', it shows how his depiction of the international emerges from the juxtaposition of transparent republican enclaves with the insidious rule of 'appearance' emanating from expansionist commercial society.

Some qualifications are important before we begin. First, while I am sympathetic to Rousseau's egalitarian aims, my goal is not to identify him as the true 'inventor' of transparency or to propose a Rousseauian transparency for the twenty-first century. Each path would involve an untenable anachronism. And although aspects of Rousseau's work presage the emergence of critical theory, it should be clear that I agree with those who have pointed to the paternalistic or Eurocentric elements of his philosophy.

The paper starts by describing the distinctive way Rousseau appeals to enclaves of transparency to express the hope for solidarity and to identify the systematised corruption driving an expansionist European politics. The second part of the paper further develops this account, charting the role of Rousseau's transparency in his accounts of three key aspects of international relations: commerce; war; and imperialism. The third section considers the wider implications of Rousseau's transparency, drawing parallels with later, predominantly radical attempts to depict the international and to imagine how it might be otherwise. Returning to the present conception of transparency, I argue that this should be seen as one idiom within a wider modern language of transparency, but that it is distinguished by the relative demise of the figurative and utopic aspects which characterise earlier versions. This gives rise to its ideological power but also reflects a sclerosis of political imagination which contributes to liberalism's present crisis.

Rousseau's transparency

The rule of appearance. At first glance, Rousseau has little interest in international relations. He even concludes the *Social Contract* by declaring it 'too vast for my short sight [trop vaste pour ma courte vue]'.[2] However, if the international is especially hard to 'see' this in fact reflects its place among Rousseau's core concerns. The imagery of distance and (in)visibility which recurs throughout his work reflects the close connection of the international to his wider social and political theory, and the central role of transparency metaphors in joining the two (Roosevelt, 1990).

In his pedagogy-cum-*Bildungsroman*, *Emile*, Rousseau identifies the tendency to desire things beyond our reach as the root of misery and corruption. In their pursuit, we forget 'the country we have already crossed' while 'what remains to cross ceaselessly grows and extends' (Rousseau, 1979a: 80–81). His concern is clearly political but the danger involves the structuring of subjectivity itself (Melzer, 1980); even infants can be 'tyrannical', using others to attain goals which are otherwise beyond reach. With this, 'prejudices and opinion can take their first roots' (Neuhouser, 2008: 129–140; Rousseau, 1979a: 67–68).

'Opinion' emerges as we mentally 'extend' ourselves beyond nature, and problems develop once it becomes the basis for social interaction (Melzer, 1980: 1027; Shklar, 1985: 75–76). Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality* (Second Discourse) presents a hypothetical history in which the emergence of human association involves a social system based on opinion. As is well-known, he identifies the rule of a form of self-esteem – *amour propre* – with an inherently comparative aspect. Appearances signifying strength or power become important, with the result that 'sociable man. . . lives outside himself' (Rousseau, 1997c: 187; Strong, 2002: 68):

> [t]o be and to appear became two entirely different things, and from this distinction arose ostentatious display, deceitful cunning, and all the vices that follow in their wake (Rousseau, 1997c: 170–171).

In the modern world, this combination of pathological overextension and the rule of appearance is manifested in the expansionism of European powers. These extend

themselves 'over the whole earth [and become] sensitive over this entire large surface', with the result that 'our ills are multiplied by all the points where we can be wounded' (Rousseau, 1979a: 83).

Amour propre need not take a pathological form, however. Indeed, the happiest age for humanity arrives only *after* esteem becomes important (Marks, 2001: 624–625; Rousseau, 1997c: 165–7). It is through 'inflamed' *amour propre* that the members of some societies find themselves living an alienated existence in the 'empire of opinion' (Dent, 1988: 57–58; Forst, 2017: 524; Neuhouser, 2008; Rousseau, 1997c, 2004: 206).

As Jean Starobinski demonstrates in his influential study, the tension between 'transparency' and the 'obstruction' generated by the rule of opinion [*la transparence et l'obstacle*] lies at the heart of Rousseau's philosophy (Starobinski, 1988). Rousseau fears its impact both on the self and on our ability to live life in 'common' (Melzer, 1980; Strong, 2002). At an individual level the result is the crisis of subjectivity described in his autobiographical writing. He hoped to make himself as 'transparent as crystal' and appears to have been distressed by the inevitable failure of his efforts (Rousseau, 1967, 1979b, 2012: 155; Starobinski, 1988). In later life, the opacity surrounding him seemed to conceal a vast conspiracy (Rousseau, 1967, 1979b). Collectively, through the rule of appearance citizens (actual or potential) become passive spectators of a corrupt system (Rousseau, 2004).

In response, Rousseau identifies various enclaves of transparency; places or individuals shaped not by opinion but by virtuous citizenship. The clearest theoretical expression of this vision is his account of the general will (Rousseau, 1997f). However, he presents an array of transparent settings: classical republics (Rousseau, 1997d); robust, peripheral nations (Rousseau, 1997a, 2004); bucolic idyll (Rousseau, 1997e); so-called 'savage' societies (Rousseau, 1997c). Each represents a site of possible or imagined transparency in contrast with superficial appearance, and therefore of solidarity or virtue. Together, this constellation of enclaves reveals the possibility of an alternative politics, thereby throwing light on existing corruption.

The most important enclave is the republican state. Here, transparency takes a festive form where healthy mutual esteem fosters the solidarity of ordinary people. Genevan citizens gather 'in the open air, under the sky' and 'each sees and loves himself in the others so that all will be better united' (Rousseau, 2004: 344). Public gatherings are to play the same role in Rousseau's proposals for the much larger Polish state (Rousseau, 1997a).

The best for which the inhabitants of the most corrupt societies – the large European powers – can hope is a mode of individual, cosmopolitan republican virtue also depicted in terms of transparency (Roosevelt, 1990). This is the fate of Emile, who will become a resilient 'man of the world' for whom there is 'no appearance, always reality' (Roosevelt, 1990). '[C]ounting the cords and pulleys whose crude magic deceives the spectators' eyes', he will be 'indignant at [. . .] seeing his brothers tear one another apart for the sake of dreams' (Rousseau, 1979a: 242). Much as the transparent republic has political substance, for Emile 'when there remains nothing for him to show except himself, he is not nothing, he is something' (Rousseau, 1979a: 194–195).

The utopian impulse – the hope for solidarity – expressed in the language of transparency represents the substance of Rousseau's political theory. It does not promote a return

to the simplicity of the first state of nature or to classical utopias (cf. Shklar, 1985). Rather, in the face of the modern rule of appearance, transparent communities display a Promethean capacity to forge solidarity through healthy *amour propre*. A transparent individual like Emile might display republican virtue even while living amidst corruption.

While Rousseau's appeals to transparency express a certain utopian *impulse*, though he is not naively anticipating a utopia of total transparency. In Geneva, the 'gentle habit of seeing and knowing one another' means 'neither the shady stratagems [manœuvres obscures] of vice nor the modesty of virtue could have escaped the gaze [dérober aux regards] and judgement of the Public' (Rousseau, 1997c: 114). However, the veil of appearance will still descend until 'we have nothing more than a deceiving and frivolous exterior' (Rousseau, 1997c: 187).

Transparency and persuasion. In contrast with twenty-first century transparency, then, Rousseau's is an imagined moral or political state attained by overcoming the rule of opinion. Transparency plays both a critical and a utopian function, helping to depict the inflamed *amour propre* integral to a corrupt, expansionist society and the republican solidarity which might challenge it. The next section will focus on how this shapes his international theory. First, it is important to consider the specific character of his transparency in more depth.

Several points are particularly significant. *Pace* the prevailing view in critical theory, and as noted above, Rousseau does not desire 'total' transparency. He also rejected rationalistic ideas about the necessarily progressive power of 'unveiling' the truth. Moreover, as indicated in the introduction, his transparency is not an analytical concept or normative principle. Rather, it is a set of images drawn from the pre-existing sources – the 'master code' mentioned above – and used skilfully to convey both the idea of solidarity and to capture the rule of appearance. Rousseau pursued this goal with a keen sense of the political importance of figurative language (Planinc, 2022).

In fact, the influence of pre-existing languages of transparency means that, in some respects, there is nothing original about Rousseau's use of this imagery, which was already clichéd when he began using it (Jameson, 2005: 695; Rosenblatt, 1997: 9; Starobinski, 1988: 3). Classical accounts of virtuous ancient republicans were a key point of reference, as was the example of Spartan austerity (Shklar, 1985). Rousseau was also influenced, of course, by the wider discourse of 'enlightenment'.

His work also reflects his Genevan Calvinist heritage, which emphasised the transparency of the individual before God and fellow believers (Khawaja, 2018). Indeed, Calvinism's conjunction with political radicalism in eighteenth century Geneva was the context for some remarkably 'Rousseauian' appeals to transparency (Rosenblatt, 1997). For example, in one sermon, Jean-Jacques Lambercier – Rousseau's childhood tutor – described society as 'a theatre where everyone masks himself. . .' (quoted in Rosenblatt, 1997: 36).

Nevertheless, in Rousseau's hands 'the cliché came back to life' as he put the material provided by these pre-existing languages of transparency to effective use. Rousseau's transparency is distinguished partly by the way it expresses 'a pain, a rending of the soul' (Starobinski, 1988: 4–5). Using this imagery, he depicts the experience of the individual encountering the unjust structures of both tradition and modernity (Berman, 1983:

17–18). The *Confessions* – his great attempt to render himself transparent – describes the formative moment when 'appearances were against me', resulting in a beating for a misdemeanour he had not committed (Rousseau, 1967: 29–30; Starobinski, 1988: 7–8). This connection to personal suffering imbues his writings with a depth absent from the work of contemporaries (Shklar, 1985: 81–82). The fate of the individual – the very structure of their subjectivity – becomes tied to the possibilities and pathologies of an emerging modernity, and specifically to an expansive political and social system (Berman, 1983: 17–18; Jauss and Roetzel, 1988; Melzer, 1980).

Rousseau's transparency metaphors therefore have a subversive character similar to his metaphors of personification such as 'the body politic'. Indeed, Shklar's description of the latter can usefully be applied to the former; because transparency was 'rich in conventional associations', Rousseau could use it to express 'his utter contempt for prevailing political opinion'. Transparency is not a rhetorical 'ornament' or simply a 'description' but 'part of that 'moral truth' that reveals how people feel in specific situations'. Moreover, '[i]n that exposure, there is a judgement' – existing arrangements are condemned (Rosenblatt, 2006: 71; Shklar, 1985: 166–167).

This subversive appropriation of existing discourses is obscured in influential interpretations of Rousseau's work, which have often portrayed his transparency as the epitome of a Western project of totalising rationalism or simplistic account of subjectivity (Geroulanos, 2017; Inston, 2012: 193–194, note 4). For example, Starobinski claims that Rousseau's 'unambiguous' bid to restore a lost state of total transparency reflects an 'excessive' and insatiable personal desire (Starobinski, 1988: 13, 157). Starobinski's interpretation informs Derrida's portrayal of a whole tradition of 'Rousseauism' in which transparency is tied to a Eurocentric, monolithic conception of self and the desire for 'immediacy' (de Man, 1977: 2; Derrida, 2016: 17–18). In a similar vein, Foucault suggests that Rousseau presents the 'lyrical' counterpart to Bentham's infamous Panopticon; the Rousseauist dream is that of a society in which power can find no dark corners to hide (Foucault, 1980: 152).[3]

Such interpretations, influential among critical theorists, undoubtably identify problems with Rousseau's position. The dynamics of personal transparency are, at one level, clearly contradictory – Rousseau can only reveal himself through the *medium* of writing. His appeals to transparency are also symptomatic of the limited social imagination of the emerging European bourgeoisie, reflecting ideas of a pristine nature, isolated subjectivity, and cultural hierarchy. This relative paucity leads to simplistic depictions of society such as Rousseau's hugely popular novel *Julie*, where masters and servants interact in bucolic transparency (Rousseau, 1997e). As we will see below, similar difficulties are apparent in his account of colonised societies. At the level of subjectivity, Rousseau's concern with transparency is linked to his paranoia (Rousseau, 1979b). His attacks on appearance reflect a certain bourgeois *ressentiment*, the destructive effects of which would become a tragically familiar feature of European politics.

Nevertheless, there is little evidence that Rousseau sees 'total' transparency – the complete lack of mediation in social relationships – as desirable or attainable. For all its profound importance, he is adept at capturing transparency's contradictory and perhaps futile character (Jameson, 2005) and does not seek to 'fix' with immediacy the indeterminacy Derrida associates with writing (de Man, 1977; Simon, 2013: 14). His goal is

healthy mutual esteem, not unmediated interaction. As we saw above, the 'golden age' – humanity's happiest time – only arrives with the emergence of public esteem, that is, with a certain loss of the simple transparency of the state of nature (Marks, 2001: 624–625).

In fact, Rousseau's appeals to transparency support a creative, subversive, and often tragic attempt to depict subjectivity and society in all their complexity. His transparent enclaves are marginal places which tend to collapse in the face of external pressure (Strong, 2002). To the extent that transparency is achieved in places like Geneva, it is tied to the irrevocable role of *amour propre*.

Often, what seems like the depiction of simple humanity stripped of all artifice turns out to represent something more complex. In his *Confessions*, Rousseau must 'hide himself to show himself' and presents an explanation of the performativity and multiplicity of selves (Rousseau, 1967; Strong, 2002: 15). The Second Discourse seemingly depicts the concealment, through corruption, of an underlying humanity by analogy with the encrustations on the mythical statue of Glaucus (Rousseau, 1997c). Starobinski presents this as evidence of Rousseau's insatiable desire for some state of perfect transparency but, as Richard Velkley points out, what lies beneath is in fact a *depiction* of a god who was once human and had been *transformed* into a deity 'adorned with sea monsters'. These multiple layers and transformations suggest that, as useful as the image of original simplicity might be, such a state will keep slipping from our grasp (Velkley, 2013: 226).

Rousseau's most direct account of transparency – the posthumously published 'Fiction or Allegorical Fragment on Revelation' (1996) – further reveals the difficulties with the prevailing critical view. Apparently inspired by classical sources, Rousseau describes a philosopher who dreams of a temple containing eight hideous statues (Kelly, 1996: 418; Plutarch, 1970: 131). Seven have a deceptively charming appearance. The eighth, veiled, is served by the worshippers and around its base, unseen, occur acts of appalling violence. Priests blindfold those entering and anyone removing their blindfold is transformed into a monster (Rousseau, 1996: 439–40). Three wise men enter the temple, each attempting to reveal its horrors. The first (possibly Diderot) discreetly removes the blindfolds of a few worshippers. The second (clearly Socrates) pulls the veil from the statue to reveal it to all (Kelly, 1996: 425–427). Neither succeeds – simply removing blindfolds or stripping away the veil is insufficient – and each philosopher is put to death. The situation is only transformed with the arrival of a Christ-like figure who topples the statue and takes its place, preaching love and compassion (Rousseau, 1996: 441–443).

As Christopher Kelly explains, the fragment shows that while Rousseau 'desires transparency of a certain type', he 'is the implacable foe of philosophic attempts to order society in accord with transparent reasoning'. '[T]he purely rational strategy of exposing the truth' might have its uses against superstition, but does not address the sources of error which lie within the people and their passions; it may even facilitate corruption (Kelly, 1996: 427). This points to a flaw with the enlightenment account of 'unveiling' in which identification of facts is transformative absent fundamental change in individuals or their relationships. This purely epistemic transparency might at times be useful but more often it will reflect the interests of philosophers and their wealthy patrons. Rousseau's images of a solidaristic transparency reveal, by means of contrast, the destructive and alienating power of rationalisation which would later concern critical theorists (Baker, 1998: 184;

Jauss and Roetzel, 1988; Strong, 2002). A solution to the sources of popular immiseration would require substantive change in pursuit of solidarity.

The Fragment reveals another essential aspect of Rousseau's transparency; it shows him working at least partly at a non-conceptual level, using figurative language to 'persuade' rather than to 'convince' (Kelly, 1987; Planinc, 2022; Rousseau, 1997f: 71). Rousseau uses imagery, metaphor, and other devices to move the passions of his audience. This pursuit of persuasion partly explains his pursuit of the novelistic writing in *Julie* and *Emile* (Kelly, 1996: 431).

At first glance, such attempts to persuade seem to point to particular difficulties for Rousseauian transparency; Rousseau appears to use *images of transparency* to stir his audience in an apparently *non-transparent* fashion (Marks, 2001). This seems to reflect, at best, a contradiction; we might even conclude that Rousseau has no interest in achieving transparency at all (Marks, 2001). In fact, the difficulties with either conclusion further reveal the nature of Rousseau's transparency. They depend on the assumption that 'real' transparency *is* 'full visibility' of political processes in something like the modern sense described at the start of this paper. It is only against this yardstick that Rousseau's self-contradiction or rejection of transparency seem to appear (see e.g. Marks, 2001: 628).[4] However, as we have just seen, he rejects the idea of rational unveiling.

In fact, the Christ-like figure seems to confirm what is apparent elsewhere – that transparency would consist primarily not in 'unveilling' but in solidarity which could only emerge from substantive action and transformed passions. The opposite of transparency is not ignorance, but the superficial appearance and corrupted passions associated with inflamed *amour propre*. While this version of transparency differs from twenty-first century conceptions, and its paternalism might be unappealing for modern democratic citizens, Rousseau's attempts to 'persuade' using the figure of transparency do not show that he is contradicting himself or being disingenuous.

Matters are clearer once we remember that Rousseau's transparency is a device constructed from pre-existing cultural 'material' to give a sense of what an emancipated society might be like and to capture the alienating character of the existing one. While it has a determinate significance, transparency is not a concept with a clear definition; it is a trope with various connotations which might be marshalled for his purposes (Planinc, 2022). The Allegorical Fragment suggests that Rousseau is turning 'enlightenment' against itself, playing on various sources and associations in order to persuasively depict republican solidarity. His goal is not to 'trick' his audience with 'mere' images or rhetoric but to foster a capacity for popular judgement which the assertion of 'naked truths' neglects or even damages (Schaeffer, 2015: 6).

Transparency and the international

If we return to Rousseau's inability to 'see' the international, it is now clearer how this might place it at the heart of his account of pathological social development (Roosevelt, 1990). This opacity reflects the presence of systemic, expansionist corruption, which might be confronted by local enclaves of transparency. Recognising this role of transparency in Rousseau's work reveals a greater depth to his international theory, in contrast with attempts to categorise him as a 'realist' or 'idealist', or as caught between the two

(Aiko, 2006: 97–98; Carr, 2001: 27, 163–164; Hinsley, 1967: 46–61; Hoffmann, 1963; Roosevelt, 1990: 7–9; Waltz, 2018; Williams, 2005: 52–53).

We can better understand Rousseau's international theory if we conceptualise the relationship between transparency and appearance as the tension between two forms of totality. On the one hand, Rousseau's account of appearance points to a pathological totality, reflected in European corruption and expansion. This is revealed through contrast with the republican solidarity of Rousseau's enclaves, which represents an 'expressive totality'. To be a transparent individual or a member of a mutually transparent collective would be to avoid 'estrangement from one's deeper self' and 'dependence on external values' (Jay, 1984: 41). It is to 'return to oneself' like Emile, or to participate in the General Will like the citizens of Geneva or Poland.

If the encounter with corrupt totality is a common experience, this anti-authoritarian hope for an unalienated 'life in common' unites a constellation of diverse enclaves. Living in 'non-simultaneous simultaneity', they are unified under the banner of equality and freedom. The tension between the two totalities is, to a great degree, constitutive of the international and of the experience of those encountering it. In Rousseau's international theory, 'the two worlds were juxtaposed' (Nabulsi, 2005: 192).

Partly by using the language of transparency, Rousseau situates corrupt global structures alongside personal injustices as another afront to the ordinary citizen. The individual is at once incorporated into and alienated from the international. The flicker of republican hope links this apparently most distant of spheres to individual experience, and thereby to the very structure of modern subjectivity. This is no naïve assertion of perfect transparency, but the depiction of a crisis of subjectivity and society in the context of increasingly globalised social relations.

This framework is apparent across Rousseau's scattered descriptions of three manifestations of the global rule of appearance: commerce; war; and imperialism.

Commerce. Rousseau's critique of appearance emerged in part from his participation in debates about 'commercial society' (Hanley, 2008; Hont, 2015; Melzer, 1980; Rousselière, 2016). The latter involves not only 'market-like' behaviour but also a distinct moral quality, according to which interaction is based on the selfish pursuit of material gain rather than 'virtue' (Hont, 2015: 3). Like Rousseau, thinkers of so-called *doux commerce* such as Mandeville and Montesquieu followed Hobbes' rejection of a naturally sociable humanity as the basis for political community (Rosenblatt, 1997). However, against Hobbes' claim that a coherent polity could be achieved by forging a 'union' through fear, commerce could supposedly produce stability through the selfish pursuit of utility and luxury (Hont, 2015: 9). 'Politeness' – the concern with ceremony and appearance – was a necessary counterweight because 'our hearts are not perfect enough to show themselves without a veil' (quoted in Rosenblatt, 1997: 60). The combination of utility and appearance was therefore a stabilising one (Hont, 2015: 13). Indeed, it was claimed that this veil of politeness could reshape international relations. For example, responding to Rousseau's First Discourse, King Stanislaw of Poland claimed that 'tranquil nations' had once faced a world of violence but that 'commerce and luxury have become the bonds of nations' (quoted in Rosenblatt, 1997: 60).

Rousseau's arguments represent a response to such claims (Rousseau, 1997b). Like Hobbes, he thought that pride was destructive (Hont, 2015: 12); the combination of utility and luxury in commercial society leads to pathological overextension and dependence (Hanley, 2008; Melzer, 1980; Rousselière, 2016). Rousseau's political theory – and the utopian impulse in his appeals to transparency – depicts an alternative politics in which individuals are not subject to the wills of those whose power has developed under these conditions (Rousseau, 1997b).

The political and personal context for Rousseau's critique of *doux commerce* was the threat posed to Genevan republicanism by French commercial society. As Rosenblatt explains, in the eighteenth century trade and banking links with Geneva's powerful neighbour had widened social divisions. For middle class artisans like Rousseau's own family, the veil of politeness was associated with an elite Francophile culture riding the wave of destructive economic forces which had elevated a small class of oligarchs at their expense (Rosenblatt, 1997: 66). Appeals to transparency by Rousseau and other Genevans like Lambercier were part of the response.

Rousseau's interest in these issues reflects the link between the personal and the international levels identified above, and the clash between an expressive (Genevan republican) totality and corrupt (French commercial) totality. Remembering the ideologically ambiguous character of Rousseau's transparency, we can also see how it might be connected to both radical visions of solidarity and early expressions of bourgeois *ressentiment* – two modes of confronting an incipient capitalist system.

Rousseau takes up these themes to depict a wider system of expansionist European corruption confronting nations and individuals. Like Geneva, Poland and Corsica are marginal places which might resist the spread of commercial society by pursuing Rousseauian transparency. Meanwhile, Emile will have a resilience lacking in contemporaries educated in accordance the dictates of politeness, and his transparency is part of the 'virtue' through which he will respond to the vagaries of modern 'fortuna' (Rousseau, 1979a: 194).

Indeed, one of Emile's lessons involves a demonstration of the realities of global commerce and its connection to the rule of appearance. Bringing his pupil to a banquet, Emile's tutor asks: 'what will he think of this luxury when he finds that every region of the world has been made to contribute; that perhaps 20 million hands have worked for a long time; that it has cost the lives of perhaps thousands of men, and all this to present to him with pomp at noon what he is going to deposit in his toilet at night?' (Rousseau, 1979a: 190).[5] From the globe down to the household and the individual themselves, commerce produces a system of violence, dependence, and alienation which the transparent Emile will reject.

War. The confrontation between two totalities described in the language of transparency also structures Rousseau's account of war. In one of his few writings dedicated to international politics, we find the same concern with distance and visibility apparent at the end of the *Social Contract*. Having considered the injustices inflicted on individuals in the name of 'the law' within the state, Rousseau's next step is to 'lift my eyes and look into the distance [J'élève les yeux et regarde au loin]' to find that '[b]efore me is a panorama of murder' (Rousseau, 1990b).

Rousseau's depiction of the struggle between transparency and appearance reveals the connection between the domestic and the international spheres. Domination has two deceptive faces: 'law' domestically and so-called 'raison d'etat' externally. Powerful European states subdue their own subjects through the former, which conceals exploitation and injustice (Mills, 1997; Rousseau, 1997c). They confront those beyond their borders with supposed rationality which conceals pride and an *animus-dominandi*. Any supposed 'laws of nations' are 'only illusions', based on their utility for rulers rather than in the hearts of citizens (Rousseau, 1990b: 186). The symbiosis of domestic oppression and international aggression is reflected in the use of standing armies to 'shackle and enslave citizens' and 'attack and conquer neighbours' (Rousseau, 1997a: 233–234, Rousseau, 1997b: 28).

In fact, for Rousseau the international is the ultimate realm of 'appearance' since '[i]ts power. . . being purely relative, the political body is forced ceaselessly to compare itself in order to know itself' (Hont, 2015; Rousseau, 1990b: 191). Although this is unavoidable, its current form reflects inflamed *amour propre*. Thus, in his sympathetic critique of St. Pierre's proposal for a European confederation, Rousseau argues that this plan will fail because Princes are 'ceaselessly deceived by the appearance of things [abusés par l'apparence des choses]' (Rousseau, 1990a: 224; Williams, 2005). The opacity in question is not simply that of *arcana imperii* that might evaporate through public scrutiny, but of the mediating structures of inflamed *amour propre*. Princes feed their pride and build their power through expansion, war, and the pursuit of 'absolute independence', thereby chasing the apparent rather than the true interests of the state (Rousseau, 1990a: 222; Williams, 2005: 68). Secrecy on the part of politicians is the product of this underlying corruption, which is also the political cause of war (Nabulsi, 2005: 192; Rousseau, 1997b: 8, 28).

Since *amour propre* is not necessarily 'inflamed', however, the international system need not be condemned to violence (Hoffmann, 1963). Rousseau never presents a systematic account of how to achieve peace but he does promote a defensive republicanism which would reject wars of conquest and prestige (Nabulsi, 2005: 186; Rousseau, 1997a: 233–234, Rousseau, 1997b). A precondition for reducing interstate violence would therefore to be to develop expressive totality via transparent republican solidarity. Thus, at the individual level, educated in accordance with Rousseau's principles, the transparent Emile 'loves peace' (Roosevelt, 1990: 168). At the level of the state, Rousseau's rejection of standing armies and celebration of citizen soldiers is presented with the imagery of festive transparency (Rousseau, 2004). The ultimate defence against aggressors lies, as in Poland, in the patriotism of those citizens, who 'constantly feel under the public's eyes' and whose status depends on 'public esteem' (Rousseau, 1997a: 183, 238–239).

Imperialism. While imperialism is, like war, never the object of Rousseau's sustained scrutiny, his repeated references reveal this as another manifestation of the over-extended rule of appearance (Muthu, 2009: 45). As elsewhere, the operation of a corrupt totality is depicted partly by comparison with transparent expressive totality. It is also at this point in Rousseau's international theory, however, that the ideological function of transparency identified above – its role in promoting as well as challenging Western bourgeois interests – is most apparent.

So-called 'savages' appear in Rousseau's writings free of the adornment which characterises European society. As with other transparent enclaves, this facilitates a contrast with expansionist European states and illustrates his claim that 'moral' inequality is a social product. For example, the frontispiece of the Second Discourse, labelled 'he returns to his equals', depicts a member of the Khoikhoi[6] who has discarded Western clothing and, thereby 'unveiled', is departing from a group of elaborately clothed Dutchmen (Klausen, 2016; Roberts, 2014; Rousseau, 1997c: 112; Rubiés, 2011: 119). In a similarly critical vein, Rousseau describes the European conquest of the Americas as having taken place through acts of 'vain ceremony' (Rubiés, 2011).

Such descriptions do not, however, point to the same kind of expressive totality Rousseau finds in Europe. They are distinguished by their place in his hypothetical history of humanity. Rousseau is no primitivist, promoting a return to the simple transparency of the first state of nature (Lovejoy, 1923). As we have seen, his concern is transparency achieved through healthy esteem in the present. The earlier 'golden age' he describes gives a sense of what this might involve but European societies cannot 'go back' (Rousseau, 1997c). Colonised peoples occupy an ambiguous status, however, since they are depicted as members of actual societies which might escape subjection to corrupt European powers *and*, in some cases, as an illustration of the earlier stages in Rousseau's hypothetical history (Klausen, 2016).

One of the various languages of transparency upon which Rousseau draws is a pre-existing European discourse in which the contrast between European adornment and corruption, on the one hand, and 'savage' nudity and simplicity, on the other, plays a significant role. This was a device for reflecting on European practices but reflected little genuine interest in other societies (Muthu, 2009; Roberts, 2014; Rubiés, 2011: 107–108; Toscano, 2019). Rousseau is no exception to this instrumentalization and drew on second-hand reports to provide support for his own attempt to show that corruption was due to social sources (Muthu, 2009: 20).

This is an instance of the problem identified above, where transparency hides social complexity. If Rousseau did not intend his appeals to transparency to denote the return to a more primitive state, he made an exception for non-Europeans. The supposed transparency of the colonised appears as a *primitive* expressive totality, thereby establishing a hierarchy of peoples in which, however decadent, Europe is more sophisticated (Mills, 1997: 68–69). These dehumanising descriptions reflect a contradiction, since they sit alongside Rousseau's overall depiction of humans as 'self-making agents' which inspired later anti-imperialist thought (Muthu, 2009: 13). As we have seen, most of Rousseau's appeals to transparency promote this substantive, Promethean liberation.

In fact, this latter side of his work is apparent in some of Rousseau's accounts of the colonised. Rousseau does not identify a strong teleology with European society as its end-point (Maldonado-Torres, 2014: 136–137); other societies 'would not inevitably and globally be replaced by European culture, as long as other peoples had any freedom at all to think and make choices concerning their own destinies' (Ellingson, 2001: 92). Some of Rousseau's descriptions of 'savage' life can therefore be read as modern rejections of expansionist European power. As elsewhere in his work, in these cases transparency depicts the capacity for critique and self-authorship through which independence might be maintained.

Jimmy Casas Klausen identifies one such instance in the footnote which accompanies the frontispiece to the Second Discourse. This describes how the individual depicted had been raised by Europeans and travelled with them to India. Upon returning to Africa, he discards his 'former clothes' and, announcing that 'I forever renounce these trappings', 'ran off' to live in the Cape (Klausen, 2016: 215–217; Rousseau, 1997c: 220–221). Rousseau presents this account 'to the scrutiny of the admirers of European Political order' (Rousseau, 1997c: 220).

This passage undoubtably reflects the problems identified above but, as Klaussen suggests, rather than representing a passive occupant of a simpler stage, the protagonist could also be seen as expressing a '*deliberate* preference' and undertaking an modern act of *marronage* (Klausen, 2016: 216).[7] His abandoning the trappings of European appearance is the act of a modern individual who, with 'intimate experience of the authorities they evade' is 'authorising themselves' in such a way as to pursue positive freedom (Klausen, 2016: 215–217). As elsewhere in Rousseau's work, then, transparency draws together individual experience, solidaristic self-determination, and the critical depiction of a corrupt global totality.

This critical transparency can, moreover, be set in contrast with European 'knowledge' of other societies, which is shaped by 'ridiculous prejudices'. As a result of the latter, the non-European is invisible in much the same way that Europeans remain invisible to each other (Rousseau, 1997c: 209). With this, however, we arrive back at Muthu's contradiction, since Rousseau's own accounts of colonised peoples are partly based on these problematic sources.

The fact remains that the transparency of actually existing non-European societies remains tied to an account of historical development in which Europeans occupied a 'later' stage. As has so often subsequently been the case (albeit in reverse direction), the idea of transparency promotes a Eurocentric hierarchy. This arguably reflects the wider risk identified above; despite the critical power and complexity of Rousseau's transparency, the relatively thin sociological underpinnings of his position make it easy for him to fall back on a version which obscures specific power structures. This ambiguous character is reflected in Rousseau's significance for subsequent anti-colonial thought (Muthu, 2009). His descriptions of the 'savage' are complicit in structures of racism, but Rousseau is also a theorist of the 'creativity of the masses' so important to anti-colonial revolt and nation-building (CLR James quoted in Henry and James, 2015: 180; Hallward, 2017; Mills, 1997; Nabulsi, n.d).

Transparency and modernity

This paper began by outlining the key role of transparency in modern global governance and international relations. Our account of Rousseau's transparency has seemingly taken us far from this point. How, if at all, might the preceding analsyis help us to understand transparency's subsequent significance?

As explained in the introduction, my aim is neither to promote a Rousseauian transparency for the present nor to propose specific transparency policies. Instead, the paper is concerned with the role of transparency in defining the field of political problems and possibilities. In this vein, we have found that for Rousseau, transparency is a persuasive

image used to depict the tension between two totalities – potential republican solidarity and the actual rule of appearance. His international theory depends on this tension, with transparency helping to depict the implications of this rule for commerce, war, and imperialism.

Rousseau's position is undoubtedly *sui generis* but it can help us to see how subsequent attempts to conceptualise global modernity have drawn on transparency in a similar fashion. Contrary to the approach adopted in much of the literature, transparency might be approached as a constellation of images and metaphors rather than as a determinate analytic or political principle. No mere rhetorical garnish, though, it offers a figurative means of persuasively conveying a specific experiential, critical, and political content. Contrary to many critical readings, it cannot be reduced to the pursuit of total transparency or rationalistic unveiling.

In this final section, I draw on this account to outline a more expansive approach to transparency. I look first at transparency's role until the early twentieth century, when it continued to offer a figurative means of describing the tension between citizens and systems of global power. I then argue that, against this background, contemporary liberal transparency appears as a specific idiom the power of which can be grasped by considering both the similarities and differences with earlier uses.

Radical transparency. Just as for Rousseau, the language and imagery of transparency offered later thinkers a means of contrasting popular solidarity with global structures of power. In this way transparency could support radical critique and, at times, reflect *ressentiment* and paranoia. A variety of later versions of transparency developed, with varying degrees of sophistication and influence. Some were inspired by Rousseau but in most cases the connection is not direct. This history has largely been concealed by the prevailing definition of transparency in terms of 'availability of information' and the anachronistic assumption that understanding the history of transparency requires that we simply identify past instances of transparency so defined.[8]

The festive aspect of Rousseau's transparency certainly inspired subsequent republican admirers (Taylor, 2004: 126–127). Karma Nabulsi locates Rousseau in an influential, if overlooked, tradition of defensive republican internationalism that extends into the twentieth century. This 'tradition of hope' is manifested in, among other things, 'the relentless unmasking of corrupt political structures' (Nabulsi, 2005: 240–241). In keeping with Rousseau's accounts of solidaristic transparency, a recurring theme of the republican festivals staged following the French Revolution was a 'transformation scene' involving 'the beam of liberty' (Ozouf, 1988: 100–101). The idea of citizenship in the 'open air' combined with the imagery of illumination offers an early example of the populist connotations of transparency (Ozouf, 1988: 26).

Rousseau's stylistic skill in using transparency to challenge the appearances of an emerging modern society also finds parallels in Marx (Silva, 2023). The two share a desire for 'simple' politics grounded in popular power, with Marx arguing against the 'delusion' that 'administration and political governing were mysteries' (Leipold, 2020: 173). United in 'fraternal concurrence', the working class should 'master themselves the mysteries of international politics' and 'watch the diplomatic acts of their respective governments' (Marx, 2019: 765). More generally, through popular solidarity, the opaque

capitalist system would 'strip off its mystical veil' (Blumenberg, 2011: 43; Marx quoted in Forst, 2017: 542; Leipold, 2020: 173, 180; Wokler, 2012: 219).

For Marx, too, transparency was not a determinate principle or concept. The language of transparency captured the experience of encountering global structures of power while pointing beyond them to a world reshaped through solidarity (Leipold, 2020: 173; Wokler, 2012: 215–216). Like Rousseau, Marx used transparency metaphors in an apparently contradictory fashion to illuminate the character of a global system. The global impact of capitalism involved a violent process whereby 'for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, [the bourgeoisie] has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation' (Marx and Engels, 2019: 64). However, much as for Rousseau rationalistic unveiling left injustice intact, bourgeois society was only transparent in a limited sense; in *Capital*, feudal political forms are described as 'more transparent' than those we find under capitalism (Marx, 1976: 172).

As suggested in the introduction, the idea of transparency shaped responses to the international crises of the early twentieth century, offering a means of imagining a world in which the international was no longer the preserve of violent and exploitative elites. The concern was often with democratic scrutiny of foreign policy, but the connection with solidarity as much as with knowledge, so important in Rousseau, recurs; critics of secret diplomacy promised not simply to remove the veils concealing the idols of statecraft, but to topple them in the name of popular empowerment. For example, Wilson's call for diplomacy 'in the public view' mirrored his domestic calls for 'a clear air in which we shall see our way to social betterment'(quoted in Marquardt, 2016: 75). Wilson is in some respects a precursor of later information-based liberal transparency – he envisaged the League of Nations as a 'great clearing house' of information – but the impression, at least, was that his open diplomacy would overturn the old, aristocratic international system hand-in-hand with wider processes of social transformation (Knock, 1992; Manela, 2007; quoted in Marquardt, 2016: 89; Mayer, 1964).

Wilson was, in fact, reacting to competing visions of popular power which also promised to sweep away the soil in which secret diplomacy was rooted (Mayer, 1964). Within and across the warring powers, radical visions of popular solidarity and peace deployed the imagery of transparency. Shortly before Wilson's famous "Fourteen Points" speech, Leon Trotsky had published imperial Russia's secret treaties with the declaration that bourgeois diplomacy should 'fear the light of day' (Knock, 1992; Mayer, 1964; Trotsky, 1917). Once again, the sharing of political secrets foreshadows later transparency measures. However, illumination would not involve detached public scrutiny so much as the evaporation of bourgeois international politics in the face of proletarian solidarity.

It would be a mistake to assume that our account points only to a progressive or revolutionary discourse of international transparency. The idea of a transparent community certainly shaped reactionary and fascist responses to supposed Western decadence (Storchi, 2007). In the case of Wilson, who had been raised in a Presbyterian 'covenantor' household, the religious connotations of the metaphor combine with the imagery of national mission (Knock, 1992: 4). Deployed in the context of US colonialism and Wilson's racist domestic policies, the soaring rhetoric of illumination had an imperialistic tone – the US was to be 'the light which shall shine unto all generations and guide the

feet of mankind to the goal of justice and liberty and peace' (quoted in Knock, 1992: 20; Manela, 2007).

Nevertheless, the language of transparency is apparent in other egalitarian accounts of a radically different world. For example, Paul Scheerbart's surreal expressionist novels, written on the eve of the First World War, depict a peaceful future transformed by glass architecture.[9] Scheerbart ('Glass Papa' to his admirers) influenced a generation of modern architects, some of whose work was seemingly inspired by the familiar principle of institutional visibility. Scheerbart's goal, though, was quasi-spiritual, anarcho-pacifist transformation of warlike bourgeois society, not better scrutiny of its institutions (Bletter, 1981; Scheerbart, 2014).

By this point W.E.B. Du Bois had already developed his concept of the 'veil' to capture the Black experience of racism (Du Bois, 2008). During, and then following the war, he depicted an international status quo shaped by the 'colour-line', speaking from within 'cruel and promethean gloom' of the transparency available to the racially oppressed as they observe 'the souls of white folk': 'I see in and through them. . . I see the working of their entrails. . . stripped,—ugly, human' (Du Bois, 2016). Du Bois' depiction of a better future echoes Rousseau's constellation of transparent enclaves – a world of self-determining peoples will be one of 'many little shinings of the sun' (Du Bois, 2016).

Transparency today. Contemporary transparency policies seem (to say the least) far less poetic. Nevertheless, transparency remains to some degree an appealing figure with which to depict a specific vision of popular power. It still, too, reflects an underlying 'master code' in which illumination and visibility are associated with progress, empowerment, and knowledge.

Transparency has, in particular, offered an appealing term with which to respond to concerns about a 'democratic deficit' in global and transnational governance (Buchanan and Keohane, 2006). For example, starting in the early 1990s, the European Community, and then the European Union, responded to an apparent crisis of legitimacy through the promotion of 'transparency'. In this way it promised, via access to information, a less 'distant' relationship between citizens and institutions (Lodge, 2003). A similar dynamic was apparent when organisations like the World Bank and WTO responded to anti-globalisation protests by developing 'transparency' measures which would publicise their own processes (Donaldson and Kingsbury, 2013; Grigorescu, 2007**).**

Just like earlier uses, in these cases transparency points to a particular international problem-field and persuasively depicts the solution in the form of a given vision of publicity. To present 'transparency' in response to criticism acknowledges (at least implicitly) the alienation of ordinary citizens encountering international structures and institutions – for transparency to be possible there must, after all, be an 'obstruction'. The specific solution which 'transparency' favourably depicts is a public increasingly included in the circulation of information already identified as essential for effective governance. This adds further detail to the depicted problem-field by reinforcing the impression of a global hierarchy in which transparency is a source of Western efficiency and freedom, while its absence links non-observance of liberal governance norms to a deeper set of political and societal failings beyond the liberal 'core'. This was apparent,

for example, when Western officials identified a supposed lack of transparency as a key source of the 1997 Asian financial crisis (Best 2005: 138).

Rather than taking the present definition of transparency as the obvious starting point for analysis, then, we can approach transparency as an element in various attempts at 'world-making' – at envisaging and structuring the relationship between citizens and global systems and institutions (Getachew, 2019). The use of 'transparency' to refer to information-based governance is by far the most successful, but still only one such attempt. Faced with enduring concerns about alienation and disempowerment, contemporary transparency does not neutrally denote a set of methods of liberal governance; it reflects an effort to shape world politics by promoting a *particular* political vision of popular power. Viewed historically, this apparently most commonsense principle of governance reflects a *specific* liberal idiom of transparency, derived from a wider language which neither originates with nor can be entirely encapsulated within the bounds of liberalism.

In the context of the present crisis of the liberal order, this interpretation is a useful means of politicising transparency. For liberals, to recognise the degree to which they have needed to engage in the activity of persuasion, and to see that this ostensibly technocratic or commonsensical concept has had other meanings, represent important lessons (Planinc, 2022). This is especially so as they face intense challenges from alternative visions of publicity and international relations.

Indeed, as Mark Fenster points out, while right-wing populists have very little regard for 'administrative transparency', they have promoted their own version based on 'unwritten norms', 'emotional connections', and ostensibly direct statements from leaders (Fenster, 2021: 291). For example, throughout his 2016 election campaign and first term in office, Donald Trump repeatedly referred to his own 'transparency' (Fenster, 2021: 311). Early in his second term, he called for 'radical transparency' regarding federal government spending (The White House, 2025). Like the other examples considered above, this version of transparency is tied to a specific vision of the international, in this case manifested in open power politics and 'America First' policies. The preceding account suggests that liberals would do well not to dismiss this as simply a crude misuse of the idea.

However, our account also gives reason to think that liberalism will struggle to meet these challenges. Herein lie the main lessons for critical theorists, for whom an expansive view of transparency points to a complex history of ideological capture and closure. Liberal transparency's distinct character and problems are apparent if we turn to the ways it differs from the older modes considered above. A first set of differences concerns the specific nature of the totalities it depicts. From Rousseau to the thinkers of the early twentieth century, transparency is used to depict a sharp contrast between the expressive totality which emancipated publics might form, and the pathological totality which currently defines global structures of power. The language of transparency describes the problems of the international and their resolution via novel social and political forms.

Today, this gap between expressive totality and the existing order has all but disappeared. Transparency will involve access to information about *existing* processes and remove obstacles to the efficiency of *existing* institutions. It can be a highly effective means of challenging corruption or increasing accountability, but it does not point to a

fundamentally different system. Liberal transparency is therefore not just one idiom among several; it reflects a particularly successful attempt to reconcile citizens with existing modes of governance.

This distinctive character is further apparent if we consider its specific conceptual structure. Radicals, progressives, and revolutionaries drew on the figurative power of transparency, so near the surface in Rousseau's account, partly because they sought to depict experiences and possibilities which were difficult – if not impossible – to express using existing concepts. Rousseau's transparency depicts incipient conditions of alienation and subjection, together with their egalitarian resolution, in a manner intended to resonate with an audience who might previously not have considered these possibilities (Berman, 1983: 17). Similarly, for example, Du Bois uses the imagery of transparency to capture both the marginalised individual experience of racism and the widely ignored structures of global white supremacism. These novel modes of critique were developed by turning existing tropes and images to new uses. The *need* to use figuration relates partly to the distance between envisaged and actual totalities, while the *possibility* of doing so reflects the relative malleability of an underlying master code.

Today, neither the gap nor the malleability can be taken for granted. For all that it retains something of its figurative character, significant changes are manifested in the solidification of transparency into a determinate concept. Transparency's now commonsense character not only arises from the demise of competing accounts or the obvious political value of having access to more information; its conceptual solidification has involved the relative demise of the figurative, utopian, and critical aspects first apparent in Rousseau. The emergence of the specific term 'transparency' to refer to a determinate set of policies concerning the availability of information is not, therefore, simply a sign of precision and progress; it reflects the narrowing of the gap between envisaged and actual politics, and the relative loss the figurative resources with which to depict it.

In this very victory we find currents which link transparency with liberalism's present crisis. Transparency has been a useful means of reassuring restive publics of the responsiveness of liberal governance, but it also reflects a sclerosis of a political imagination. By rendering the wider constellation of images and metaphors into the clearly defined concept, liberalism has undermined transparency's erstwhile capacity to point to a radically different future. The result is a discourse which recognises the danger of popular alienation but cannot match this with a vision of empowerment which departs from the institutions and practices which are among the sources of dissatisfaction. Popular empowerment might be implied, but it would involve the creation and circulation of information integral to liberal governance. The incipient right-wing transparency identified by Fenster demonstrates that some malleability remains but ultimately reflects the same ossification; 'transparency' is a buzzword to be seized and repeated in ways which direct citizens back to another set of pre-existing structures – those of the nation, powerful elites, and 'traditional' values. To return to Rousseau's allegory, in each case the veil might be removed but in neither will any statues be toppled.

The case of transparency thereby offers critical theorists a useful insight into some of the ideological dynamics behind the crisis of the liberal order. Beyond this, regarding the future of transparency specifically, progressive critics of both liberal governance and its right-wing populist challengers face a choice: seek to renew the connection between

transparency, solidarity, and imagination apparent in earlier radical versions, or learn the lessons from transparency's ossification and look for new means of depicting the collective capacity of ordinary people to create new worlds. Which option they should choose is, though, a question beyond the scope of this paper.

Conclusion

Our investigation of Rousseau's transparency has revealed its central importance for his international theory. Transparency is a figure which allows him to depict the tension between republican solidarity and the systemic pathologies driving global commerce, war, and imperialism. It does so in a way which links these with individual alienation, while 'persuasively' depicting a better society. In pursuit of these goals, Rousseau makes skilful use of the 'master code' in which visibility denotes progress and empowerment. While his transparency at times conceals injustice and promotes hierarchies, it cannot be equated with the rational surveillance or total transparency often feared by critical theorists.

This account has helped us to shift the register in which the later connection between transparency and the international can be understood; transparency has been a figurative means of depicting publicity in the face of global structures of power. From Marx to Wilson, transparency provided a means of portraying future forms of popular power and presenting the existing order in a critical light.

This has pointed, in turn, to a new angle from which to understand the contemporary conception of transparency. This now appears as a specific idiom of transparency still concerned with the persuasive depiction of a particular mode of publicity. However, for all that the resultant definition of transparency is widely accepted, it also reflects a crisis of political vision. The present clarity of transparency as a key concept of governance – an apparently well-defined point of reference for policy and debate, promoted in a multitude of documents and speeches – stands in striking contrast with the vague intimations of empowerment which accompany it. We might know that transparency 'means' access to information, but the systems and structures which rely on the circulation of information remain for most of us opaque and alien. Appeals to transparency tacitly acknowledge the problem even if they now do little to help us imagine the world after it has been solved. Rousseau would not be surprised.

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Notes

1. This is one reason that 'transparency' is not simply interchangeable with related concepts such as 'solidarity', 'publicity', or 'accountability'.
2. All French quotations are from (Rousseau, 1964).
3. See also Michael Sandel's criticism of Rousseau's anti-pluralist promotion of 'speechless transparence' (quoted in Marks, 2001: 619–620).
4. Khawaja (2018: 128–129) makes a similar point regarding 'confession'; we should reject the idea of an 'ur-norm' of unmediated confession which Rousseau's pursuit of persuasion might supposedly violate.
5. Cf. the grape harvest festivities in *Julie*, where '[t]he luxury and pomp of feasts are absent, but plenty and joy are present' (Rousseau, 1997e: 498).
6. Rousseau uses the pejorative 'Hottentot'.
7. Cf (Roberts, 2014).
8. It is, of course, still possible and useful to identify conceptions similar to contemporary liberal transparency. The most significant example is the work of Bentham.
9. My thanks to Nitasha Kaul for pointing out the significance of Scheerbart's work for discussions of transparency.

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