

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rustic Republics and *völkische Vaterländer*: Rousseau and Heidegger’s Rural Political Visions

Timothy Berk 

Political Science, Colgate University, Hamilton, NY, USA
Email: tberk@colgate.edu

(Received 04 October 2024; revised 05 August 2025; accepted 05 August 2025)

Abstract

Rousseau and Heidegger’s critiques of the modern commercial city, as well as their valorization of rural life, speak to problems of urban–rural polarization and rural alienation. This article disentangles Rousseau’s rural political vision which promotes agrarianism in service of egalitarian republicanism from that of Heidegger, which seeks to radically overcome the “uprootedness” of post-Enlightenment civilization by reconnecting the *Volk* to its primordial rootedness-in-the-soil of the fatherland. It proceeds by (1) comparing their critiques of the modern commercial city, (2) reconstructing their plans for rural political renewal, and (3) identifying the roots of their differences in competing understandings of “Being,” “nature,” and “history.” It concludes that Rousseau’s more nuanced evaluation of agrarianism, which better comprehends both the limits and possibilities of rural life, serves as a valuable corrective to Heidegger by providing a vision of rural politics that challenges but nevertheless proves more amenable to compromise with increasingly urbanized liberal democracies.

Keywords: Martin Heidegger; Jean-Jacques Rousseau; populism; romanticism; rural politics

Introduction

The critique of urban, cosmopolitan elites on behalf of the virtues and values of the rural was a staple of the Romantic Counter-Enlightenment and is exemplified in the rural political thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Martin Heidegger. Both advocate for the political-spiritual benefits of agricultural life out of a polemical opposition to the decadence of the modern commercial city, which maps onto what Cas Mudde calls the “classic populist distinction between the

corrupt, metropolitan, urban elite and the pure, indigenous, rural people.”¹ Their disagreements, however, point to two distinct but overlapping visions of rural renewal: the republican populism of Rousseau² and the *völkisch* politics of Heidegger. Whereas Rousseau provides an immanent critique of liberal democracy that emphasizes the necessity of rustic republican virtues and values as instrumental means toward upholding the Enlightenment goods of liberty and equality, Heidegger provides a total critique, seeking to radically overcome post-Enlightenment politics by reconnecting the *Volk* with the autochthonous depths of the *Vaterland* as the soil for a new illiberal political-spiritual world.

Despite the influence of Rousseau³ and Heidegger⁴ on competing contemporary anti-establishment, populist movements, there are few sustained comparisons between the two thinkers. Richard L. Velkley⁵ and Waller R. Newell⁶ have written on Rousseau’s influence on German political thought up to and including Heidegger. While these studies also highlight Rousseau and Heidegger’s shared critique of urban-bourgeois modernity, their turn to antiquity, and their search for a pre-rational origin as a ground (or *Abgrund*) for their respective philosophies, neither sets out to provide sustained direct comparisons of the two thinkers, and they do not focus on, or reconstruct, their competing outlines of specifically rural political institutions and practices.⁷ Comparing their agrarian prescriptions (a) clarifies the continuities and discontinuities between Rousseauian and Heideggerian political thought, (b) illuminates the plurality of political projects that can arise from Romantic appeals to rural authenticity against the alleged inauthenticity of modern urban life, and (c) helps identify

¹ Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 550.

² For a debate on whether Rousseau should be understood as a “populist” or a “republican,” see Annelien de Dijn “Rousseau and Republicanism,” *Political Theory* 46, no. 1 (2018): 59–80, and Philip Pettit, *On the People’s Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 14. While de Dijn provides a valuable corrective by reintegrating Rousseau into the republican canon, I consider Rousseau’s republicanism and populism to be complementary.

³ For an appropriation of Rousseau by a major European populist party (Italy’s Five Star Movement’s 2016 “Rousseau Platform”) see Illaria Cozzaglio, “Can Realism Save us from Populism? Rousseau in the Digital Age,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 22, no. 2 (2022): 276–98.

⁴ For Heidegger’s influence on contemporary “populist far/radical right” thinkers and parties see Julian Göppfarth’s “Rethinking the German Nation as German Dasein: Intellectuals and Heidegger’s Philosophy in Contemporary German New Right Nationalism,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 25, no. 3 (2020): 248–73; Matthew Feldman, “Between *Geist* and *Zeitgeist*: Martin Heidegger as Ideologue of ‘Metapolitical Fascism,’” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 6, no. 2 (2005): 175–98; Jussi Backman “Radical Conservatism and the Heideggerian Right: Heidegger, de Benoist, Dugin,” *Frontiers in Political Science* 4 (2022): <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2022.941799>; Alexander S. Duff, *Heidegger and Politics: The Ontology of Radical Discontent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 10–11, 186–89; Richard Wolin, *Heidegger in Ruins* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 306–58.

⁵ Richard L. Velkley, *Being After Rousseau: Philosophy and Culture in Question* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 7, 26–27, 48.

⁶ Waller R. Newell, *Tyranny and Revolution: Rousseau to Heidegger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 6, 186–88, 190, 195, 201–2, 262.

⁷ While Stephen J. Coote “An Analysis of the Concept of a Politico-Ecological Self in the Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Martin Heidegger” (PhD diss., Anglia Ruskin University, 2020) compares the two as ecological thinkers, I analyze their relation to the rural through the lens of agrarianism rather than deep ecology.

Rousseauian resources that can assist liberal democracies in responding to the challenge of far-right Heideggerianism. In doing so, this article builds on and brings into conversation realist interpretations of Rousseau's constitutional projects in Corsica and Poland⁸ and critical readings of the illiberal politics of autochthony in Heidegger,⁹ while also contributing to our understanding of Heidegger's reception of the political theory canon.¹⁰

The article begins by comparing Rousseau and Heidegger's critiques of the modern commercial city. The second and third parts reconstruct their respective prescriptions for political-spiritual renewal through the promotion of the rural. The fourth part argues that the political differences identified therein should be understood not just in light of competing valuations of Enlightenment understandings of freedom and equality, but more fundamentally from their foundational philosophic disagreements over the essence of nature, history, and Being. It provides an original account of Heidegger's political and philosophic confrontations with Rousseau from 1933–1943 and constructs a novel Rousseauian “response” to Heidegger, showing how Rousseau's greater appreciation of the limits of the rooted agricultural life provides a valuable corrective to Heidegger, lending itself to a more malleable and politically salutary vision of rural political renewal.

Critiques of the Modern Commercial City

Rousseau and Heidegger's championing of rural life must be understood in light of their critiques of the modern commercial city. Yet this should not be mistaken for an opposition to “the city” as such. Rousseau found much to admire in city-states such as Sparta, republican Rome, and contemporary Geneva,¹¹ and models

⁸ Mark J. Hill, “Enlightened ‘Savages,’” *History of Political Thought* 38, no. 3 (2017): 462–93; Mark J. Hill, “Rousseau and Poland: Pragmatic Rebirth rather than Idealistic Reforms?,” in *Constitutional Moments: Founding Myths, Charters and Constitutions through History*, ed. Xavier Gil (Leiden: Brill, 2024), 246–67; Ethan Putterman, “Realism and Reform in Rousseau's Constitutional Projects for Poland,” *Political Studies* 49 (2001): 481–94; Denise Shaeffer, “Attending to Time and Place in Rousseau's Legislative Art,” *Review of Politics* 74, no. 3 (2012): 421–41; Jeffrey A. Smith, “Nationalism, Virtue, and the Spirit of Liberty in Rousseau's ‘Government of Poland,’” *Review of Politics* 65, no. 3 (2003): 409–37; Jeffrey A. Smith, “Nature, Nation-Building, and the Seasons of Justice in Rousseau's Political Thought,” *Review of Politics* 68, no. 1 (2006): 20–48.

⁹ Charles Bambach, *Heidegger's Roots: Nietzsche, National Socialism, and the Greeks* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003); Wolin, *Heidegger in Ruins*, chap. 5. For a reading of Heidegger's philosophy of place that downplays its *völkisch* political implications, see Jeff Malpas, *Heidegger's Topology: Being, Place, World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 17–27. While “green” appropriations of Heidegger are possible—see Michael E. Zimmerman, *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics, Art* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1990)—I concur with Duff, *Heidegger and Politics*, 8, 167–74, that they miss the violent and *völkisch* currents of his thought.

¹⁰ See Mark Blitz, *Heidegger's Being and Time and The Possibility of Political Philosophy* (Philadelphia, PA: Paul Dry Books, 2017); Michael Allen Gillespie, “Martin Heidegger's Aristotelian National Socialism,” *Political Theory* 28, no. 2 (2000): 140–66; Bambach, *Heidegger's Roots*, 200–14; Duff, *Heidegger and Politics*, 100–2.

¹¹ See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Letter to M. D'Alembert on the Theatre,” in *Politics and the Arts*, trans. Allan Bloom (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1960), 58–60, 95–96; Mira Morgenstern highlights the ambiguities of Rousseau's evaluation of the city in “Politics in/of the City: Love, Modernity, and Strangeness in the City of Jean-Jacques Rousseau,” in *Rousseau and Desire*, ed. Simon Kow, John Duncan, and Mark Blackell (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 165–86.

the *Social Contract* accordingly. Heidegger, meanwhile, goes beyond even Nietzsche in his praise of the tragic culture of ancient Athens as the heretofore high-water mark of Western civilization, and writes favorably about medieval cities such as Bamberg whose impressive cathedrals serve, like the rural temples of Greek antiquity, as great world-disclosing works of art.¹²

According to Rousseau, cities are salutary insofar as they promote freedom and political virtue, while for Heidegger, an authentic city (*polis*) is the open space for the mysterious revelation of Being to a people, as the “pole” around which this revelation is gathered.¹³ The tension between their conceptualizations of the healthy city is exemplified by their competing evaluations of Athens and Rome. Heidegger praises Athens’s tragic festivals as exemplars of the Greeks’ mysterious and primordial relationship to Being, while Rousseau sides with Sparta over Athens in response to the latter’s commercialism and decadent dedication to the arts and sciences.¹⁴ Conversely, Rousseau praises republican Rome for its austere civic culture while Heidegger criticizes it for its superficial appropriation of Greek philosophy and culture. They agree, however, that the modern commercial city is fundamentally corrosive of the highest political goods: freedom and virtue for Rousseau, and the autochthonous existential-philosophic depth of an authentic historical world for Heidegger. Moreover, they concur that the incompatibility of the modern commercial city with authentic modes of existence emerges out of its production of the bourgeois as an inauthentic, egoistic individual uprooted from the soil of the homeland, which provides a decisive impetus for their political thought. Allan Bloom¹⁵ and Arthur M. Melzer¹⁶ underscore the significance of Rousseau’s critique of the bourgeois, contributing to what Bernard Yack describes as the “longing for a total revolution” against “the ‘dehumanizing’ spirit of modern society” that would typify post-Rousseauian German thought.¹⁷ Since Rousseau’s critique of the bourgeois emerges from his critical observations of “cosmopolitan life in a great capital city,” Charles E. Ellison rightly argues that Rousseau’s political theory “is significantly related to and perhaps even shaped by his theory of the modern city.”¹⁸

¹² Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 166.

¹³ Martin Heidegger, Hölderlin’s Hymn “The Ister”, trans. William McNeill and Julia Davis (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 79–83; Martin Heidegger, *Nature, History, State: 1933–1934*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 41–42.

¹⁴ Rousseau’s critique of Athens in the “Discourse on the Arts and Sciences,” in *First and Second Discourses*, ed. Roger Masters (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1964) (henceforth *First Discourse*, with “Discourse on the Origin of Inequality” as *Second Discourse*) must be tempered by his devotion to the arts and sciences. For an attempted resolution, see Leo Strauss, “On the Intention of Rousseau,” *Social Research* 14, no. 4 (1947): 463–64, 475.

¹⁵ Allan Bloom, “Introduction,” in *Emile or on Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books: 1979), 4–5.

¹⁶ Arthur M. Melzer, “Rousseau and the Problem of Bourgeois Society,” *American Political Science Review* 74, no. 4 (1980): 1018–33.

¹⁷ Bernard Yack, *The Longing for Total Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 7 (see 8 which implicates Heidegger); see also Werner J. Dannhauser, “The Problem of the Bourgeois,” in *The Legacy of Rousseau*, ed. Clifford Orwin and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 3–19.

¹⁸ Charles E. Ellison, “Rousseau and the Modern City: The Politics of Speech and Dress,” *Political Theory* 13, no. 4 (1985): 497.

Rousseau delineates the ancient city from its modern counterpart by distinguishing the citizen from the bourgeois.¹⁹ He claims that “the true meaning” of the word *city* “has been almost entirely lost among modern men,” causing them to “mistake a town [*ville*] for a City [*Cité*], and a bourgeois from a citizen. They do not know that houses make the town, but that citizens make the City.”²⁰ A true city, in the ancient sense of the *polis*, is not simply any large concentration of buildings or inhabitants, but a collection of active, civic-minded citizens who are “participants in the sovereign authority.”²¹ True citizens are those who have been “denatured” by the political community to find “the *I*” not in the “absolute existence” of the originary wholeness of the natural pre-political individual, but in the “relative existence” of “the common unity,” where they believe themselves “no longer one but a part of the unity.”²² As Judith Shklar²³ and Melzer²⁴ argue, while the artificial wholeness of the citizen as a wholly dependent member of the community is limited in comparison to the natural wholeness of the independent and wholly self-referential individual of the state of nature, it is nevertheless perhaps the best approximation of natural wholeness, liberty, and equality that the majority of individuals can hope to experience amidst the fallenness of civilization.

The bourgeois, in contrast is not a citizen of the city or *polis*, but is a town (i.e., borough) dweller. The modern town or city might be larger than the ancient *polis*, but for Rousseau, the difference between the two is qualitative rather than quantitative. Lacking a republican city or *patrie*, the bourgeois is caught in a no-man’s land between the state of nature and the civil state. The bourgeois lacks both the natural wholeness that the pre-social individual finds in oneself, and the artificial wholeness that the “citizen” finds in the city.

He who in the civil order wants to preserve the primacy of the sentiment of nature does not know what he wants. Always in contradiction with himself, always floating between his inclinations and his duties, he will never be either man or citizen. He will be good neither for himself nor for others. He will be one these men of our days: a Frenchman, an Englishman, a bourgeois. He will be nothing.²⁵

If the bourgeois is the typical fruit of the modern commercial state—of France and England, and their metropolises of Paris and London—then from a Rousseauian standpoint, the modern approach to politics, which centers the city as commercial borough rather than a rustic *polis*, is inherently defective.

¹⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, ed. Roger D. Masters (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1978).

²⁰ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, I.vi; *Emile*, 337.

²¹ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, I.vi.

²² Rousseau, *Emile*, 40; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “On the Government in Poland,” in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 11, ed. Christopher Kelly (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2005), 179.

²³ Judith Shklar, *Men and Citizens: A Study of Rousseau’s Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

²⁴ Arthur M. Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

²⁵ Rousseau, *Emile*, 40.

As opposed to the civic-minded austerity of ancient republics, the modern state expands outward from large metropolises whose power stems from commerce rather than manpower, and whose appeal lies in its promises of *doux commerce*: luxury, abundance, and the arts and sciences. In comparison to “ancient politicians [who] incessantly talked about morals and virtues, those of our time talk only of business and money.”²⁶ Accordingly, the bourgeois is primarily occupied by the pursuit of private commercial ends, which contribute toward the collective ends of state wealth, power, and prosperity. Rousseau, however, famously countered that the egoistical and acquisitive spirit of commerce is ultimately a corrosive political and moral force. Commercialism replaces attachment to the *patrie* with an attachment to money; entraps us as mutually dependent individuals within a zero-sum competition, encouraging dissembling actors and cunning knaves who find ingenious ways to excel at the expense of other; proliferates the desires, making us increasingly dependent on obtaining a growing number of unnecessary luxuries; its development of the “useless” arts soften and enfeeble us, enervating the “vigour of the soul” from which virtues spring; exacerbates natural inequalities of strength and cunning while enshrining them as inheritable inequalities of wealth, and so on. Hence Rousseau’s polemical judgments that, as the centers of commerce, the arts, and luxury, “Cities are the abyss of the human species,”²⁷ and “a capital is a pit into which almost the entire nation goes to lose its morals, its laws, its courage, and its freedom.”²⁸

We can find echoes of Rousseau’s critique of the urban bourgeois in Heidegger’s description of “inauthentic” *Dasein* in *Being and Time*. For Heidegger, authenticity and inauthenticity are intimately bound with time and historicity. Whereas the authentic individual reconciles the three “ecstases” of time (past, present, and future) by directing present actions in accordance with future projects, that are in turn informed by the possibilities opened up by the past, the inauthentic individual lacks futural aims and is alienated from their heritage, thus lost to the present moment and the whims, opinions, and “idle chatter” of “the they” (*das Man*).²⁹ Whereas Rousseau blames “foresight” (including that of death) and memory for civilized man’s inability to enjoy the sweetness of the sentiment of existence,³⁰ Heidegger embraces being-towards-death as the mode of existence that shakes us from an immersion in the present and redirects us toward future oriented goals and projects that give existence unity and purpose. Insofar as the modern urban world privileges the busy-ness and stability of the present at the expense of futural civilizational goals rooted in the primordial depths and destiny of one’s collective heritage, I join critical Heidegger scholars

²⁶ Rousseau, *First Discourse*, 51.

²⁷ Rousseau, *Emile*, 59.

²⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Plan for a Constitution for Corsica,” in *The Collected Writing of Rousseau*, vol. 11, ed. Christopher Kelly (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth Press, 2005), 123–155; see Rousseau, *Emile*, 468–69.

²⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010), 170–71, see also 163–64, 242–44; cf. Ellison, “Rousseau and the Modern City,” 501, 504–9, for Rousseau’s critique of modern urban speech as “chatter.”

³⁰ See Rousseau, *Emile*, 82–83, 208, 222, 225, 379, 411.

in identifying an intimate (although not strictly determinative) connection between the text's discussion of authentic and inauthentic historicity and Heidegger's explicitly political writings from the 1930s.³¹

For Heidegger, the inauthenticity of so much of modern existence is bound up with the inauthentic historicity of the modern urban "world." Since *being-in-the-world* is one of the fundamental structures of *Dasein*, whether one is embedded in an "authentically" or "inauthentically" historical world plays an important role in whether one is capable of living authentically. In a dramatically urbanizing "world," however, individuals increasingly do not experience the rooted simplicity of the "countryside"³² with its historical "battlefields and cultic sites,"³³ but instead belong to the urban world of "everyday trade and traffic, as the soil from which they have grown and the stage where they are displayed."³⁴ Amidst the frantic busy-ness of the city with its distractions, demands, and entertainments, modern *Dasein* is "uprooted,"³⁵ "free-floating,"³⁶ and inconstant.³⁷

In contrast to the inauthentic urbanite, authentically historical (*geschichtlich*) *Dasein* is assigned (*geschichte*) a "fateful destiny" (*schicksalhafte Geschick*) by the way that Being has revealed itself to a particular "generation" grounded in a historical world.³⁸ Heidegger develops this theme in the early 1930s whereby collective participation in this shared fate is the basis of a *Volkgemeinschaft* as the authentic expression of political life, with the *Volk* serving, as Blitz observes, "as the authentic analogue" to the inauthentic "public" "as the home for *Dasein*."³⁹ Uprooted from the soil and heritage of the fatherland, the modern, urban, cosmopolitan *Bürger* does not participate in the primordial depths of the *Volkgemeinschaft* and the historic destiny assigned to it by Being (exemplified by the camaraderie experienced by soldiers in their "nearness to death" in World War I), but is instead a mere member of *Gesellschaft* (society) as an arbitrary collection of individuals coming together to pursue what are ultimately private ends.⁴⁰ The modern commercial city is therefore not an authentically historical world conducive to authentic existence, but an *un-Welt*; an emblem of the "moribund

³¹ See Blitz, *Heidegger's Being and Time*, chap. 6, 276–77; Waller R. Newell, "Heidegger on Freedom and Community: Some Political Implications of his Early Thought," *American Political Science Review* 78, no. 3 (1984): 775–84; Joannes Fritsch, *Historical Destiny and National Socialism in Heidegger's Being and Time* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999); Duff, *Heidegger and Politics*, 174–81; Ronald Beiner, *Dangerous Minds: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Return of the Far Right* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 75–86; Wolin, *Heidegger in Ruins*, 13–14. For readings that deny this connection, see Fred Dallmayr, *The Other Heidegger* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 5; Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 76.

³² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 370.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 369.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 170, see also 164, 166.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 369, see also 170, 375.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 371–72, see also 114, 390–91.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 365–68.

³⁹ Blitz, *Heidegger's Being and Time*, 277; see Bambach, *Heidegger's Roots*, 20; Duff, *Heidegger and Politics*, 180.

⁴⁰ Martin Heidegger, Hölderlin's Hymns "Germania" and "The Rhine", trans. William McNeill and Julia Ireland (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014), 66.

pseudocivilization” (*die abgelebte Scheinkultur*) of the modern post-Enlightenment West that is collapsing “into itself, pulling all forces into confusion and allowing them to suffocate in madness.”⁴¹

Thus, both Rousseau and Heidegger critique modern cities for generating the bourgeoisie—individuals who are egoistic yet inauthentic, lack manly vigor or resoluteness, and are ill-fitted participants of a genuine political community. Rousseau’s bourgeois is not fitted to be a citizen of a republic, jealously guarding its freedoms, whereas for Heidegger, the bourgeois is uprooted from the existential depths of participating in “the historical spiritual mission of the German Volk,”⁴² and therefore from Being. The shared identification of the modern commercial city with the inauthentic bourgeois lead both Rousseau and Heidegger to seek collective alternatives to the urban liberalism of Enlightenment civilization, which are colored by their respective republican/*völkisch* diagnoses of the political-spiritual maladies of modernity.

“[A]t the end of a few generations” Rousseau observes, cities cause “the races [to] perish or degenerate. They must be renewed, and it is always the country which provides for this renewal.”⁴³ Heidegger concurs, responding to the devastation of the countryside and uprooting of human beings from the earth with the proclamation that “everything essential and everything great originated from the fact that man had a home and was rooted in a tradition.”⁴⁴ In response to the purported decadence of the modern city, Rousseau and Heidegger both look to the countryside as a source for political-spiritual regeneration.

Rousseau’s Rustic Republicanism

Rousseau’s constitutional plans for Corsica and Poland emphasize the importance of favoring an agricultural rather than commercial economy as the foundation of the state. In contrast to Shklar’s assessment that the alleged “pseudo-realism” of his constitutional plans are “the most visionary, pejoratively utopian, of his works,”⁴⁵ I join Ethan Putterman,⁴⁶ Denise Schaeffer,⁴⁷ Jeffrey A. Smith,⁴⁸ and Mark J. Hill⁴⁹ in interpreting these texts as offering fraught but realist or prudential policy prescriptions, which seek to take “men as they are,”⁵⁰ activating the springs of the passions⁵¹ with significant adaptations

⁴¹ Martin Heidegger, “The Self-Assertion of the German University,” in *The Heidegger Controversy*, ed. Richard Wolin (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 38.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 30.

⁴³ Rousseau, *Emile*, 59.

⁴⁴ Martin Heidegger, “Only a God Can Save us,” in *The Heidegger Controversy*, ed. Wolin, 105–6.

⁴⁵ Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, 14–15.

⁴⁶ Putterman, “Realism and Reform.”

⁴⁷ Schaeffer, “Attending to Time and Place.”

⁴⁸ Smith, “Nationalism, Virtue, and the Spirit of Liberty”; Smith, “Nature, Nation-Building.”

⁴⁹ Hill, “Enlightened ‘Savages’”; Hill, “Rousseau and Poland.”

⁵⁰ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 46.

⁵¹ See Putterman, “Realism and Reform”; Smith, “Nature, National Building,” 30–32, 37.

to time and place,⁵² while nevertheless recognizing the political tensions and fragility of Rousseau's agrarian reforms.⁵³ I build on this literature by centering the ways in which these reforms not only seek to redress the ills of commerce, but of urbanism.

By "agriculture" Rousseau means a "constitution that leads a people to spread itself out over the whole surface of its territory, to settle there, to cultivate all its places, to love the country life, the labors that relate to it, to find the necessities and embellishments of life so well in them that it does not at all desire to leave it."⁵⁴ Agriculture is politically advantageous because it increases state power, and therefore independence, more readily than finance or commercialism. Hence Rousseau's maxim that "commerce produces wealth but agriculture assures freedom."⁵⁵ Agrarianism helps generate a larger and more robust civilian base, which is a "more real" source of power than the accumulation of wealth.⁵⁶

The taste for agriculture is advantageous to the population not only by multiplying men's means of existence, but also by giving the body of the nation a temperament and morals that cause them to be born in greater number. In every country the inhabitants of the countryside multiply more than those of the cities, either from the simplicity of the rustic life which forms better constituted bodies, or by the constant attention to labor which forestalls disorder and vices.⁵⁷

Whereas commercial cities primarily cultivate money, which ultimately begets more ephemeral money—in turn necessitating international trade and therefore dependence on other nations—the countryside produces citizens, who in filling the agrarian station of peasant-soldiers secure material self-sufficiency and military independence. The agrarian relationship to the land means that the peasant is "much more attached to their soil than city dwellers are to their towns" and therefore imbued with a "love of the fatherland [*la patrie*] which attaches him to its constitution."⁵⁸ Hence, the physically and morally robust peasant, with deep attachment to the soil and rootedness in the customs and character of the nation,⁵⁹ is a better and more willing soldier than the "rebellious and soft" bourgeois who puts their own interests ahead of the state's: "the genuine education of the soldier is to be a plowman."⁶⁰

⁵² See Hill, "Enlightened 'Savages,'" 486, 492 and "Rousseau and Poland," 255, 264, 266; Hill argues contra Smith, "Nationalism, Virtue, and the Spirit of Liberty," 420, that Rousseau does not revise his previous theories, but adjusts them to local circumstances.

⁵³ Smith, "Nature, Nation-Building," 46–47, identifies the dangers that overpopulation presents to the agrarian republic, while Schaeffer, "Attending to Time and Place," 428, 441, notes the risk of laziness and complacency that follows from an unreflexive attachment to agrarianism.

⁵⁴ Rousseau, "Corsica," 126.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 127.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 125; Rousseau, "Corsica," 214.

⁵⁷ Rousseau, "Corsica," 126; see Rousseau, *Emile*, 59, 362.

⁵⁸ Rousseau, "Corsica," 126.

⁵⁹ See Rousseau, *Emile*, 468–69.

⁶⁰ Rousseau, "Corsica," 126.

Agriculture also tends toward freedom insofar as it is the economic order most compatible with republicanism, and in particular, democracy. This is in part because democracy is a less costly form of government (its administration passes “through fewer ranks and requires the fewest different orders”⁶¹), making it particularly suitable to a rustic and egalitarian way of life. Likewise, the relative decentralization of democratic administration is well suited to Rousseau’s ambition of a population that is “evenly dispersed over the territory”⁶² (“the fundamental maxim of our foundation”⁶³), with power redistributed away from concentrated urban centers, thus “keep[ing] the country independent of the cities.”⁶⁴

A policy of agrarian revival and the corresponding repopulation of the country, however, requires addressing the root causes of urbanization: the commercialization of agriculture and the corresponding need to satisfy vanity (*amour propre*) through the unequal accumulation of the luxurious fruits of commerce. Rousseau establishes the “definite maxim that everywhere money is of the utmost necessity the nation detaches itself from agriculture in order to throw itself into more lucrative professions; the station of plowman is then either an object of commerce and a sort of manufacture for the big farmers, or the last resource of poverty for the crowd of peasants.”⁶⁵ While large commercial farms exacerbate inequality, turning plowmen into paupers, a commercial economy requires small-scale family farms to sell an excess yield in market towns in order to pay monetary taxes, which in turn exposes them to the temptations of the city’s lax morality and material abundance. “Brought up in brokering,” the farmer’s “children become debauched, attach themselves to the towns, lose the taste for their station and make themselves into sailors or soldiers rather than take on their father’s station. Soon the countryside is depopulated and the town swarms with vagabonds,” introducing “all the vices that finally cause the ruin of the nation.”⁶⁶

Rousseau must therefore find a way to lower if not eliminate the tax burden on farmers while restoring public virtue to make agricultural life self-sustaining. First, as Hill notes, he reduces rather than eliminates commercialism.⁶⁷ Rousseau proposes banning financiers and limiting the need of money to the greatest extent possible by favoring a system of non-monetary exchange of produce overseen by the state’s administrative apparatus, and by substituting taxes with labor service and a paid standing army with a militia.⁶⁸ Secondly, he tries to reduce the corruption of public morals and virtue by limiting the non-useful arts and sciences,⁶⁹ and by minimizing the temptations of the city by making “the

⁶¹ Ibid., 127.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 128.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 127; see Rousseau, *Emile*, 469–70, 474.

⁶⁵ Rousseau, “Corsica,” 129.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Hill, “Enlightened ‘Savages,’” 486–87.

⁶⁸ See Rousseau, “Corsica,” 141–43, 149, 150; Rousseau, “Poland,” 210–11, 213–14.

⁶⁹ Rousseau, “Corsica,” 144.

seat of the supreme Government ... less a capital than an administrative centre.”⁷⁰ After all, “a cultivating people must not look covetously at residence in cities and envy the fate of the sluggards who live there.”⁷¹

As Putterman,⁷² Smith,⁷³ and Schaeffer⁷⁴ agree, Rousseau ultimately recognizes that it will be easier to limit commercialism and revitalize agriculture by redirecting vanity than by fighting it. He would prefer money to be held in contempt rather than forbidden,⁷⁵ and to make the agricultural life the path toward recognition, esteem, and political privileges.⁷⁶ “It is a question of making the people adopt [agricultural] practices, of making it love the occupation we want to give it, of fixing its pleasures, its desires, its tastes there, in general of making it into the happiness of life, and of limiting plans of ambition to it.”⁷⁷

Banning money and forcing habitually idle citizens to labor on the fields is doomed to fail, because while fear of government force may stop individuals from doing evil, it does not sufficiently motivate them to do good.⁷⁸ Humans are, however, positively motivated by hope, and in particular the hope that they can achieve pleasure. With the development of vanity, the socialized individual takes more pleasure from public than private pleasures, from esteem and status rather than sensualism alone. Since esteem, as an inter-subjective good, is ultimately dependent on popular opinion, “the arbiters of a people’s opinion are the arbiters of its actions. [Vanity] seeks things in proportion to the value [opinion] gives them; to show [vanity] what it ought to esteem is to tell it what it ought to do.”⁷⁹ Rousseau’s task, then, is to make sure that agricultural life is held in sufficient public esteem for citizens to be drawn to and remain content within it.

He proposes to reinvigorate agricultural life by “attaching men to the land, so to speak by drawing their distinctions and their rights from it” and “strengthening this bond by that of the family by making the land necessary to the station of fathers.”⁸⁰ He divides the Corsican nation into “aspirants,” “patriots,” and “citizens,” allowing individuals to climb these ranks in accordance with their cultivation of land and establishment of families, incentivizing men to become patriarchs and farmers:

Not seeing anything above them, those who carry it on will make it their glory, and opening up for themselves a path to greater employments they will fill this station like the first Romans. Not being able to leave this station, one will want to distinguish oneself in it, one will want to fill it better than others do, to make larger harvests, to furnish a stronger contingent to the

⁷⁰ Ibid., 132.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Putterman, “Realism and Reform,” 481–94.

⁷³ Smith, “Nature, Nation-Building,” 30–37.

⁷⁴ Schaeffer, “Time and Place,” 422–23.

⁷⁵ Rousseau, “Poland,” 179.

⁷⁶ Rousseau, “Corsica,” 153–54.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 138.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 153.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 154.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 138.

state, to deserve the people's votes in elections. Large families well nourished and well clothed will bring honor to leaders; and since real abundance will be the sole object of luxury, each will want to distinguish himself by that sort of luxury.⁸¹

Rousseau therefore redirects vanity so that one finds esteem, privilege, and pleasure not in the individualistic hedonism of the city, but in fulfilling one's duty to the farm, family, and state. The farmer reaps the benefits of both the natural freedom of the relative independence and self-sufficiency of the family farm, as well as the civic freedom of the citizen of a well-ordered republic, which secures his liberty, equality, and property.

Heidegger also thought that spiritual-political renewal was intimately connected to a revitalization of the people's relationship to the soil. Yet, his political ambitions demand a complete break with Enlightenment normativity, including, as Newell observes, Rousseau's acceptance of the modern premise that humans are primarily individuals motivated by self-love, and that a well-ordered republic requires formal constitutional guardrails that protect the rights of citizens and reflect the pre-political freedom and equality of the individual.⁸² Whereas Rousseau thought that the raw, lawless vigor of the Corsicans and the Poles presented a rare opportunity for modern European peoples to receive ambitious legislation that would instrumentalize agrarianism in service of the goods of freedom and equality, Heidegger sought to harness what he saw as the promising spiritual-political energies of the German *Volk* during the 1933 National Socialist revolution in service of the existential-ontological principle of *völkisch* primordial rootedness itself.

Heidegger's Radical Retrieval of Rootedness-in-the-Soil

Heidegger claims that, amidst the wasteland of liberal modernity, the German *Volk* has been tasked with creating "a truly *spiritual* world,"⁸³ which consists neither in culture or "useful knowledge and values,"⁸⁴ but rather "the power that comes from preserving at the most profound level the forces that are rooted in the soil and blood of a *Volk*, the power to arouse most inwardly and to shake most extensively the *Volk's* existence."⁸⁵ As rector of the University of Freiburg, Heidegger tried to make this total revolution of German *Dasein* a reality by embedding students in the rural soil, in spatial-spiritual proximity to the peasantry.

Heidegger outlines a politics of space, soil, and rootedness that rejects modern understandings of the state. Just as Heidegger critiques the Cartesian-Newtonian idea of space as a series of empty coordinates abstracted from historical meaning, he denies that we can take "the space of the people ... as a bounded

⁸¹ Ibid., 144.

⁸² Newell, *Tyranny and Revolution*, 201-2.

⁸³ Heidegger, "Self-Assertion," 33 (original emphasis).

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 33-34, see 38; see also Martin Heidegger, *Being and Truth*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015), 5-7, 46, 52, 69-71.

geometrical surface that we can measure precisely in terms of square kilometers—that is, as a measurable extended area” contained within clearly demarcated borders.⁸⁶ The state cannot be understood formally as “an intellectual construct, or a sum of legal principles, or a constitution.”⁸⁷ Rather, it “is essentially related to space and formed by space,”⁸⁸ “people and space mutually belong together.”⁸⁹ Because the state is the state of Being of the *Volk*, and the Being of the *Volk* is rooted in its primordial relation to the land as a historical *Vaterland*, rootedness-in-the-soil is an ontological and political necessity for an authentic *Volk*/state. The question of who belongs to the *Volk*, meanwhile, cannot be determined by an abstract, formal consideration of residence within the state’s administrative borders. “For a Slavic people, the nature of our German space would definitely be revealed differently from the way it is revealed to us; to Semitic nomads, it will perhaps never be revealed at all.”⁹⁰ Membership as part of a *Volk* entails having an ethnically-historically derived relation to the land (and thereby Being) “that cannot be taught; at most, it can be awaked from its slumber.”⁹¹

As Charles Bambach⁹² and Richard Wolin⁹³ demonstrate, Heidegger’s philosophy sets itself the task of reawakening German *Bodenständigkeit*. His first strategy is to rebalance political power between the urban and rural. As with Rousseau’s constitutional projects, this involves repopulating the countryside and limiting the appeal of the city. In order to cultivate “a fully valid existence as a *Volksgenosse* [comrade of the folk-people] in the German *Volksgemeinschaft*” one must “know to what point urbanization has brought the Germans, how they would be returned to the soil and the country through resettlement.”⁹⁴ This would be part of a larger effort by various instruments of the state and civil society, including the university and newspapers, of promoting “public state-mindedness in the village and, in the city ... a political existence that remains bound to the rural areas.”⁹⁵

Heidegger, however, provides a warning of how not to rebalance the relationship between the country and the city. “The world of the city runs the risk of falling into a destructive error” by passing a “very loud and very active and very fashionable obtrusiveness” as “concern for the world of and existence of the peasant.”⁹⁶ For all the “literati’s dishonest chatter about ‘folk character’ and ‘rootedness in the soil,’” they disturb the peasant from what “he needs and wants,” namely, “quiet reserve with regard to his own way of being and its

⁸⁶ Heidegger, *Nature, History, State*, 53.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Bambach, *Heidegger’s Roots*.

⁹³ Wolin, *Heidegger in Ruins*, chap. 5.

⁹⁴ Martin Heidegger, “Political Writings: 1933–1934,” in *The Heidegger Case*, 53.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Martin Heidegger, “Why do I Stay in the Provinces?,” in *Philosophical and Political Writings*, ed. Manfred Strasser (London: Continuum, 2003), 18.

independence.”⁹⁷ Instead of the urbanite’s exploitation of the rural world as a site of recreation and novelty, or the presumptuous attempt to educate the country-dweller about indigenous folkways, the task before the Germans is “learn[ing] to take seriously that simple, rough existence up there. Only then will it speak to us once more.”⁹⁸

How, then, can the urbanized population be fruitfully reintegrated into the rural world of the peasants? As Rector, Heidegger answers with an ambitious attempt to reorganize the German University in accordance with a tripartite division of labor service (*Arbeitsdienst*), military service (*Wehrdienst*), and knowledge service (*Wissensdienst*), each of which is to be reoriented toward and benefit from exposure to the land. Having students participate in labor camps will serve as “a new and decisive force for education” that provides a “direct revelation of the *Volksgemeinschaft*” through working in solidarity with members of different classes in proximity to the land.⁹⁹ “[L]abor reconquers for the peoples its rootedness,”¹⁰⁰ providing “the basic experiences of hardness” and “closeness to the soil,”¹⁰¹ while clarifying and reinforcing “one’s sense of social origin [*der ständischen Herkunft*] and of the responsibility that derives for the individual from the fact that all belong together in an ethnic-cultural [*volkhaft*] unity.”¹⁰²

While Heidegger follows Rousseau insofar as he admits that self-interest and “employment prospects” will be what drive many of the “lame, comfortable, and effete” into the *Arbeitsdienst*, he breaks with Rousseau in locating the origins of the citizen’s pride not in the flattery of one’s vanity, but in a spirited attunement to the destiny of the *Volk*. “Those who are strong and unbroken are proud that extreme demands are being made of them: for that is the moment when they rise up to the hardest tasks, those for which there is neither pay nor praise, but only the ‘reward’ of sacrifice and service in the area of the innermost necessities of German Being.”¹⁰³

Next, Heidegger advocates that students participate in military service. The *Volk*’s “relatedness to space” consists of both “mastering space and becoming marked by space.”¹⁰⁴ Relatedness to land is not just a matter of agrarian labor:

it is not right to see the sole ideal for a people in rootedness in the soil, in attachment, in settledness, which find their cultivation and realization in farming and which gives the people a special endurance in its propagation, in its growth, in its health. It is no less necessary to rule over the soil and space, to work outwards towards a wider expanse, to interact with the outside world.¹⁰⁵

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Heidegger, “Political Writings,” 42.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 50.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 53.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 55.

¹⁰⁴ *Nature, History, State*, 55.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

The work of the peasant is therefore only one side of a *Bodenständigkeit*, which must be complemented by military-political rule over the land, and even “the will to expansion, or generally speaking, interaction,” whereby the state “finds its borders by working out into the wider expanse.”¹⁰⁶ Peoples who forget this “are in constant danger of losing their peoplehood and perishing.”¹⁰⁷ While Sonia Sikka¹⁰⁸ reads Heidegger’s invocations of international interaction¹⁰⁹ as intimating cosmopolitan dialogue, the contextual equation of the need for expansion/interaction with “the great problem of those Germans who live outside the borders of the Reich” who “do have a German homeland but ... do not belong to the state of the Germans, the Reich” and are thereby “deprived of their authentic way of Being,”¹¹⁰ lends itself more readily to Wolin’s identification of this discourse with the militaristic politics of the *Großdeutsches Reich*.¹¹¹ In contrast, Rousseau advises Poland to willingly lose territory so that it can better protect the land it does own, while disbanding its paid standing army in favor of a defensive militia that can guard the country and its constitution.¹¹²

Nevertheless, Rousseau and Heidegger do agree that exposure and attachment to the land makes citizens better soldiers. Heidegger’s memorial address for the proto-Nazi martyr Leo Schlageter¹¹³ impresses upon his student audience that the “clarity of heart” that allowed Schlageter to “place before his soul an image of the future awakening of the Volk to honor and greatness so that he could die believing in this future”¹¹⁴ (i.e., “the greatest thing of which man is capable”¹¹⁵), came from his rootedness in the Black Forest. As Schlageter “stood defenseless facing the rifles, the hero’s inner gaze soared above the muzzles to the daylight and mountains of his home that he might die for the German people and its Reich with the Alemannic countryside before his eyes.”¹¹⁶ He therefore urges his students, when on their “hikes and outings ... in the mountains, forests, and valleys, of the Black Forest, the home of this hero,” to “experience ... and know” Schlageter’s relation to the land;¹¹⁷ the hardness of the “primitive” granite stone of the mountains should “harden[] the will,” while the autumn sun that “bathes the mountain ranges and forest in the most glorious clear light” should nourish the same “clarity of heart” that enabled Schlageter’s heroism.¹¹⁸

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 55–56.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 55.

¹⁰⁸ Sonia Sikka, *Heidegger and Morality: Questioning the Shepherd of Being* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 8, chap. 5.

¹⁰⁹ See also “Political Writings,” 48–53, which affirms Hitler’s plebiscite to leave the League of Nations so as to facilitate “manly” (48) international encounters.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 56.

¹¹¹ See Wolin, *Heidegger in Ruins*, 277–79, 263–67.

¹¹² Rousseau, “Poland,” 216–22.

¹¹³ See editor’s footnote to Heidegger, “Political Writings,” 40.

¹¹⁴ Heidegger, “Political Writings,” 41.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 40 (original emphasis).

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 41.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

Heidegger rejects the dominance of abstract, universal knowledge, arguing that genuine *Wissensdienst* is not occupied with the accumulation of indifferent knowledge, but with clarifying and awakening the historical mission of the *Volk*, and emerges out of the same provenance as, and in proximity to, the life of the peasant.¹¹⁹ He sees his work as being opened up by Todtnauberg valley.

On a deep winter's night when a wild, pounding snowstorm rages around the cabin and veils and covers everything, that is the perfect time for philosophy. Then its questions must become simple and essential. Working through each thought can only be tough and rigorous. The struggle to mold something into language is like the resistance of the towering firs against the storm.¹²⁰

The drama of the valley neatly encapsulates Heidegger's understanding of Being and the task of the philosopher: to gather the Heraclitean *polemos* of Being as *logos*. "[T]rue Wissenschaft does not differ at all from the knowledge of the farmer, woodcutter, the miner, the artisan" as each consists of knowing and comporting oneself to the communal "world," fulfilling "the task assigned us, whether this task be to till the soil or to fell a tree or to dig a ditch or to inquire into the laws of Nature or to illuminate the fate-like force of History," so as to allow the Germans to "master" their world-historical situation,¹²¹ thus following the "unprecedented will" of "our Führer Adolf Hitler."¹²²

Heidegger's famous musings on "the history of Being," which unfolded throughout the 1930s, were his attempt to clarify the world-historical "situation" to the Germans so that they could embrace their historical political-spiritual destiny of overcoming modern nihilism. The history of the West is one in which the original Greek raising of the question of "Being," out of a rootedness in and receptivity to the revelations of the mysterious, chthonic world of pre-Socratic Greece was gradually concealed by the post-Platonic metaphysical tradition's focus on eternal and otherworldly "beings" uprooted and abstracted from a people's particular, historical understanding of Being. This culminates in the free-floating, urban-industrial, cosmopolitan, worldlessness of technological modernity, which the Germans are tasked with overcoming through the initiation of "another beginning" of history, by way of a renewed encounter with the ancient Greek inception of history in the form of a new experience of Being rooted in the primordial ground of the German's relation to their language and soil.¹²³ Heidegger promotes Hölderlin as the prophet of Germany's historical mission of inaugurating the "other beginning" through a new German revelation of Being via a renewed poetic relation to the German landscape and language, sowing the

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 35; Heidegger, "Provinces," 16–17.

¹²⁰ Heidegger, "Provinces," 16.

¹²¹ Heidegger, "Political Writings," 58 (original emphases).

¹²² Ibid., 60.

¹²³ See Heidegger, *Being and Truth*, 93–94, 116, 129, 172; Martin Heidegger, *Logic as the Question Concerning the Essence of Language*, trans. Wanda Torres Gregory and Yvonne Unna (New York: SUNY Press, 2009), 126.

seeds for the “return” of the immanent gods of the homeland, as emissaries of the Volk’s relation to Being, and with them a new trans-modern political-spiritual world. While Jeff Malpas¹²⁴ and Fred Dallmayr¹²⁵ appeal to Heidegger’s turn to the Hölderlinian poetics of “place” beginning in 1934–35 as a rejection of his earlier embrace of Nazism, I emphasize along with Bambach,¹²⁶ Catherine H. Zuckert,¹²⁷ and Alexander S. Duff¹²⁸ its continuities with Heidegger’s “private” understanding of National Socialism.¹²⁹ As Bambach remarks,

Heidegger’s pastoral language of fields paths, native soil, pathmarks, fertile ground, and folkish rootedness ... betrays a fundamental unity with the language and axiomatics of his “other” paramilitary discourse about heroism, sacrifice, courage, will, struggle, hardness, violence, and self-assertion that marks his political works of the ‘30s and beyond. Far from being a pastoral roundelay about the rural landscape, Heidegger’s song of the earth in praise of rootedness and autochthony (*Bodenständigkeit*) is part of a martial-political ideology of the chthonic.¹³⁰

Whereas Rousseau’s material-psychological diagnosis of the decline of agriculture could theoretically be redressed through economic-institutional reform, Heidegger’s ontological-metaphysical diagnosis calls for a complete transformation of Western *Dasein*, demanding the end of the modern epoch and the leap into a radically new beginning of history, with new modes of thinking, poetry, and politics, rooted in the primordial ground of the soil and the abysses of Being.

Competing Conceptions of History and Being

While Rousseau and Heidegger’s contrasting historical milieus play an important role in their different political approaches to rural renewal,¹³¹ I focus on how their political differences point to core philosophic disagreements regarding the essence of and relation between Being, history, and nature. Heidegger raises his disagreements in two rare critiques of Rousseau from seminars from 1933–35, both of which are introduced within the context of broader critiques of modern/post-French Revolutionary political-intellectual dispositions. First, he uses a

¹²⁴ Malpas, *Heidegger’s Topology*, 20, 23.

¹²⁵ Dallmayr, *The Other Heidegger*, chaps 5, 6.

¹²⁶ Bambach, *Heidegger’s Roots*, 4–5, 63–68, 230–46.

¹²⁷ Catherine H. Zuckert, “Martin Heidegger: His Philosophy and his Politics,” *Political Theory* 18, no. 1 (1990): 58–59, 62–66

¹²⁸ Duff, *Heidegger and Politics*, 21, n. 41.

¹²⁹ Consider, for example, Heidegger’s post-war equivocation of the Allies with Nazi Germany through his assertion that mechanized agriculture is “in essence the same as the production of corpses in the gas chambers and concentration camps,” in *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures*, trans. Andrew J. Mitchell (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 26–27.

¹³⁰ Bambach, *Heidegger’s Roots*, 5.

¹³¹ See Helena Rosenblatt, *Rousseau and Geneva* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) and Hans Sluga, *Heidegger’s Crisis: Philosophy and Politics in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

politically charged reading of Hölderlin to critique the Rousseauian-Romantic view of Nature as a state of harmony and wholeness. The tenth strophe of Hölderlin's "The Rhine," at first appears to approvingly name Rousseau among the "demigods"—beings who, in striving toward Being raise themselves above mortals while necessarily falling short of the gods, become eschatological figures who signal the destiny of the German *Volk*.¹³² Heidegger argues instead that Hölderlin is critiquing Rousseau, or those inspired by him, for falling short of this station because of an inadequate relation to Being. Hölderlin's description of Rousseau as "foolishly divine" and lawless "out of holy fullness" must be read in the context of the stanza's broader evocation of "primordial beyng, uninterrupted in its naturalness, [which] suggests the thought of Rousseau and his teaching" of "*nature*" as a "constant, uninterrupted harmony with the gods and with beyng in general."¹³³ Here, Rousseau bifurcates "nature" and "history." Nature is the complete pre-linguistic/rational immersion in the pure be-ing of the present, while history represents an alienation from Being understood as the wholeness of nature.

Heidegger counters Rousseau's harmonious conception of nature with a Heraclitean understanding of *physis* (later translated to the Latin *natura*) as *polemos*, that is, struggle, war, or confrontation (*Kampf, Aufeinandersetzung*). For Heidegger, genuinely struggling with *physis* (Being understood as the immanent unconcealment and concealment of truth) and gathering it in the *logos* of poetry and thought is the ground of history and the highest distinction of human existence/civilization. The natural wholeness of the Rousseauian savage in his or her simple/pure immersion in Being as "nature" falls below the pre-Socratic's genuine historical encounter with Being as "physis" (i.e., the encounter of historical peoples with Being and its gods). Thus, the Rousseauian understanding of Being as "simply" remaining at "the origin" (as Hölderlin puts it), is according to Heidegger "not something that has properly sprung forth—that is, escaped from this beyng of the gods and even rebelled against them."¹³⁴ The Rousseauian is therefore "not a proper demigod, not a between whose essence is counter-turning," but a being who longs to remain in the womb of the sweetness of the sentiment of existence rather than wrest a people's historical experience of Being from concealment into unconcealment.¹³⁵ For Heidegger, then, Rousseau stands as another figure in the history of metaphysics who, in trying to rehabilitate "nature," contributes to the concealment of Being as a historical event.

Rousseau's belief in the harmonious goodness of nature as a regulative standard leads to a radically different conception of politics than Heidegger's understanding of nature as *physis* and *polemos*, which Gregory Fried locates at the center of Heideggerian politics.¹³⁶ The natural freedom and equality of the pre-

¹³² Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymns*, 251–52; Heidegger briefly returns to this stanza in *Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister,"* 139. For Heidegger's thematization of demigods, see *Hölderlin's Hymns*, 148–77.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 252 (original emphasis).

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ Gregory Fried, *Heidegger's Polemos: From Being to Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

historical and undifferentiated Rousseauian savage serve as normative guides for republican, egalitarian politics, whereas Heraclitean *polemos* distinguishes individuals and peoples in the arena of historical confrontation, giving birth to inequalitarian politics where some are revealed as masters and others as slaves. This extends to Heidegger's hierarchical ranking of peoples based on their proximity to Being. Some, like the Germans and Greeks, by virtue of the resources embedded within their respective languages, are elect peoples who enter into the most authentically historical relation with Being, while others, like the Africans, allegedly remain immersed in Rousseauian nature and thus never enter history understood as a genuine confrontation with Being.¹³⁷ Hence, in another brief but telling reference to Rousseau, Heidegger claims that "thought in a Greek way ... 'nature' in Rousseau" is a form of "barbarianism."¹³⁸ Other peoples, meanwhile, like the Americans, Western Europeans, or the Bolshevik Russians, have fallen out of history, as reflected by their ahistorical and egalitarian (i.e. technological) politics.

Heidegger identifies Rousseau's political thought with the latter grouping. For Heidegger, the proto-liberal idea of a pre-historical state of isolated individuals living in freedom and equality is a philosophical-political fiction that severs us from Being and cannot serve as a normative guide for politics.

Rousseau, for instance, believed that the state was a *contrat social* that was based on each individual striving for his own welfare. The state would no longer be the state in the sense of the political as the fundamental character of Western man, who exists on the basis of philosophy; it would be a subordinate means to an end, in service to the development of the personality in the liberal sense, one domain among many.¹³⁹

Thus, for Heidegger, Rousseau's republicanism remains fatally "liberal" insofar as it takes its bearings from the ideal of the individual, abstracted from historical-communal ties, who forms the state as an instrument in service of pre-political ends. This is opposed to the concept of the state as the *state of Being* of the *Volk*, born out of the Führer's "awakening the same will" in the people, from which "arises a community" of "sacrifice" and "service."¹⁴⁰

While Rousseau's constitutional projects put strong emphasis on cultivating national character along with communal virtues,¹⁴¹ these are instruments in service of approximating the freedom and equality of the pre-historical state of nature where humans are fundamentally self-interested individuals. While Rousseau also insists that the free political community of citizens must be a closed society, and that national characteristics flourish better in the country than in the commercial city, he differs from Heidegger insofar as he maintains—

¹³⁷ Heidegger, *Logic*, 71–72.

¹³⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, trans. Andre Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 70.

¹³⁹ Heidegger, *Nature, History, State*, 52.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 62–63.

¹⁴¹ See Rousseau, "Poland," 174–76; Rousseau, "Corsica," 133; Rousseau, *Emile*, 453.

as recognized by Leo Strauss¹⁴² and Helena Rosenblatt¹⁴³—that the philosopher can and should transcend the civic prejudices of the closed society in order to participate in the universal or cosmopolitan.¹⁴⁴

At the bottom of Heidegger's hierarchy are "nomadic" peoples who leave "wastelands behind them where they found fruitful and cultivated land."¹⁴⁵ If only a rooted *Volk* is capable of being authentically historical, and authentic historicity is the measure of human *Dasein*, then there is little stopping fascistic politics whereby the rooted/authentic *Volk* is entitled if not obligated to wage war against uprooting or deracinating forces, whether internally or externally. Hence he encourages the Germans to find an internal enemy who has "attached itself to the innermost roots of the *Dasein* of a people"¹⁴⁶ and to ready themselves for an attack against this enemy with "the goal of total annihilation."¹⁴⁷ Heidegger justifies this through his Heraclitean reading of *physis* as *polemos*.¹⁴⁸

Rousseau, on the other hand, provides a valuable corrective to (or at the very least, limits) these Heideggerian dangers through his more nuanced and ambivalent evaluation of rootedness and agriculture. Despite Rousseau's preference for agrarianism over commercialism in his constitutional projects, he pinpoints the development of agriculture and metallurgy as the fateful historical turning points toward the division of labor, establishment of private property, and enshrinement of gross inequality, whereby "vast forests were changed into smiling fields which had to be watered with the sweat of men and in which slavery and misery were soon seen to germinate and grow with the crops ... [F]or the poet it is gold and silver, but for the philosopher it is iron and wheat which have civilized man and ruined the human race."¹⁴⁹ That agriculture is unnatural is confirmed by the fact that it requires foresight,¹⁵⁰ and thereby temporality, which natural man lacks. In comparison, he holds up the nomadic "savage" as a natural ideal and praises the "golden mean" achieved by pre- or proto-agrarian semi-nomadic tribal societies as "the happiest and most durable epoch."¹⁵¹ When Rousseau does appeal to agrarianism it is to find ways to harness its power against the very evils it unleashed.

While both Hill¹⁵² and Istvan Hont¹⁵³ place greater emphasis on the development of metallurgy than agriculture in Rousseau's narrative of historical decline (there were, after all, more salutary forms of primitive agriculture prior to the

¹⁴² Strauss, "On the Intention of Rousseau," 473–74.

¹⁴³ Helena Rosenblatt, "Rousseau, the Anticosmopolitan?" *Daedalus* 137, no. 3 (2008): 59–67.

¹⁴⁴ See *Second Discourse*, 160–61; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Political Economy," in *On the Social Contract*, 218–20; Rousseau, *Emile*, 39, 468–70.

¹⁴⁵ Heidegger, *Nature, History, State*, 55, see 56.

¹⁴⁶ See Heidegger, *Being and Truth*, 73.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 73–74.

¹⁴⁹ Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, 152, see 153–60.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 153.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 150–51, see 153, 146.

¹⁵² Hill, "Enlightened 'Savages'," 481–83.

¹⁵³ Istvan Hont, *Politics in Commercial Society: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 99.

arrival of metallurgy), it is important not to go too far in absolving agrarianism. In addition to critiquing primitive agriculture as the germ of private property and the division of labor in the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau further qualifies his assessment of the independence of the rooted, agricultural life in *Emile*. He praises “man’s first trade” (agriculture) as “the most decent, the most useful, and consequently the most noble he can practice,” but warns that the farmer is “dependent on his field, whose harvest is at another’s discretion”—whether a “prince, a powerful neighbour, or a lawsuit.”¹⁵⁴ While the well-ordered martial agrarian-republic might reduce domestic or foreign threats to one’s land, root-edness itself nevertheless implies dependence. As *Emile* concludes,

In our travels I have sought to find some piece of land where I could be absolutely on my own ... I have found that my very wish was contradictory; for, were I dependent on nothing else, I would at least depend on the land where I had settled. My life would be attached to this land like that of the dryads was to their trees. I have found that dominion and liberty are two incompatible words; therefore, I could be master of a cottage only in ceasing to be master of myself.¹⁵⁵

Emile’s tutor teaches him a trade in addition to agriculture since the artisan who “depends only on his work ... is as free as the farmer is slave ... Wherever [enemies] want to vex the artisan, his baggage is soon packed.”¹⁵⁶ Yet even the artisan remains dependent: “to practice a single art they are subjected to countless others. A city is needed for every worker.”¹⁵⁷ Rousseau’s autobiographical writings thus explore the solitary nomadic artist or “man” living on the fringes of society as an attractive modern alternative to both the citizen-farmer and the bourgeois.¹⁵⁸

Rousseau’s greater acceptance of the limits of politics, and therefore of historical malleability, makes him more skeptical of the prospects for radical rural-political regeneration. He is doubtful that his schemes for agrarianism or republicanism can work in the large states that typify modernity—the window for agrarianism in Europe is rapidly closing, and corruption is difficult if not impossible to reverse once it has set in.¹⁵⁹ His agrarian constitutions are not possible among the large commercial states that typify modernity. “The best economic system for Corsica and for a Republic is assuredly not the best for a monarchy and for a large state. The one that I am proposing would not succeed either in France or in England, and could not even be established there.”¹⁶⁰ The physical size of these larger states renders commerce and money necessary for

¹⁵⁴ Rousseau, *Emile*, 195.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 470.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 195, see 457.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 188.

¹⁵⁸ See Christopher Kelly, *Rousseau’s Exemplary Life: The Confessions as Political Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987); Thomas L. Pangle, *The Life of Wisdom in Rousseau’s Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2023).

¹⁵⁹ Rousseau, “D’Alembert,” 125; see Rousseau, *Social Contract*, II.x.

¹⁶⁰ Rousseau, “Corsica,” 150.

administration and makes genuine republican self-governance unlikely. Even if these nations had a more advantageous size and population, they are already too corrupt to receive agrarian legislation. It therefore seems quite unlikely that Rousseau would think that any contemporary Western state remains capable of receiving such legislation, whereas Heidegger continues to hold onto eschatological hopes that even the corrupted post-war Germans (or perhaps the Russians or Chinese) will eventually inaugurate “an other” inception to the history of Being—a revolution beyond liberal modernity.¹⁶¹ Despite Rousseau’s influence on the French Revolution, even critics as unsympathetic as Bertrand Russell¹⁶² admit that, as Hill phrases it, “Although radical in thought, Rousseau was not a revolutionary.”¹⁶³ Accordingly, Rousseau puts himself at a greater ironic distance from his own plans for the rustic renewal of the political community than Heidegger.

Conclusion

While Rousseau and Heidegger overlap both in critiquing the modern, commercial city and in turning to the countryside for a political renewal that would take the community beyond the bounds of liberalism, they provide different political visions that anticipate two competing varieties of contemporary rural protest—republican populism and the *völkisch* New Right.¹⁶⁴ The failure to distinguish these visions risks the all-too-hasty support or condemnation of these movements as a unified whole (depending on whether we interpret protesters through the lens of rustic republicanism or the politics of far-right autochthony) rather than a nuanced exploration of how competing factions might pose challenges or offer opportunities for increasingly urbanized liberal democracies. This is not to downplay the similarities between these two admittedly ideal types. Both are critical of contemporary liberalism’s embrace of urbanization, globalization, and cosmopolitanism, favoring the rustic to the urbane, the rooted member of a small community to the cosmopolitan, and the domestic to the foreign. Rousseau embraces policy demands common to both, including the reduction or elimination of taxes on farmers, sharp limits on immigration, the formation of rural militias, and the championing of pro-natalist policies. Yet Rousseau’s rural vision remains more amenable to compromise with liberalism, insofar as he turns to the rustic virtues of the country to better secure the broadly democratic-egalitarian Enlightenment principles that underlie contemporary liberal

¹⁶¹ Heidegger, “Only a God Can Save us,” 106–8, 111–13.

¹⁶² Bertrand Russell, *The History of Western Philosophy* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis, 2004), 739–40.

¹⁶³ Hill, “Rousseau and Poland,” 266; see also Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, vii–viii, 30; Rousseau, “Poland,” 226, expresses preference for gradual reform over revolution; for the ambiguities of his historical/philosophic influence see *Rousseau and Revolution*, ed. Holger Ross Lauritsen and Mikkel Thorup (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011); Yack, *Longing for Total Revolution*.

¹⁶⁴ See n. 3. Both Heidegger’s New Right epigones Alain de Benoist (with Charles Champetier) *Manifesto for a European Renaissance* (London: Arktos, 2012), III.10 and 11, and Alexander Dugin *Eurasian Mission: An Introduction to Neo-Eurasianism* (London: Arktos, 2014), 85, critique “megapolises” and seek to repopulate the countryside.

democracies. In contrast, Heidegger and his far-right epigones seek to overcome the post-Enlightenment political world as such for the rebirth of authentic, illiberal, and trans-modern autochthonous peoples, as bearers of new collective revelations of Being.

Rousseau's rural republicanism highlights genuine structural difficulties that farmers are confronted with in commercial societies and may even offer resources to help embattled liberal democracies come to their own defense against far-right challengers. Yet, as he is aware, the nativist passions that he courts remain a highly combustible element of his republicanism.¹⁶⁵ Furthermore, Rousseau appears at times particularly unamenable to compromise between agrarianism and commercialism. He warns the Polish, for example, "above all" not to "attempt to unite these two projects; they are too contradictory, and to want to reach both by a mixed procedure is to want to fail at both of them."¹⁶⁶ Yet Rousseau's acknowledgment of the impossibility of moving from commercialism to agrarianism in large modern states, his compromises with commerce in his constitution for Corsica, his material-psychological rather than metaphysical-existential account of the decline of modern agrarianism, his recognition of the limits of the agricultural way of life, and his corresponding acceptance of the pole of "man" in addition to that of "citizen," all prove more amenable to pragmatic compromise with liberal polities than Heidegger's cultivation of total revolution. Such an uneven compromise—in which the agrarian would be subordinated but subsidized within a commercial and largely urbanized state—would likely only be able to alleviate some of the economic pressures and cultural-political insecurities that rural workers and communities face in a globalized economy. If, however, the only modern alternative to this compromise is the collapse of rural life, its expedience for unfettered commercialism would have to be weighed against the costs to civic cohesion and the longer term price to be paid for the loss of a vision of the good life that we, as heirs to both the Enlightenment and Romantic Counter-Enlightenment, recognize as an important spiritual—and perhaps also political—counterweight to the potential one-sidedness of life in the modern commercial city.

Acknowledgments. This research was funded by Government of Canada, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Postdoctoral Fellowship 756-2023-0488. Open Access was funded by the Colgate University Research Council. The author would like to give special thanks to Robert Sparling and the School of Political Studies at the University of Ottawa, and to Ruth Abbey, two anonymous reviewers, and the editorial team at *The Review of Politics* for their feedback and support, as well as to Simon Kow and Christopher Kelly for their generous comments as discussants of early versions of the manuscript at the annual 2024 conferences for CPSA and APSA in Montreal and Philadelphia, respectively.

¹⁶⁵ See Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, 79.

¹⁶⁶ Rousseau, "Poland," 210.

Cite this article: Timothy Berk, "Rustic Republics and *völkische Vaterländer*: Rousseau and Heidegger's Rural Political Visions," *The Review of Politics* (2026), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S003467052610076X>