

Summary

„Rousseau in Amerika: Liberale Tradition und demokratischer Dissens im US-amerikanischen Selbstverständigungsdiskurs“

by Hans-Jörg Sigwart

The essay examines Jean-Jacques Rousseau's influence on the „American political tradition“. This influence appears to be comparatively marginal at first sight, particularly within the political discourse during the American revolutionary and founding era. On closer inspection, however, the critical involvement with Rousseau's political thought turns out to be significant in various respects. It serves, first, as a major object of critique against which the “Founding Fathers” articulated their understanding of political liberty and republican government. Being virtually an alternative model to Rousseau's more radically democratic ideas, the Founder's conception of republican government nonetheless, secondly, shares with Rousseau the distinct emphasis on the principle of “popular government” as its ultimate basis of legitimacy. This twofold and partly contradictory connection towards Rousseauian ideas results in a principal normative tension inherent in the mainstream of American political self-understanding. This tension, which may be understood as a “Rousseauian moment” in the political theory of the American Founding, has, thirdly, served as a theoretical starting point of a genuinely American tradition of Rousseauian political critique that has continuously accompanied the liberal tradition of the American mainstream as its democratic “dissenting opinion”.

