

CHANGING THE COMMON WAY OF THINKING

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Part 1 – The *Encyclopaedia*, a polyphonic work

We saw that the *Encyclopaedia* was a collective work. It is also a polyphonic work. What does that mean? Let us first say that the Encyclopaedists did not all have the same literary voice, because they came from very different horizons of thought. For example, the Abbot Mallet was a Catholic theologian, Jean-Edme Romilly was a pastor, Saint-Lambert and d'Holbach were atheists, Beauzée was a fervent Catholic, Voltaire was deist, Morellet was sceptical, as to the three editors, if Diderot and D'Alembert were atheists, Jaucourt was Protestant.

It is, therefore, a true polyphony that rose from the *Encyclopaedia*. The diversity of authors guaranteed that the reader was not imposed a one-track thought. But it was not always peaceful knowledge and traditional content that the encyclopaedic dictionary offered. Diderot wanted the *Encyclopaedia* to spread critical spirit. "The characteristic of a good dictionary, he said, is to change the common way of thinking." The volumes of the *Encyclopaedia* were in fact infused with the most important political, religious, moral and scientific questions of the time. We will therefore mention some of them, starting with the political question and then the religious question.

Part 2 – *Encyclopaedia* and political criticism

Direct political criticism was the one expressed the most subtly because the *Encyclopaedia* was, until its prohibition, a work published under a regime of royal censorship, which means that each page was read by censors. However, alongside articles perfectly in line with the censors' expectations, we find very bold statements. We were then under a regime of absolute monarchy where royalty was considered of divine right. But here is what we can read in the article "Political Authority": "No man has received from nature the right to command others" and especially "The prince owes to his very subjects the authority that he has over them; and this authority is limited by the laws of nature and the state." The article caused a scandal, as has been said, and was one of the reasons for the first ban on the *Encyclopaedia*.

So it is often elsewhere, in seemingly innocuous articles, that the *Encyclopaedia* judged the royal government's policy; for example in the article "Hungry Appetite", we can read: "When people die of hunger, it is never the fault of Providence, it is always that of the administration" or again in the article "Beat", we note: "We trample the people when we charge them with excessive taxes." It is known that at the time taxes were levied on the people, while the nobility and the clergy were exempt from them, and salt, necessary to feed cattle, was heavily taxed by the gabelle.

It is necessary to read the article on the tax on salt where Jaucourt denounced it, because the peasants could not afford to pay. And Diderot's article "Indigent" is a true indictment of the political organisation that founded social justice. "Indigent": "A man who lacks the necessities of life in the midst of his fellow-men who enjoy with insulting pomp all the superfluities possible. One of the most unfortunate consequences of maladministration is to divide the society in two classes of men, some who live in opulence and others in poverty." We could almost believe that this article was written today.

Part 3 – *Encyclopaedia* and religious criticism

As for religious criticism, it can be said that one of the fiercest battles of the *Encyclopaedia* was conducted against intolerance and religious fanaticism. Indeed, at the time, the massacres of religion wars of the 16th century were still in all memories, and the same went for the revocation of the Edict of Nantes by Louis XIV in 1685, which had triggered violent persecution against Protestants and provoked the forced exile of tens of thousands of them, not to mention the persecution suffered by the Jansenists at the dawn of the 18th century.

To Diderot, "The word intolerance, he wrote, is traditionally understood as a fierce passion that leads to hating and persecuting those who are in the wrong". The article "Fanaticism", for its part, analysed the phenomenon throughout history and religions. It concludes: "Go through all the ravages of this plague under the crescent banner, and see from the beginning a caliph ensuring an empire of ignorance and superstition by burning all books... Soon another caliph will compel Christians to circumcision while a Christian emperor forces Jews to receive baptism." What could be the remedies? Wondered the author. "We do not know what to do with a group of fanatics: protect them and they trample you, persecute them and they rise up. There is only contempt and ridicule that can discredit them and weaken them. It is said that a chief of police, in order to put an end to the prestige of fanaticism, had resolved, in concert with a celebrated chemist, to have them parodied at the fair by charlatans." Encyclopaedic advice to meditate today.

Another barbaric practices, the Inquisition ones. This religious court that was active in Italy, Spain and Portugal, to uproot Jews, Moors, infidels and heretics. Jaucourt, in the article "Inquisition", warned his own century: "If anyone in posterity dares to say that in the 18th century all the peoples of Europe were civilised, we will quote the inquisition to prove that they were largely barbarians."

We have seen that both at political and religious level, there are many articles animated by the Enlightenment's critical spirit. Judged subversive then, they testify to the intellectual courage of their authors. And what strikes us in the 21st century is the relevance of many of these articles.