

# "ANTI-PHILOSOPHICALS"

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## Part 1 – The establishment of a category: "Anti-philosophers"

AS: Hello Olivier Ferret, you're an expert in literary quarrels from the age of Enlightenment. Can you explain to me what an "anti-philosopher" is and the connections this category has with the one of the "philosopher"??

OF: Hello Alain Sandrier, what a big question. In the book, I try to defend the idea that "anti-philosopher" and "philosopher" function as two labels which, one like the other, attach themselves to, or is attached but only finds a semblance of unity in the struggles which oppose both groups. On the one hand, the philosophers, the Enlightenment, both well-known, while on the other hand, the anti-philosophers, defined, as their name at the time indicates, by their opposition to the first.

But unlike philosophers who struggled to agree on a unified doctrine, anti-philosophers formed a quite heterogeneous group as demonstrated by Didier Masseau in his work entitled *Les Ennemis des philosophes*. All in all, it is their enrolment in a controversial field that bestows a minimum of consistency to these ideas. I also put forward the hypothesis that on account of this logic of confrontation, we have a lesser understanding of philosophical texts, their position, sometimes even of their excesses, if we ignore the texts of anti-philosophers.

AS: Could you give us an example of these controversial simplifications?

OF: To strike an equal balance, we find two common positions in the texts of this time. Under the pen of anti-philosophers, philosophers are rebellious people who want to ruin the fabric of France under the Ancient Regime. For philosophers, anti-philosophers are reactionary idiots or fanatics. Of course, in both cases, it's about controversial representations established by opposing texts in which the aim is to discredit the adversary. On closer examination, these positions are much more complex.

## Part 2 – The art of reading anti-philosophers

AS: Who was on the side of the anti-philosophers?

OF: Well, a good number of them could qualify, I'll use an anachronism. Reactionaries defended the traditional alliance of throne and altar. This meant carrying out the central role of religion, Catholic to be precise, within a political regime, a monarchy of divine right in which this religion is the religion of

the state. The philosophical clan is powerful. It benefits from support in high places like those in Louis XV's entourage, such as the queen or the dauphin. Some had support within parliament. In 1759, the indictment of assistant public prosecutor Joly de Fleury against the *Encyclopaedia* is directly inspired by texts by Abraham Chaumeix, an author among others of the *Legitimate Prejudices Against the Encyclopaedia*.

Some had support within government. That's the case of Minister Choiseul who, through political opportunism, supported Palissot, when the latter presented, in 1760, at the prestigious Comédie Française's theatre, a philosophic comedy which showed a group of philosophers on stage as dishonest people among who everyone recognised Diderot. Moreover, if Voltaire set himself against Fréron, it was because the journalist was at the head of powerful press organ, the *Année littéraire* which he rebaptised the *Âne littéraire*, whose newspapers were widely circulated and exercised a heavy influence on budding public opinion.

AS: However, they were not idiots.

OF: Certainly not, these were even astute readers of philosophical texts. Partisan as they all are, the reading of their work might also interest us, for example in order to understand what could not be said openly, but may be suggested, left to the implicit, because of the vigorous surveillance of printed editions under the Ancient Regime. Chaumeix understood perfectly how the *Encyclopaedia* worked, he updated its edginess, even if that meant exaggerating a little. The adversaries of Voltaire, Fréron mainly, understood perfectly what the issue of his plea in favour of tolerance was about. The subordination of religion under politics, which driven to the extreme, prefigured the separation of the church from the state. At any rate, it was about jeopardising the alliance of the throne and altar which I was talking about earlier.

## Part 3 – Anti-philosophers in posterity

AS: But they lost the game. How do you explain that?

OF: In the eyes of literary history, the die is cast, that's true. One hardly talks of Fréron's works any more except because Voltaire assured them some celebrity by having them as a target. It's true that the struggle is unequal from a certain point of view. Responding to texts by Voltaire with his incisive style and formal inventiveness through large volumes of profound refutation was probably not the wisest strategy for reaching a wider public. The *Legitimate Prejudices* by Chaumeix, for example, has a total of 8 volumes with more than 2300 pages in total. You'll tell me that the *Encyclopaedia* has 17 volumes and 11 theatrical works, but it's a dictionary and very rarely do people do guided reading on this.

Certainly, some anti-philosophers targeted the danger of oppressiveness and the serious mind, but they are visibly uncomfortable in the production of what Voltaire called the "short and salacious". Two years after the last volume of *Legitimate Prejudices*, Chaumeix would anonymously publish, under the title *La Petite Encyclopédie*, an attack on the *Encyclopaedia* which parodied the method of attack, that being the dictionary format, with very relative humour, one has to admit.

AS: Must these texts therefore be relegated to the museum of outdated literary curiosities?

The anti-philosophers certainly lost the literary battle. It is not, however, sure that they lost the ideological battle. Their ideas continued to circulate during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, right the way up to today. In the comedy *The Philosophers*, Palissot accuses philosophers of trampling family lines under foot, of wanting to annihilate religion and even undermining the idea of nation with their cosmopolitanism. These beliefs resound strangely with what we've been hearing about over the last few years in terms of decline in supposedly patriotic identity, of questioning the principle of the separation of state and religion and the defence of the family, thus implying the Christian family.

AS: Let's say to conclude that you must know the roots of these arguments to better understand this defence philosophers fought for and the values they fought for, the values they naively believed were universal, but which they'd defend when they were attacked. Thank you very much Olivier for having reminded us of this context.