



HOW RADICAL WAS THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF THE ENCYCLOPÉDIE?

In this month's discussion Henry C. Clark, who is a visiting professor in the Political Economy Project at Dartmouth College and the editor and translator of [Denis Diderot's Encyclopédie Liberty](#) (Liberty Fund, 2016), explores some of the currents of political thought which swept through the massive 17 volume Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers which appeared over a 15 year period between 1751 and 1765. In his lead essay he argues that, although it offended at times the Church and the French government, it could be read in ambiguous ways. The influences of [John Locke](#), [Voltaire](#), and [Montesquieu](#) are assessed and he concludes that the Encyclopédie was "not so much an ideology as a quarry" from which different readers were destined to draw different kinds of inspiration. Hank is joined in this discussion by Dan Edelstein who is William H. Bonsall Professor of French, Stanford University; Andrew Jainchill, Associate Professor, Department of History, Queens University, Kingston Ontario; and Kent Wright, Associate Professor School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership, Arizona State University.

HOW RADICAL WAS THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF THE ENCYCLOPÉDIE?

by Henry C. Clark



Libertas (Liberty)

The *Encyclopédie* referred to here was a multivolume compilation edited by Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert starting in 1751 that did double duty--as a massive reference work full of factual and up-to-date information on every possible topic and as a "war machine" (Diderot's term) for wide-ranging enlightened reform.^[1] Its 73,000 or so articles included a fair number of entries on expressly political topics. How radical was the doctrine contained in those entries?

The question is as old as the work itself. To the authorities, that compendium--by some measures the most important publication project of the 18th century--began and remained plenty radical. Right away in 1752 and again in 1759, the French Church and state banded together to discontinue its publication, briefly in the former case, indefinitely (for several years, as it turned out) in the latter.^[2] The religious and political content of the work, as well as the domestic and even international controversies that seemed to crop up around it, made it a lightning rod, perhaps even a scapegoat, for many of the tensions of the day.

Across the Channel, meanwhile, Adam Smith spent nearly a third of the University of Glasgow's library budget acquiring the first seven volumes, while defending its innocence and clearly drawing on some of its contents in drafting his own work.^[3] The English legal compiler Owen Ruffhead thought that "Whoever takes the trouble of combining the several political articles, will find that they form a noble system of civil liberty."^[4] Edmund Burke, on the other hand, writing during the French Revolution, detected in it a cabal of "men of letters" who, no longer as influential as they had been under Louis XIV, hatched a conspiracy for nothing less than "the destruction of the Christian religion."^[5]

Recently, our question has taken a different turn. As part of his revisionist project on the Enlightenment--a project that hinges upon redefining its religious, metaphysical, and political commitments in roughly equal measure^[6] - Jonathan Israel has argued that the *Encyclopédie*, under Diderot's guiding influence, gave a major impetus to an essentially Spinozistic combination of atheism, materialism, and democratic egalitarianism central to the age as a whole. He sees a "decisive shift to radical ideas" on the part of Diderot and his circle in the years just before his editorship began (1748-51). He asserts that, despite d'Alembert's promise in the lengthy "Preliminary Discourse" (1751) of a Baconian project of useful empirical knowledge, this goal was "in no way reached," partly because Diderot was himself opposed to such Baconianism. Instead, this Anglo-centered model ended up being "squeeze[ed] ... into a subordinate, marginalized status" under Diderot's influence. Politically in particular, the *Encyclopédie* did not "reflect the views and perspectives" of the main French followers of this English mainstream, especially Voltaire and Montesquieu.^[7]

Not unlike the argument as a whole, this latter claim surprised many readers, since the centrality of Voltaire and Montesquieu to the mid-century Enlightenment has long been taken for granted. In a study that uses data-mining techniques on word-searchable texts such as the *Encyclopédie*, authors associated with the ARTFL^[8] *Encyclopédie* database at the University of

Chicago have disputed Israel's conclusions. Though they document a "'subversive style' of non-citation" in the work, they find little evidence of "Spinozist philosophy," instead concluding that the *Encyclopédie* as a whole "was overwhelmingly tilted toward such authors as Voltaire and Montesquieu."^[9]

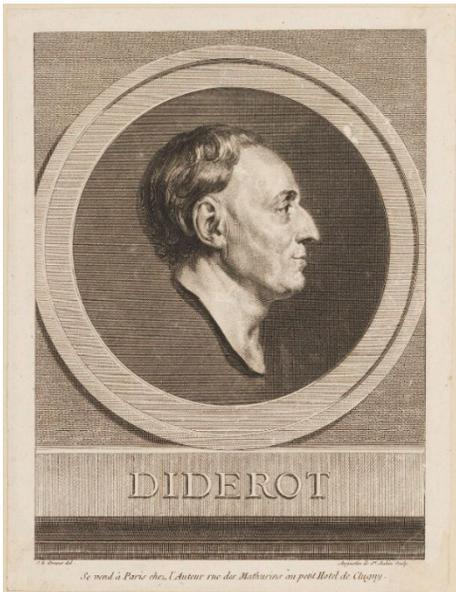
"MEN OF LETTERS"...HATCHED A
CONSPIRACY FOR NOTHING LESS
THAN "THE DESTRUCTION OF THE
CHRISTIAN RELIGION."

The pitfalls in venturing a general answer to our question are formidable. Unlike a standard, single-author work--which, of course, can harbor its own ambiguities--the *Encyclopédie* was rolled out sequentially over a 14-year period, one that saw significant changes in both France and Europe. The editorial "line" was not necessarily identical in 1765 to what it was in 1751. Moreover, what kind of editorial "line" was even possible for such a work? There were somewhere between 140 and 160 contributors to the project as a whole. Although Diderot could at times be an active, hands-on editor, he was also inevitably at the mercy of the different authors whose contributions he needed to fill out the volumes in a timely fashion. There is thus a certain irreducible pluralism attending its composition.

It is useful in this light to wonder what a casual, ordinary 18th-century reader might have experienced in browsing through a work which, after all, few would have read straight through. Though doubtless artificial, this exercise bids us to notice the eclectic variety of perspectives actually present in the texts. One such perspective is a certain pronounced strand of "conservatism" (for want of a better term) that tends to be forgotten today.^[10]

Take the case of Antoine Gaspard Boucher d'Argis.^[11] Legal scholar and jurist, Boucher d'Argis contributed the rather staggering figure of some 4,500 articles out of the 73,000 total, making him well and truly the in-house expert on all things legal. It is normally said of Boucher d'Argis that the majority of his entries were

primarily descriptive rather than prescriptive, so he is often overlooked in discussions of political thought. But lucid summaries of countless aspects of legal history and practice, however dry in presentation, might have been informative and interesting to many contemporaries, as indeed they continue to be to us. Moreover, our casual reader might have noticed that the author could embed his policy preferences in his dry descriptions, more often than not for the "conservative" purpose of urging government to perform its traditional duties. In his entry on "Loix somptuaires" ("Sumptuary laws"), to take one example, the jurist caps an historical survey, ancient and modern, by recommending that "all these sumptuary laws should be observed in order to repress luxury" in all its forms.^[12]



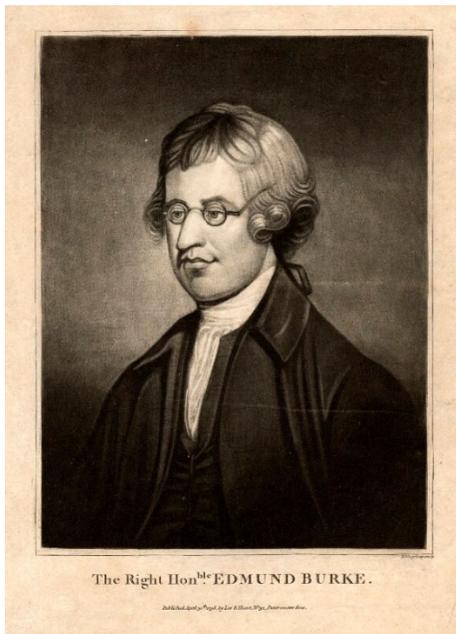
Denis Diderot

It is worth noting, too, the circumstances under which Boucher d'Argis was welcomed onto the team of contributors. It happened only with volume three, shortly after the first of the two above-cited controversies that threatened to shut the whole project down. So his inclusion may perhaps be viewed as an implicit compromise by the editors, part of a continual give-and-take with the authorities that stretched over many years.^[13] It is important not to lose sight of this give-and-take because it did much to shape the parameters of acceptable discourse within the 17-volume enterprise as

a whole. Since some of Diderot's most famous works today are audacious works of the imagination that were only published posthumously, it is easy to be drawn into speculations as to what his "real" political commitments may have been. The benefits of these speculations, however, have their limits, since it was the text itself of the *Encyclopédie* that became a best-seller.^[14]

Early on in the project, Diderot seems to have developed an intuition as to what the acceptable boundaries of discourse were likely to be. His article on "Autorité politique" ("Political Authority"), which appeared in the first volume, stirred up a storm for its opening salvos in defense of limited government based on individual consent. By the end of that same article, it had emerged that "obeying, honoring and fearing their master" is a political obligation for French subjects.^[15] Sardonic irony or tactical retreat? Contemporaries wondered, and so can we.^[16]

But the case for taking such moments of apparent "conservatism" seriously is not a negligible one. At the end of a generally sympathetic treatment of "Democracy," for example, the Chevalier de Jaucourt--drawing mostly on Montesquieu^[17]--closes with a cautionary note: "it is quite rare," he writes, "that a *democracy* is able to save itself for long from these two shoals"--that is, from aristocratic inequality and despotic equality. Such a conclusion bespeaks, it would seem, an altogether classical suspicion of popular government. In "Government," too, Jaucourt treats constitutions as organic entities, which "carry within them the principle of their destruction." While a return to first constitutional principles is possible, it is by no means guaranteed because "After growing and expanding, states then tend toward their decline and their dissolution."^[18] In the entry on "Republic," likewise, Jaucourt does nothing to evade Montesquieu's scathing indictment of the contemporary Italian states of that form; indeed he highlights it, concluding with the latter's argument that "a prince's tyranny does no more to ruin a state than indifference to the common good does to ruin a republic."^[19]



Edmund Burke

In "Innovation," with language that could almost have been used by Burke, Jaucourt writes that "a novelty that has its advantages and disadvantages, and that is brought in to replace current abuses without mature reflection, will never fit with the fabric of a timeworn part because it is not matched to the piece."^[20] Likewise in the four-line entry on "Corruption publique" ("Public Corruption"), Diderot offers the pointed reminder that it is easier to abolish "bad" laws than to assure compliance with good ones since the latter depends inescapably upon "private integrity."^[21] So readers would have found plenty of classically inspired hesitations about sudden and radical change and about popular government.

It is true that the *Encyclopédie* was the venue for Jean-Jacques Rousseau's long, seminal essay that we now know as the "Discourse on Political Economy," appearing under the title "Economie ou Oeconomie" in 1755 and offering a trial run, as it were, for the far-reaching notion of the "general will" that would claim center stage in *Du Contrat social (The Social Contract)* seven years later. But it is also true that in a later volume, Diderot included an even longer article with a similar title, "Oeconomie politique," written by the speculative theorist of prehistoric antiquity Nicolas Antoine Boulanger, offering a much more favorable evaluation of modern monarchy. Contrary to

Rousseau's argument that life in the state of nature was in many ways healthier, nobler, and freer than in modern societies, Boulanger's multilayered essay painted a picture of modern, law-abiding monarchy as a long-gestating solution to the pathologies of all ancient life.^[22]

This episode raises a second general point, also not incompatible with a certain "conservative" reading of this collection. The late Istvan Hont suggested that the 18th century as a whole was not so much an age of republicanism as an age when a modern form of monarchy became a respected polity.^[23] Whatever one may think of the idea in general, it is certainly consistent with Boulanger's essay, and there are other ways too in which the modernization of the existing regime, rather than its replacement by one of different type, is manifest in the *Encyclopédie*. Our casual reader might have noticed multiple, periodic forays into the arena of what might simply be called "good government" advocacy.

In "Arithmetique politique" ("Political Arithmetic"), for example, Diderot sets up a sharp contrast between the new practice--Baconian in spirit--of carefully compiling demographic and economic statistics "useful for the art of governing people" and the more typical (unnamed) government minister so infatuated with his own "natural genius" that he feels he can dispense with such information.^[24] By drawing on the work of the 17th-century Englishman William Petty, Diderot conveys the impression that this particular contribution to good government is an English import (although French governments had, for good or ill, been refining their information-gathering techniques for some time).^[25] There are a number of entries on political economy, in fact, in which the Dutch and especially the English are taken as tutors initiating French latecomers into the modern art of promoting prosperity--Forbonnais's "Compagnie de Commerce" ("Trading Company"), for example, or Faiguet de Villeneuve's entry on the utility of private savings.^[26]



The assumptions behind populationism, or natalism, also account for a whole raft of arrows in the "good government" quiver. When contemporaries thought about enriching their societies, as they increasingly did, they were as likely to advocate measures to increase population as to raise the individual standard of living. Such thinking is highly prominent in the political thought of the *Encyclopédie*--"population" taking up nearly a full column in the Index of *Encyclopedic Liberty*. Even the constant drumbeat of attacks against the religious monopoly, censorship, and persecution associated with the Catholic Church may be viewed, in part, as so many attempts to "catch up" to the socially useful discovery made already in the 17th century by the Dutch and English--and to a certain extent more recently by rivals such as Frederick II (the Great) of Prussia--that a country could become more populous, and therefore richer, more powerful, and even happier, by welcoming religious minorities. It was the ultimate in contemporary "best practices." And more generally, the *Encyclopédie* turned out to be an excellent vehicle for promoting this whole, essentially recuperative brand of reformism.

The foregoing, of course, in no way denies that there were many bold, far-reaching, perhaps even radical political ideas found in Diderot's Dictionary. After all, the project was at various times publicly denounced, censored, and twice discontinued. To the extent that the buzz surrounding the work would have primed readers to seek out its novelties, we might assume that they would have been more rather than less likely to find them than in the absence of such buzz. There can be little doubt that many of our "casual readers" would have been Burkeans *avant la lettre* in their shocked responses to the

coverage of topics such as the religious foundations of monarchy, or that many others would have thrilled to the new language of freedom and political accountability they contain.

The Diderot biographer Arthur Wilson once argued that the *Encyclopédie* is essentially Lockean in the main orientation of its political thought.^[27] Although it seems a tad schematic today, there is no denying the frequency with which ideas such as natural liberty, individual consent, and popular representation make their way into the articles--entries such as "Etat de nature" ("State of Nature"), "Gouvernement" ("Government"), and "Pouvoir" ("Power") clearly sound these themes. The word "égalité" appears over 600 times in the collection, and "liberté" nearly 3,000.^[28]

But even bold, Lockean-sounding ideas were not necessarily entirely unmoored from any monarchical framework. Take d'Holbach's anonymous essay on "Representatives" ("Representans"), often regarded as one of the most original political essays in the entire collection.^[29] Published at a moment when the King was reasserting his own control over the "rights and interests" of the French people against a restive challenge by the judicial and administrative elite in the *parlements*,^[30] d'Holbach's 1765 entry seems audacious enough: a nation, he asserts, is represented not by privileged orders or hereditary powers of Church or nobility, but by "elected citizens who in a limited government are charged by society to speak in its name." While it might once have been acceptable for an "absolute monarch" to govern by the tacit consent of the people, buttressed by the above-named estates, times have changed; utility as defined mainly by economic production is now a better standard.^[31]

That seems like a straightforward, radical call for popular representative government. But even if we declare d'Holbach to be a forerunner of abbé Siyès' new "revolutionary representation," which is by no means a foregone conclusion, it is useful to recall how manifold were the attempts to anchor the various traditional French bodies in new forms of "social representation" throughout the century, almost invariably within the

framework not of a republic but of a decentralized, legally bound, liberalized monarch.^[32] The anonymous article "Intendants" ("Intendants") is a good example of the genre in *Encyclopedic Liberty*.



Louis de Jaucourt

By far the most active conveyor belt for reformist political ideas in the *Encyclopédie* was the aforementioned Chevalier Louis de Jaucourt. In a steady output that dwarfed that of the already prolific Boucher d'Argis at roughly 17,000 articles, the French Huguenot nobleman familiarized his readers not only with Locke, but with Sydney, Harrington, Thomas Gordon, and others in a broadly republicanizing orbit.^[33] He had spent decades in Switzerland, Holland, and England, clearly admired many aspects of these decidedly non-absolutist regimes, and did much to incorporate some of the ideas and political practices learned there into his countless entries.^[34]

Most notably, though, it was through the sieve of his close reading of Montesquieu, and especially *The Spirit of the Laws*, that Jaucourt offered up his political commentary. *The Spirit of the Laws* had appeared three years before the *Encyclopédie* commenced publication, and it was as close to an all-purpose, default authority for the project's political articles as one could find. Precious few of the 44 entries by Jaucourt that are included in *Encyclopedic Liberty* fully escape its shadow.^[35] But this

brings us back full circle. For it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that the overall "radicalism" of the *Encyclopédie* depends largely on our assessment of the "radicalism" of the Baron de la Brède.

That is a topic for another discussion, but we can at least conclude with a couple of brief thoughts. First, Montesquieu was "conservative" enough--largely because of his defense of the privileged status of the nobility--to be sidelined from the main currents of Revolutionary debate fairly early on, perhaps by the end of 1789.^[36] Second, he was "radical" enough to get his book condemned by the Sorbonne and placed on the Index by the Papacy.^[37] In addition to these religious reactions, his claim that "virtue" was the predicate for republics but not for monarchies was taken as an oblique attack against the moral foundations of the Bourbon dynasty.^[38] Third, Montesquieu was "moderate" enough to be widely regarded in the Anglo-Saxon world--both in the 18th century and today--as the great apostle of an ordered liberty under the law, with checks and balances against excessive concentrations of power, an idea that seems to enjoy a revival any time stable constitutionalism comes under threat. All of these dimensions of his thought--and then some--make their appearance in the *Encyclopédie*, even when they are being revised by their borrowers.^[39] If they fail to bring closure to our question, perhaps that is because that compendium, not unlike *The Spirit of the Laws* itself, was "not so much an ideology as a quarry" from which different readers were destined to draw different kinds of inspiration.^[40]

Endnotes

[1.] For these two perspectives, see Frank A. Kafker, "The *Encyclopédie* in Relation to the Nine Predecessors," in Frank A. Kafker, ed., *Notable Encyclopedias of the 17th and 18th Centuries: Nine Predecessors of the Encyclopédie* (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1981), 223-37; updated in *Lexicography: Critical Concepts*, ed. R.R.K. Hartmann (London: Routledge, 2003), 39-51, and Philipp Blom, *Enlightening the World: Encyclopédie, The Book That Changed the Course of History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

[2.] See Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, *Encyclopedic Liberty: Political Articles in the Dictionary of Diderot and d'Alembert*, ed. Henry C. Clark, trans. Henry C. Clark and Christine Dunn Henderson (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2016), xviii-xix.

[3.] See Smith's 1756 "Letter to the *Edinburgh Review*," in Adam Smith, *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, ed. W.P.D. Wightman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980; repr. Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Classics, 1982), 244-48. See also Ian Simpson Ross, *The Life of Adam Smith*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 153, and Frank A. Kafker and Jeff Loveland, "L'Admiration d'Adam Smith pour l'*Encyclopédie*," *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie*, 48 (2013):191-202.

[4.] See the *Monthly Review* XXIX (1768), 545; cited in Arthur M. Wilson, *Diderot* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 491; *Encyclopedic Liberty*, xvii.

[5.] Edmund Burke, "Reflections on the Revolution in France," in *Select Works of Edmund Burke: A New Imprint of the Payne Edition*, 3 vols., ed. Francis Canavan (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), 2:208-209.

[6.] See Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); idem, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670-1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); idem, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights, 1750-1790* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); and idem, *Revolutionary Ideas: An Intellectual History of the French Revolution from The Rights of Man to Robespierre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014). See the H-France Forum, Vol. 9, no. 1 (Win., 2014), <http://h-france.net/forum/h-franceforumvol9.html> for an unusually lively and informative exchange.

[7.] Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 818, 842, 846, 849-50.

[8.] Project for American and French Research on the Treasury of the French Language.

[9.] Dan Edelstein, Robert Morrissey, and Glenn Roe, "To Quote or not to Quote: Citation Strategies in

the *Encyclopédie*," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 74, no. 2 (Apr. 2013):213-36; quotes at 215, 235.

[10.] Or is it only in retrospect, precisely *because* we know "how the story turned out," that our sense of irony leads us to notice strands of "conservatism" in a work conceived as a "war machine"?

[11.] See "Contributors," in *Encyclopedic Liberty*, xxv-xxvi.

[12.] See Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, eds., *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une Société de gens de lettres* (Encyclopedia, or critical dictionary of the sciences, arts and trades, by an Association of men of letters), 17 vols. (Paris: Briasson et al, 1751-65), 15:672-75; quote at 675; cited as *Encyclopédie* below. Available in electronic form on the ARTFL website at <http://artflsrv02.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/getobject.pl?c.8:1840:180.encyclopedie04_16>.

[13.] For this point, see Frank A. Kafker and Serena L. Kafker, *The Encyclopedists as Individualists: A Biographical Dictionary of the Authors of the Encyclopédie* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1988), 51. (See <<https://artflsrv03.uchicago.edu/philologic4/kafker/navigate/1/19/>>.)

[14.] See Robert Darnton, *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopédie, 1775-1800* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1979).

[15.] See "Political Authority" in *Encyclopedic Liberty*, 13-14, 20.

[16.] See Jacques Proust, *Diderot et l'Encyclopédie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995; orig. pub. 1962), esp. 432 for a summary of possible interpretations.

[17.] Especially books 2 through 5 of *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748); see *Encyclopedic Liberty*, 78-85.

[18.] See "Gouvernement" ("Government"), *Encyclopédie*, 7:788-91, in *Encyclopedic Liberty*, 225-38, quotes at 238.

[19.] "Republic," *Encyclopédie*, 14:150-51, in *Encyclopedic Liberty*, 555.

[20.] "Innovation," *Encyclopédie*, 8:755, in *Encyclopedic Liberty*, 294.

- [21.] "Public Corruption," *Encyclopédie*, 4:278, in *Encyclopedic Liberty*, 77.
- [22.] See *Encyclopedic Liberty*, 397-448.
- [23.] Istvan Hont, *Politics in Commercial Society: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith*, ed. Béla Kapossy and Michael Sonenscher (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 77.
- [24.] "Political Arithmetic," *Encyclopédie*, 1:678-80, in *Encyclopedic Liberty*, 5-6.
- [25.] On this theme, see Jacob Soll, *The Information Master: Jean-Baptiste Colbert's Secret State Intelligence System* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009) and Henry C. Clark, "Grain Trade Information: Economic Conflict and Political Culture Under Terray, 1770-1774," *The Journal of Modern History* 76, no. 4 (Dec. 2004):793-834.
- [26.] See "Trading Company," *Encyclopédie*, 3:739-44, in *Encyclopedic Liberty*, 55-64, esp. 59-64, and "Savings," *Encyclopédie*, 5:745-50, in *Encyclopedic Liberty*, 145-64, esp. 158-59, 161.
- [27.] Arthur M. Wilson, "Why Did the Political Theory of the Encyclopedists Not Prevail? A Suggestion," *French Historical Studies*, 1 (Spr., 1960):283-94, esp. 286-87.
- [28.] Not too much should be made of these raw numbers; many uses of "liberté," for example, refer to theological notions such as freedom of the will, *liberum arbitrium*, which have little to do with our topic. Still, they are suggestive.
- [29.] For d'Holbach's general place in the *Encyclopédie*, see Alan Charles Kors, *D'Holbach's Coterie: An Enlightenment in Paris* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), esp. 88-91, and Alain Sandrier, "L'attribution des articles de l'*Encyclopédie* au baron d'Holbach: bilan et perspectives," *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie*, 45 (2010):44-57.
- [30.] See Georges Benrekassa, "D'Holbach et le problème de la nation représentée," *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie*, 8 (Apr. 1990):79-87; quote at 80.
- [31.] See "Representatives," in *Encyclopédie*, 14:143-46, in *Encyclopedic Liberty*, 541-52, esp. 541, 542, 548-49.
- [32.] For the contrast between "social" and "revolutionary" representation, see Keith M. Baker, "Representation Redefined," in *Inventing the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 224-51, esp. 238-50.
- [33.] Jaucourt's output amounted to perhaps 23 percent of the total, including nearly half in the later volumes, when he had become Diderot's de facto co-editor in the wake of d'Alembert's exasperated departure after volume seven, when the editors were under outside pressure from multiple directions. On the latter episode, see Blom, *Enlightening the World*, 231-32.
- [34.] See Madeleine Morris, *Le Chevalier de Jaucourt: un ami de la terre (1704-1780)* (Geneva: Droz, 1979), and Jean Haechler, *L'Encyclopédie de Diderot et de ... Jaucourt: Essai biographique sur le chevalier Louis de Jaucourt* (Paris: Champion, 1995). For broader context, see Rachel Hammersley, *The English Republican Tradition and Eighteenth-century France: Between the ancients and the moderns* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010).
- [35.] Edelstein et al, "To Quote or not to Quote," 235, also note the prevalence of Montesquieu in Jaucourt's contributions.
- [36.] See Renato Galliani, "La Fortune de Montesquieu en 1789: un sondage [Montesquieu's fortunes in 1789: a poll]," in R. Galliani and F. Loirette, eds., *Etudes sur Montesquieu* (Paris: Lettres modernes, 1981): 31-47.
- [37.] See "Introduction" in David Carrithers, ed., *Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu* (London: Routledge, 2016; first pub. Ashgate 2009), xxviii.
- [38.] Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*, 3.5-3.7.
- [39.] See articles by St.-Lambert, Boulanger, Damilaville, even sometimes Jaucourt himself in *Encyclopedic Liberty*.
- [40.] See Norman Hampson, *Will and Circumstance: Montesquieu, Rousseau and the French Revolution* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983, 25).

RADICAL ENLIGHTENMENT NOW?

by Johnson Kent Wright

It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to respond to Henry C. Clark's essay, which comes on the heels of his and Christine Dunn Henderson's masterful selection and translation of political articles from Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*.^[41] Clark and Dunn have rendered a tremendous service to Anglophone scholarship on the Enlightenment, for which we should all be grateful. As Hank points out here, the *Encyclopédie's* political message proved elusive from the start. Responses varied widely. In France, condemnation by ecclesiastical and secular authorities nearly derailed the enterprise at the outset. But it was seen through to completion, owing in part to skillful editorial tacking, but also to the protection by liberal reformers such as Malesherbes. Across the Channel, the *Encyclopédie* was regarded as a pedagogical feast by Adam Smith, and its political articles were seen as comprising "a noble system of civil liberty" by Owen Ruffhead, a Welsh critic of Wilkes. For Edmund Burke, on the other hand, benefitting from hindsight, the *Encyclopédie* was the very model of the arid and unbending rationalism that had led inexorably to the Revolution. Today, Burke's case for the essential *radicalism* of the *Encyclopédie* has been restated in magisterial fashion by Jonathan Israel -- though for purposes of celebration rather than commination. On Israel's account, Diderot and d'Alembert's work was indeed a "war machine": its publication marked the arrival on French shores of the militant "Spinozism" that served as the "one particular 'big' cause" of the entire cycle of political revolutions that convulsed the Atlantic world in the half-century after 1776.^[42]



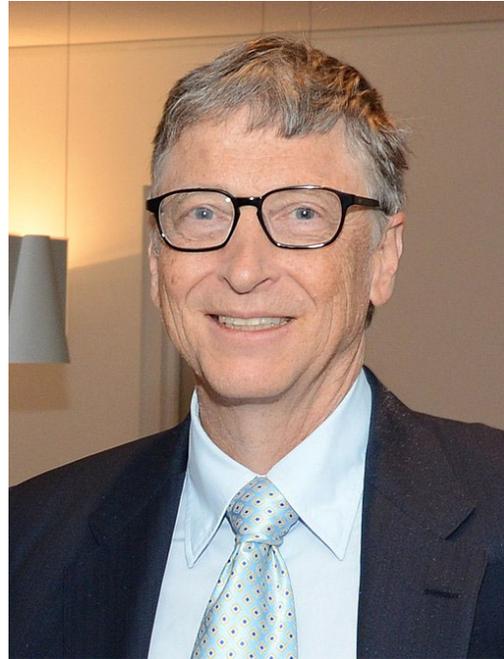
Adam Smith

What is Hank's response? First, to suggest that, far from any radicalism, what would have struck any "casual, ordinary eighteenth-century reader" on glancing at the *Encyclopédie's* political articles is "a certain pronounced strand of 'conservatism,'" easily overlooked today. How else to describe the role assumed by the jurist Boucher d'Argis? Pressed into service after the initial collisions with authority, he went on to contribute some 4,500 articles to the enterprise, all unfailingly moderate and reformist in outlook. Or take the case of Rousseau. His mature outlook got a try-out in the *Encyclopédie*, the Third Discourse first appearing as "Economie ou Oeconomie" in its fifth volume. But Rousseau subsequently took his ideas, including the "general will" itself, elsewhere. In the *Encyclopédie*, his own essay was trumped by Boulanger's far longer and thoroughly unradical "Oeconomie politique" in volume 11. But the chief test-case for the political profile of the *Encyclopédie*, Hank argues, lies in the work of Jaucourt -- author of some 17,000 articles total, more than half of those collected in *Encyclopedic Liberty*. To Jaucourt fell the task of introducing French readers to the harvest of a century of cutting-edge political thought from the Protestant world. But here Hank introduces a twist in his argument. Given Jaucourt's well-attested debt to Montesquieu -- "it was through the sieve of his close reading of Montesquieu, and especially *The Spirit of the Laws* (*De l'esprit des lois*), that

Jaucourt offered up his political commentary" -- "it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that the overall 'radicalism' of the *Encyclopédie* depends largely on our assessment of the 'radicalism' of the Baron de la Brède." Alas, that is a subject for another occasion, Hank writes -- though he concludes by reminding us that Montesquieu was "radical" enough to get *De l'esprit des lois* condemned by the Sorbonne and the Papacy, "conservative" enough to fall afoul of French revolutionary egalitarianism, and "moderate" enough to win the embrace Anglo-Saxon liberalism.

As a demonstration of how to have one's rhetorical cake and eat it too, Hank's essay could hardly be bettered. After teasing us with the suggestion that the *Encyclopédie's* political message might be the exact opposite of that described by Israel, Hank appeals to Montesquieu in order to table the question, pending further inquiry, while hinting that we may well discover that what the text offers, in the end, is the benign pluralism summed up in Norman Hampson's phrase: "not so much an ideology as a quarry," with something for everybody. Of course, elegant fencing of this kind is probably the best one can do in responding to Jonathan Israel. No matter what is actually contained in its 77,000 articles, the *Encyclopédie* could never have been anything other than the very incarnation of "Radical Enlightenment," which Israel sees as the Prime Mover in the advent of "modernity" itself -- just as surely as Jacobinism would later turn out to represent a "Counter-Enlightenment." The publication of the *Encyclopedie* is indeed the pivot of the master-narrative that extends across Israel's pentalogy -- what made it possible for the radical "Spinozism" incubated in the late 17th-century Netherlands to unleash the "General Revolution" that swept around the globe at the end of the 18th.^[43] A tidal wave of criticism from professionals in the fields he has traversed has left Israel completely unmoved. What remains to be explained is why this particular historiographic *image d'Epinal* -- the Radical Enlightenment *caused* the French Revolution -- has resonated so deeply with a wider reading public. No doubt Israel's capture, and domestication, of the term "radical" itself has something to do with his success. But if further proof of its enormous appeal in our time were

needed, it can now be found in Steven Pinker's *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* -- Bill Gates's "new favorite book of all time," praised for its "radical honesty" by David Brooks.^[44]



Bill Gates

But perhaps Israel and Pinker are not quite the last word in "radicalism," at least where the *Encyclopédie* is concerned. Let me suggest two different avenues for approaching the issue anew, in regard to both form and content, in ways that might appeal to Hank and to Jonathan Israel alike. First, on the side of form, is it possible that what we are confronted with in the *Encyclopédie* is not just "esoteric" writing, but esoteric writing of a novel kind? That the question can even be posed in this way is owing to the recent appearance of Arthur M. Melzer's *Philosophy between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing*.^[45] Melzer's serene and level-headed book -- the first comprehensive survey of the topic, surprisingly enough -- begins with the overwhelming evidence for the *existence* of the phenomenon of esotericism, not just in the West but around the globe, and concludes by considering the consequences for modern thought of the recovery of this "lost history." But Melzer's greatest service lies in the lucid taxonomy of four different kinds of esotericism set

forth in the middle of the text -- *defensive*, meant to shield its practitioners from persecution; *protective*, serving to insulate its audience from "dangerous truths"; *pedagogical*, in which obscurity and ambiguity are seen as teaching tools in and of themselves; and finally, *political* esotericism. The last is the joker in the pack, distinct from the other three in two ways: first, for being a thoroughly modern phenomenon, no more than three or four centuries old; and second, for being inspired by purely *political* rather than *philosophical* motives -- intended neither to promote and protect philosophy nor to shield society from its truths, but instead to use it as an instrument for changing the world. Thus *cloister* -- the "single word that best conveyed the essential characteristic of premodern philosophical secrecy" -- gave way to "*conspiracy*, which is initial concealment for the sake of future disclosure."[\[46\]](#)



Sir Francis Bacon (circa. 1578)

Exhibit #1 for "political esotericism"? Though it was preceded by a series of daring solo "philosophical conspirators" -- Machiavelli, Bacon, Descartes, Spinoza -- the "most surprising and illuminating case" of political esotericism is none other than the *Encyclopédie*, "the flagship of the modern Enlightenment and its project of political rationalization."[\[47\]](#) Here all Melzer has to do is introduce the basic evidence: not just the various articles directly addressing political esotericism in this sense ("Exotérique et sotérique," "Mensonge officieux," and

Jaucourt's own "Mensonge"), but also the specific avowals of editorial intent: in d'Alembert's famous letter to Voltaire:

"No doubt we have some bad articles in theology and metaphysics, but with theologians as censors ... I defy you to make them better. There are articles, less open to the light, where all is repaired. Time will enable people to distinguish what we have thought from what we have said",[\[48\]](#)

and in Diderot's explanation of the *Encyclopédie's* system of cross-references in his own article "Encyclopédie."

"When it is necessary, [the cross-references] will produce a completely opposite effect: they will counter notions; they will bring principles into contrast; they will secretly attack, unsettle, overturn certain ridiculous opinions which one would not dare to insult openly.... This means of undeceiving men operates very promptly on good minds, and it operates infallibly and without any detrimental consequence -- secretly and without scandal -- on all minds. It is the art of deducing tacitly the boldest consequences. If these confirming and refuting cross-references are planned well in advance, and prepared skillfully, they will give an encyclopedia the character which a good dictionary ought to possess: this character is that of changing the common manner of thinking."[\[49\]](#)

That is as far as Melzer goes -- but it is some distance, directly abutting Team ARTFL's work on the cross-references cited by Hank. Jonathan Israel gets a respectful nod from Melzer as well.[\[50\]](#) But that points us on from form to content. Is there anything more specific to be said about the aims of the *Encyclopédie's* "political esotericism" beyond the Israel conception of "Radical Enlightenment" -- "monism, "democracy," "human rights," and the like? For purposes of discussion, let me make a suggestion, inspired by the cohort of French scholars currently hard at work on what they call the "French exception" -- the exceptionally *radical* character assumed by republicanism in France, by comparison with

its variants elsewhere in the Atlantic world.^[51] Their specific focus is what they term "social republicanism," founded on a radical egalitarianism that was without precedent in the early republican tradition -- indeed, was born of its sudden and explosive fusion with hitherto adjacent but distinct currents of utopian thought. So far, this cohort has devoted its attention primarily to the most spectacular fruits of "social republicanism," revolutionary Jacobinism and the Babeuism that mutated out of it, together with their 19th-century fallout. Investigation of its earlier appearances has been largely confined to Rousseau and to pioneers in blending republican and utopian themes -- Morelly and Mably. As for the *origines lointaines* of French "social republicanism," one obvious place to start would be with what Michael Sonenscher dubbed, in *Sans-Culottes*, the "Rousseau-Fénelon pairing" (by contrast with the "Rousseau-Montesquieu pairing") -- the profoundly influential current of thought launched by Fénelon's effort to bring "ancient prudence" to bear on the reform of modern monarchy. This was the tradition to which Istvan Hont referred in the passage from his *Politics in Commercial Society* cited by Hank. It was a long journey, of course, from the "Rousseau-Fénelon pairing" to Robespierre and Babeuf. But it would be interesting to know what, if anything, the long incubation of "social republicanism" in this sense owed to the *Encyclopédie* in particular. That is perhaps another job for Team ARTFL -- to set out in search, not of Israel's Radical Enlightenment, but of this other, less "Spinozist" and more home-grown form of radicalism.

But neither of these suggestions is intended to let Hank off the hook in regard to the "Jaucourt-Montesquieu pairing." If he continues to think that the question of the radicalism, or otherwise, of the *Encyclopédie* is at one with that of *De l'esprit de lois*, then I propose that we corner him in discussion and force him to cough up the answer. One can understand his reluctance, especially given that the stakes here extend to Rousseau as well. Paul Rahe, second to none in uncovering the interplay between esoteric and exoteric writing in the Western political thought, has recently argued that "Jean-Jacques Rousseau constructed his system within the framework of Montesquieu's science of politics.... [T]he critique of bourgeois society

that he shouted from the rooftops was a restatement of themes presented in a highly muted fashion in *The Spirit of the Laws*."^[52] Is something like that true for the *Encyclopédie* as well?

Endnotes

[41.] Henry C. Clark, ed., *Encyclopedic Liberty: Political Articles in the Dictionary of Diderot and d'Alembert*, Henry C. Clark and Christine Dunn Henderson, trans. (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund: 2016).

[42.] For a sample of Israel's claims about "causation," see the concluding cadences of *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights, 1750-1790* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 950-51.

[43.] *Democratic Enlightenment* was the third volume in the series. Israel has gone on to publish *Revolutionary Ideas: An Intellectual History of the French Revolution from The Rights of Man to Robespierre* (Oxford & Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014) -- which drummed the Jacobins out of the Radical Enlightenment -- and, most recently, *The Expanding Blaze: How the American Revolution Ignited the World, 1750-1848* (Oxford and Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

[44.] Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (New York: Viking, 2018). For Gates's effusion, see <<https://www.gatesnotes.com/Books/Enlightenment-Now>>; for Brooks, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/22/opinion/stev-en-pinker-radical-honesty.html>>.

[45.] Arthur M. Melzer, *Philosophy between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

[46.] *Ibid.*, p. 246.

[47.] *Ibid.*, p. 249.

[48.] Cited in Melzer, p. 250).

[49.] Cited in Melzer, pp. 250-51.

[50.] *Ibid.*, p. 247.

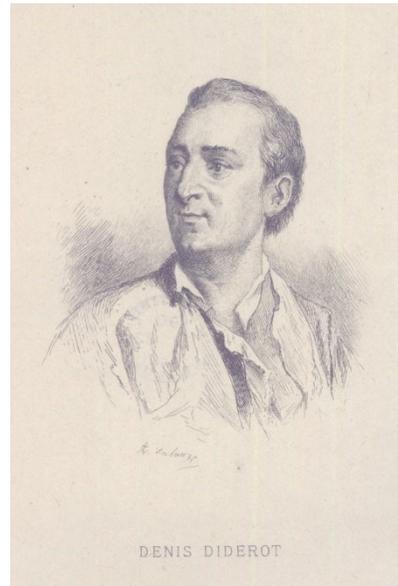
[51] For samples of their work, see Stéphanie Roza and Pierre Crétois, eds., *Le républicanisme sociale: une exception française?* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2014), and Stéphanie Roza, *Comment l'utopie est devenue un programme politique: Du roman à la Révolution* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2015).

[52] Paul A. Rahe, *Soft Despotism, Democracy's Drift* (New Haven, CT & London: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 138.

A BROADLY SUBVERSIVE PROGRAM

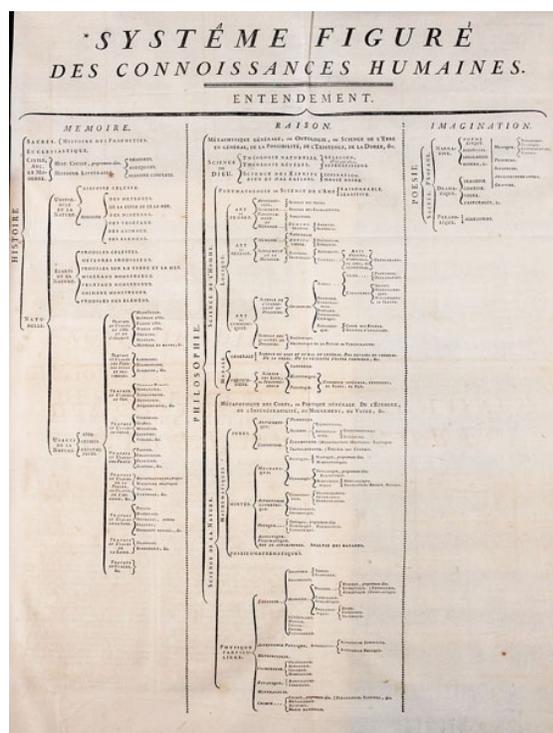
by Andrew Jainchill

In his learned and sharp essay, Henry Clark proposes that the *Encyclopédie* "was 'not so much an ideology as a quarry' from which different readers were destined to draw different kinds of inspiration," and rightly stresses the "eclectic variety of perspectives" in the text. Such an approach serves to caution against discounting the many "conservative" and "reformist" aspects of Diderot's so-called "war machine." Clark is undoubtedly correct to a point, but his argument also risks occluding the genuinely and powerfully subversive currents within the text's nearly 73,000 articles. This is in part because the question posed – "How radical was the political thought of the *Encyclopédie*?" – can only incompletely assess its "radicalism." Extracting explicitly political thought from the work as a whole serves to sidestep many of the text's most political interventions, as many of the text's most "radical" elements do not materialize in response to questions of classical political thought, as important as they are. A brief consideration of three related subjects – religion, epistemology, and privilege – makes clear just how "radical" the *Encyclopédie* could in fact be.



Denis Diderot

The most obvious example is the *Encyclopédie's* treatment of religion. Its famous "Map of the System of Human Knowledge" placed the "Science of God" on an equal footing with the "Science of Man" and the "Science of Nature," all as part of "Philosophy" and attributed to the faculty of "Reason." The Map then took the further step of subdividing the "Science of God" into "Natural Theology," "Revealed Theology," and the "Science of Good and Evil Spirits," with the former two regrouped as "Religion, from which, through abuse, Superstition" and the latter divided into "Divination, Black Magic." The visual effect of the Map and the use of terms such as "Superstition" and "Black Magic" are striking. Moreover, the text was full of hidden jabs, such as the infamous cross-reference to "Eucharist, Communion, Altar" found at the end of the entry "Cannibals." [53] The point was, unmistakably, to undermine the authority of the Catholic Church and revealed religion, a point with no small political stakes in the context of France's still sacral monarchy.



"Map of the System of Human Knowledge"

The *Encyclopédie* did not simply mock the Church and revealed religion. Even more powerfully, it articulated a new epistemology that aggressively displaced religious knowledge in favor of knowledge derived from human experience and reason, imagination, and memory, the three faculties that structured the tree of knowledge. As Robert Darnton put it in *The Business of Enlightenment*, the *Encyclopédie* "made it clear that knowledge came from the senses and not Rome or Revelation.... They had rearranged the cognitive universe and reoriented man within it, while elbowing God outside."^[54] Vincenze Ferrone categorizes this as no less than "a genuine epistemological revolution."^[55] Diderot, in the entry "Encyclopedia," put the matter bluntly: "Man is the unique point from which one must set out, and to which everything must be brought back."^[56]

With man established as the epistemological starting point, it was not only the epistemological authority of the Church that was "elbowed" aside. The *Encyclopédie* aimed to subject *all* received knowledge to critical analysis. A few pages after declaring the epistemological centrality of "man" in the article "Encyclopedia," Diderot called for "intellectual courage" and wrote that "all things must be

examined, all must be winnowed and sifted without exception and without sparing anyone's sensibilities."^[57] This sentiment was in many ways the animating impulse of the entire intellectual enterprise. And critical reason, once liberated from tradition, would question the foundational institutions and principles of the Old Regime throughout the *Encyclopédie's* 17 volumes of text. In the article "Trading Company," for example, the reader is told that "[the purpose of the *Encyclopédie* is to instruct](#)" and, then, that the "prejudice" against commercial competition "[has not entirely dissipated ...](#) because it is easier to imitate than to reason."^[58]

Perhaps no traditional institution was subject to more withering attack than that of "privilege." Indeed, William Sewell describes the *Encyclopédie* as "the Philosophes' most important weapon in their attack on privileges."^[59] Multiple articles addressed the topic, both under the heading "privilege" and as it pertained to other matters. The first entry under the head word "Privilege," categorized as "grammar" but clearly taking aim at a much broader range of issues, explained that privilege was an "advantage accorded to one man over another. The only legitimate *privileges* are those that nature accords. All others can be regarded as injustices carried out against all men in favor of a single individual."^[60] The article, uncertainly attributed to Diderot, plainly called into question this pillar of Old Regime France. Crucially, it did so by invoking the authority of nature and implicitly downgrading that of tradition and established hierarchies. And Turgot, in his famous article on "[Foundations](#)," certainly did not pull any punches in arguing that the traditional privileges of corporate bodies should not be considered authoritative or binding. The "reflections" advanced in his article, he wrote in its final paragraph,

["ought to leave no doubt](#) on the incontestable right possessed by the government ... to dispose of old foundations, to extend their funds to new objects, or, better still, to suppress them altogether. Public utility is the supreme law, and it ought not to be nullified by any superstitious respect for what we call the intention of the founder — as if ignorant and short-sighted

individuals had the right to chain to their capricious wills the generations that had still to be born."

Strikingly, Turgot did not stop there and continued his assault on the privileges of corporate bodies by invoking the rights of citizens against corporate bodies.

"[Citizens have rights](#), and rights sacred for the very body of society. They exist independent of that society. They are its necessary elements. They enter into it with all their rights, solely that they may place themselves under the protection of those same laws to which they sacrifice their liberty. But private bodies do not exist of themselves, nor for themselves; they have been formed by society, and they ought not to exist a moment after they have ceased to be useful."[\[61\]](#)

In a society saturated with privilege, one can hardly imagine a more "radical" political stance.

This brief discussion points to what could be considered a broadly subversive program that actively undermined key elements of Old Regime political culture. Such was the judgment of the royal historiographer Moreau, who in 1757 condemned the *Encyclopédie* as undermining "morality, religion and government."[\[62\]](#) Clark is undoubtedly correct that the *Encyclopédie* was a kind of "quarry." But a reader who carefully excavated the text would find less durable material for reinforcing the bases of Old Regime political culture than for laying the foundations of a rather different social and political order.

Endnotes

[\[53.\]](#) "Anthropophages [Cannibals]," *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, eds. Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert (University of Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project, Autumn 2017 Edition), Robert Morrissey and Glenn Roe (eds), <<http://encyclopedie.uchicago.edu/>>, 1:498.

[\[54.\]](#) Robert Darnton, *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopédie, 1775-1800* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1979), 7-8.

[\[55.\]](#) Vincenze Ferrone, *The Enlightenment: History of an Idea*, trans. Elisabetta Tarantino (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2015), 109.

[\[56.\]](#) "Encyclopédie [Encyclopedia]," *Encyclopédie*, 5:641. Quoted in Ferrone, *The Enlightenment*, 110, with a slightly different translation.

[\[57.\]](#) "Encyclopédie [Encyclopedia]," *Encyclopédie*, 5:644A. Quoted in Keith Michael Baker, "Enlightenment Idioms, Old Regime Discourses, and Revolutionary Improvisations," in *From Deficit to Deluge: The Origins of the French Revolution*, ed. Thomas E. Kaiser and Dale K. Van Kley (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 174.

[\[58.\]](#) Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, *Encyclopedic Liberty: Political Articles in the Dictionary of Diderot and d'Alembert*, ed. Henry C. Clark, trans. Henry C. Clark and Christine Dunn Henderson (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2016), 58.

[\[59.\]](#) William Sewell, *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 23.

[\[60.\]](#) "Privilège [Privilege]," *Encyclopédie*, 13:389.

[\[61.\]](#) See "Foundation" in *Encyclopedic Liberty*, 208, where it is the penultimate paragraph. In the original, it is the final paragraph. *Encyclopédie*, 7:75.

[\[62.\]](#) This is the paraphrase of the "General Chronology of the Encyclopédie" of the ARTFL project. <<http://encyclopedie.uchicago.edu/node/82>>.

RETIRING THE "RADICAL ENLIGHTENMENT"

by Dan Edelstein

Hank Clark largely (and rightly) dismisses Jonathan Israel's claim that the *Encyclopédie* promoted the trifecta of atheism, materialism, and democracy that Israel has dubbed "Radical Enlightenment." Since Hank does an excellent job of showing how the *Encyclopédie* was, with respect to political thought, often more conservative than radical, I will not reiterate those arguments here. But I would like to pose a broader question: should we even be asking whether the *Encyclopédie* was "radical"? Given how thoroughly and frequently Israel's category has been denounced as teleological, ideological, misconstrued, and mainly just existing in his own head, why are we using it as a measure of anything? I would suggest that it is long past time to retire this category, not only because it is analytically broken, but because it distorts the historical complexity of Enlightenment political thought.



French Revolution

One of our greatest challenges when seeking to reconstruct how the *philosophes* thought about politics is to bracket the French Revolution and the left/right political spectrum that it bequeathed us. Indeed, this is another reason why "radicalism" is such a confusing category when applied to the Old Regime: it dates from a postrevolutionary moment, both in the UK and in France, and is closely related to the republican politics of the French Revolution.^[63] As such, it is anachronistic and teleological to speak of "radical politics" in 18th-century

thought. The word itself was seldom used (except in expressions like "*vice radical*," or as a term of lexicography).

Once we have banished radicalism from our analytical categories, what is left (no pun intended)? There were of course different flavors of political thought in the Enlightenment, ranging from the frankly conservative to the fairly progressive. But even here, again, we risk projecting onto Old Regime politics our own postrevolutionary categories. The challenge is to describe Enlightenment political thought, or its varieties, with terminology and comparisons that are more historically attuned. In this short essay, I want to dwell on Hank's passing comment about how French Enlightenment authors tended to think "almost invariably within the framework not of a republic but of a decentralized, legally bound, liberalized monarch." I will show how a majority of the *Encyclopédie's* political claims can indeed be subsumed under this general category of monarchic liberalism.

Most contemporary theorists view nondemocratic liberalism as a dangerous type of regime to be avoided.^[64] In the 18th century, however, monarchic regimes were often viewed as affording *greater* liberty than republics (*pace* Rousseau). In the famous chapter on the English constitution in *On the Spirit of Laws* (1748), Montesquieu suggested that "[In the Italian Republics ... there is less liberty than in our monarchies](#)," an assertion echoed by Jaucourt in at least two *Encyclopédie* articles.^[65] Monarchy and freedom could even be understood as co-constitutive: "[When the Goths conquered the Roman Empire](#), they founded monarchy and liberty everywhere," Montesquieu affirmed, a phrase that similarly resonated throughout the *Encyclopédie*.^[66]

These claims seem foreign to us today, when political autonomy is largely viewed as the foundation of all liberty. But for most Enlightenment thinkers (again, sorry, Rousseau) the real basis of our rights and liberties was natural law -- and who was more likely to understand natural law, the mob or the monarch? The role of the sovereign was to ensure that positive laws did not contradict, and ideally aligned with, natural ones. To turn

the spotlight again on Boucher d'Argis, in his well-known article "*Droit de la nature*," he insisted that the purpose of positive laws "[is not to impede liberty, but to direct properly all man's actions.](#)"^[67] If freedom is not framed as an issue of autonomy, but of adherence to natural law, then popular sovereignty ceases to be one of its preconditions.



Montesquieu

While Montesquieu provided a political rationale for monarchic liberalism, it received an important boost from another quarter -- Physiocracy. The Physiocrats offered an understanding of liberalism that easily — in their case, necessarily — coexisted with monarchy. Focusing on private property, they promulgated a theory of natural rights that *required* a "*puissance souveraine*," which François Quesnay identified with the monarch. Unlike in Hobbes's *Leviathan*, this sovereign power "does not destroy the natural right of every man; on the contrary, it guarantees and regulates it in the most fitting and interesting way for society."^[68]

Just as there was a Montesquieu-Fénelon pairing in French Enlightenment thought (as Kent Wright notes in his comment), there was also, onward from the 1750s, a Quesnay-Fénelon pairing that promoted economic liberalism, monarchic government, and natural law. And this strain received a good deal of airtime in the *Encyclopédie*.^[69] Quesnay himself contributed six

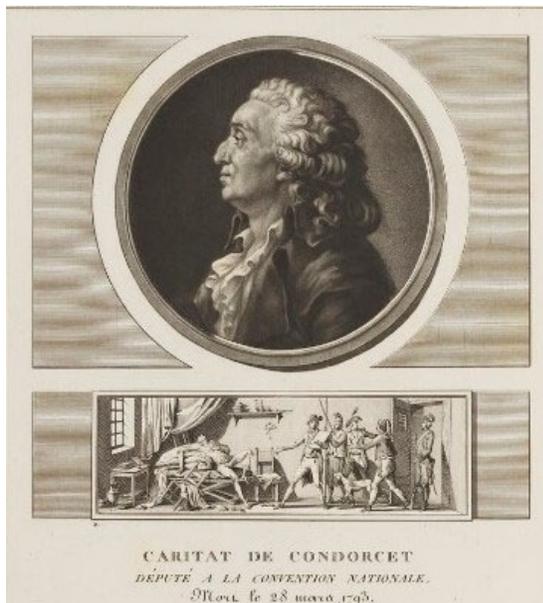
articles, only three of which would be published: "Evidence," "Fermiers," and "Grains." These texts also insisted on liberty, albeit in a different key than Montesquieu: in "Grains," for instance, Quesnay focused primarily on free trade (*la liberté du commerce*), particularly for the grain trade.^[70] This Physiocratic theme was picked up elsewhere. In "*Foire*," the future Controller-General of Finances, Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, assailed the system of exemptions and tariffs that made commercial fairs profitable at the expense of the larger economy. In "*Maîtrises*," Joachim Faiguet de Villeneuve criticized professional guilds for repressing "competition and liberty in all professions."^[71] And in "*Vingtième*," signed by Boulanger, but authored by Diderot and Étienne-Noël Damilaville, the authors also defended the free trade of wheat, ascribing this doctrine to Henri IV's finance minister Sully who, they claimed

knew very well that the source of happiness and wealth in France was to be found in the great expanse and fertility of its land. The earth, he would say, produces every treasure, both necessary and superfluous; one should only seek to multiply its products, by making their sale safe and free [*il ne faut qu'en rendre le commerce sûr & libre*].^[72]

The economic liberalism of the *Encyclopédie* is often treated separately from its political twin, but the two were typically conjoined. In "*Esclavage*," Jaucourt drew on Montesquieu's criticism of slavery to further insist that "*Le droit de propriété sur les hommes ou sur les choses, sont deux droits bien différens.*" Our natural right to own property, the basis of economic liberalism, serves here to outline a natural right not to be treated as property, that is, a natural right to civil freedom. The political ramifications of this move are underscored by Jaucourt himself (quoting Montesquieu):

If *slavery* offends natural law and civil law, it injures as well the best forms of government: it is contrary to monarchical government, in which it is supremely important not to humble or debase human nature.^[73]

The importance of Physiocracy in advancing abolitionism can also be seen in later works by Saint-Lambert and Condorcet.^[74] But the economic liberalism defended by the Physiocrats had other, more surprising political consequences as well. It was in the name of free trade that some of the first defenses of social welfare were made. In the *Encyclopédie* article "*Fondation*," Turgot insisted that society has an obligation to assist those who cannot find employment or are too sick to work: "humanity and religion both make it our duty to assist our fellows in need." He went so far as to frame this duty correlatively in terms of a right: "[the poor have uncontestable claims](#) [*des droits incontestables*] on the abundance of the rich."^[75] This defense of socioeconomic rights would remain a fixture of Physiocratic thinking up until the French Revolution: in the *cabiers de doléances* for the Third Estate of Nemours, Pierre Samuel Du Pont de Nemours included the "right to free assistance" for "anyone in a state of infancy, impotence, invalidity, or disability."^[76]



Marie-Jean-Antoine-Nicolas Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet

There were, to be sure, other political and economic positions in Enlightenment thought besides what I'm calling monarchic liberalism, but it does appear to have been a dominant theory in the *Encyclopédie*. Its political and economic strands were not always in perfect harmony -- Montesquieu, for instance, places far less

importance on natural laws than Quesnay. But these tensions did not prevent authors from combining elements of both, particularly those authors (including Turgot) who maintained a certain distance from the more doctrinal form of Physiocracy. What makes this kind of nondemocratic liberalism particularly intriguing from a contemporary perspective is how it blurs the lines between progressive and conservative, radical and traditional. On the one hand, its denial of political autonomy seems to our eyes extremely retrograde, and the insistence on economic free-trade would come to be associated with right-wing economics. On the other hand, its attacks on slavery and demands for social welfare would today be categorized as progressive. Rather than attempting to force Enlightenment pegs into our own square holes, we should pay greater heed to their unfamiliar and surprising arrangements of ideas.

Endnotes

^[63.] See for instance Jennifer Mori, *Britain in the Age of the French Revolution: 1785-1820* (London: Routledge, 2014).

^[64.] See, e.g., Sheri Berman, "The Pipe Dream of Undemocratic Liberalism," *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 3 (2017): 29-38.

^[65.] *On the Spirit of the Laws*, trans. and ed. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller, and Harold Samuel Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 11.6; 157; cf. "*Dix, conseil des*" ("*la liberté est encore moins à Venise que dans plusieurs monarchies*," 4:1088), and "*Venise, gouvernement de*" ("*c'est une aristocratie despotique, &... la liberté y regne moins que dans plusieurs monarchies*," 17:15), in *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, eds. Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert (University of Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project, 2017), eds. Robert Morrissey and Glenn Roe: <<http://encyclopedie.uchicago.edu/>>.

^[66.] *On the Spirit of the Laws*, 17.5, 283. This same phrase appears twice in the *Encyclopédie*: see "*Fief*" (6:689) and "*Tartares ou Tatars*" (15:924), both by Jaucourt.

^[67.] *Encyclopédie*, "*Droit de la nature, ou droit naturel*" (5:134); translation in *Encyclopedic Liberty: Political Articles in the Dictionary of Diderot and d'Alembert*, ed. and trans. Henry C.

Clark and Christine Dunn Henderson (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2016), 110.

[68.] Quesnay, *Essai physique sur l'économie animale* (Paris: Cavelier, 1747), 3 vols; sec. 3, chp. XVIII; 3:349-73 (369).

[69.] John Lough, *The 'Encyclopédie'* (1971; Geneva: Slatkine, 1989), 331-57.

[70.] This expression occurs nine times in "Grains," *Encyclopédie*, 7:812-31. Liberty is also a central topic of the article "Evidence:" see in particular *Encyclopédie*, 6:157.

[71.] "Maîtrises," *Encyclopédie*, 9:911-15.

[72.] "Vingtième," *Encyclopédie*, 17:872. Damilaville, a civil servant working in tax administration, was an intimate friend of both Diderot and Voltaire, and the latter's chief correspondent in Paris from 1760 until his death in 1768. See Ian Davidson, *Voltaire: A Life* (London: Profile Books, 2010), chp. 26.

[73.] "Esclavage," *Encyclopédie*, 5:937; English translation by Naomi J. Andrews, in *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project* (Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, 2012):

<<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.did2222.0000.667>>.

The second clause is from *On the Spirit of the Laws*, 15.1.

[74.] See esp. Saint-Lambert, *Ziméo*, in *Les Saisons, poème par Saint-Lambert. L'Abenaki, Sara Th..., Ziméo, contes* (n.p., 1769); and Condorcet, *Réflexions sur l'esclavage des nègres* (Neufchâtel: Société typographique, 1781).

[75.] "Foundations," *Encyclopédie*, 7:73-75; English translation, *Encyclopedic Liberty*, 201. See also Gaston V. Rimlinger, *Welfare Policy and Industrialization in Europe, America, and Russia* (New York: John Wiley, 1971), 26-27, and Thomas McStay Adams, *Bureaucrats and Beggars: French Social Policy in the Age of the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[76.] *Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860*, ed. M. J. Mavidal et al. (Paris: P. Dupont, 1862-), 4:162.

HOW RADICAL WAS THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF THE *ENCYCLOPÉDIE*?

by Henry C. Clark

Kudos and thanks to Andrew, Dan, and Kent for their impressively encyclopedic exercises in wit, wisdom, and erudition. It is no fault of their own if their posts do not converge upon a single conclusion. Indeed, if my original purpose had been to divide and separate my commentators, it would have to be counted a signal success. Andrew and Kent seize the chance to remind us of the overlooked Leftward possibilities of the *Encyclopédie*, while Dan takes up my suggestion to follow its Rightward drift. Along the way, there are several important agreements in their comments, as well as one or two possible tensions at work.

Andrew makes two general points that are important enough to be highlighted separately: first, that "political" thought itself during this period cannot be divorced from the broader religious and epistemological frameworks in which it was embedded; and second, that once we view the *Encyclopédie* in this light, we find it much more radical in intention and design than my account allows. "Extracting explicitly political thought from the work as a whole serves to sidestep many of the text's most political interventions," as he puts it, appending the famous "Map of the System of Human Knowledge" for good measure. But even those of us who can embrace these points, as I meant to do by imagining many "Burkeans *avant la lettre*" among the early readership, might still "curb our enthusiasm" for the conclusion that Andrew seems to draw from them, namely, that "a reader who carefully excavated the text would find less durable material for reinforcing the bases of Old Regime political culture than for laying the foundations of a rather different social and political order."



Jean le Rond d'Alembert

One hesitation that this formulation evokes concerns simply the perennial gap between intention and result. The "Map of the System of Human Knowledge" appeared in the Preliminary Discourse to the *Encyclopédie* written by d'Alembert in 1751, as the project was just getting under way. As a declaration of intention, it is indeed a bold and far-reaching statement. But d'Alembert himself left his post in disgust after the seventh volume was published in the late 1750s, while over 100 contributors, including the indefatigable Boucher d'Argis and Jaucourt, soldiered on to the bitter end. So the work raises the problem of authorial or editorial intention in an acute form.

Moreover, one may question just how tight the connection is between epistemology and politics. The Map of Human Knowledge was partly inspired by the work of Francis Bacon. But although the ambitious Englishman became crucial to the mainstream of English intellectual life--Joel Mokyr calls him one of the major "cultural entrepreneurs" of the period^[77]--his epistemological revolution did not translate readily or automatically into a political one. The English tried republicanism for a while, but they brought back their monarchy at exactly the time they institutionalized

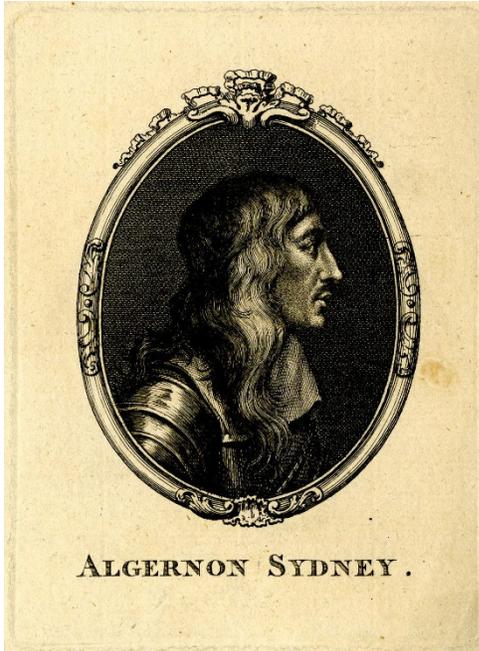
Bacon's epistemological project by founding the Royal Society.

Or consider privilege, which Andrew cites as another radical commitment that my way of framing the issue tends to overlook. It is true that the systemic problem of privilege was eventually addressed radically--beginning with abbé Siéyès' famous evocation of a return of the nobility to the Franconian forests of the Middle Ages in 1789^[78]. But in midcentury, would-be reformers sought to address the problem in ways more respectful of the current order, such as by organizing provincial assemblies along property rather than status lines, or by drawing on the resources of a growing commercial economy. Dan mentioned the articles "*Foire*" (Fair) and "*Maîtrises*" (Masterships) as examples of privilege-based problems that could be addressed in this fashion; "*Chef d'oeuvre*" (Masterwork) would be another example.

Kent, for his part, takes the discussion Leftward in a different way--by referring not to epistemological or religious frameworks but to hitherto overlooked political ones. In particular, he poses two large and intriguing questions. First, is there a "French exception" in the political thought of the period, a kind of incipient "social republicanism" stretching from the reformist circles of the last years of Louis XIV right through the Revolution, and that might be detected within the pages of the *Encyclopédie*? And second, could the radicalization of Montesquieu's thought that Paul Rahe finds in the work of Rousseau also be detected in Diderot's dictionary? These questions are thrust forward with some insistence, since Kent has discovered that I'm one of those "elegant fencers" (we've all met them) who also want to "have [my] rhetorical cake and eat it too."

Kent's first question inevitably directs attention to the problem of defining a "mainstream" against more marginal strands. Was the existence itself of a kind of egalitarian republicanism a French exception, or was that strand--however defined--somehow more central to French thought than it was elsewhere? In England, after all, there was also egalitarian and republican thinking stretching from at least Winstanley and the [Civil War Levellers](#) and Diggers through the various projects of the

John Toland era, and throughout the century. In the *Encyclopédie*, echoes of at least a certain kind of republicanism can be heard in occasional references by Jaucourt and others to works by [Algernon Sydney](#) or [Thomas Gordon](#).^[79]



Algernon Sydney

But the question is always how much weight to attach to such moments relative to the larger context. The appeal of studying the *Encyclopédie* for this purpose consists in the tantalizing prospect that with well over 100 authors, one might actually get a glimpse into what a "mainstream" looks like in this period. As it happens, when the political aspirations of its surviving contributors have been measured in practice, they have fallen short of what most of us would call "radical."^[80] So my inclination, faced with the option of a ticket on a Fénelon-Babeuf Express, would be to hold off until the rails are more firmly in place.

"The monarchy is ruined when a prince, deceived by his ministers, comes to believe that the poorer the subjects, the larger their families will be; and the more they are burdened with taxes, the more able they are to pay them—two sophisms that I call crimes of lèse-majesté, which have always ruined and will always ruin monarchies.

Republics end in luxury, monarchies in depopulation and poverty."

Kent's second question--whether Montesquieu has been radicalized in the process of being quoted--is one that has occurred to me too, for there are indeed cases where a contributor cites Montesquieu but adapts him ever so subtly in a more pointed way. One example will suffice: Montesquieu had written that "[Republics end in luxury, monarchies in poverty](#)."^[81] In his entry on "[Monarchy](#)," Jaucourt states, "Republics end in luxury, monarchies in depopulation and poverty."^[82] So Jaucourt trades in the art and brevity of Montesquieu's original for a chance to gently pile on in his veiled critique of the current government--depopulation being a frequent critique of the current regime. This minor detail calls to mind a larger truth in Kent's observation, namely, that answering our original question entails knowing not only which authors were used by the contributors, but how they were used. It seems doubtful, however, whether a thorough study would dramatically change the "radicalism" quotient.

Dan shares my skepticism about the "radicalism" of the *Encyclopédie*, and in an informative and insightful post, he offers two concrete solutions to the problem of its overuse: one is to banish the term "radicalism" itself as a standard for assessing the project, and the other is to pay more attention to the "monarchic liberalism" informing the work and the period. Since "hear! hear!" was my most common marginal note to Dan's remarks, I'll conclude with just one micro-caveat.

An alternative to retiring the "radicalism" standard (a tempting option, to be sure) would be to rightsize it to more manageable dimensions. Radicalism, after all, is in common parlance a generic, almost statistical term meaning an outlier on any distribution. We talk of everything from the Radical Reformation of the 16th century to the Radical Right of the 21st, and in this common-sense usage, the term strikes me as unlikely to disappear. It ought to be possible to resist the claim that "All Enlightenment by definition is closely linked to revolution"^[83] without denying a circumscribed place for its more extreme variety.

Margaret C. Jacob, who did as much as anyone to put the modern notion of a "radical Enlightenment" on the map, has attempted to tether her "radicals" to a larger, more eclectic intellectual environment, and as such, has increasingly distanced herself from a version of "radical Enlightenment" that has--as Kent noted--eclipsed her own among a certain reading public.^[84] So while I agree with Dan that the concept of "radicalism" seems to be "analytically broken," there would be at least some loss in abandoning it altogether.

Even monarchical liberals could be "radical." David Hume, whose sympathy for what he called a "[civilized monarchy](#)" (a notion calculated to discomfit the blinkered Whigs in his midst) appealed to French readers right up through the Revolution,^[85] harbored a religion and metaphysics too "radical" for academic employment. And Baron d'Holbach, despite his own scandalous atheism, has been aptly labeled (by Jacob) a "liberal, almost utopian monarchist."^[86]

Perhaps our current democratic discontents will have the indirect effect of making it at least marginally easier to appreciate some of these (far from negligible) complexities in the landscape of Encyclopedic political thought.

Endnotes

^[77.] Joel Mokyr, *A Culture of Growth: The Origins of the Modern Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), ch. 7.

^[78.] See "What is the 'Third Estate?'" in Emmanuel-Joseph Siéyès, *Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Michael Sonenscher (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2003 [1789]), ch. 2, 99.

^[79.] See *Encyclopedic Liberty*, 85, 92, 227, 238, 461, 530-31, 566, 619.

^[80.] See Frank Kafker, *The Encyclopedists as a Group: A Collective Biography of the Authors of the Encyclopédie* (Oxford: Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, 1996).

^[81.] Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 7.4.

^[82.] See "Monarchy" in *Encyclopedic Liberty*, 385.

^[83.] *Enlightenment Contested*, 7.

^[84.] See Jacob's *Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons, and Republicans* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981) and *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). Whatever may be thought of her general thesis, she at least makes a diligent attempt to relate "radicalism" to a broader intellectual mainstream in *Scientific Culture and the Making of the Industrial West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). Her review of the first of Israel's volumes appears in *The Journal of Modern History*, 75, no. 2 (June, 2003):387-89, and of later installments in "The Radical Enlightenment and Freemasonry: Where We Are Now," in *Revista de Estudios Históricos de la Masonería: Latinoamericana y Caribeña* (2013):13-25, esp. 19-24. (<[http://www.academia.edu/23657928/ The Radical Enlightenment and Freemasonry Where We Are Now](http://www.academia.edu/23657928/The_Radical_Enlightenment_and_Freemasonry_Where_We_Are_Now)>)

^[85.] Hume first introduced the concept in his "Of Civil Liberty," which appeared in 1742; see *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, 2d ed., ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1987), "[Of Civil Liberty](#)," 92-93, 94; he elaborated upon it in "[Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences](#)," 111-37, esp. 125-27; and he occasionally incorporated it into his 1754 work *The History of England*, 6 vols. (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Classics, 1983 [1778]), 1:50. For his popularity in France, see [Laurence L. Bongie, David Hume, Prophet of the Counterrevolution](#) (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2000 [1965]).

^[86.] Jacob, "The Radical Enlightenment and Freemasonry," 21.

DROPPING POSTREVOLUTIONARY CATEGORIES

by Dan Edelstein

On radicalism, I'm happy to compromise with Hank and would settle for a moratorium. Ten years? I'd even go as low as five, if we could only get Jonathan Israel on board...

More seriously, Hank's thoughtful response highlights one of the issues I was trying to get at, namely, how difficult it is for us to think about old-regime politics without framing our arguments in terms of a Left/Right opposition. To be sure, this opposition was not born ex nihilo in 1789, and one could trace genealogies of liberal, "progressive" thought (loosely speaking, the Left) and of traditional, "conservative" thought (loosely speaking, the Right). But I would reiterate that doing so flattens and can even distort pre-revolutionary political ideas. When we sigh in disappointment at Diderot's apparent lack of nerve at the end of "*Autorité politique*," we are judging him by a different framework than his own. Diderot simply did not think it was a good idea to empower the people with revolutionary agency. He made this argument explicitly in the *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville*, which remained unpublished during his lifetime and thus did not need to pass a censor's review:

We must speak out against senseless laws until they're reformed and, in the meanwhile, abide by them. Anyone who on the strength of his own personal authority violates a bad law thereby authorises everyone else to violate the good. Less harm is suffered in being mad among madmen than in being wise on one's own.^[87]

One might be tempted to view this statement as a kind of proto-Burkean conservatism, but that would be an anachronistic and oversimplified reading of Diderot's position. Despite superficial resemblances, his argument here is neither conservative, nor progressive, in any post-1789 sense. It draws instead from a kind of historical prudence, and a memory of the French wars of religion. It was after all these wars (and Henri IV's actions) that

provide the context for Diderot's final argument, in "Political Authority," [that by "resisting ... men have never corrected princes or abolished taxes.... \[T\]hey have merely added a new measure of misery to the misfortunes they were already lamenting."](#)^[88] From a quasi-utilitarian perspective, Diderot rejects resistance as ineffective and ultimately counterproductive.



Edmund Burke

By urging us to set aside our postrevolutionary categories, I do not mean to press for relativism. We should not limit ourselves to judging the past by its own standards. But with respect to political thought, our own standards can seem rather narrow. We may have a more limited political imagination today than before the French Revolution. We have difficulty conceiving of politics that mixes views that we would now identify as Left or Right. My suggestion to ban radicalism as an analytical category was meant to go in this sense — if we hope to gain a fuller understanding of old-regime political thought, a good place to start is by dropping postrevolutionary categories.

Endnotes

^[87.] "*Supplément au voyage de Bougainville*," in Diderot, *Political Writings*, ed. and trans. John Hope Mason and Robert Wolker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 74.

will redirect Hank's point to our discussion of the *Encyclopédie* itself. One powerful strand of monarchic liberalism – the economic liberalism Dan outlines in his essay – advocated, to reprise two of Dan's examples, freeing the grain trade and ending slavery. Such reforms would have remade the Old Regime political, social, and economic order in a manner that was in no way "conservative" and might merit the term "radical." The monarchy's decision to establish the freedom of the grain trade in 1763-64 (repealed in December 1770) has been described by its foremost historian as a "radical new departure in liberalization" and "the most radical and significant departure from the mold of the administrative monarchy made in the old regime."^[90] And one can hardly think of a more "radical" stance than abolishing slavery. Perhaps I'm quibbling over labels at this point, but in the context of the publication of the *Encyclopédie* these were powerful critiques of the existing order and, it seems to me, "radical."

Endnotes

^[89] Quoted in Darnton, *The Business of Enlightenment*, 10.

^[90] Steven L. Kaplan, *Bread, Politics and Political Economy in the Reign of Louis XV* (The Hague : Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), 1:144 and 2:446.

THE FRENCH EXCEPTION, POLITICAL ESOTERICISM, AND THE SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION

by Kent Wright

Faced with three musketeers, Hank wisely aims at dividing our ranks. Andrew Jainchill and I persist in the effort to find something "radical" about the *Encyclopédie*. But Dan Edelstein has come in forcefully on Hank's side, making it a fair fight at least. Responding to Andrew, Hank doubts whether d'Alembert's Baconian "Map of the System of Human Knowledge" points to any kind of political

radicalism. Bacon was certainly no republican; nor did any contributor to the *Encyclopédie* come close to anticipating Sieyès's assault on "privilege." My suggestion that we still might glimpse in it prodromes of the revolutionary egalitarianism to come meets with a similar objection. Traces of that kind of radicalism there may be, Hank allows, but the dominant tone of the *Encyclopédie* is manifestly not Jacobin. The same goes for Montesquieu -- Jaucourt's channeling of him is mildly reformist, at most. Dan has it right: the most accurate label for describing the political outlook of the *Encyclopédie* would be something like "monarchic liberalism." It may be too late, Hank concludes, to give Israel's "Radical Enlightenment" the decent burial that Dan thinks it deserves -- but giving it a rest for a while would do us all a world of good.

“BACON WAS CERTAINLY NO
REPUBLICAN; NOR DID ANY
CONTRIBUTOR TO
THE *ENCYCLOPÉDIE* COME CLOSE TO
ANTICIPATING SIEYÈS'S ASSAULT ON
"PRIVILEGE.””

Evidently, one thing we all agree on is that "Radical Enlightenment" is not exactly what Joan Scott famously called "gender" -- "a useful category for historical analysis." Imagine if Hank had asked a different question: "How *revolutionary* was the political thought of the *Encyclopédie*?" Although that sounds close to our topic, the ensuing discussion likely would have been very different -- and probably shorter, since my guess is that all four of us would have converged on the same answer: "Not very." No doubt one of Jonathan Israel's achievements, if achievement it is, has been to sow discord among specialists. But as tempting as Dan's call for a moratorium on "Radical Enlightenment" is, I think that Hank and Andrew are right that we have to find a way to live with it. So let me make another suggestion, which owes much to Dale Van Kley's great essay "The Varieties of Enlightened Experience."^[91] The problem

with Israel's conceptual schema lies not just in the obvious anachronism of "Radical Enlightenment" itself, but also in the lazy amorphousness of its supposed opposite number, the "moderate mainstream." Van Kley's solution is to revert to a pluralist conception of the Enlightenment, based not on national variants, but on specific thematic outlooks, formed out of a variety of theological, metaphysical, social, and political dispositions. On his count, there were at least *seven* distinct such "enlightenments," sharing certain bedrock commitments, but otherwise quite distinct from one other. In addition to Israel's "radicals," there were three currents that were explicitly confessional -- a Catholic, a German, and Pocock's "Arminian" enlightenment in the Anglo-American world; two others not overtly hostile to religion, but which chaffed one another on occasion -- John Robertson's "commercial enlightenment" and a "classical republican" alternate -- and even a separate "Rousseauist" version. None of these is entitled to be called "*the* Enlightenment," as Israel would have it -- that label applies to the set as a whole.



Claude Adrien Helvétius

Now, if Van Kley's overall conception of the Enlightenment can be accepted -- obviously, his specific definitions and enumeration of its seven "varieties" are

open to question -- then it has a clear bearing on the issue at hand. Van Kley largely accepts Israel's claim that the editorial team behind the *Encyclopédie* represented a "radical" enlightenment. But he provides a very different explanation of the *philosophes'* turn in a militantly materialist and atheist direction. For one thing, its philosophical impetus owed far more to Condillac's "sensationalist" reading of Locke than it did to any kind of "Spinozism." But more important still was the specific ideological context in which Diderot and d'Alembert, Helvétius and Holbach were obliged to maneuver. For the publication of the *Encyclopédie* coincided with the climax of the decades-long battle between the Jesuits and the Jansenists. This was a theological dispute that, owing to the unique architecture of Bourbon Absolutism -- *parlements* and the General Assembly of the Clergy in control of crucial constitutional and fiscal levers -- was always deeply political. It was the triangularization of this conflict -- Jansenists and Jesuits alike finding the *philosophes* convenient scapegoats, the latter responding, as Van Kley puts it, "with the heaviest ideological artillery available" -- that pitched the French Enlightenment into an assault on Christianity that had no precedent elsewhere in the European world.

This returns us to the question of a "French exception" with a vengeance, of course. For as Van Kley has argued elsewhere, the connection that Israel sees between metaphysical and political radicalism -- "All Enlightenment by definition is closely linked to revolution" -- is almost entirely a *French* phenomenon. Far more common, in the ideological run-up to the Atlantic revolutions, in the Protestant and Catholic worlds alike, was the role played by a very different kind of political radicalism, an explicitly Christian form of "neo-Augustinianism." France, for reasons that went back to the Religious Wars, traced a unique path to ideological and political modernity moving across three centuries, "from an era of religious revolution to a self-consciously irreligious revolution by way of religion itself" [\[92\]](#)

Does this "French exception" overlap in any way, in the *Encyclopédie* or elsewhere, with the one to which I

alluded earlier? That is something that can only be established by further research. There seems nothing implausible about the possibility that the "social republicanism" described by Stéphanie Roza, Pierre Crétois, and their colleagues might have owed something to the "philosophic" radicalism of the team that steered the *Encyclopédie* into print -- or, indeed, to Jansenist "neo-Augustinianism" and the secular "patriotism" that succeeded it. What does seem clear, however, is that a comprehensive answer to our question -- "How radical was the political thought of the *Encyclopédie*?" -- cannot avoid coming to terms with the extraordinarily complicated ideological context analyzed by Van Kley -- a "theological-political problem," if ever there were one. The phrase reminds us of the other suggestion I made, which neither Hank nor Andrew nor Dan seem to want to touch with a 10-foot pole: the possibility that the *Encyclopédie* might present us with with an example, perhaps *the* example, of "political esotericism," à la Strauss and Melzer. If I were them, I'd probably steer clear of it too. But surely this is the right terrain for pursuing the dialectic between intentions and consequences, which Hank and Andrew agree is central to our discussion. The evidence that d'Alembert and Diderot aimed at concealing some kind of esoteric message, for future disclosure, looks strong. What was that message? Hank's question invited us to confine our attention to the "political thought" of the *Encyclopédie*, and I think we can all agree that there doesn't seem to have been much to hide in that respect. Hank and Dan describe its basic shape as "monarchic liberalism." I think a good case can be made for assigning the political thought of the *Encyclopédie* a place in Dennis Rasmussen's "pragmatic Enlightenment," which is explicitly offered as a corrective to Israel's "radical" version.^[93] Rasmussen has scarcely anything to say about the *Encyclopédie*, but plenty about Montesquieu, one of the stars of his show. But what if we are looking for "radicalism" in the wrong place? What if prudent tacking in regard to "politics" -- for which there is more than a little evidence, as we've seen -- was merely a strategy of *reculer pour mieux sauter*, for some deeper purpose? Any guesses about where these depths might lie?

In the spirit of not wanting to miss a *belle occasion de me taire*, let me conclude by returning once more to Jonathan Israel -- if only to assure you that, having joined in bouncing him from the party through the front door, I am not proposing to let him back in via the fire-escape. It has occurred to me that perhaps part of the explanation for Israel's success in capturing the Enlightenment for our time lies simply in his inaugural gesture, the sleight-of-hand by which he subsumed nearly everything that was once called "the Scientific Revolution" *into* "the Enlightenment." Among other things, that would help explain the peculiar demiurgic role played by Spinoza and "Spinozism" in the enterprise. The possibility has been brought home forcefully as a result of studying David Wootton's magnificent *The Invention of Science: A New History*, the major recent attempt to rescue and rehabilitate that particular concept for our epoch. In it, Wootton performs a feat of prestidigitation that is the opposite of Israel's -- that of making the Enlightenment disappear. Having presented the Scientific Revolution as the most "important transformation in human history" since the Neolithic Revolution, Wootton moves straight on to its Industrial sequel before concluding with his extended polemic against the "relativism" that he traces primarily to the baleful influence of Wittgenstein. Actually, the Enlightenment is *not completely* missing from his account. At the very end of his second chapter, "The Idea of the Scientific Revolution," Wootton briefly ushers Denis Diderot on stage in order to pose the question of what it might have been like to have experienced first-hand the perspectival switch of "the invention of science." Wootton concludes:

It might seem far easier for us to answer that question than it was for Diderot, for he was still caught up in the triumph of Newtonianism (which came later in France than in England), while we have all the advantages of hindsight. But Diderot had one great advantage over us: graduating from the Sorbonne in 1732, he had been educated in the world of Aristotelian philosophy. He knew how shocking the destruction of that would have been, for he had experienced it at first hand. From a bird's-eye-

view -- the historian's view -- the Scientific Revolution is a long slow process, beginning with Tycho Brahe and ending with Newton. But for the individuals caught up in it -- for Galileo, Hooke, Boyle, and their colleagues -- it represents a series of sudden, urgent transformations. In 1735 Diderot, educated in the old ways, still planned to become a Catholic priest; by 1748, only a little more than a decade later, he was an atheist and a materialist, already at work on the great *Encyclopaedia*, the first volume of which appeared in 1751. The destruction of the temple of philosophy was not, for him, an historical event; it was a personal experience, the moment when he had awakened from a nightmare.^[94]

There might be a touch of melodrama in the term "nightmare" -- but surely "radical" is not too strong a word to describe the experience of that kind of awakening.

Endnotes

^[91.] Dale K. Van Kley, "Conclusion: The Varieties of Enlightened Experience," in William J. Bulman and Robert C. Ingram, eds., *God and the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 278-316.

^[92.] Dale K. Van Kley, "The Religious Origins of the French Revolution, 1560-1791," in Dale Van Kley and Thomas Kaiser, eds., *From Deficit to Deluge: The Origins of the French Revolution* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 117 -- an essay that resumes and updates his own masterwork, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From Calvin to the Civil Constitution, 1560-1791* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996). For his most extensive discussion of revolutionary "neo-Augustinianism," see Dale K. Van Kley, "Religion and the Age of Patriot Reform," *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 80, No 28 (June 2008), pp. 252-96.

^[93.] Dennis C. Rasmussen, *The Pragmatic Enlightenment: Recovering the Liberalism of Hume, Smith, Montesquieu, and Voltaire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

^[94.] David Wootton, *The Invention of Science: A New History* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015), pp. 53-54.

HOW RADICAL WAS THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF THE *ENCYCLOPÉDIE*?

by Henry C. Clark

Well, at the risk of attracting the unwanted attention of Kent's equivocation-detector, I have to say that I find a great deal to admire and agree with in all three of these latest commentaries. Dan's comment about how hard it is to dispense with our Left-Right terminology reminds me that in a way this modern polarization has its roots not only in the Revolution but in the Enlightenment itself. The term *lumières* appears over 1,100 times in the *Encyclopédie*, and though it often means simply "light" or "knowledge," many contemporaries saw it in stark opposition to terms like "superstition" (517 hits), *enthousiasme* (317), or *fanatisme* (182). Whereas Left and Right are locational terms, the terms used in the 18th century are more like states of mind. Both pairings have a temporal dimension, as they had recourse to more and less "enlightened" ages just as we resort to the language of progressive and regressive.

As Kent reminds us, though, there are different topics that came under "enlightened" influence--different "Enlightened Experiences" in Dale Van Kley's formulation--each with its own itineraries and parameters. Of the ones he mentioned, I would echo the difficulty of squeezing a "commercial enlightenment" and a classical republican one into the same steamy tent. Since classical republicanism was suspicious of private interests and commerce, it often ended up at loggerheads with any "commercial enlightenment"--and long before Benjamin Constant, looking back ruefully at his own experiences during the Revolution, defined the two as incompatible in his 1819 address "On Ancient and Modern Liberty Compared." Whereas an embrace of commerce was clearly "modern" in its sympathies, an embrace of

classical republicanism was likely to be ancient; could *the* Enlightenment include both?

Andrew asks rhetorically whether provincial assemblies along property lines rather than status lines and commercial erosion (not necessarily abolition) of privilege wouldn't have represented "fairly dramatic reforms." Yes, they could be very far-reaching indeed; but my sense continues to be that in the minds of their proponents, and in our own common parlance, they would usually be considered "reformist" rather than "radical." All close observers were aware of the changes brought by monarchs such as Peter in Russia and Frederick II in Prussia, and most commentators, in the *Encyclopédie* and elsewhere, looked for ways of folding even far-reaching reforms within the French royal umbrella as well. Both Henry IV and his frugal minister Sully did an extended star turn throughout the century, in general and in the *Encyclopédie* itself.^[95]



King Henry IV

The case of Diderot himself is instructive. The philosophe who offered us the strangely cautious ending of "Political Authority" and that "conservative"-sounding passage from the *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville* was the same "atheist and materialist" evoked by David Wootton. It was the same Diderot who spent months in

Russia (shortly after the *Bougainville*) trying to convince Catherine II to bring far-reaching (radical?) reforms to her people, only to call her a "despot" some years later, by which point his interventions in Raynal's history of colonialism were sounding some of the most "radical" sentiments of the age. Nor was he alone in this multivocal character of his political ideas: Voltaire, the beating heart of the Enlightenment mainstream if ever there was one, combined a famous sympathy for absolute monarchy--it was the biggest stick to beat the privileged orders he despised--with the view that the "people" will quite naturally prefer "democracy" as their form of government (he differed from Adam Smith on this point), while also noting that "the argument always ends with agreement that men are very difficult to govern."^[96] It is not always as easy as we might like to figure out what "team" our 18th-century players are on.

In that vein, I'll close by echoing Dan's remark about our "more limited political imagination" today. In places like the Club de l'Entresol, perhaps frequented briefly by Montesquieu, contemporaries became accustomed to think pluralistically about regimes. Elaborating on a practice that went back to Plato and Aristotle, they thought of different constitutional types not in either-or, end-of-history terms but in cost-benefit terms as options that all had pluses and minuses. Since France was regarded in the middle of the 18th century as a mostly successful country (though that would begin to change somewhat after the Seven Years' War), it should be unsurprising that modern-sounding values such as liberty and equality were first tried out within that framework.

But even 21st-century citizens, according to the moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt, are concerned not only with liberty and equality but also with the ways in which equally elementary moral intuitions--loyalty, authority, sanctity--are accommodated by their political regimes, inhibiting our understanding of the politics around us. Perhaps we are doubly limited in our attempts to understand the *Encyclopédie*.^[97]

Endnotes

^[95.] See *Encyclopedic Liberty*, 17-20, 147, 215, 250, 314, 484, 504n36, 520-21, 530, 647, 668, 684-85; there are 74

mentions of "Sully" in the *Encyclopédie* as a whole, though a few of them are to figures other than the royal minister.

[96.] "[Patrie. Homeland](#)" in "Pocket Philosophical Dictionary" and "[Démocratie. Democracy](#)" in "Questions on the Encyclopedia," in Voltaire, *Political Writings*, ed. David Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 29, 37). Smith, on the contrary, wrote, "[That kings are the servants of the people](#), to be obeyed, resisted, deposed, or punished, as the public conveniency may require, is the doctrine of reason and philosophy, but it is not the doctrine of Nature." Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), I.iii.3, 53.

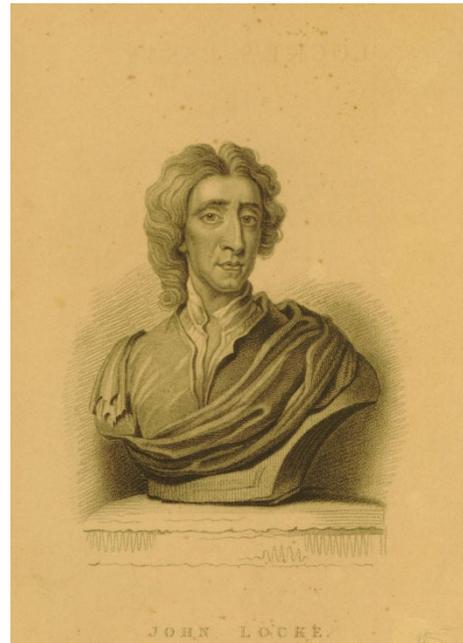
[97.] See Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind* (New York: Vintage, 2012), for his argument that evolution has left us with basic moral intuitions on behalf of equality, care, sanctity, loyalty, authority and liberty, which we apply in our different ways to our political lives. Istvan Hont recovered a part of this forgotten history in "Commercial Society and Political Theory in the Eighteenth Century: The Problem of Authority in David Hume and Adam Smith," in *Main Trends in Cultural History*, ed. Willem Melching and Wyger Velema (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), 54-94.

REGARDING POLITICAL ESOTERICISM

by Andrew Jainchill

Kent prods the rest of us to take up the topic of political esotericism in the *Encyclopédie*. Without going all-in on the term, I think it is worth considering specifically in relation to the "Jaucourt-Montesquieu" pairing that came up earlier in our conversation; that is, as Hank puts it, whether "Montesquieu has been radicalized in the process of being [selectively] quoted" by Jaucourt. As Hank points out, Jaucourt "piles on in his veiled critique of the current government." Jaucourt performed a similar move in his article on toleration, which almost entirely quoted from Locke's *Letter* on the subject but, crucially, without the famous passages about not extending such

toleration to atheists or Catholics. Locke was certainly "radicalized" by Jaucourt in this manner. Moreover, Jaucourt, and thus the *Encyclopédie*, championed religious toleration, which was certainly a subversive political value in a France that at the time officially had no Protestants and where "*une foi, une loi, un roi*" (one faith, one law, one king) remained a traditional adage of the monarchy. In addition to the subversive content itself, does the act of "radicalizing" well-known texts through selective quotation make these contributions even more radical as a form of "political esotericism"? And what does that tell us about the overall political project of the *Encyclopédie*?



John Locke

SPHINX WITHOUT A SECRET?

by Kent Wright

Just a couple of points of clarification. As Hank's opening essay made plain, the question we were invited to address was inspired by Jonathan Israel's conception of "Radical Enlightenment," which has dominated the field of Enlightenment studies for more than a decade. None of us is an Israelite. Hank's essay in effect reversed Israel's verdict on the *Encyclopédie* -- a good case

forbids, but is permitted or even encouraged by the Straussian approach.

Endnotes

[98.] M. F. Burnyeat, "Sphinx Without a Secret," *New York Review of Books*, May 30, 1985 -- which provoked a wonderfully funny ruckus in the Letters pages, as one big name after another -- Cropsey, Jaffa, Bloom, etc. -- protested over the caricatures of both Burnyeat and David Levine (who was held to have given Strauss "two right hands").

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Henry C. Clark](#) has been a visiting professor in the Political Economy Project at Dartmouth College since 2014. Before then, he taught at Canisius College (where he became professor of history), Norwich University, Lawrence University, Tulane University, and Clemson University. He is the author of *La Rochefoucauld and the Language of Unmasking in Seventeenth-Century France* (1994) and *Compass of Society: Commerce and Absolutism in Old-Regime France* (2007). He has edited *Commerce, Culture and Liberty: Readings on Capitalism Before Adam Smith* (2003), and has translated *Montesquieu's Mes pensées* (My Thoughts [2012]), named a *Choice* magazine Outstanding Academic Title. His edition, co-translated with Christine D. Henderson, of *Encyclopedic Liberty: Political Articles in the Dictionary of Diderot and d'Alembert* appeared in 2016. His articles and reviews have appeared in journals of history, political science, philosophy and economics. His current book project, on which this post is loosely based, bears the provisional title *Honor Management: The Unsocial Passions and the Untold Story of Modernity*.

[Dan Edelstein](#) is the William H. Bonsall Professor of French, and Professor of History (by courtesy) at Stanford University. He is the author of *The Terror of Natural Right: Republicanism, the Cult of Nature, and the French Revolution* (2009), *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy* (2010), and *On the Spirit of Rights* (forthcoming, 2018), all with the University of Chicago Press.

[Andrew Jainchill](#) is an associate professor in the department of history at Queens University (Canada). He is the author of *Reimagining Politics after the Terror: The Republican Origins of French Liberalism* (Cornell University Press, 2008) as well as articles and essays in a number of venues, including *French Historical Studies*, *The Journal of Modern History*, the *Revue Voltaire*, and *Modern Intellectual History*. He is currently completing a critical edition of the 18th-century political writer René-Louis de Voyer de Paulmy and marquis d'Argenson's most important text, the *Considérations sur le gouvernement ancien et présent de la France*, and working on an intellectual biography of d'Argenson as well as a study of French political thought during the first half of the 18th century, tentatively titled "Sovereignty and Reform in the Early Enlightenment."

[Johnson Kent Wright](#) is an associate professor in the school of civil and economic thought at Arizona State University and a former editor of the journal *French Historical Studies*. He is the author of *A Classical Republican in Eighteenth-Century France: The Political Thought of Mably* (Stanford University Press, 1997), as well as articles and essays on French political thought in the 18th century and on historiography in the 19th and 20th centuries. He is completing a book on the Atlantic Revolutions and launching another on the place of the idea of "the Enlightenment" in modern thought.

COPYRIGHT & FAIR USE STATEMENT

"Liberty Matters" is the copyright of [Liberty Fund, Inc.](#) This material is put online to further the educational goals of Liberty Fund, Inc. These essays and responses may be quoted and otherwise used under "fair use" provisions for educational and academic purposes. To reprint these essays in course booklets requires the prior permission of Liberty Fund, Inc. Please contact submissions@libertyfund.org if you have any questions.