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Jean Le Rond d'Alembert



Denis Diderot

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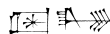
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*Political Articles in the Dictionary  
of Diderot and D'Alembert*

Edited and with an Introduction by Henry C. Clark

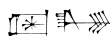
Translated by Henry C. Clark and Christine Dunn Henderson



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## Introduction

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“Whoever takes the trouble of combining the several political articles, will find that they form a noble system of civil liberty.” So wrote the English legal expert Owen Ruffhead in 1768, referring to the seventeen-volume *Encyclopédie*, edited by Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d’Alembert, whose publication had been completed three years before.<sup>1</sup> One volume per year had rolled off the presses from 1751 until 1757; the remaining ten volumes emerged all at once in 1765. The present anthology brings together as many of the politically themed articles as could comfortably fit within a single volume, so readers may decide for themselves whether a “noble system of civil liberty” or, indeed, any system at all emerges from them.

The worthiness of the project will be well known to students of the period. The editors described their compendium in terms that made clear their intention not only to provide a uniquely comprehensive reference work, but to “change the way men think,” to supply a “war machine” by which to overcome what they considered the entrenched, institutionalized resistance to new knowledge all around them. In his celebrated *Preliminary Discourse*, an introduction to the whole compilation, d’Alembert traced an entire history of modern philosophy and science designed to chart the way toward a sweeping Baconian project of improving the world through usable knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

And yet, for all the bold-sounding language that accompanied the prospectus and the first volume, the treatment of political subjects was problematic throughout the work’s publishing history. Diderot had already

1. See *Monthly Review* 29 (1768): 545, cited in Arthur M. Wilson, *Diderot* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 491.

2. Jean Le Rond d’Alembert, *Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopedia of Diderot*, trans. and intro. Richard N. Schwab (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963).

spent some months in prison for his writings in the late 1740s before working on the *Encyclopédie* and had not enjoyed the experience. But some of the biggest early controversies came from his own political contributions—in substantial articles such as POLITICAL AUTHORITY, CITIZEN, and NATURAL RIGHT, all of them included in this volume. The resulting firestorm, in combination with the plausible threat of further incarceration, evidently led him to delegate most political topics later in the work to other contributors.

In a more general sense, the tortured character of political coverage in the work was no doubt a function of the sheer fragility of the editors' rights to publication. At the very time when the second volume was appearing, in 1752, a Sorbonne thesis by an abbé Martin de Prades, who had contributed the entry CERTITUDE to the *Encyclopédie*, was condemned for unorthodoxy.<sup>3</sup> Diderot's dictionary was briefly suppressed by a royal order in council; there was even talk of putting its editors to death. The dauphin's Jesuit preceptor, Bishop Jean-François Boyer, received the king's permission to take action. The royal censor, Chrétien-Guillaume Lamoignon de Malesherbes, a man generally sympathetic to the enlightenment project who held this important office from 1752 to 1763, devised a compromise whereby the *Encyclopédie* would continue publication. In exchange, Bishop Boyer was able to choose the censors assigned to its volumes.

In 1758, after the appearance of volume 7 the previous November, a larger crisis developed. The global war that had begun in 1756 (eventually called the Seven Years' War) was not going well for France, and wartime censorship was in full operation by 1758. There was also an attempt on the life of King Louis XV by the psychotic Damiens (1757) and a trial that led to his drawing and quartering (1758). The article GENEVA (reproduced here) had in the meantime caused an international incident with the Genevan government's declaration of orthodoxy in February 1758. For these reasons Diderot came under increasing personal pressure during this time; d'Alembert himself made the decision between December 1757 and February 1758 to discontinue his editorial association with the project.

3. See Jeffrey D. Burson, *The Rise and Fall of Theological Enlightenment: Jean-Martin de Prades and Ideological Polarization in Eighteenth-Century France*, with a foreword by Dale Van Kley (South Bend: Notre Dame University Press, 2010), especially chaps. 7–9.



Voltaire was among those urging Diderot to take the enterprise abroad for safety's sake.

In the summer of 1758 Rousseau precipitated a long-brewing breach with the encyclopedic party through the publication of his *Letter to d'Alembert on the Theatre*, a work containing a personal attack against Diderot. Also that summer (July 1758) Claude-Adrien Helvétius's materialist treatise *De l'Esprit* was published. For numerous reasons, including the prefatory dedication by Diderot's close friend Friedrich-Melchior Grimm, the work quickly became a flashpoint for mounting hostility against the *Encyclopédie* itself.

Finally, in November 1758, the archbishop of Paris condemned the book; the pope followed two months later. The Parlement of Paris—the chief judicial body in the realm, which also exercised administrative functions—resolved to launch a full-scale investigation of all scandalous literature and decided upon an immediate ban on the sale of the *Encyclopédie* itself, a judgment confirmed by the Royal Council in March 1759. The pope enjoined any Roman Catholic who possessed a copy of the work to bring it to a local priest for burning.

“Where they burn books,” Heinrich Heine once wrote, “they end up burning men.” The ending to this story, though, was less gruesome. Diderot's files were empty when the police searched his home because Malesherbes, the royal censor, had himself taken them into safe custody. Although the publishing project had seemingly reached a dead end by July of 1759 when the parlement ordered the editors to cease operations and repay subscribers, a confidential and unwritten arrangement allowed Diderot and the chevalier Louis de Jaucourt, a Protestant nobleman who had by now in effect replaced d'Alembert as co-editor, to continue their work in private, with an expectation that the last volumes would appear at an opportune moment. That moment finally arrived in 1765.

Among the reasons that government officials eventually allowed the enterprise to go forward was the calculation that too much had been invested, by producers and buyers alike, to allow such a lucrative venture to migrate to Prussia or Holland, as would otherwise have been likely. The contrast with Diderot's Chinese counterpart, Sung Ying-hsing, is stark. That redoubtable late Ming scholar brought out a comparably ambitious and wide-

ranging compendium of practical knowledge, *The Making and Wonders of the Works of Nature*, in 1637; but despite an enthusiastic reception by its readers, the work had all but disappeared from circulation within a few years—victim of a remarkably successful government suppression—only to be fitfully reconstructed from rare surviving copies centuries later.<sup>4</sup> The eventual publication of the last ten volumes of Diderot’s work may accordingly be seen as a triumph of (partially) free expression, political pluralism, and commercial enterprise.

Properly speaking, neither Diderot nor his fellow contributors of political articles would have been recognized as political philosophers. But Diderot’s dictionary was not meant to be a collection of original essays. “Woe betide such a vast work,” the editors wrote, “if we wanted to make the whole thing a work of invention!”<sup>5</sup> It was designed as a general reference work, and modern research has established how extraordinarily successful it was in this ambition.<sup>6</sup>

It was also designed, however, as a dynamically interactive, aggressively cross-referenced compendium of the new knowledge and new ways of thinking in all fields of study. Both the prospectus and d’Alembert’s “Preliminary Discourse,” as well as Diderot’s important article *ENCYCLOPÉDIE* itself, emphasized the intention to propagate this new approach to a larger audience. The question that would have hovered over the political articles, therefore, was: what do the new learning and the new ways of reasoning that the editors wished to disseminate have to say about the origins, nature, and ends of political order? Although some of the articles featured here are indeed distinguished for their originality, a contributor’s main task would have been skillful synthesis of recognized authorities. The problem was that the selection and citation of such authorities was fraught with con-

4. For an English translation and textual history, see Sung Ying-hsing, *T’ien-kung k’ai-wu: Chinese Technology in the Seventeenth Century*, trans. E-tu Zen Sun and Shiou-chuan Sun (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1966).

5. 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] (Paris: Briasson, David, Le Breton, Durand, 1751–72), 3:vii.

6. See Robert Darnton, *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the “Encyclopédie,” 1775–1800* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).

trovery, as we have seen, which furnishes a not insignificant part of the interest of this volume.

Contributors resorted to a gamut of strategies in finessing this problem. They could lift material from an author without acknowledgment (see Jaucourt's use of Bolingbroke in *PATRIOT*, for example); they could quote material without identifying either author or work (see Jaucourt's use of Addison's *Cato* at the beginning of the same entry); they could refer to an author obliquely ("a talented English author") without naming him; they could mention a work or author once while drawing on him more often throughout the entry; or they could summarize their general reliance upon a source by mentioning it at the beginning or end of an entry. There is some reason to believe there was at least a loose correlation between citation practice and publication status: that is, in the complexly graded system of publishing permissions available under the French monarchy—everything from a full royal privilege to a complete ban, with other options in between—the more officially respectable a work's publication status was, the more overt the citation might be. Montesquieu's political work was more likely to be cited explicitly than Locke's or Bolingbroke's, Bossuet's than Montesquieu's. Different contributors, of course, had different risk thresholds, and the perceived riskiness of a work could change over time.<sup>7</sup>

Although no full-scale critical study has yet been attempted of the sources used in the political articles of the *Encyclopédie*,<sup>8</sup> it is clear enough that the main modern authorities utilized and cited for the entries presented in this volume would include the following: Hobbes; Grotius, Pufendorf, and the recently published Jean Burlamaqui (1747) for the natural-law tradition; Locke and Sidney for the English, as well as Mandeville, Shaftesbury, Addison, Bolingbroke, Gordon, and Hume; Voltaire—especially his *Letters on the English* (known today as the *Philosophical Letters*) and his *Essai sur l'histoire universelle* (more commonly known since the mid-twentieth century

7. For some of these last points, see 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 (April 2013): 213–36.

8. Those interested in this topic can follow the progress of scholarship on the *Encyclopédie* as a whole at <http://www.zotero.org/groups/encyclopedie/items>, the George Mason University website for this subject.

as *Essai sur les mœurs* [Essay on manners]); and, above all, Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*. That last polyglot masterpiece, which had just appeared in 1748, possessed an authority in the political articles that would be difficult to exaggerate. Jaucourt relied on it almost exclusively for many of his entries. But even authors who explicitly took issue with Montesquieu's ideas—such as Boulanger in POLITICAL ECONOMY, Saint-Lambert in HONOR and LEGISLATOR, or Damilaville in POPULATION and FIVE PERCENT TAX—often take their starting point from a question or proposition advanced by him.

Rousseau, for his part, is relatively and perhaps surprisingly unimportant for understanding the *Encyclopédie*. His long entry ECONOMIE OU CÉCONOMIE in volume 5, widely available today as *Discourse on Political Economy* and not reproduced in this volume, was an early forerunner of his more developed political theory. And his signature concept of the “general will” is used in Diderot's NATURAL RIGHT, Saint-Lambert's LEGISLATOR, and Damilaville's FIVE PERCENT TAX, which do appear in this volume, and occasionally in entries that do not, for example, GRECS (PHILOSOPHIE DES) [Greek Philosophy] and VERTU [Virtue]. D'Alembert does defend the dictionary against Rousseau's two discourses of 1750 and 1754, with their indictment of the corrupting influences of the modern arts and sciences on human mores.<sup>9</sup> But the *Social Contract*, Rousseau's main political work, did not appear until 1762 and finds little echo in these pages.

Even more conspicuous by his nearly complete absence is Bishop Bossuet (1627–1704), the leading exponent of the political theory of divine-right absolute monarchy under the reign of Louis XIV.<sup>10</sup> Nothing could more vividly illustrate the sea change in political thinking that had taken place between 1680 and 1750.

On the other side of the Atlantic, Americans did not know much about this most seminal of reference works. Unlike Montesquieu's *Spirit of the*

9. See *Encyclopédie*, 1:xxxiii; also found in d'Alembert, *Preliminary Discourse*, 103–4.

10. I have found 111 references to Bossuet in the work (plus a handful of others when searching under the term “Meaux,” his place of origin), but these cite almost exclusively his oratory or his religious works, such as his *Histoire des variations des églises protestantes* [*History of the variations in the Protestant churches*]. The lone instance when his political theory, contained mainly in his *Politique tirée des propres paroles de l'Écriture sainte* [*Politics drawn from the very words of Holy Scripture*], is even mentioned, it is disparaged by Damilaville in FIVE PERCENT TAX, below.