

# Diderot's Criticism of Colonialism: Plea for Equality and Reciprocity among Peoples<sup>1</sup>

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To whom do you pretend to make believe that a man can be the property of a sovereign, that a child can be the property of his father, that a woman can be the property of her husband, that a servant can be the property of his master, that a negro can be the property of the colonist? (Diderot, *History of the Two Indies*. OC III, 740).

This paper addresses the issue how Diderot displays a free analysis thanks to anonymity in the *History of Two Indies*. I claim that the author criticizes without any roundabout style colonialism and slavery, focusing first on the fragments of this work attributed to Diderot. Second, I tackle the fact that Diderot argues in this work for the right to hospitality and breaks down the consequences stemming from trade under an inspiring view for contemporary analyses. I also attempt to cast light on Diderot's view of other peoples and cultures traditionally considered 'wild', drawing a conclusion that they are useful to identify the boundaries of European bourgeois moral codes, usually considered 'civilized'. In this vein I also address in the paper the *Addendum to the Journey of Bougainville*, a key writing for appraising issues as anticolonialism and cosmopolitanism in Diderot's thought.

**Keywords:** anticolonialism, cosmopolitanism, slavery, hospitality, trade

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## INTRODUCTION

Diderot's notes on colonialism and its discontents raise a large attraction since some decades. In fact, Diderot targets in his account of the slaves produced by European nations large flaws weakening the civil order on the old continent. My main aim in this paper will be to highlight some thesis argued by Diderot that still show that the Diderot's anti-colonialism – highlighted, in its day, by Yves Benot – is sufficiently blatant in his anonymous contributions to *A Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies*, published by Abbé Raynal. In the chapter *On the Savage Nations*, Diderot urges the Hottentots of South Africa to go inside the woods, for there they can only lose their lives, whereas civilized men will take away their liberty. 'Grab the axes, tighten the bows, and let poisoned arrows rain upon those foreigners, who consider unworthy of living anyone who does not think as they do' (Diderot 1994–1997: 680). Nothing to do, so far, with the call for civic hospitality amongst Europeans and uncivilized peoples typical of the Kantian juridical cosmopolitanism. On the contrary, the exploitation of territories and their inhabitants, as well

as the plundering of their natural resources, are portrayed as the 'civilized' visitors' coveted loot. These considerations by Diderot are framed by one of the main obstacles with which Enlightenment cosmopolitanism had to deal: the contrast between savage and civilized peoples.<sup>2</sup>

### DIDEROT'S PLEA FOR THE EQUALITY OF NATIONS

In order to think of a cosmopolitan kind of citizenship, it was fundamental not to perceive the non-European peoples as inferior, or to show contempt for their forms of life, which did not mean preferring the despotic governments, in some cases, or the anarchy, in others, which reigned amongst those non-European peoples. All the more since in Paris itself one could find two very differentiated kinds of citizens, as Diderot writes in his *Apostrophe to Louis XVI*:

'Some, overflowing with wealth, display a luxury that outrages those who are not corrupted by it; the other ones are immersed in an indigence which is made bigger by the mirage of a relief which they do not have, for such is the power of gold, once it has become the god of a nation, a god which replaces any talent and any virtue to the point that it is necessary either to possess wealth, or to make others believe that one possesses it' (Diderot 1994–1997: 638).

Diderot thinks it is worth asking whether the nations that continue to be more or less wild are more or less happy than the civilized peoples. For the inhabitants of the former content themselves with satisfying their most elementary needs, whereas civilization imposes an infinite variety of artificial demands. The savage man would never miss what he does not desire, nor would he ever desire what he ignores, or fall pray of boredom. In contrast, most of the civilized men are reduced to a certain kind of bondage, as they have to struggle with tasks which are as difficult as they are absorbing, and they have to carry upon their shoulders the weight of society. In the countryside there are day labourers whose work only brings them a small portion of the harvest of what they have sowed; in the cities, workers are exploited by employers who are as lazy as they are greedy, and who pay them minimum wages even though they sell their products at high prices. The savage man enjoys a kind of independence, which contrasts with that of even the rich man, who is surrounded by laws, by other people, by prejudices, and by the latest fashions which, at each and every instant, remind him of his loss of freedom:

'Ask a civilized man if he is happy. Ask a savage man if he is happy. If both answer "No", the discussion can be considered as terminated' (Diderot 1994–1997: 677).

This does not necessarily mean, however, that Diderot prefers the savage state to the civilized one, convinced as he is that the savage man will gradually advance towards the civilized state, and, conversely, that the civilized man will long for a return to his primitive state somehow. Diderot concludes rather that an intermediate state between the primitive and the civilized state is the desirable one. For him, there is no qualitative difference between those two states; rather, they are separated by a temporal interval. In fact, endorsing one of the pillars of the Kantian cosmopolitan right, Diderot tells us about the *hospitality* which travellers had the chance to enjoy, e.g. in Brazil. Thus:

*Hospitality* constitutes one of the most certain indicators of man's instinct and calling for sociability. Born out of natural commiseration, hospitality was in an original time general, and it constituted a solid bond amongst nations; thus, if a man was persecuted by his fellow

<sup>2</sup> Cf., for example, the volume edited by Villaverde and López Sastre (2015) in order to frame this contrast within the general context of the Enlightenment, Agnani (2013) and Okon (1980), who approach it by focusing on Diderot's *Addendum*.

citizens, he would run away and look for peace elsewhere (Diderot 1994–1997: 685).

Diderot also coincides with Kant in considering the spirit of trade as a guarantee of peace, given that a war between nations of traders is like a devastating fire, and that bankruptcies are state affairs. Having said that, he also endorses the Kantian thesis about the first occupier – which Diderot takes from Rousseau's *Social Contract* –, regarding the inhabitants of territories that are considered for colonization: 'If the country is populated, then I can only, legitimately, aspire after the hospitality and help that man owes to man' (Diderot 1994–1997: 690). It would only be permissible to take possession of deserted territories through work, and only for my own subsistence, as Rousseau has it, although 'he could expel and exterminate me if I took control over his women, his children, and his properties, and if I acted against his civil freedom, if I offended his religious beliefs, if I tried to legislate over him, if I attempted to enslave him' (Diderot 1994–1997: 691).

Respecting the rules that allow them to live together, the commercial transactions between colonists and indigenous peoples should only be freely assumed by both parties, independently of how asymmetrical they might appear on account of assigning different values to things. It is hard not to evocate the stay in Eldorado that Voltaire makes *Candid* go through when we read the Diderot's following remark:

'If I secretly laugh at the imbecility of the one who gives me gold in exchange for iron, the alleged imbecile also laughs at me, for I give him my iron, whose utility he is aware of, in exchange for his gold, which is of no use to him. We both deceit one another, or rather, none of us deceits the other one. Exchanges should be perfectly free' (OC III, 691).<sup>3</sup>

According to Diderot, European nations should judge their own behaviour by putting themselves in the other one's position. When European navigators arrive in a region of the New World that is not occupied by any other people of the old continent, they immediately decide that this territory belongs to them. What would you think of some savages who after arriving at your coasts did likewise? How can you adjudicate to yourselves any right upon men who are your equals, or upon the products of their lands?

'Is not ownership identical everywhere, grounded on taking possession of something through work, and on long and placid enjoyment? Europeans: Could you tell me at what distance away from your residence does this sacred title becomes invalidated? Twenty steps away? Ten leagues away? You say "No". Well, then, neither does it become invalidated ten thousand leagues away from you' (OC III, 697).

Diderot thinks that expeditions to those far regions should not have brought guns or soldiers with them, but only a group of young men and women, who, by marrying the natives, would have turned foreigners and natives into a unique family, held together by the strongest form of bond: consanguinity. Trade establishes itself without any difficulty amongst those who have reciprocal needs, and it immediately gets people accustomed to seeing as friends those who arrive in their own land without trying to take hold of it. Unfortunately, however, the adventurers who went to those far lands only wanted to conquer them, and they succumbed to their thirst for gold.

In this context, slavery is unequivocally criticized, since natural freedom is the right to avail

<sup>3</sup> The example reminds us of the anecdote told by Aristotle in Book V of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, regarding the weapons that the Trojan Glaucus gives to the Achean Diomedes – golden weapons for bronze ones –, once Glaucus understands that his ancestors were hosts and guests. To be sure, the Aristotelian example belongs to an anthropological environment completely different to that envisaged by Diderot. The context in which the example is given is the discussion of whether one can treat oneself unjustly.

of oneself at will that nature has given to every man, and it is, together with reason, the distinctive characteristic of man. Nobody can avail himself of my freedom, according to Diderot, who describes a ship owner who has made of slavery his business in the following way:

‘Stooped over his desk, feather in hand, [the slave trader] reckons how many rifles will he need in order to get a negro, how many shackles will he need in order to keep him imprisoned within his ship, how many whiplashes will he need in order to make him work. You shudder. Well, then, if there was a religion which tolerated, even if only through silence, suchlike horrors, and which considered it a crime that a slave broke his chains, shouldn’t we strangle its ministers on the rubble of their altars?’ (OC III, 697).

## THE APPROACH TO WILD CULTURES

In his *Addendum to the Journey of Bougainville*, another key work in order to figure out his conception of cosmopolitanism by means of the contrast between nature and culture, between the man that belongs to a primitive society and the civilized man, Diderot takes up themes in both the Rousseau’s second *Discourse* and Kant’s *Conjectural Beginning*, by comparing certain Tahitian customs and traditions with their European counterparts, making a special emphasis in sexual habits – in part, perhaps, for purely biographical reasons: around that time, Diderot had problems with his lover, he had to overcome some difficulties in order to consolidate his daughter’s marriage, and he had to cope with the intransigence of his brother’s religious fanaticism. Hence his second subtitle: *On the Drawback to Binding Moral Ideas to Certain Physical Actions Which Bear None*. The Tahitian utopia will serve Diderot’s purpose of subjecting the political to the immutable order of nature.<sup>4</sup>

In his *Voyage Around the World*, Bougainville described scenes that would inflame the erotic imagination of Europeans, above all when they arrived in an island which they tried to call ‘New Citara’, recalling both the legendary debauchery of that little Greek island and one of the names of Aphrodite, but whose inhabitants called ‘Tahiti’. Not only did the natives invited the strangers to eat, but they demanded them to make love with their young women, forming a circle around the guest and the young victim of the hospitable duty, while musicians sang to the sound of a flute a hymn of joy. ‘Venus – writes Bougainville – is here the goddess of hospitality, her cult not admitting any mystery, and each enjoyment means a festivity for the nation; they were surprised by the embarrassment that they witnessed, four our customs rule out such publicity, but one would immediately get used to the local usage’ (Bougainville, p. 235).

We are reminded by Jean Proust in his Preface to Bougainville’s text, published in the *Mercur de France a Postscript on the Island of New Citara*, where one of the members of the crew, called Commerson, claimed to have visited Utopia itself, ‘the only corner of the world where men with no vices, no prejudices, no needs, and no dissensions. They do not recognize any god other than Love, a divinity to whom they consecrate themselves every day, the whole island being its temple, and all women its altars.’ Women in that place give themselves to everybody under the complacent eyes of their compatriots, and to find anything wrong about it would tantamount to denying ‘the condition of the natural man, who was born essentially good, without any prejudice, and who without any remorse follows the sweet impulses of an instinct which is always certain because it has not yet degenerated in reason’; ‘the right

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Bernard Papin (1988), *passim*. Cf. The moral tenets of Diderot’s appraisal of the savage in Strugnell (2013: 17–30).

to property – he adds – is not in nature, and it is a mere convention' (Bougainville, p. 22). Through these tales they illustrated the myth of the 'noble savage', attributed to Rousseau in spite of the fact that it has no relation to his thought.

Bougainville also describes the reception given to the crew. The boat was surrounded by dugouts full of very attractive women, 'most of these nymphs were naked. The men pressed us to choose a woman, follow her to solid ground, and with unequivocal gestures they showed the manner in which we should get to know them' (Bougainville, p. 226). One might get the impression that they had arrived at the Champs-Élysées. 'As it seemed, for the most necessary things in life, there was no property, and everything belonged to everyone' (Bougainville 1982: 255), including women and children. Now, this idyllic picture was very much qualified by his conversations with the native which he brought with him to France. Bougainville tells us, further, that Tahitians are in constant war with the inhabitants of neighbouring islands, that women owe their husbands absolute submission, and that there are great inequalities amongst them. This suggests that the collective right to the enjoyment of the community's women does not diminish the violence connatural to human species, but merely transfers it to other anthropological orders.

However that may be, Diderot is interested in emphasizing the simplicity of the savage's life, in comparison to such complicated machines which are the civilized societies. And, as it was earlier pointed out, it is not so much a spatial but a temporal matter, for we are in two different moments of the same process: 'The Tahitian borders with the world's origin, whereas the European with its old age. The interval that separates them from us is greater than the distance between a newborn and a decrepit man' (Diderot 1994–1997: 546). Diderot makes a venerable old man give voice to the defense of his way of life against Bougainville, who represents the civilized world:

'We obey pure natural instinct, and you have tried to erase its mark from our souls. Here everything belongs to everyone, and you have advocated who knows what sort of distinction between what is yours and what is mine. We are free, but you have sowed in our land the seed of our future slavery. Is this country yours because you have crushed it? If one day a Tahitian disembarked on your coasts and engraved on a tree's bark that your country belongs to the Tahitians, what would you think? Leave our customs to us; they are fairer and more honest than yours; we don't want to trade what you call our ignorance for your useless lights. We have all that is good and necessary. Are we despicable because we haven't created superfluous needs for ourselves? Do not numb us with your artificial needs or with your chimerical virtues' (Diderot 1994–1997: 547–548).

Here we find the same theses against colonialism and slavery that we found in the *History of the Two Indies*, and in one passage of the *Addendum* Diderot even says, ironically, that Raynal may perhaps had undercover collaborators. Clearly, Diderot can express his ideas much more bluntly than Kant, for in the *History* case he speaks anonymously, and in the other case his text will not see the light during his lifetime. The *Addendum*, in effect, was only published in 1796, the same year that Kant's *Perpetual Peace* was translated into French. That does not prevent the Kantian proposals, which we dealt with in the first part of this paper, from being as forceful as those of Diderot, in spite of being confined by a juridical language, and devoid of the freshness of the literary genre chosen by Diderot in order to analyse the same problems.

Another memorable passage in the *Addendum* is the conversation between the chaplain and the indigenous man, who introduces his wife and three daughters so that the chaplain selects the one with whom he wants to spend the night, although he recommends the youngest

one, since she still has no children and that makes it harder to set up her marriage. The pruderies displayed concerning honesty and an imperative of chastity, which the chaplain does not quite manage to explicate, are devastated by the reasoning put forward by the Tahitian, who does not understand how it is possible that the chaplain's religion prevents him from enjoying such an innocent pleasure, to which nature, our sovereign, invites us all: to bring one of your fellow creatures to life, and to enrich a nation by giving it one more member. He does not propose the chaplain to take these local customs to his home country, but he does ask him to respect them while he is in the country that shows hospitality to him. One would nearly say that Diderot wants to get to the core of the *Social Contract* by reviewing the clauses of the *Sexual Contract*. The chaplain tries to explain to his Tahitian host that in Europe sexual relationships are rigorously scrutinized by the public opinion, and that they cause all sorts of condemnation when they go against the loyalty demanded by marriage. The chaplain's interlocutor then replies with the following remark, invoking the Kantian distinction between persons and things:

'I find those particular precepts contrary to nature, as they presuppose that a being who feels, thinks, and is free can be the property of an equal being. What is that right based on? Can't you see that in your country the thing that has no sensibility or thought, desire or will, that one can take or leave, keep or trade, without it suffering or complaining, has been conflated with the thing that can't be either traded or acquired, which has freedom, will and desire, which can give itself of refuse to do it for a moment, which complains and suffers, which cannot become merchandise without losing its character and without its nature being violated?' (Diderot 1994–1997: 555).

According to Diderot, there would be nothing in common between the gallant Athenian Venus and the fecund Tahitian Venus. Referring back to the argument about the allegedly asymmetrical exchanges between Europeans and the allegedly naïve indigenous people, Diderot has the Tahitian confessing a secret to the chaplain, in order to make him understand that any voluntarily accepted exchange can be beneficial to both parties involved, even though the different worth than each of them attributes to what is exchanged cannot be understood, as in the case of the gold and the iron:

'You arrive in here, we give you our women and daughters, you show a kind of thankfulness that makes us smile, you thank us when we load upon you the heaviest of the tributes. We haven't asked you for money, nor have rushed to lay our hands on your merchandise; we rejected your provisions, but our women and daughters came to take the blood out of your veins <...>. From you and your likes we have obtained the only profit which we could obtain, for, savage as we may be, we also know how to calculate. Wherever you go, you will always find someone as quick-witted as yourself' (OC II, 567–8).

Of course, Diderot does not hesitate in equalizing the savage and the civilized men. The European as well as the Tahitian would be citizens of the world, endowed with identical rights, such as that of hospitality and of the first occupier, underlined by Kant with regard to the cosmopolitan order.<sup>5</sup> Diderot's reflection on the customs and on the conflict between different codes which never stop contradicting one another has a universal scope:

'If you go through the history of the centuries and of the ancient and modern nations, you'll see men subjected to three codes, the one of nature, the civil one, and the religious one, and alternately forced to transgress these three codes, which have never been in agree-

<sup>5</sup> On Diderot's reflections about the injustices committed by the slave market and colonialist enterprises see Thomson (2017).

ment <...>. If it is deemed necessary to keep all three legislations, it is imperative that the second and the third ones be but the imitation of the first one, which is engraved on the bottom of our hearts and which will always be the strongest one' (OC II, 570).

How short – exclaims Diderot – would the code of a nation be if it strictly conformed to the code of nature! And immediately afterwards he makes a compendium of history, arguing that an artificial man has developed inside the natural man, with all the tensions that such a mixture brings with it. Is it worth it to civilize man? – he asks himself. Here is his answer, which is perfectly valid for any world citizen:

'If you want to be a tyrant, do civilize him, poison him as much as you want with a morality contrary to nature; give him constraints of any kind, put a thousand obstacles to his movements, set phantoms that terrorize him before him, and chain this natural man at the feet of morality. Do you want him happy and free? Leave him and his affairs alone <...>. Let's invoke all political, civil, and religious institutions; carefully examine them, and I would be proved wrong if you do not find the human species, throughout the centuries, subjugated to the yoke that a bunch of rascals decided to impose upon it' (OC II, 575).

Just as Kant would see in the French Revolution an unequivocal sign of the moral progress of man and of the arrival of republican governments that would promote a cosmopolitan right, Diderot, more in keeping with what is happening in the New World, praises the American Revolution instead, trusting that it could offer 'to all the inhabitants of Europe an asylum against fanaticism and tyranny, and instruct those who govern men on the legitimate use of authority, managing to prevent an extremely unequal distribution of wealth and the corruption of customs' (OC I, 1197) – as we read in his *Essay on the Reigns of Claudius and Nero*.

## CONCLUSIONS

This toast to the American independence would be a supplementary facet to Diderot's radical anti-colonialism. He finds in exotic cultures the experience of moral codes which are much more naturalist and liberal than the European patterns of morality. The key word in order to understand his remarks is not the mere *respect* for different customs, but the *denounce* of one's own prejudices, which goes hand in hand with the confrontation with the sociability of the Tahitian tribes. In this context, Diderot casts light over the relative features of European morals and customs. Moreover, according to this view European bourgeois ideals of life impair the energies and faculties that human beings possess since birth, hindering their free cultivation. The otherness of the savage man works in Diderot as a magnifying glass for the internal contradictions of the European civilized morality, in which extreme social inequality coexists with the celebration of the most elevated principles. Under this view Diderot's work appears as a magnificent inspiring path for enlightening the 'civilized mind'.

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## D. Diderot kolonializmo kritika: argumentai už žmonių tarpusavio lygybę ir sąveiką

### *Santrauka*

Atskleidžiama, kaip išnaudodamas anonimiškumo galimybes D. Diderot veikale *Dviejų Indijų istorija* pritaiko laisvos analizės metodą. Remiantis rašytojo priskiriamomis šio veikalo dalimis, pirmiausia tvirtinama, kad autorius be jokių užuolankų kritikuoja kolonializmą ir vergiją. Antra, atskleidžiamas faktas, kad D. Diderot ginčijo vadinamąją svetingumo teisę ir išnagrinėjo vergų prekybos pasekmes tokiu būdu, kuris gali būti įkvėpimo šaltinis ir šių dienų analitikams. Straipsnyje stengiamasi paaiškinti D. Diderot pažiūras į kitus žmones ir kultūras, tradiciškai laikomas „laukinėmis“. Prieinama prie išvados, kad jos yra parankios nustatant Europos buržuazinės moralės kodų, kurie įvardijami kaip „civilizuoti“, ribas. Taip pat analizuojamas straipsnis *Priedas Bugenvilio kelio nei*. Tai pagrindinis šaltinis, atskleidžiantis, kaip D. Diderot vertino antikolonializmo ir kosmopolitizmo klausimus.

**Raktažodžiai:** antikolonializmas, kosmopolitizmas, vergija, svetingumas, prekyba