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The *Histoire des Deux Indes*: Reception, Historiography, Enlightenment

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**Abstract**

This article proposes an interpretation of the *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* (1770) within the intellectual context of Enlightenment historiography. The first section describes the book, its contents, editions, authorship, and censorship. The second section provides a critical synthesis of the history of historiography on the work. The third section proposes an interpretation of the *Histoire* as an enlightened critique of colonialism and empire. A brief conclusion situates the book within a specific definition of the Enlightenment that accounts for its contradictions rather than attempting to overcome them.

Keywords

Enlightenment. Colonialism. Enlightenment Historiography.



The *Histoire des Deux Indes*: polyphony and polygraphy

In 1772, the *République des lettres* was stirred by an anonymous six-volume book, published under the title *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes*. Although the title page stated 1770 as the date and Amsterdam as the city of publication, it was probably printed in Paris or Nantes. The work, expanded and revised, was again published in 1774, in The Hague, also in six volumes, with a seventh containing a *Tableau de l'Europe*. This edition included a portrait of the author, but not his name. Later, in 1780, Jean-Leonard Pellet republished it in Geneva, explicitly naming Guillaume-Thomas François Raynal as the author, with a new portrait and several additions and changes. Between the first edition and Raynal's death, in 1796, the work was printed 48 times, in pirate and official editions. During that period, it was translated into English, Italian, Spanish, German, Dutch, Russian, Polish, and Danish. Moreover, excerpts were published separately. The author began to prepare a new issue, which he never finished and, re-worked by others, would finally appear in ten volumes, in Paris, in 1820 (see Courtney, 1999; Brot, 2015).¹

Born in 1713, Raynal was educated by the Jesuits at Pézenas. He left the order in 1747 and, as many others, went to Paris to try his fortune as a writer. At first, he wrote sermons for the priest at Saint-Sulpice. Later, he collaborated with the *Mercure de la France* and with Melchior Grimm's *Correspondance littéraire*. In 1748, he compiled a *Histoire du stathoudérat*, published in The Hague, and a *Histoire du Parlement d'Angleterre*, which appeared in London. In 1754, he became a Fellow of the Royal Society. After writing a manual on modern military practice at the beginning of the following decade, Raynal devoted more than 20 years to a work which became known by the short-hand of *Histoire des Deux Indes*. He established a far-reaching network of correspondents (from North America, Portugal, Spain, England, Prussia, Russia...), gathered a large number of documents, and enlisted the help of many collaborators (Pechméja and Diderot amongst them) to write a history of European ultramarine expansion. Raynal became known as the author of a work he had compiled, partly written, and edited. The three issues of the *Histoire* were censored in France and Raynal was finally forced to flee the country in 1781 to avoid imprisonment. He went to Liège, Darmstadt, Gotha, Weimar, Berlin, and Neuchâtel. He was allowed to return to France in 1785 and settled in Marseille. In 1788, he took part in the compilation of the *Cahiers de doléances* of the Third Estate in that city. The following year, he was proposed as a deputy for the *États Généraux* but declined, citing old age. In April 1791, at the age of 78

¹ The modern scholarly edition is Raynal, 2010-2022, Strugnell *et al* (eds.), in four volumes. The history of the editions is described in Courtney *et al*, 2021. On the importance of official and pirated issues of the work, see Darnton, 1995, 88-9; 194; 199, and 2021, 114-120; 200-205; 226-230. All translations are my own.



and considered by many of his contemporaries an “*apôtre de la liberté*”, he travelled to Paris. On May 31, he wrote a critical letter to the president of the National Assembly, which caused a great stir because it censured several aspects of the Revolution. Disgraced, Raynal fled again and died in relative obscurity in Chaillot, on March 6, 1796 (Feugère, 1922; Lüsebrink, 1981).

The *Histoire des Deux Indes* is a strange and fascinating work. For two decades after its first appearance, it was one of the most widely read books in France and possibly Western Europe, rivalling Voltaire’s *Candide* and Rousseau’s *La nouvelle Héloïse* (Wolpe, 1957, 8). It brings forth issues of authorship and collaboration. It opens a window to the history of publishing of licensed and clandestine works, as well as on the history of censorship. It illuminates the scope and the limits of the political involvement of the *philosophes*, as well as their relationship and that of their thought to the North American and the French revolutions. It provides an interesting path for the study of intellectual relations and patronage in eighteenth-century France. Finally, the *Histoire* is a polyphonic approach to the long history of European colonialism and its consequences, thus revealing both the critical range and the contradictions of the Enlightenment.

The origins of the book are well known (Duchet, 1971, 126; Pagden, 1995; Brot, 2015). As a result of its defeat in the Seven Years War, France lost Canada and Louisiana to Britain in 1763. At the same time, the importance of colonies for the success of European nations became clearer than ever. The question of the fate of the remaining colonial possessions of France and the best way to manage them interested both the Crown and the republic of letters. A shared faith in the benefits of commerce fostered debate regarding the convenience of maintaining the exclusivity of exchange between the metropolis and the colonies and the advantages of free trade. The merits of a free or forced labour system were also open for debate: slavery was justified and rejected on economic and moral grounds. The role of colonial administrators, creoles and natives was another important issue. Almost no one doubted that Europeans in general, and the French in particular, had the right to possess empires. It was in this context that Étienne François de Choiseul, minister of Foreign Affairs to Louis XV, commissioned Raynal to compile a comprehensive study of European expansion. The *abbé* received a state pension, which he never lost, and set to work.

The result was rather astonishing. The *Histoire* is a comprehensive survey of European endeavours in the “East and the West Indies” from the earliest Iberian voyages to the latest colonial settlements. According to the book, the discovery of the “New World” and the passage to the East Indies were “the most interesting event in the history of the human species in general and the European peoples in particular. It was the beginning of a revolution in commerce, in the power of nations, in mores, in industry and in the government of all peoples” (Raynal, 1780,



vol. I, book 1, Intro). A comparative work of factual synthesis and political criticism, the *Histoire* contained lengthy commentaries on the history, traditions, customs, and government of European and non-European societies. It included a good share of philosophical reflection on nature and the ways in which it conditions human development. It raised fundamental criticism on aspects of imperialism, slavery in particular, and placed high hopes on the beneficial effects of commerce. Reinier Salverda highlights that, in the final chapters of the work, the authorial voice, reflecting upon the good and evil the discovery of the New World has brought to humanity, “takes his leave with a rather humbler wish for a better future for mankind, in a world where our only hope appears to be for ‘philosophy’ and the ‘civilised nations’ to give the ‘savages’ out there something better than the vice and oppression they have had until then from us Europeans” (Salverda, 2022, 88).

The ambitious character of an encyclopaedic work covering all European interactions with the rest of the globe was further complicated by the fact that, although Raynal assumed authorship, he was “an eager inquirer after other men’s truths,” according to John Elliott’s brilliant description (Elliott, 1970, 1). He used published and unpublished material provided by a network of collaborators from the administration in France (Malouet and Dubuq gave him access to the *Mémoires d’administration*) and from several sources in Europe and parts of America. He also included fragments written specifically for the *Histoire* by several authors, ranging from anthropology and history to economics. As a result, it is a polyphonic and fragmentary work (Duchet, 1978, 1991). In some passages, this reaches the point of contradiction regarding, for instance, the implications of commerce, the limits of colonisation or attitudes toward brutality, freedom and despotism. The reader could find in the book calls for reform and the preservation of empire, denunciations of colonial power, incitement to violent resistance and a more basic questioning of the right of Europeans to hold empires (Muthu, 2003, 72). Raynal himself recognized the complexities of the authorship of the *Histoire*. In order to produce it, he wrote, “I have interrogated the living and the dead. I have weighed their authority. I have contrasted their testimonies. I have clarified the facts” (Raynal, 1780, I, 3).

Sources remained unquoted and many passages were taken literally or with little modification from several works, Antoine François Prévost’s *Histoire générale des voyages* (1746-1759) the most used, among many others (Goggi, 1995, 328). All contributions were anonymous, which enabled Raynal’s collaborators to develop more radical arguments than if they had risked censorship, imprisonment or exile. As Raynal’s visibility as author increases, so does the textual and philosophical weight of contributions written by others (Duchet, 1991). This method of composition created inconsistencies but also “made the *Histoire* a remarkably representative



work" (Ansart, 2009). In general, while Raynal seeks a compromise for the survival of empire in reform and commerce, Diderot, particularly in the 1780 edition, rejects colonialism as a threat to liberty. He even calls for revolt: "Sooner than later, justice will be made. If it were otherwise, I would address the populace. I would say to them: 'Peoples, your roars will make your masters tremble. What are you waiting for? For what moment do you reserve your torches and the stones that pave your streets. Throw them!'" (Raynal, 1780, III, 9, 268).

Collaboration took place from the first edition but Diderot's contribution doubled between the first and second editions and was multiplied tenfold in the one published in 1780, when it amounted to 700 pages. Carefully identified by historians, these were also the most radical and provocative passages (Feugère, 1915; Dieckmann, 1951; Duchet, 1960 and 1978; Goggi, 1991, 17). Political oppression is denounced, despotism repudiated, ecclesiastical authority deemed infamous, resistance justified. In the first edition, Diderot's texts mostly provide philosophic and political commentary but, in the third one, his contributions reshape the work. Malouet, a friend of Raynal's until the end, but also an advocate of conservative views on empire and slavery, stated that Diderot had abused "the confidence which he [Raynal] had placed in him" (Malouet, 1868, I, 180). On the other hand, in an apology of Raynal, Diderot vindicated the work and declared that it had become "the book that I love, and which kings and courtesans detest, the book that will give birth to Brutus". In the same letter, he defended his additions as having been made at Raynal's express request (Diderot, 1956, 640-3).

An enormous amount of facts was combined with strong political and philosophical views that were sometimes radical, sometimes reformist. This implied both dialogue and conflict between Raynal—who probably aimed at a precise economic, historic, and geographic account of colonialism—and Diderot—who likely privileged a critical and philosophical view (Strugnell, 1995; Goggi, 2003; Brot, 2015). Although the complexities of authorship in the *Histoire* were not publicly known, they were not completely ignored by contemporaries. Melchior Grimm reckoned that it could only have come from the hand of a "*grand ennemi du despotisme*", and therefore refused to identify him. Fernando Galiani, writing from Naples to Madame d'Épinay in September 1772, doubted that Raynal was the sole author (Israel, 2013, 425).

Despite complex authorship, despite variegated—to the point of contradiction—and changing content, the book became famous as "Raynal's *Histoire*" and was promptly censored. After the publication of the first edition, the Royal Chancellor declared that the work was "contrary and dangerous" to religion and monarchy, and an *arrêt* was issued by order of the king on 19 December 1772. The papacy followed suit in 1774 (Israel, 2013, 428). The uprising of the North American colonies in 1776 brought increased attention to the book. An extract of



the sections concerning those lands was immediately published in Edinburgh, citing Raynal as the author (Raynal, 1776). After the third edition, at the end of May 1781, Antoine-Louis Séguier, *avocat général* to the Grand Conseil, addressed the Parliament and argued that the book was both blasphemous and treasonous. Parliament defined it as “impious, blasphemous, seditious, tending to rouse people against sovereign authority and to overthrow the principles of civil order”. They decided to lacerate and burn the *Histoire*, imprison Raynal, and seize his possessions. The *arrêt* condemned “the philosophic spirit” that reproduces scepticism and “denaturalizes the basis of morality”, something that could “introduce anarchy into the kingdom”. Censors objected that the book “assimilates all religions”, considering them equal and finally transforming Christianity “into an object of contempt and sacrilegious derision”. They decried the author’s attempt to criticise “prejudices”, because he understood as such “what is most sacred to Religion and the State, the form of political administration, of civil government, the dogmas and mysteries of religion, the bases of our saintly beliefs”. When the author criticises “tyranny and imposture”, he is said to be attacking “what is most precious for the tranquillity and happiness of the whole world: the sovereignty of earthly powers and Christian religion; kings become tyrants, church ministers become impostors”. The text also accuses the *Histoire* of revealing the secrets of government policy and identifying with the sentiments of “the enemies of France” (*Arrêt*, 1781).

The ban was followed by national and international editorial success. As a result, the book ranks fifth on Robert Darnton’s list of clandestine best-sellers in France in the two decades following its first appearance (Darnton, 1995, 88). Perhaps despite Raynal’s own ideas, for some contemporaries and many historians, the *Histoire* became an encyclopaedic synthesis of the evils of Empire and the possibilities of commerce: “the most powerful denunciation of European empire-building to have appeared during the Enlightenment [...] and the most exuberant defence of the values of the eighteenth-century commercial society” (Pagden, 2013, chapter V).

The *Histoire des Deux Indes* in historiography

The general consensus states that, after its initial success, the *Histoire* fell into relative obscurity for most of the nineteenth century, a circumstance that the 1820 edition did not change. Although Napoleon declared being a “zealous disciple of Raynal” and supposedly took a copy of the book in his expedition to Egypt (Wolpe, 1956, 8), Raynal’s criticism of the revolution in 1791 made the book less interesting to radicals, whereas the most vehement portions of the book made it less appealing to historians of empire. In this sense, he was among the *écrivains obscurs et oubliés* of the Enlightenment (Kraus, 1963). It was only a century after that late edition that scholarly interest re-emerged, when Anatole Feugère devoted an interpretative essay to Raynal



as a “precursor to Revolution”, who had produced a book through the use of the work and the words of others, that is, through compilation and plagiarism (Feugère, 1922).

Interest in the *Histoire* waned again for a while, until the 1950s witnessed a wave of important publications on the subject. In 1955, Antonello Gerbi published his seminal *La disputa del Nuovo Mondo*, in which he thoroughly examined the idea of the inferiority of America and the Americans, from natural sciences during the Enlightenment up to Hegel and his contemporaries. He also considered the polemics against this idea, raised by Jesuits (Clavigero) and Americans (Caldas, Bolívar, Franklin, or Jefferson). Raynal and his work featured prominently in this fascinating book for the *Histoire* reproduced the idea of American decadence: even Spanish cruelty in the New World was partly explained by the distance travelled and the corrupting influence of the climate of the continent. For Raynal, America was an immature country and its inhabitants, decrepit. Clavigero scorned him as one of the “cabinet philosophers”, who spread false notions about the New World, never having set foot in it (Gerbi, 1955, 50 ff; for other readings of Raynal in America or by Americans, see Delgado, 1959, Ventura, 1988).

The main impulse for a renewal in the studies regarding the *Histoire* had started before that. In 1948, Herbert Dieckmann discovered Denis Diderot’s posthumous papers, the *Fonds Vandeul*, an event that revolutionised studies on the encyclopaedist and his work. Feugère (1915) had noted Diderot’s collaboration to the *Histoire* but, from then on, it was possible to identify his contributions with greater certainty, a task that Dieckmann and Michèle Duchet undertook with zeal and precision (Dieckmann, 1951; Duchet, 1960). These discoveries gave rise to a great deal of erudite work that sought to better understand the peculiarities of patronage, research, writing and editing of the *Histoire* (Duchet, 1978; Lüsebrink and Strugnell, 1995), as well as its importance in the construction of anthropological discourse during the Enlightenment (Duchet, 1971). But, because of these findings, many scholars also focused almost exclusively on the passages written by Diderot (which were considered worthy of interest) and relegated Raynal to a secondary role, a compiler who benefited from the work of others. Exceptions emerged, of course. Hans Wolpe insisted that a clear separation of both contributions was simplistic and anachronistic (Wolpe, 1956). For Wolpe, the book (and not only fragments of it) became a “war machine” that fuelled political unrest in Europe and the New World. In any case, Diderot’s passages are still being published today in separate volumes with no sign of Raynal on the front covers (Diderot, 2020).

Scholarly work on the *Histoire* continued with good progress in the 1980s and the 1990s. Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, C.P. Courtney, Gianluigi Goggi, Anthony Strugnell, Manfred Tietz and others have studied various aspects of the book and of Raynal’s endeavours. The reception of the



work throughout Europe and in America was analysed in detail, enabling a better understanding of how contemporaries were reading it, but also of how translation and reception transformed it (Lüsebrink and Tietz, 1991). This has led to a better understanding of the book's impact on the formation of public opinion in the last third of the 18th century. A different outlook on the *Histoire*, not as mere compilation but as a work conceived with the purpose of becoming an encyclopaedia of the colonial world, to be used as a source for political, economic, and social debate, also emerged from this research (Lüsebrink, 2006). The book was of interest not only to those who were for or against empire, for or against slavery, for or against one metropolis or the next. One of its assets was that it offered up-to-date information that was eagerly sought after in the context following the Seven Years War and was difficult to acquire anywhere else.

This tenacious hermeneutic of sources, archives and exchanges has also clarified the intellectual networks that made the *Histoire* possible. Raynal created an international web of correspondents who not only provided information but also furthered the dissemination of the work: translations, correspondence and travel made the *Histoire* better known in many corners of Europe and America. In some cases, Raynal is thus presented as a precursor of global history, in the sense of a way of both gathering and producing information (Courtney and Mander, eds., 2015). The depiction of this kind of transnational exchange and intellectual sociability reinforces the idea of an enlightened republic of letters.

Raynal, Diderot and the *Histoire* have also received thorough consideration in more general studies of the Enlightenment (especially its radical exponents), as well as in postcolonial critiques of its involvement and justification of colonialism. We may begin by the latter. The general argument for the rejection of the Enlightenment by postmodern intellectuals is well known. The French *philosophes* and their contemporaries from other regions are seen as legitimising a Eurocentric, imperial, sexist and racist mechanism of control and domination that rationalised anything that was not white, male and European as inferior (Withers, 1996; Kramer, 1997; Baker and Reill, 2001; on postmodernism and the *Histoire*, see Strugnell, 1996). The *Histoire* has received some of the fallout from this barrage, albeit peripherally. *Le livre noir du colonialisme*, for instance, pays little attention to the book or its author; dismissing them for their contradictions (Ferro, ed., 2013, 620-621). However, other cases target the work as a typical example of enlightened colonialism. Júnia Ferreira Furtado and Nuno Gonçalo Monteiro, while recognizing the "dissonances in the different contributions", choose to emphasise "several complacent judgements of Portuguese colonisation, especially when compared to the Spanish", stemming from its reliance on Portuguese sources (Ferreira Furtado and Monteiro, 2019, 4-6). In passing, they consider that the central thesis of the *Histoire* is that of "the unjust



exploitation of the colonies by the metropolitan powers”, but they nevertheless conclude that the book contains “the most systematic, well-argued and apologetic description of Portuguese government in America produced in the eighteenth century” (28-29).

Among the scholars (and defenders) of Enlightenment, Jonathan Israel has devoted several pages of his volumes on its radical and democratic versions to our subject (Israel, 2001 and 2013). The author emphasises the importance of the *Histoire* for the development of advanced philosophical ideas on issues of colonialism, commerce and empire, but also in dealing with politics, morals, despotism and slavery. Israel, perhaps underestimating the complex authorship and the contradictory statements in the book, highlights “Diderot’s rhetoric of universal basic human rights universally violated” and the echoes of “*l’immortale Raynal*” throughout Europe (Israel, 2013, 414). Perhaps more open than Israel to the tensions between Raynal’s “moderate” approach and Diderot’s “radicalism”, Anthony Pagden shares his general outlook (Pagden, 2015, chapter 5; see also Pagden, 1995). More systematically against a postcolonial interpretation of Enlightenment and the *Histoire*, Sankar Muthu sees the collective that took refuge behind Raynal’s name as part of “a number of prominent European political thinkers [...] challenging the idea that Europeans had any right to subjugate, colonize, and ‘civilize’ the rest of the world” (Muthu, 2003, 2). Diderot’s idea of a “general will of humanity” becomes an understanding of all human beings as “fundamentally cultural agents”, an analysis that “plays a key role in [his] characterizations of non-European peoples and in his arguments against European empires” (Muthu, 2003, 121 and ff.).

Recently, the debate between ardent post-colonialists and defenders of Enlightenment seems to have ebbed among specialists on Raynal and the *Histoire*. Other interpretations have tended to place the book in a kind of purgatory between outright complicity with imperialism and radical critique against it. Christian Donath, for instance, sees the *Histoire* as a proposal for an alternative to colonialism, a vision that pushes for an empire without coercion, compatible with some manner of soft imperialism (Donath, 2015). Monica Michaud chooses to focus on Raynal’s critique of Spanish colonisation and his analysis of French intervention, in order to present the *Histoire* as “an experiment in early anthropological methodology that draws upon descriptive and analytical portraits of Non-European peoples in order to elaborate a plan for a more humane colonization”. Raynal thus becomes the champion of a “*colonialisme éclairé*” (Michaud, 2014).

In 2018, Damien Tricoire argued that the book has been insufficiently contextualised politically and that it would be useful to consider the “overall coherence of its narratives” in order to understand its purpose. Tricoire stresses that Raynal stood under the patronage of leading



court figures and accuses historians of forgetting that “their authors were usually part of clientele networks”. Suggesting that previous historiography has been anachronistic in applying the terms colonialism and anti-colonialism to the *Histoire*, Tricoire proposes that it “proves not to be anti-colonial but instead a patriotic book” (Tricoire, 2018). It is surprising that Tricoire ascribes such novelty to the fact that Raynal was under Choiseul’s patronage and that he received a pension from the ministry. In 1991, Gianluigi Goggi described Choiseul’s criticism of the French colonial system in the context of the defeat of France in the Seven Years War, his proposals for reform and his relationship with Raynal (Goggi, 1991, 17 and ff.). Later, in 1995, Ottmar Ette discussed the same issue, concluding that although “the project of the *Histoire* is born in a context of the public discussion of the necessary reforms for the French colonial administrative system, and responds thus to a concrete political situation, the work distances itself from its original context in the course of the following decade and the following editions” (Ette, 385 and ff.). In 2000, JGA Pocock recognized that the *Histoire* was written as a response to British ascendancy: he noted that the theme of a strong French army at the core of a European league aimed at establishing a system of free trade recurs throughout the *Histoire* (Pocock, 2000). Tricoire neither mentions Goggi or Ette nor quotes Pocock’s analysis.

An interpretation: the *Histoire des Deux Indes* within Enlightenment

I would like to propose an interpretation of the *Histoire* as an enlightened critique of colonialism and empire. Reading the book in this manner could be advantageous in comparison to other interpretations for several reasons. Firstly, it is a fitting description of the content of the work, addressing a historiographic dissatisfaction with competing labels such as “anti-colonialist” or “neo-colonialist”. Secondly, understanding the *Histoire* within the Enlightenment encompasses the changing intentions and at least part of the reception of the book, something that other definitions fail to achieve. Thirdly, far from celebrating or condemning the *Histoire*, its authors or the Enlightenment as a whole, such a reading allows for an acknowledgement of their contradictions. Finally, this perspective also allows for the inclusion of recent debates on Enlightenment and could encourage a contribution to them.

Defining the *Histoire* as an “enlightened critique of colonialism and empire” is a close neighbour to describing it as an “Encyclopaedic compilation” (Lüsebrink and Strugnell, 1995; Greilich, 2021). Historians who propose this interpretation convincingly argue that it underlines the fact that the work was not a vulgar compilation based on plagiarism, but a rewriting that transforms it into an original book. The aim of providing a historical, geographical and economic account without excluding a political and philosophical commentary led Raynal to seek the



help of a group of collaborators, rendering a polygraphic book. This is both true and accurate. However, the choice of the broader term “enlightened critique” allows for a consideration not only of the structure of the *Histoire* and the contributions of its authors, but also for its unintended consequences and interpretations.

Allow me to present evidence and arguments in favour of my hypothesis. The stances of the *Histoire* on slavery provide material in this regard. Pechméja and Diderot wrote the most radical passages on the subject both in the 1770 and the 1780 editions, albeit with significant changes. Most specialists conclude that the work fundamentally opposed slavery (Biondi, 2015). The first edition of the *Histoire* is already explicit in its rejection: “Whoever justifies such an odious system, deserves from the *philosophe* a silence full of contempt, and from the black a strike of the knife” (Raynal, 1780, IV, 167-168). The weight of the argument is supported not only by declamation, but also by data. We learn, for example, that in Surinam, in 1780, the Dutch were estimated to own 430 sugar, coffee and other plantations that were operated by 60,000 Black enslaved people, subject to 2,824 slave owners, and that the escaped “victims of infamous avarice” suffered harsh repression (Israel, 2013, 424; Raynal 1780, VI, 402, 421). In addition, the book presents a series of philosophical arguments against slavery, rebuking the justifications for its existence and arguing for its abolition (Raynal, 1780, XI, 200 and ff.). Ultimately, the authorial voice recognizes that slave owners and traders will not be convinced by reason and that “slaves do not need the generosity nor the advice” of Europeans in order to “free themselves from the sacrilegious yoke that oppresses them”, because “nature speaks a clearer language than philosophy”. The result of such exploitation was to be a general rebellion:

The only thing that the blacks need is a courageous chief that will guide them to vengeance and carnage. Where is this great man, that nature owes to its abandoned, oppressed, tormented children? Where is he? He will appear, we do not doubt it, he will show himself, he will raise the sacred banner of freedom. This venerable signal will assemble around him all his companions in misfortune. More impetuous than torrents, they will leave everywhere indelible traces of their resentment [...]. The *code noir* will then disappear and the *code blanc* will be terrible if the victor only consults the right to reprisal. While waiting for this revolution, the blacks moan under the yoke of work (Raynal, 1780, XI, 220-221).

The authors of the *Histoire* thus argued for rights derived from a common humanity, regardless of colour or origin. Anthony Strugnell has pointed out that this refutes the argument



that criticism of colonialism and slavery during the Enlightenment “only served to hide an even more sinister Eurocentric and hegemonic agenda” (Strugnell, 1996). This is not to say that “the Enlightenment” was unambiguously abolitionist. Pierre Victor Malouet defended “the servitude of the blacks” because “in their country it had all the characteristics of barbarism, but in the colonies, it steers them towards civilization” (Malouet, 1802, III, 79; on Malouet’s relationship with Raynal and the *Histoire*, Salverda, 2022). The *Histoire* also provides evidence about this. As Michèle Duchet has shown, denunciations of slavery shared the stage with considerations regarding the issue of labour in the colonies, which led the Baron de Bessner to propose a reform plan (1774) —quoted by Raynal— that only envisaged the end of slavery after a few decades (Duchet, 1971, 136 and ff.). Moreover, the posthumous edition of the *Histoire*, published in 1820, shows some discrepancies on this subject in comparison with the previous editions (Benot, 1990; Droixhe, 2012), including a passage that considers that “blacks are kind of men that were born for slavery” (Raynal, 1820, VI, 130). It also excludes the prediction of the disappearance of the *code noir*, replaced by the notion that a general emancipation of slaves would be ruinous for America.

In the end, however, at least for its contemporaries, the anti-slavery stance of the *Histoire* and its acknowledged author prevailed. In September 1790, the *abbé* sent a letter to Brissot in which he stated that *les amis des noirs* enjoyed “the approval of every enlightened man, and in due time will acquire the support of the multitude” (quoted in Dorigny, 2015). Moreover, even after Raynal’s critical 1791 open letter to the National Assembly, in 1797, Anne-Louis Girodet painted a portrait of Jean-Baptiste Belley, a hero of the uprising in Saint-Domingue led by Toussaint Louverture. The Black man, by then a representative to the National Assembly, was depicted next to a bust of Raynal. The contemporary public who saw the painting at the *Salon de 1798* concluded that it represented a “sublime” association between Raynal and the “*liberté des Negres*” (Pierre-Jean-Baptiste Chaussard, quoted in Dorigny, 2015b). They were clearly at odds with historians who see the painting as a devaluation or sexualization of Belley (Musto, 1993, Schmidt-Linsenhoff, 2000; I find this interpretation anachronistic and untenable).

The theme of commerce is also central to the Enlightenment and to a proper interpretation of the *Histoire* which, lest we forget, aimed to study not only *des établissements* but also *du commerce* of Europeans in both Indies. In the 18th century, “commerce” had meanings that have since faded. It encompassed the notion of economic traffic of goods and services, but also referred to other sorts of human trade, from ideas to sentiments: commerce was understood as any kind of communication, interaction and exchange. In the context of the incorporation of “conquered” territories into the “mother country”, it became for many European thinkers a kind of “universal panacea, a moralising balm that could revive the older increasingly discredited image



of 'empire'", implying an optimistic vision of the future of relations between Europe and the rest of the world, that "did not necessarily involve dependency of any kind" (Pagden, 2004, 260). This was not alien to the outlook of the *Histoire* on these issues. The passages of the book commerce tend to be positive:

Going through the earth, crossing the seas, removing the obstacles which limited the communication between peoples, extending the sphere of needs and the desire for enjoyment, [commerce] multiplies work, encourages industry; it becomes the driving force of the world, weakening the fanaticism of religion and the spirit of conquest (Raynal, 1780, IX, 164).

But the book also contained ambivalences between a more benevolent view of commerce and civilization and the confirmation that they were often associated with violence and destruction (Imbruglia, 2015). According to JGA Pocock, the *Histoire* "opens with a song of praise of [...] 'le commerce' (I, 3), but the nineteen books which follow are one long denunciation of a commerce which has been extractive and monopolistic, the product of the fact that Europeans are still barbarous and the cause of the fact that they have been barbarians in their dealings with others" (Pocock, 2000, 28). Colonial commerce was the defining characteristic of the modern world ("it has become essential to the organization and the existence of political bodies", Raynal, 1780, IX, 171). Reform was necessary but its specific characteristics are never explicit in the *Histoire*. In any case, as Anthony Pagden has shown, in a most enlightened fashion and despite occasional criticism, "the *Histoire* is simultaneously a celebration of the humanizing, civilizing effects of international commerce and a condemnation of the European colonizing venture. Far from seeing these as necessarily linked, both Raynal and Diderot regarded them as antithetical" (Pagden, 1995, 165; for a similar view, Silva, 2017). The attitude towards commerce in the book is very much in line with the enlightened theory that, after European conquest, civilization could be exported without violence through "*doux commerce*".

Perhaps the treatment of commerce in the *Histoire* is to be read in connection to another central theme of Enlightenment thought: our "philosophical history" has been defined as a "critique of tyranny and oppression in all of its manifestations, in defence of the principle of freedom" (Cavalcante, 1998, 24-25). According to Girolamo Imbruglia, this element partly explains the radicalism of the book and is better understood within a general interpretation of European history (Imbruglia, 1995, 105). For Raynal, at the beginning of its global expansion, Europe was starting to enjoy freedom after centuries of servitude and tyranny, a kind of fanaticism



and despotism that continued among the Turks (Raynal, 1780, I, 13). In the struggle between liberty and despotism, Europeans were not only fighting against a monstrous and contemporary Other but also against their own past (Raynal, 1780, I, 3). Imbruglia insists that, in the *Histoire*, perfectibility is not certain and, in fact, it could only follow revolutionary violence (“a nation will only regenerate after a bloodbath”; Raynal, 1780, IX, 4): Europe should find a way to liberty, rather than to feudality and despotism.

This is all too familiar to specialists in Enlightenment thought. The tension between despotism and liberty, the progressive view of history that casts the mediaeval past into obscurity and contemporary times into the light of philosophy and commerce, the projection of despotism onto an Oriental Other that lives in the present but resembles the Europeans of the past: all this is characteristic of both Scottish and French Enlightenments, each with its peculiarities, from Montesquieu to Voltaire and Condorcet; from William Robertson and Adam Ferguson to Adam Smith (regarding temporality in the *Histoire*, particularly in relation to prognosis and the future, see Koselleck, 2002, 137-140). This Eurocentric view, oriented above all towards liberty, is projected globally in the book. However, on several occasions, it disputes that modern Europeans bear freedom: not only are the first Spanish and Portuguese explorers portrayed as “feudal” conquerors of the new-found lands, but contemporary voyagers are also viewed with suspicion (on the Spaniards, see for instance Villaverde Rico, 2015). When discussing the way of life of the Hottentots, the book advises them to flee from the Dutch (because “feral beasts inhabiting the forests are less terrible than the monsters under whose empire you will fall”) and even encourages resistance: “if you feel the courage, take your axes, stretch your bows, let your poisoned arrows rain down on these strangers” (Raynal, 1780, II, 203). In other cases, such as that of Barbary, in Northern Africa, the book explores the possibility of European intervention to rescue “the peoples who tremble under a yoke from which they wish to be freed” (Raynal, 1780, IV, 113-114), but the author is unsure of the effects of his proposal:

If we are not going to treat these men as our brethren, if we do not aspire to have them as our friends, if we wish to uphold and perpetuate slavery and poverty amongst them, if fanaticism renews the odious crusades that philosophy has indignantly condemned, if Africa is to become a theatre of our barbarism, as Asia and America have been in the past and are still today, then let this project fall into oblivion, we should remain within the confines of our ports (Raynal, 1780, IV, 115-6).

The criticism, even occasional rejection, of colonialism in the *Histoire* reaches its highest point when it denounces the cruelties of empire. Diderot’s inflamed rhetoric fuels these passages,



which refer to “*brigands privilégiés*” who profit from commercial companies and the exploitation of colonies (Raynal, 1780, II, 233), to “*monstres exécrables*” who massacre innocents while justified by “*prêtres et superstitieux*” (Raynal, 1780, III, 352) or, more generally, to “*barbares européens*” (Raynal, 1780, I, 225; I, 334; on “barbarism” in the *Histoire*, see Kwiatkowski, 2020, 156-182). The catalogue of the disastrous consequences of empire upon non-European peoples and of hypotheses on the causes of the Europeans’ barbaric actions is long. The author confesses that he often writes his history “bathed in tears” (Raynal, 1780, VII, 1). No colonial power is spared: the Portuguese, the Spanish, the English, the Dutch and (less radically) the French receive their fair share of censure. Against this background, the possibility of revolt is occasionally raised and even considered unavoidable: “This is the decree pronounced by fate upon your colonies: you must either renounce your colonies or they will renounce you” (Raynal, 1780, XIII, 1).

This does not mean that the text of the *Histoire* is to be considered anti-imperialist in the sense we assign to the term from the second half of the 19th century onward or that it is free from contradictions. Imbruglia points out that, even for Diderot, reason and fairness permit colonies (Imbruglia, 2015). This is particularly the case if the establishment of a colony, by well-planned stages, could contribute to achieving a civilised society (Goggi, 2015). However, there are principles restricting their establishment and the local nation has “the right to ensure that the occupier has no aggressive intentions, and also to a pre-emptive defence” (Imbruglia, 2015; Raynal, 1780, I, V, 33). If the colonisers were to infringe the rights of the local peoples or if the exchange between them was not free, the locals had the right to expel the newcomers (the roots of this argument could be traced to the theories of resistance in the 16th century; see Skinner, 1978, vol. II, 302-348). This is, perhaps, the scope and limit of enlightened anti-colonialism. It is not an outright rejection of any kind of colony; however, it asks not whether the global encounter could have been conducted differently, but whether it should have taken place at all, thus questioning the right of Europeans to colonise *any* inhabited land and rejecting all colonies that oppose reason and humanity (on the contradiction between criticism of empire and civilising process in the *Histoire*, see Racault, 1995, 119 and ff.).

A pertinent question would be whether contemporaries of the *Histoire* saw the book as anti-colonialist, pro-reform, defending patriotic interest or in some other manner. Much has been written about the European and transatlantic readings of the book. Lüsebrink and Tietz acknowledge that its reception is not only about its readers but also about Raynal’s interventions in the sociability of his time, the strategies of promotion of his works, his networks throughout Europe and, of course, political circumstances beyond the *abbé’s* control (Lüsebrink and Tietz, 1991, introduction). Although the reception of the book varied greatly, it was generally regarded as a critical source of information full of political and philosophical reflection. In 1772, for instance,



Horace Walpole wrote to the Countess of Aylesbury that the *Histoire* “tells one everything in the world; how to make conquests, invasions, blunders, settlements, bankruptcies, fortunes, etc.; tells you the natural and historical history of all nations; talks commerce, navigation, tea, coffee, china, mines, salt, spices; of the Portuguese, English, French, Dutch, Danes, Spaniards, Arabs, caravans, Persians, Indians, of Louis XIV and the King of Prussia; [...] and against all governments and religions” (quoted in Racault, 1995, 126). Of course, the British view changed after the North American Revolution. In 1781, Lockyer Davis, a London publisher, edited an English and a French version of book XVIII, chapters 38-52 of the third edition published in Geneva: *The Revolution of America* and *Révolution de l’Amérique*. Although *Monthly Review* celebrated the author’s audacity and praised him as a defender of the rights of humanity against tyranny, *Critical Review* rejected his partiality and conjectured that the editor had been influenced by British partisans of the American cause (Strugnell, 1991, 260). If some Englishmen enjoyed the book, perhaps we should not be surprised that some Frenchmen would see it as a display of Anglophilia rather than patriotism. Emilien Petit, deputy to the *Conseil Supérieur des Colonies Françaises*, writing in 1776, thought that the *abbé* harboured “an extreme preference for the British Government and the English nation” (quoted in Pagden, 1995, 167). Anti-patriotism was a common accusation against the *philosophes* (Venturi, 1971, 20-21).

In a letter to Louise d’Épinay, written in 1772, the Neapolitan Ferdinando Galiani found the *Histoire* full of good intentions and elegant writing but rejected the author’s humanitarianism. Vindicating only “the purest Machiavellism” in politics against the ideas he attributed to Raynal, Galiani concluded that “we should continue our ravages in the Indies just as long as we are successful in so doing, save that we should withdraw when we are beaten” (quoted in Gerbi, 1955, 125). In a *Década epistolar sobre el estado de las letras en Francia*, published anonymously in Spain in 1781, the *Histoire* was seen as “a monstrous history, born from the brain of an arch-maniac philosophe, obstinate to die in a fit of frenzy” (Tietz, 1995, 266). In Portugal, the marquis of Pombal campaigned for the book to be censored because it was written by a “scandalous Monarchomach”. Frei Joaquim de Sant’Ana e Silva, who further justified the suppression of the book, insisted that “everything in it attacks the holy and eternal truths of Christian religion and the most just and prudent laws, in disavowing the most cultured and polished nations, in blemishing the most illuminated ministries and in rejecting the most useful and laudable establishments” (quoted in Tietz, 1995, 272). Examples such as this could fill pages.

Others, like Jakob Mauvillon, believed that “Raynal subordinated the principles of the Enlightenment to the needs of the French state” (quoted in Fontius, 1991, 168). The public in the colonies deemed it an ambiguous discourse, which denounced and justified colonisation and commerce, including practical information on techniques and cultivation of tropical products:



"*un guide du parfait colon*" (Wolpe, 1956, p. 69). Considering this and the accusations of Anglophilia against the *Histoire*, American revolutionaries unsurprisingly took little interest in the work. However, the extracts on America were frequently republished in the *New World*: twice in Philadelphia (first in 1782), once in Norwich, Connecticut, and once in Salem, Massachusetts. The preface states that it is "one of the finest works which have appeared since the revival of letters and perhaps the most instructive of any which have been known", in which the reader could find "the full illumination of these mistakes, obstinate and purse proud Britons, who ridiculously believed that they could create themselves not only the Tyrants of the Old but likewise of the New World" (quoted in Tortarolo, 1995, 310). In any case, Thomas Paine wrote a letter to the *abbé* in which he addressed his "mistakes" in the account of the Revolution, published in Philadelphia in 1782 (Paine, 1782). If the *Histoire* interpreted American independence as an expression of the universal will to liberty, Paine and his compatriots presented themselves as a legitimate power restoring traditional rights, rather than born out of rebellion (Ansart, 2009).

This is of course linked to the relation between the *Histoire* and revolution in France. According to Anthony Strugnell, Diderot's intervention "transformed it, in the course of its three editions, from a fairly run-of-the mill attack on the colonizing endeavours of the European powers into a barely covert revolutionary manifesto" (Strugnell, 1973, 216). But this was not done by Diderot alone. On the one hand, the rhetorical intensity of the work served to lessen the weight of its internal contradictions and to increase its political radicalism. Contemporaries were aware of this. In a letter to Morellet, Turgot wrote: "I admire the talent of the author and his work; although I was shocked by the incoherence of his ideas and to see the most opposing paradoxes being defended with the same zeal, the same eloquence, the same fanaticism" (quoted in Pujol, 1995, 360). On the other hand, Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink has shown that it was a selective reception of the work, detaching and re-joining parts of the text, that enabled contemporaries to separate what constituted an encyclopaedic exposition from a contribution to a radical cause (Lüsebrink, 1988). As a consequence, several revolutionaries saw Raynal as "a prophet of revolutionary times", placing him and his text in the Pantheon of predecessors to revolution, along with Voltaire, Rousseau and the *Encyclopédie* (Lüsebrink, 1991, 88; for further examples, see Israel, 2013, 25, 158, 413), especially among those fighting for the abolition of slavery (Benot, 1991). According to Malouet, this was a product of Diderot's intervention and very much against Raynal's will (Malouet, 1868, I, 180). We have seen that, although he participated in the composition of the *Cahiers de doléances* for the Third Estate in Marseilles, Raynal's Address to the National Assembly in 1791 would do away with this reputation and affect that of the *Histoire*. It is very rare to find contemporary readers of the *Adresse* that consider it a continuation of the



Histoire: most found it to contradict Raynal's previous work, some denied he had authored both writings, others yet insisted on the radical change in the author's ideas (Lüsebrink, 2015).

The genre of the *Histoire* is also important for an attempt to read it within the Enlightenment. On the one hand, although the novelty of the book was philosophical and political, the radicalism of the philosophical choice was based on a historical reconstruction (Imbruglia, 1995, 108). The question is, then, what sort of history is the *Histoire*. It was innovative in the portrayal of the world-system that emerged from the Europeans' dominion over most of the planet. These endeavours had been historicised before but this was possibly the first attempt to summarise them in a single history. According to JGA Pocock, the *Histoire* contributes to the central theme of Enlightenment historiography: the unravelling of the "Christian millennium: eleven centuries of darkness, barbarism and religion" into "the advent of modernity at the end of the fifteenth century, when Europe was beginning to emancipate from its clerical and feudal past". Pocock defines the place of the book within enlightened historiography as standing at the crossroads between critical stance and Eurocentrism: it is "a story of European triumphs, but not an epic of European triumphalism. (...) What we call Eurocentricity can be the product of European self-hatred as well as of self-flattery; and the two together led the *Histoire* to a historization of what Europe was" (Pocock, 2000, 19-20).

Despite many natural, moral, civil and political histories, "political and philosophical" was a rarer title, meaning that it recognized the weight of a philosophy of history in the political outcome of the whole narrative. This does not mean that truth is to be subordinated to politics. On the contrary, the book practically begins with the following statement: "Such is the dreadful task which I set myself to perform. I dedicated my life to it. (...) The august image of truth has always been present to me. O Holy Truth! It's you alone that I respected" (Raynal, 1780, I, 2-3). The authors of the *Histoire* did not abandon the meticulous gathering of relevant evidence, but this notion of truth emphasises the philosophical aspect of the work, thus distancing it from the antiquarian method (the *locus classicus* for describing this tension in the 18th century is Momigliano, 1950, 307-310).

Furthermore, for Raynal, neither truth is aseptic nor the historian is indifferent: they shed light on despotism and denounce tyranny and barbarism (even when exercised by those who claim to be civilised) in order to foster a world without injustice: "It is from there that we see the proud head of the tyrant stoop and cover itself with mire, while the modest forehead of the just man touches the vault of his eyes" (Raynal, 1780, I, 4). The impartial historian is passionate and takes a stand in a civic battle. Much has been written about the differences and contradictions in tone, arguments and aims between Raynal and Diderot within the book. Perhaps we could



read it as a work consisting of mutually addressing authorial voices. This may not make much sense for us, but it may have done for some of its contemporaries.

Conclusion

In a thorough and engaging article published in 2022, Reinier Salverda attempts to read the *Histoire* in search of the relevance of “those radical ideas [...] in our postcolonial and globalised world of today” (Salverda, 2022, 86; for another view centred on “a reflection concerning our present days”, see Strozzi, 2004). Although I share his goal, my aim has been quite different. Instead of attempting to find what the *Histoire* can provide to us, I have been searching for the meaning the book had for its authors and their contemporaries. The polygraphic nature of the book, the tensions and contradictions within it provide a clue to some of the characteristics of Enlightenment, to a recognition of its powers and its limitations.

The underlying premise of this interpretation is a definition of Enlightenment that resembles that proposed by JGA Pocock: not as a single phenomenon, but as a variety of statements and assumptions, related but not continuous, characterised more by family resemblances than by a set of features. This means that it is not a cause to be defended or a programme to be derided as the origin of all modern evils. On the contrary, it can be studied as “‘an’ Enlightenment which occurred in ‘a’ particular context—one that was multinational but specific and entailed the pursuit of certain intellectual objectives to the exclusion of others. [...] The specificity of ‘Enlightenment’ is better displayed in its plurality than in its unity” (Pocock, 2008, 94-95). In recognising such plurality, this view acknowledges and even embraces the contradictions of Enlightenment rather than seeking to resolve them. It is probably of little use in passing moral judgement on the past or in finding in it the traces that lead to the present. But it might be useful in an attempt to translate the uncertainties of remote times to the language of ours.

Jonathan Israel has pointed out the peril of this approach: using “Enlightenments” in the plural may reduce them to a series of irreconcilable tendencies and “Enlightenment” may cease to be meaningful as a historiographic notion (Wolin, 2016, 102). Perhaps, the danger is exaggerated. Whatever their differences and quarrels, there was in all Enlightenments an impulse towards truth, a search for a civil morality grounded on politeness and commerce that may enable Europeans to live in *their* world, in freedom and without fear. This did not constitute a “project”, but provided a set of themes that were central to Enlightenment thought, becoming the backdrop against which history, politics and intellectual intervention were set. Polyphony, disagreement and bitter debate were also an integral part of the Enlightenments.



This is precisely what I believe can be found in the *Histoire des deux Indes*. The book attempted to provide a philosophical and political history of European global expansion. It was based as much on fact as on political and philosophical conviction. In developing its theme, the book offered several and often conflicting accounts, ideas and projects about slavery, commerce, freedom and despotism, colonialism and civilization, reform and revolution. The project also involved a particular, enlightened, view of history, neighbouring stage theory and closely connected to the idea of progress. Reading the *Histoire* within the Enlightenment helps us better understand both.

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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