Public Commitment and Political Philosophy: The Case of the Encyclopédie and Political Economy in the 18th Century

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ABSTRACT This article explores the tensions and possibilities of public philosophy through the lens of the *Encyclopédie* and its treatment of political economy in eighteenth-century France. Situating the *Encyclopédie* within the broader context of Enlightenment thought, it examines how philosophy navigated the risks of ideological distortion, epistemological abstraction, and social inaccessibility in order to become a truly public and politically engaged discourse. The article contrasts two competing epistemological models present within the Encyclopédie: a practical, egalitarian approach rooted in empirical observation and vernacular knowledge, and a technocratic model exemplified by the physiocratic vision of the "political economy" by François Quesnay. Ultimately, it shows that the category of rural economy—very often marginalized in studies of the eighteenth century—represented a competing model to the later developments of classical (political) economy. Grounded in an egalitarian conception of knowledge, this category produces an alternative discourse on the relationship between human beings and nature. Today, this discourse offers a possible direction for rethinking the philosopher's engagement with contemporary crises.
KEYWORDS Enlightenment; *Encyclopédie*; political economy; François Quesnay; Diderot; vernacular knowledge.

RESUMO Este artigo explora as tensões e possibilidades da filosofia pública através da lente da *Encyclopédie* e do seu tratamento da economia política na França do século XVIII. Situando a *Encyclopédie* no contexto mais amplo do pensamento iluminista, examina de que modo a filosofia navegou os riscos da distorção ideológica, da abstracção epistemológica e da inacessibilidade social, a fim de se tornar um discurso verdadeiramente público e politicamente comprometido. O artigo contrasta dois modelos epistemológicos concorrentes presentes na Encyclopédie: uma abordagem prática e igualitária enraizada na observação empírica e no saber vernacular, e um modelo tecnocrático exemplificado pela visão fisiocrática da "economia política" de François Quesnay. Por fim, mostra que a categoria de economia rural — frequentemente marginalizada nos estudos do século XVIII — representou um modelo alternativo aos desenvolvimentos posteriores da economia (política) clássica. Ancorada numa concepção igualitária do conhecimento, esta categoria produz um discurso

alternativo sobre a relação entre os seres humanos e a natureza. Hoje, este discurso oferece uma possível orientação para repensar o compromisso do filósofo com as crises contemporâneas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE Iluminismo; *Encyclopédie*; economia política; François Quesnay; Diderot; saber vernacular.

1. Introduction: Diderot's claim to "*change the common way of thinking*"

> *"There is nothing in the world like savages, peasants, and provincial folk when it comes to thoroughly examining their affairs from every angle; and so, when they move from Thought to Action, you find things fully accomplished."*
>
> Honoré de Balzac, *Le Cabinet des Antique*s (1838)

This article examines the question of public philosophy by returning to a key historical moment: the Enlightenment, when clandestine literature began to emerge as a form of public discourse (Lilti, 2019, p. 327). The *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and D'Alembert (1751-1772) is the product of this new literary space, one that has begun to reflect on its own publicity both as an intellectual guarantee and as a necessary condition for scientific progress. The publication of the "*Dictionnaire universel*" was even accompanied by a *Prospectus* –a public announcement of the project that outlined the editorial and scientific direction adopted by its contributors. The *Prospectus*, and the first stir it provoked within the literary sphere in the mid-eighteenth century, reveal an emerging awareness among authors of the very notion of "public debate". Public philosophy, especially when developed through dictionaries and periodicals, became the scene of a genuine commercial battle between competing literary enterprises. This battle –first and foremost a battle for the public– is particularly visible in the case of the Encyclopédie, which, beyond its materialist tone (Diderot was already known for his philosophical provocations), entered into direct competition with the *Dictionnaire de Trévoux*, maintained by the Jesuits since 1704.

During this so-called "century of dictionaries" (Didier, 2003, p. 237), knowledge was increasingly produced through collective, public efforts, actively embedded in the Republic of Letters. This transformation offered new visibility to philosophical language and enabled thinkers to participate directly in political debate. Within this context, the *Encyclopédie* serves as a significant case study for exploring the tensions and possibil-

ities of philosophy's public commitment – particularly through the lens of political economy. From the second half of the eighteenth century onward, political economy became a public issue in the sense that social groups began to advocate for economic, agrarian, and fiscal reforms. Certain members of these groups –merchants, landowners, and farmers– came to possess a "public voice" which must be understood as a genuine form of engagement: on the one hand, directed toward government, to encourage political reform; and on the other, toward the public, to inform and guide it in its economic decisions –whether in matters of investment, agronomic conversion, or other forms of practical action.

The personal case of the Encyclopédie's chief editor, Diderot, is particularly revealing in illustrating the tensions surrounding the public circulation of writing in the eighteenth century. Diderot's materialist philosophy first emerged in a clandestine work, *Letter on the Blind for the Use of those who can see* (French: *Lettre sur les aveugles à l'usage de ceux qui voient*) which he published anonymously in 1749. Once unmasked, the publication cost him a stay in the Vincennes prison –an experience that would indelibly shape the rest of his career (Lilti, 2019, p. 412). He thus moved from clandestine writing –in which he could, in a kind of pure form, develop a materialist theory with subversive political and religious implications– to public writing, that of the Encyclopédie, published under royal privilege until its first suspension in 1752.

This shift provides an entry point into the issue we wish to examine here, for Diderot's personal history exemplifies the difficulties that accompany *the passage from a pure, speculative form of writing –free from the political and cultural constraints of the space in which it circulates– to a form that must adapt to the concrete conditions of publication.* The *Encyclopédie* develops various strategies of circumvention (such as cross-references) to evade censorship while remaining faithful to its philosophical ideals, even when these ideals challenge religious dogma or political authority. Yet it seems inevitable that this form of writing –because it is public and therefore *engaged with the real*– risks "damaging" the purity of philosophical theory. This, at least, is a source of Diderot's own lament: he would have preferred to speak more directly, without resorting to strategies of appeasement toward the religious or political sensibilities with which public writing was forced to negotiate (Leca-Tsiomis, 2015, p. 349.).

1.1. Ideological risks of the political philosophy

The central question guiding this analysis is: *How can abstract philosophical concepts be effectively applied to concrete social and political issues, and what challenges and opportunities arise from such an application?* This question is neither new nor simple. The political engagement of philosophy has historically posed a fundamental risk to philosophy itself. It is the same risk that haunted Jean-Paul Sartre, the fear of having "*les mains sales*" (Sartre, 1968) once the philosopher's space is no longer the abstract realm of contemplation, but the cultural, political, and concrete sphere of action. In more recent terms, philosophers are often expected to preserve their "*axiological neutrality*" in a Weberian perspective, remaining detached from political entanglement to safeguard objectivity. However, recent historiographical debates –particularly those concerning the translation of Weber's concept of Wertfreiheit as either "*axiological neutrality*" or "*non-imposition of values*"– show that what once appeared as an axiom of scientific or philosophical practice (the absence or suspension of value judgment) is far from self-evident. Isabelle Kalinowski has documented the intellectual and political context in which Weber formulated the opposition between facts and values and in her new edition of Weber's essays, she proposes translating *Wertfreiheit* as "*non-imposition of values*" rather than preserving Talcott Parsons's English rendering, "*axiological neutrality*," which suggests a total absence of commitment on the part of scientists –whereas Weber himself was deeply involved in the founding of the Weimar Republic (Weber, 2005, p. 191).

Although the concept of "axiological neutrality" was not formalized in the eighteenth century, Enlightenment thinkers were already acutely aware of the ideological risks that accompanied philosophical intervention in political affairs. Diderot, for example, was particularly sensitive to the ideological shift that philosophical discourse could undergo. In *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville* (1796), the narrator recognizes that the seemingly anti-imperialist speech of the old Tahitian is, in fact, a projection of European thought. When character B finished recounting the episode of the old Tahitian's harangue against the Europeans, character A is struck by the fact that he recognizes in it the republican ideal of equality so typical of European nations: "This speech seems vehement to me; but through something abrupt and wild, I seem to find European ideas and expressions in it.". To this, character B replies that language, as

the vehicle of cultural values, has no doubt altered the nature of the original speech: "Just think—it is a translation from Tahitian into Spanish, and from Spanish into French." (Diderot, 2013, p. 151).[1]

Similarly, in his commentary on William Petty's political arithmetic, a new method of statistics and mathematization of the social world for the purposes of governance and political administration, Diderot warns that such a method –though ostensibly empirical– is ideologically aligned with British national interests and thus requires critical scrutiny. Indeed, his article Arithmétique Politique is both a reworking of its English counterpart from Chambers' *Cyclopaedia* –of which the *Encyclopédie* was initially intended to be the translation– but Diderot allows himself to point out: "This essay is addressed to the king; that is almost to say that its results are favourable to the English nation." (*Arithmétique politique*, vol. I, 1751, p. 679).[2] Political arithmetic, however, is precisely a science whose very object is "the public" and "the *res publica*" since its goal is the mathematization of the social world through calculation (demography, productivity, and so on), and in particular through the calculation of probabilities (life expectancy, commercial profitability, the gains and risks of smallpox inoculation, etc.). Political arithmetic is thus the science of the administration of things and people, and it draws philosophy toward the domain of political science and the discourse of government. Diderot's suspicion is therefore twofold: not only was William Petty's political arithmetic ideologically biased by his English chauvinism, but it also risked reducing the social world to a set of calculations meant to guide governmental action. These examples clearly reveal the anxiety animating the editor of the encyclopaedic project: philosophical discourse, insofar as it is also political discourse, serves a public that it may be tempted to flatter. Since the modern notion of scientific objectivity had not yet been formalized, Diderot did not conceive of science and philosophy as detached from the service of the nation, social utility, and the *progress of morals*. Yet even if philosophy is of public utility –as the *Encyclopédie* project itself demonstrates– political philosophy always runs the risk of being subordinated to particular interests (the prince, specific social groups, religion, and so on).

1 Author's translation.

2 All excerpts from the articles of the *Encyclopédie* are translated by the author from the Digital Collaborative and Critical Edition of the *Encyclopédie* (Edition Numérique Collaborative et CRitique de l'Encyclopédie, ENCCRE, www.enccre.academie-sciences.fr).

1.2. Mismatch between philosophy and political action

A second challenge arises from a potential mismatch between the nature of philosophy and the nature of concrete political issues. Philosophy is often perceived as too abstract or universal to address contingent, local realities effectively. The historiographical renewal that took place from the 1960s onward, and later, in the 1990s –particularly through the efforts of the Cambridge School and authors such as Quentin Skinner (Skinner, 2001) and J. G. A. Pocock (Pocock, 1997)– sought to break with the method of a *philosophia perennis* that lacked proper contextualization of ideas, especially political ideas. The Cambridge School specifically targeted the abstract use of major philosophical canons whose overly speculative and ahistorical character prevented an adequate correspondence between the concepts of political philosophy (liberty, government, law) and the historical reality of the authors themselves (Skornicki & Tournadre, 2015, p. 11). The work of the Cambridge School and of the new history of political thought has profoundly transformed our understanding of what constitutes a text of political philosophy, particularly in the early modern period. Indeed, in contrast to earlier interpretations centred on great authors and canonical concepts, abstracted from their historical context, contextualist scholars (such as Q. Skinner and J. G. A. Pocock) have promoted the idea of philosophical writing as a form of *action* within the literary world. Quentin Skinner, drawing notably on his encounter with the philosophy of language developed by Austin and Wittgenstein, argues that a text of political philosophy is not merely the ideal description of a political or moral system, but a *linguistic act* –an intervention by the philosopher within the sphere of possible contemporary actions (reform, education, critique, etc.). In an interview given to *La Vie des Idées* in 2019, he stated:

> "My central thesis is that one can hardly claim to have understood a text unless one is able to answer these questions, and that such understanding can be achieved only by situating the texts under study within the discursive contexts that allow us to untangle what is at stake in them. The texts we study must be treated as interventions within existing frameworks of discourse and debate; identifying the precise kind of intervention they rep-

> resent in each case must lie at the very heart of the interpretative task." (Skinner & Guénard, 2019)

Thus, texts of political philosophy can be seen as so many variations on the famous idea of "*how to do things with words*" (Austin, 1963). Modern political philosophers –Diderot, Voltaire, Rousseau, but also Turgot, Quesnay, and others– are therefore intrinsically bound to a public within a public sphere, one that may be persuaded through a particular normative use of political concepts. Any interpretative reading of philosophical texts and concepts –whether abstract or speculative– must therefore be examined in light of their proximity or distance from the actual sphere of political action. Through the contextualization of texts and the history of concepts (*Begriffsgeschichte*) (Koselleck, 2016), this historiographical renewal redefined a certain way of interpreting political philosophy texts.

A return to early modern political philosophy is therefore essential in order to address the question of the inadequacy between concept and reality –a question that is characteristic of the eighteenth century and its critique of abstract and systematic thought. Already in the eighteenth century –especially among the Encyclopaedists– there was a growing sense that the theoretical systems, particularly Cartesian ones, were losing ground under the influence of English empiricism and Condillac's sensualism. A critique emerged of the so-called "*esprit de système*" – a phrase that is difficult to translate, but that refers to a set of speculative reasoning disconnected from empirical observation. In response, Enlightenment thinkers increasingly turned toward local and historical phenomena, as evidenced by the emergence of disciplines like natural history and the *philosophies de l'histoire* of Voltaire and Montesquieu. These developments marked a departure from the universalist models exemplified by thinkers such as Bossuet's *Histoire universelle* (1681).

1.3. You said "public"?

A third concern is the accessibility of philosophy. One could imagine a revised form of Platonism in which political philosophy is the purview of a select few –statesmen, ministers, or elite thinkers– rather than a discipline addressed to the public. This revisited Platonism ultimately entails the loss of the very concept of the public, understood as the active collective of those engaged in political philosophy and public action. In

this view, the public is reduced to a passive popular mass, incapable of being the subject of its own understanding (epistemic) or its own autonomy (political).

Yet the Enlightenment witnessed a profound shift in the intended audience of philosophical writing. Philosophy moved from secrecy to publicity, from clandestine manuscripts to journals and dictionaries. In doing so, it began to reach a broader, non-specialist readership, actively engaged in contemporary intellectual and political debates (Darnton, 1983, p. 177). This shift is particularly visible in discussions surrounding "*political economy*": it appeared as a new field of political thought in the eighteenth century and constituted a hotspot of public philosophy, insofar as its object concerned public matters (grain, taxation, commerce) and was publicly debated in journals, essays, and dictionaries, among ministers, philosophers and workers. As questions of trade, taxation, and state regulation entered the public sphere, philosophers and economists alike competed to shape opinion.

The *Encyclopédie* responded to this moment by articulating a new form of public and collective writing, explicitly designed to democratize knowledge and make it more accessible. In his *Prospectus*, Diderot defended the *Encyclopédie* project by outlining the editorial approach he and his contributors had adopted: he promoted a non-elitist conception of science, grounded in the dialogue between "men of letters" and workers, so that the *Encyclopédie* was not only addressed to the public but was also meant to be co-constructed through the participation of artisans in the description of the arts and trades. The expression "to change the common way of thinking", from his article *ENCYCLOPÉDIE* (vol. V, 1755, p. 642v), must therefore be understood as the effort required of the philosophical tradition to produce concepts from the real world (the socio-economic sphere), and with the real world (workers and non-philosophical agents).

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To address these three tensions –the ideological risk, the mismatch between philosophy and political issues, and the question of the "public" in philosophy– we can therefore ask: how does political economy in the *Encyclopédie* reveal the internal tensions of philosophy's public and political commitment? Political economy, situated at the very centre of the debates and among the actors contending over the scientific and technical content of this emerging category, thus provides an especially

revealing test case for assessing what it means for political philosophy to adopt a genuinely public orientation.

2. Encyclopaedic ideal and the reconfiguration of a public writing: publicity against secrecy, publicity against intricacy, publicity against disunity

The French eighteenth century, marked by political crisis and transformations of authority, provided fertile ground for reconsidering philosophy's role in political life. Articles such as Autorité politique, inspired by Locke's natural law theory, exemplify critiques of monarchical concentration of power. The opening words of Diderot's article have remained famous, appearing as a hallmark of an egalitarian claim: "No man has received from nature the right to command others" (Autorité politique, vol. I, 1751, p. 898). These texts were not addressed solely to an elite readership, nor exclusively to rulers in the style of Machiavelli's Prince. Instead, they helped establish political philosophy as a public discourse. The transformation of traditional (top-down) monarchical authority into public power lies at the heart of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's analysis in the article ECONOMIE or OECONOMIE (vol. V, 1755). Rousseau not only develops the distinction between the domestic economy of the family (private) and the *political economy* of the state (public), but also promotes a redefinition of the relationship between citizens and political authority through the concept of "*raison publique*": "[the magistrate's private reason] must be suspect to him, and he must follow no rule other than public reason, which is the law" (p. 338). This concept of "public reason" strikes a blow against traditional monarchical structures –where the law is understood as the expression of sovereign arbitrariness– while simultaneously opening the possibility for the economy to be conceived no longer as the privileged domain of military power, but rather as a redistributive administration of goods.

This shift from monarchical authority to public authority unfolded gradually over the early modern period. Yet the *Spirit of Law* accelerated new ways of thinking about society on the one hand (historicity, customs, and manners) and about the agency of social actors on the other (economy, technique). Indeed, with Montesquieu, the classical political

typologies (republic, monarchy, despotism), traditionally defined in formal terms (as in Aristotle or Polybius), were reinterpreted as climate and historical configurations. Through a new philosophy of history, Montesquieu foregrounded individuals, their psychology (which he called "the principle"), and their cultural processes (moderation, *doux commerce*, etc.). This new political philosophy generated new concepts that gave intellectual visibility to social groups previously excluded from the philosophical domain –particularly from the domain of politics, which had long been the prerogative of the powerful. Merchants, farmers, and bourgeois citizens now became fully part of this philosophy of history, as they were recognized as central to the "*life of governments*" (Althusser, 1985, p. 46). The *Encyclopédie* owes a great deal to Montesquieu: indeed, Volume V opens with an "Eulogy of Monsieur the President de Montesquieu", which acknowledges the essential transformation he initiated in political philosophy –a transformation that, within the dictionary, becomes an editorial principle, thoroughly reshaping both epistemology and the role of the philosopher. Arnaud Orain described this as an "*encyclopaedic ideal*" (Orain, 2023, p. 101), which reshaped the nature of philosophical inquiry. This ideal rests on three fundamental criteria. First, thought must be public: it fully develops only through exchange, discussion, and the confrontation of ideas within the common space. Second, epistemology must be "from below", attentive to practices, know-how, and concrete experiences from which knowledge is constructed. Finally, this ideal entails a unified conception of science, rejecting disciplinary fragmentation in favour of a coherent vision of knowledge, in which the various forms of understanding contribute to a shared effort to comprehend the world.[3]

The *encyclopaedic ideal of public thought* operated on two levels. First, it promoted the description of crafts and trades against the secrecy of guild knowledge. In the eighteenth century, trades were organized into guilds or jurandes, which regulated the training and practice of workers through apprenticeships. These organizations, protective of their particular interests, controlled the qualifications of artisans, their right to practice, and their manufacturing techniques (Garçon, 2005, p. 379).

3 Central to this ideal was the conviction that political and social thought must be made public. For Kant, this transparency was a safeguard against the dangers of *raison d'État* (*Staatsräson*). The principle of publicity, which he developed notably in *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch* (1795), stands in opposition to the logic of the *arcana imperii and raison d'État*: a political decision must be made public, and concealing it directly contributes to the violation of the moral rules governing the civic body. Public dissemination of political ideas helps preclude their manipulation, anchoring them in a field of open critique.

However, these regulations intersected with two fundamental principles promoted by the Republic of Letters: *publicity* and *freedom*. These principles reflect a single demand: trade must be both free and public –that is, accessible to talent without being restricted by systems of co-optation, monopoly, or the withholding of know-how. From the very first article, ART, Diderot emphasized that the secrecy of trades does not account for the superiority of Lyonnais manufactures over foreign ones: "it is not that elsewhere people are unaware of how work is done there", since "the same trades, the same silks, and roughly the same practices can be found everywhere" (ART, vol I., 1751, p. 717). The quality of Lyonnais production therefore resided less in the corporate organization than in the large number of workers gathered in the *Grande Fabrique*, who collectively found solutions to perfect the craftsmanship.

The critiques levelled by the contributors against guilds link the principle of publicity with the freedom to practice a profession and to engage in commerce. The public occupies a central place in the corpus: on the one hand, its satisfaction constitutes the foundation of a prosperous economy; on the other, it represents a pool of entrepreneurs that "apprenticeship patents" tend to stifle. For this public to both benefit from the products of the trades and have access to them, it is necessary to guarantee an economic freedom that allows for the production and circulation of goods –that is, of trades and their products. Conversely, the spirit of monopoly goes directly against the principles of publicity and freedom: it manifests in the retention of rights, which the "*spirit of commerce*" (Montesquieu) must combat, and in the withholding of know-how, which the philosophical and encyclopaedic spirit could help to reveal.

At a second level, it clarified conceptual language to prevent its misuse. Making knowledge public was thus both a political and an epistemological gesture. At the heart of this ideal lies a challenge to top-down epistemology. The *Encyclopédie* rejected abstract systems and instead endorsed an "*epistemology of the workshop*": an empirical, situated approach to knowledge production. For this model to succeed, the *gens de lettres* had to recognize and incorporate the expertise of those directly engaged in practical, often marginalized forms of labour. As early as the *Prospectus* of 1749, Diderot asserted this new editorial framework and the new way of articulating knowledge through the socio-economic world: "We took the trouble to go into their workshops, to interview them, to write under their dictation, to develop their thoughts (…)" (*Prospectus*, p.

4). This reversal of the traditional hierarchy of knowledge –where doxa was to be overcome by philosophical logos– was revolutionary. Situated, local knowledge became a legitimate source of philosophical reflection.

The most striking example of the relevance of this "from below" science can be seen in the article BAS, *Bonneterie* (Vol. II, 1752), which is a description of the knitting machine. Spanning thirty columns, the article attempts, from the perspective of the man of letters, to detail every part of the machine, following in particular Descartes' definition of the analytical process necessary for any scientific endeavour (to reach simple ideas). Yet this Cartesian rationality, based on mechanistic logic, struggles to grasp the overall functioning of the knitting machine, so that it is ultimately the worker who appears to occupy the most privileged epistemic position for understanding and operating the machine.

The encyclopaedic model also embraced the unity of science. The unity of science is grounded in the unity of nature: for Diderot and the sensualist thinkers influenced by Lockean empiricism and Condillac's sensualism, all natural phenomena are interdependent, and to know them requires the collaboration of the various sciences and techniques. Thus, the distribution of knowledge does not imply an irreducible separation between technical and scientific fields. As Diderot wrote in the *Prospectus* (1749):

> "Nature offers us only particular things –innumerable in number, without any fixed or determined division. Everything in it comes in succession by imperceptible gradations. And upon this vast sea of surrounding objects, if some appear, like the peaks of rocks, to pierce the surface and rise above the rest, they owe this seeming advantage only to particular systems, to vague conventions, and to certain events foreign to the physical arrangement of beings and to the true institutions of philosophy." (p. 2).

As we can see, the sciences are related to one another just as the various phenomena of nature are: "By reducing everything that concerns the sciences and the arts to the form of a dictionary, the aim was still to make one feel the mutual assistance they lend to one another. » (*ibid.*, p. 1.).

3. Who are the experts? The case of economy in the Encyclopédie

Such a framework implied that knowledge, when shared without specialization, could be distributed more equally. For political philosophy to become truly public, it must accept that its concepts are not purely abstract but rather arise from social practices. It is possible to see that the analysis of the development of the sciences is deeply intertwined with the technical development of the labouring social categories.

Several general studies on the emergence of modern science in Europe have shown that the encyclopaedic ideal was not merely a marketing device on Diderot's part, but rather corresponded to a moment of encounter between the sphere of labour (artisans, farmers, merchants) and the intellectual sphere (naturalists, physicians, agronomists, philosophers, and others). Harold J. Cook, in his study of modern medicine in the Dutch Republic, has shown that it was the practical approach –and what he calls "matters of fact", that is, an interest in things and factual information– that enabled the development of medicine (Cook, 2007, p. 16-17). In a similar vein, the historian of science Edgar Zilsel formulated the theory, known as the "*Zilsel Thesis*", that it was the actors of the world of labour who first articulated technical responses to scientific problems (Zilsel, 2000). In this sense, philosophy becomes a counter-power: a tool for conceptualizing the social world from below. It draws from the practices of workers and local communities to produce politically meaningful knowledge. This was one of the core ambitions of Diderot's dictionary project. This model, however, was contested even within the *Encyclopédie* itself.

Political economy in the eighteenth century was not yet a stabilized discipline (Larrère, 1992). It was a site of competing epistemologies: one such school was the "science of commerce" represented by figures like Vincent de Gournay (1712-1759) and Véron de Forbonnais (1722-1800). The first was a French merchant who also became an *intendant du commerce*, a true government advisor on matters of economic reform –such as the liberalization of the grain trade. He is credited with the famous formula "*Laissez-faire, laissez-passer*", which inspired the entire liberal logic of the market, influencing the physiocrats and later Adam Smith's "free trade". The second likewise served the French monarchy, being appointed Inspector General of the Mints under Minister Silhouette.

These thinkers advocated a pragmatic, data-driven approach to economic policy, grounded in the realities of trade and commerce. The

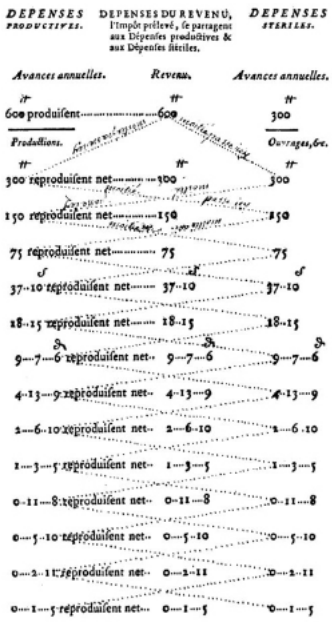
science of commerce, founded on the idea that "the nature of commerce is to vary endlessly" (Chambre de Commerce, vol. III, 1753, p. 60b), originates in the merchants' local skills and expertise in trade. Rejecting an economic order that is too absolute or definitive, the science of commerce is grounded in the observation, collection, and comparison of information drawn directly from the practical experience of merchants. While they remained cautious of universalist claims, they contributed to codifying a modern economic vocabulary, moving away from moralistic language. In the wake of Gournay's reflections, Forbonnais underscored the difficulty of establishing a true science of the administration of political commerce. Such a science depends on bringing together two distinct forms of rationality, whose reconciliation is anything but self-evident. His work revealed this epistemic gap on two levels: first, between the actors of commercial knowledge –merchants and legislators–; and second, between two orders of truth, one local and empirical, the other general and theoretical, whose alignment remains to be achieved.

This discrepancy between the practical rationality of commerce and the abstract rationality of politics appears clearly in the article Chambre de Commerce, where Forbonnais observes that "Practice contains a multitude of circumstances which theory can neither encompass nor foresee (...)." (p. 60). He adds: "(...) well-informed merchants are in a position to know the effects of the law, and the restrictions or extensions it requires." (*ibid.*). The science of commerce was thus based on a conception that was not strictly deterministic: commerce, viewed as a complex interplay of climatic, historical, and political causes, cannot be reduced to universal principles. Accordingly, the primary purpose of making political discourse on commerce public was not to establish general laws, but rather to promote the collection and comparison of facts, in order to guide the public in economic reflection. This demand for publicity had a dual function: it must both illuminate the government in crafting appropriate reforms and preserve, among merchants, the capacity to navigate their own practice. Commerce was therefore not a science of government, but a shared field of knowledge, in which the experience of practitioners retained a decisive role.

Yet within the same publication, another model emerged: the physiocratic vision led by François Quesnay (16941774). His articles Grains and Fermiers in volume six of the *Encyclopédie* marked the beginning of a project to formalize political economy as a discipline. The lexicographical novelty –political economy– was precisely coined

on the occasion of these two articles, and Quesnay sought, by using this terminology, to invent not only a new discipline but also a new way of conceiving economic science (Salvat, 2006, p. 107). Quesnay's epistemology, grounded in a divinely ordained natural order, broke sharply with the empirical and egalitarian tendencies of the Encyclopédie.

What is political economy for François Quesnay? It is the discipline that examines the "natural order", that is, the circulation of wealth within the kingdom. The "natural order" among the physiocrats — and in particular in Quesnay's thought — refers to the idea that there exists a set of immutable laws governing the production and circulation of wealth, an order to be discovered rather than imposed through political artifice. Quesnay conceived it as both a physical and metaphysical principle, forming the foundation of his economic science (Fischman, 1998, p. 71). In concrete terms, this translates into a hierarchical vision of society, divided into "social classes": the productive class, the class of proprietors, and the sterile class. This model designates agriculture as the only truly "productive" activity, generating a real surplus that must then "circulate" naturally according to regular circuits, systematically represented in Quesnay's famous *Tableau économique* (1758).



(Figure 1. François Quesnay, *Tableau économique*, 2nd edition, 1759, BNF.)

From these premises arise normative positions: on the one hand, the State must confine itself to guaranteeing the freedom of exchange and

the security of property (the principle of *laissez-faire*), so as to let the natural order operate without unnecessary fiscal or regulatory obstacles; and on the other hand, landowners, once they have understood the laws of the natural order, must invest by making "*advances*" (*avances*).

These innovations prepared the ground for modern political economy: they inspired (and were at times criticized by) the classical economists –Adam Smith and his successors– by introducing the notion of spontaneous order and by shifting the focus from the State to the internal mechanisms of the economy. But the most important point for our study is to recognize that Quesnay deconstructed the egalitarian ideal of knowledge within his economic system. Quesnay distinguished between two positions regarding economic laws: only statesmen, philosophers, and landowners (the wealthy farmers) are capable of apprehending these laws, whereas workers (laborers, merchants) remain constrained by their immersion in work and traditional practices. In this model, the comprehension of natural laws was restricted to a select elite. Quesnay's *Tableau économique* illustrated this model of abstract rationality, which was theoretically imposed on the local, contingent, and diverse situations of land cultivation.

Quesnay rejected the local expertise of the farmer: "It would not take much to believe that the use of horses and that of oxen are equally advantageous. Consult the cultivators themselves, and you will find them firmly attached to the type of cultivation that predominates in their province." (Fermiers (*Econ. polit.*), vol. VI, 1756, p. 529.). The peasants' belief in the superiority of oxen over horses is, for Quesnay, far from any form of "common sense": the expertise of political economy must free itself from the short-sighted effects of vernacular knowledge. Local, experiential knowledge –such as that of farmers and artisans– was dismissed as insufficient. Political economy thus became a form of government knowledge, inaccessible to the general public.

The Encyclopédie, then, reveals a fundamental tension between two models of political philosophy. On one side stands an egalitarian, practical approach that draws on lived experience to formulate political concepts. On the other side lies an abstract, mathematical model of governance, concerned with managing populations, territories, and wealth.[4]

4 This second physiocratic model corresponds to the analysis that Michel Foucault offers of eighteenth-century political economy in Naissance de la biopolitique and Sécurité, territoire et population. Foucault indeed sees in physiocracy the elaboration of a model

4. The Category of Rural Economy: An Ecological Model of Political Philosophy in the 18th Century

Physiocracy invented a new way of thinking about the relationship between human beings and nature. For the physiocrats, philosophy became a body of state knowledge, concerned above all with discovering a general legislation that transcends the socio-economic and climatic realities of particular regions. The physiocratic "public" was therefore more restricted: it consisted either of the philosopher, who calculates the conditions for the reproducibility of the economic circuit; the wealthy farmer, capable of managing his large estate according to the rules of the economic order; or the landowner, who provides the advances (capital). A whole set of actors disappeared from Quesnay's agricultural tableau and most notably the *œconome*, that is, the one who maintains a daily, practical relationship with a particular, changing, and unpredictable nature, and who belongs more properly to the discourse of rural economy (économie rustique), another category of the Encyclopédie.

This field encompassed all forms of knowledge relating to the management of crops, agricultural estates, forests, and livestock, as well as peasant practices, but also activities such as hunting and fishing. It shared numerous features with the science of commerce as conceived by Forbonnais: in both cases, the objects of study were concrete, localized, and embedded in specific practices and territories. A rejection of excessive generalizations in favour of an appreciation of empirical and practical forms of knowledge –what Claude Lévi-Strauss called *bricolage*: a tentative, experiential reason, rooted in the gestures of the craft (Lévi-Strauss, 1962, p. 31) can thus be observed. This type of rationality is moreover very close to the encyclopaedic ideal, since it acknowledges in the workers themselves the capacity to test and develop solutions to the problems they encounter in their daily activities –a true epistemology of situated knowledge that renews the definition of a broader "public," one that encompasses the labouring categories most marginalized

that, on the one hand, seeks to naturalize the economy (and, in so doing, to absorb the political), and, on the other, to convert the concept of the "people" into that of the "population," that is, into a mathematical concept that can be handled as a natural magnitude. On Foucault's interpretation of the physiocrats, see Arnault Skornicki, "Le 'Biopouvoir': détournement des puissances vitales ou invention de la vie ?," in La Biopolitique (d')après Foucault, ed. Diogo Sardinha (2005), pp. 56–65.

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by philosophical discourse. The *Encyclopédie* gave a prominent place to such figures in the person of Charles George Leroy (1723-1789), gamekeeper at Versailles, whose contributions embody this voice from the field.

Rural economy did more than offer an alternative epistemological framework; it proposed a social transformation of knowledge itself. In the writings of Leroy, a clear rejection of top-down science–a science that speaks from above and for others–can be observed. His intellectual and personal trajectory placed him at a crucial intersection: on one side, the world of the philosophes, whose company he kept; on the other, the world of forests and farms, which he inhabited alongside the workers, animals, and landscapes he cultivated, trained, or hunted. This dual belonging enabled Leroy, within the Encyclopédie, to address the community of scholars while adopting the perspective of those who practice –a stance that gave voice to a philosophy rooted in embodied experience and manual know-how.

In his hands, what Diderot once termed an "*epistemology of the workshop*" evolved into an *"epistemology of fields and farms*." This shift is emblematic of the Encyclopédie's broader reconfiguration of knowledge: it grounded the act of knowing in the material and social conditions under which discourse was produced. Through this lens, rural economy became a full participant in the Encyclopédie's democratizing project, which sought to restore to science its collective, situated, and fundamentally social character. The knowledge of the peasantry was not merely anecdotal –it was recognized as epistemically legitimate, for it emerged from direct engagement with the realities it sought to explain. The farmers' own material and social conditions defined them as the most competent actors to confront and resolve the challenges of their world.

This principle anticipated, in a striking way, the concept of *situated knowledge* later theorized by Donna Haraway (Haraway, 1988) and expanded by Sandra G. Harding in "Rethinking *Standpoint Epistemology*: What Is Strong Objectivity?" (Harding, 1992). Both thinkers argue that certain social groups occupy epistemically privileged positions precisely because their lived circumstances compel them to formulate the right questions –the ones that matter for their own survival and understanding. Agriculture, therefore, is not "obscure" to farmers; it is the field from which their thought organically arises. Their lived experience provides

a genuine standpoint, one that renders the problems and their possible solutions visible from within.

Leroy, for his part, underscored the need to become familiar with such perspectives –to inhabit them intellectually and practically. This call resonates with what we would now call a standpoint epistemology: a way of knowing that insists on proximity, participation, and the acknowledgment of partial perspectives. It delineates a scientific path profoundly distinct from that of political economy, which rests on the abstraction of experience and the detachment of knowledge from its conditions of emergence.

This reconfiguration of knowledge also provides a solid foundation for a public philosophy: it aims to make accessible and legitimate forms of knowledge long relegated to the margins. These knowledges –carried by actors whose practices have often been rendered invisible– have been doubly disqualified: socially, because of their subordinate position, and morally, because they belong to activities deemed too technical or utilitarian to deserve the dignity of theoretical knowledge. Diderot's encyclopaedic project precisely challenges this double marginalization, reaffirming the value of the knowledges derived from crafts and publicly promoting them, notably within a bourgeois space that was traditionally privileged for the production of philosophical discourse and political orientations (Habermas, 1993).

Rural economy presents a major point of interest for our reflection on the redefinition of political philosophy in the eighteenth century. It first invites us to reconsider what a public philosophy truly means, in a critical re-examination of the sense given to this term by Habermas: the public sphere of rural economy is a space of discussion that cannot be reduced to the ideological production of a bourgeois or landowning class (whose rapacious interests –particularly in the destruction of forests, a pressing issue in the eighteenth century– Leroy often criticized). Rather, it engages forms of knowledge, practices, and experiences emerging from more marginalized and popular milieus. Within this framework, rural economy makes visible a voice arising from manual labour, agricultural practices, and rural ways of life –a situated, concrete, and collective knowledge that displaces the very conditions of philosophy and its public exercise.

Secondly, this rural economy entails a reformulation of political philosophy itself. Contrary to the biopolitical perspective identified by Foucault in the mid-eighteenth century –where the management

of populations becomes the very core of power –rural economy seeks the conditions of equality not in the administration of bodies, but in the recognition of marginalized socio-economic positions. It advances a politics grounded in the concrete forms of existence and practices of workers, rather than in an abstract model of government.

Finally, rural economy profoundly transforms the human relationship to nature. It breaks with the naturalist conception of a dominated nature (Descola, 2005), viewed merely as a reservoir of resources or marketable values. On the contrary, it asserts a vision that can be called ecological *avant la lettre*: human beings appear as living creatures among others, embedded within socio-climatic and biological environments upon which they depend. From this perspective, rural economy elaborates a philosophy of the *milieu* (*Umwelt*) (Wolfe, 1999, p. 226), in which human well-being can only be conceived through a balanced integration into a shared environment.

Numerous articles from Leroy's corpus, along with related texts from the field of natural history, informed this conception of the *milieu* –a notion that is highly characteristic of eighteenth-century thought, particularly within naturalist and chemical traditions (notably those of Buffon and Venel). These corpora understood *œconomie* as a constellation of localized forms of knowledge that enabled populations to adapt to their environments through gradual and experimental processes, such as the acclimatization of new tree species or the production of fertilizers from available resources. This conception of the relationship between humans and nature thus produces a distinctive definition of public philosophy: one necessarily rooted in a standpoint epistemology, wherein socio-economic positions confer epistemic privileges in the development of knowledge, and which, by its very nature, also constitutes a philosophy of ecology. A political philosophy that is rooted in this public of workers and in their concrete relationship to the natural *milieu* is therefore also profoundly ecological: it makes coexistence with nature –rather than its economic domination– the foundation of an alternative political anthropology, one that diverges from the classical economy, which nonetheless became hegemonic in the contemporary reception of Adam Smith.

5. Conclusion

Political economy in the eighteenth century thus offers contradictory responses to the question of applying abstract philosophy to concrete political issues. It allows for a form of engaged, practical philosophy, rooted in vernacular knowledge. Yet it also signals the emergence of a technocratic, universalist logic that continues to shape political thought today.

The study of these models of rationality at work in eighteenth-century economic discourse makes it possible to renew our understanding of what may be meant by public philosophy. Publicity, in the Enlightenment sense, is not merely a moral virtue in the Kantian sense of the term; it is also an epistemological virtue, at the very heart of the encyclopaedic project. By advocating the public circulation of knowledge, the editors of the *Encyclopédie* affirmed the necessity of an open exchange of discourses as a means of fostering the development of scholarly practices and craftsmanship.

The first challenge lies in maintaining a form of philosophy that does not reduce itself to the legitimation of governmental knowledge. The rationality specific to political economy tends, in fact, to transform political philosophy into a technocratic science aimed at princes, ministers, landowners, and the intellectual bourgeoisie –what Habermas would later describe as the restricted public of the bourgeois public sphere. Against this tendency, the Encyclopédie, under the influence of the mid-eighteenth-century triumph of empiricist and sensualist philosophy, put forward an alternative conception of knowledge: an experimental philosophy founded on observation, experience, and the plurality of perspectives.

This experimental philosophy rests on a standpoint epistemology. It is not "public" in the Habermasian sense precisely because it grants epistemic privilege to marginalized positions capable of redefining knowledge, particularly in the economic sphere. The public to which this philosophy addresses itself is therefore heterogeneous and situated: it is composed of a diversity of social situations and forms of experience, rather than being reduced to the mere notion of population that Foucauldian biopolitics would later associate with the government of living beings. The public is not a mass of economic agents or productive forces; it remains an arena of plurality, within which situated, open, and critical forms of knowledge can emerge.

Likewise, nature cannot be reduced to the abstract circuit of wealth formalized in the Physiocrats' *Tableau économique*. Within the encyclopaedic perspective, nature is conceived as a *milieu* irreducible to any general law of economy or theory of government. Belonging to the specific model of rationality embodied in the encyclopaedic ideal, the category of rural economy –often neglected in favour of supposedly more prestigious ones– offers a crucial counterpoint to technocratic conceptions of knowledge. It makes it possible to oppose to political economy another form of political thought, one attentive to the coexistence of humanity and nature, and mindful of the destructive effects produced by reducing knowledge to the sole logic of governmental and commercial efficiency.

Thus, philosophical commitment—à la Diderot—may consist in constructing literary and intellectual spaces in which marginalized voices can be heard. Such a form of public philosophy does not seek to govern, but rather to render visible the multiplicity of human (and even non-human) experiences of nature from which knowledge itself arises.

In conclusion, these competing models remain with us. They reflect ongoing tensions in how political philosophy is defined and practiced. As a final illustration, consider the contemporary example of glacier grafting in Pakistan—a traditional technique involving the symbolic "marriage" of male and female glaciers to address water shortages. While rooted in Indigenous cosmology, the practice is also based on detailed empirical knowledge of local terrain. Recognized by the United Nations Development Programme, it exemplifies how situated knowledge can inform global policy responses to climate change. Such practices affirm the autonomy of political communities and resonate with the philosophical principles articulated in the Encyclopédie. A truly public philosophy must be prepared to listen to them.

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