

Substituting Conjecture for Facts: Diderot's Justification of the Authority of Men over Women in *L'Histoire des deux Indes*

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Introduction

The term “Theoretical or Conjectural History”¹ was coined by Dugald Stewart, a term that first appeared in a tribute he paid to Adam Smith at the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1793.² By this term, Stewart sought to designate “a particular sort of inquiry, which [...] is entirely of modern origin”³. Conjectural history, he maintained, is necessary when there is a lack of “direct evidence” or when it is “impossible to determine with certainty”⁴ the process by which an event was produced, typically: human progress in languages, sciences, arts, modes of government... In this case, he told us, conjecture must substitute for facts “to show how it may have been produced by natural causes”, that is, in the case of human progress, “from the known principles of human nature” (Stewart, 1793: 293). Although Stewart did not mention him directly, choosing instead to pay tribute to the conjectural approach that d’Alembert advocated in the mathematical sciences⁵, we are entitled to wonder whether Diderot's words, especially in the *Encyclopédie*, inspired him.

It is worth noting that Diderot signed the article of the *Encyclopédie*, “Conjecture, s. f. (Gram.)”,⁶ in which the concept is presented as a judgement of causality founded on plausible but not certain proofs derived from experience.⁷ In the article “Encyclopédie, s. f. (Philosoph.)”, when he discusses arts,

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¹ Stewart, 1793: 292.

² This tribute will be published under the title “Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith” in the *Essays on philosophical subjects* in 1795. As Marouby (2004) reminds us, in 1794, the Royal Society of Edinburgh had already published Stewart's tribute in its *Transactions* (Marouby, 2004: 33).

³ Stewart, 1793: 293.

⁴ Stewart, 1793: 293.

⁵ See Stewart, 1793: 293-4. It is worth recalling here that Stewart wrote a critical commentary on the “Discours préliminaire” the *Encyclopédie* written by d’Alembert (see Stewart, 1811, 1821).

⁶ Art. Conjecture, s. f. (Gram.), III: 870.

⁷ For a more detailed analysis of the meaning of the word “conjecture, for Diderot, see Anderson (2014). On the role of conjectures in science for Diderot, see Pimenta (2015).

Diderot recommends the use of “la conjecture et l’histoire hypothétique”⁸ to account of the evolution of an art about which we know nothing about “l’origine et les progrès successifs” (see Ottaviani, 2001). Already, in the article “Art, s. m. (Ordre encyclop. Entendement. Mémoire. Histoire de la Nature. Histoire de la nature employée. Art.)”, the author proposed “[de] recourir à des suppositions philosophiques” or “[de] partir de quelqu’hypothese vraisemblable” when “l’on ignore l’origine d’un Art mécanique, ou l’on n’a que des connoissances vagues sur ses progrès”.⁹ Diderot and Stewart are also very close in that they both share the idea that historical conjecture is sometimes preferable to facts because it can provide a more “natural” account of the progress of human affairs than the facts themselves. Where Stewart asserts that it is “of more importance to ascertain the progress that is most simple, than the progress that is most agreeable to fact; for, paradoxical as the proposition may appear, it is certainly true, that the real progress is not always the most natural”,¹⁰ Diderot maintains that by substituting “la conjecture et l’histoire hypothétique à l’histoire réelle [...] le roman seroit souvent plus instructif que la vérité”. Thus, “les progrès d’un Art seroient exposés d’une maniere plus instructive & plus claire, que par son histoire véritable, quand on la sauroit. Les obstacles qu’on auroit eu à surmonter pour le perfectionner se présenteroient dans un ordre entierement naturel”.¹¹ As a result, historical conjectures do not only have a didactic function, within Diderot’s perspective.¹² They also constitute a means to produce knowledge, not inconsistent with the experimental approach of history that he otherwise defends,¹³ since he believes that they must be founded on experience (see Rioux-Beaulne, 2008).

It seems that it was in this perspective that Diderot developed the historical conjecture on which we will focus in the following lines, and which takes place in the third edition of the *Histoire des deux Indes*. It is worth recalling Diderot's contribution to the work edited by Abbé Raynal. The *Histoire des*

⁸ Art. Encyclopédie, s. f. (Philosoph.), V: 647.

⁹ In the article “Art, s. m. (Ordre encyclop. Entendement. Mémoire. Histoire de la Nature. Histoire de la nature employée. Art.) de *L’Encyclopédie* Diderot affirme que : “[s]ouvent l’on ignore l’origine d’un Art mécanique, ou l’on n’a que des connoissances vagues sur ses progrès [...] Dans ces occasions, il faut recourir à des suppositions philosophiques, partir de quelqu’hypothese vraisemblable, de quelqu’événement premier & fortuit, & s’avancer de-là jusqu’où l’Art a été poussé [...] Voilà cependant l’expérience fortuite, ou quelqu’autre semblable, de laquelle le philosophe partira pour arriver jusqu’où l’Art de la Verrerie est maintenant parvenu. *Avantages de cette méthode*. En s’y prenant ainsi, les progrès d’un Art seroient exposés d’une maniere plus instructive & plus claire, que par son histoire véritable, quand on la sauroit. Les obstacles qu’on auroit eu à surmonter pour le perfectionner se présenteroient dans un ordre entierement naturel, & l’explication fynthétique des démarches successives de l’Art en faciliteroit l’intelligence aux esprits les plus ordinaires, & mettroit les Artistes sur la voie qu’ils auroient à suivre pour approcher davantage de la perfection. ” (I: 714). Rioux-Beaulne (2005) states that, generally speaking, Diderot “nie toujours qu’on puisse parler de savoir” quant à “l’origine d’un mythe particulier, de l’émergence d’une science ou d’un système philosophique” (voir Rioux-Beaulne, 2005).

¹⁰ Stewart, 1793: 296.

¹¹ Art. Art, s. m. (Ordre encyclop. Entendement. Mémoire. Histoire de la Nature. Histoire de la nature employée. Art.), I: 714. In *Pensées sur l’interprétation de la nature*, Diderot already affirmed that the great philosophical discoveries, in the physical as well as moral and aesthetic domains, are the fruit of conjectures having all the appearances of extravagance but drawing their relevance from the fact that they are based on knowledge derived from habit and experience (see the *Pensées* XXX et XXI in Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, t. IX: 47-9).

¹² On the role of hypothetical history in Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie*, see Le Ru (2010).

¹³ On Diderot’s experimental approach of history, see Ottaviani (2001).

deux Indes was indeed a collective enterprise within which the latter was responsible for coordinating and assembling the anonymised contributions of its collaborators (see Brot, 2015). It seems that Diderot's contribution to this undertaking was particularly important (see Googi, 2013). Note that the full title of the book is: *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes*. Now, Diderot was in charge of its philosophical dimension (see Duflo, 2013a). This philosophical dimension is particularly evident in the questioning of facts recorded by historians, leaving room for conjecture (see Duflo, 2013a: 122-33)¹⁴. This is what we will bring out in the first part of this article, by shedding light on Diderot's criticism of the travel reports that mention the superiority of women over men in the Mariana Islands, chapter 22 of the book VI of the *Histoire des deux Indes* (see Raynal, 1780, book VI, chapter 22: 88-9).

We shall see, in the second part, that Diderot responds indirectly to this criticism by proposing, in the following book of the *Histoire des deux Indes*, a conjecture on the way in which the condition of women evolves with the development of societies. Although historical conjectures were frequently used during the Enlightenment in order to highlight the role of women in the progress of societies (see Tomaselli, 2001),¹⁵ Diderot's approach presents some specificities—which are curiously ignored in Meek's famous book, *Social Science and The Ignoble Savage* (1976)¹⁶. It takes the form of a stages theory, tracing the progress of European civilization through five (and not four as it is usually the case) successive stages, corresponding to distinct modes of subsistence, namely: (i) the savage stage, (ii) the pastoral stage, (iii) the agricultural stage, (iv) the commercial stage and what we can call (v) a “gallant stage”. Diderot's originality comes from this last stage — the previous ones being similar to those of the four stages theory — which allows him to take a position in the luxury quarrel. As Pujol (2021) points out, the question of luxury occupies an important place in the philosopher's thinking, particularly from 1760 onwards.¹⁷ Diderot's position on this issue implies a judgment on the relations between men and women which structure the sexual division of labor and influence the economy. Indeed, he believes that the ultimate effect of progress is to call into question women submission to man, which he yet views as a law of nature. Indeed, Diderot considers that an optimum is reached at the commercial stage. From the gallant stage, progress implies a morals corruption that challenges the sexual division of labor and, with it, men's domination. Some of Diderot's developments in *Apologie de l'abbé Galiani* allow to understand that this decadence should inevitably lead to economic decline and the destruction of society itself.

¹⁴ On the specific features of Diderot and Raynal's historical approach in the 1780 edition, see Ohji (2006)

¹⁵ According to Tomaselli, such an approach provides evidence that intellectual thinkers of the eighteenth century did not limit themselves to the development of a Science of Man but that they extended their project to the formulation of a Science of Woman (see Tomaselli, 1991).

¹⁶ According to Meek, Quesnay, Helvétius and Goguet constitute with Turgot the French pioneers of the four stages theory (see Meek, 1976: 91-94)

¹⁷ On the question of luxury in Diderot's work, see Larrère and Klotz (1994) and Gourbin(2019)'s comprehensive analysis of luxury and economic issues in Diderot's work.

1. The Superiority of Women over Men in the Mariana Islands: Historians' Accounts versus the Code of Nature

From the *Encyclopédie* to the *Histoire des deux Indes*, Diderot offers what Rioux-Beaulne (2005) describes as “une épistémologie critique du témoignage”; a critical epistemology that leads him to warn against accounts and testimonies that relate facts contrary to experience, regardless of the authority from which they come. Now, according to him, the travel accounts that report the superiority of women over men on the Mariana Islands and, which he discusses in the *Histoire des deux Indes* (Raynal, 1780, book VI, chapter 22: 88-9), typically fall within this category. For Diderot, the superiority of women over men appears unnatural, which leads him to question the credibility of the historians who reported it, in the Mariana Islands. Conversely, the philosopher considers the submission of women to men as a law of nature based on the physiological inferiority of women. As we shall see, this idea runs through several of his writings and is part of his materialist philosophy. As pointed out by Duflo (2013a), the human organism is conceived by Diderot as a “harmonie”¹⁸ between its various parts; this equilibrium being stabilized by the authority of the brain over the rest of the body. Women’s physiology seems, however, to escape such a harmony, because of the disturbing influence of their diaphragm and uterus over their brain. This would be the physiological cause of their inferiority.

1.1. The Superiority of Men over Women: a Law Inscribed in the Code of Nature

In *Le Rêve de d’Alembert* or *Réfutation d’Helvétius*, Diderot presents animal organisms as organs networks. And he distinguishes human beings from other animal species because of their specific physiological organization, characterized by a harmony between their various organs: a harmony that ensures the supremacy of their mind over the impressions arising from their organs. On the contrary, in the other species, the mind would be dominated by another organ, so that one sense would prevail over all the others:

Toute l’âme du chien est au bout de son nez, et il va toujours flairant. Toute l’âme de l’aigle est dans son œil, et l’aigle va toujours regardant. Toute l’âme de la taupe est dans son oreille, et elle va toujours écoutant. Mais il n’en est pas ainsi de l’homme. Il est entre ses sens une telle harmonie qu’aucun ne prédomine assez sur les autres pour donner la loi à son entendement ; c’est son entendement au contraire, ou l’organe de sa raison qui est le plus fort. C’est un juge qui n’est ni corrompu ni subjugué par aucun des témoins ; il conserve toute son autorité, et il en use pour se perfectionner : il combine toutes sortes d’idées et de sensations, parce qu’il ne sent rien fortement. (Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, t. XXIV: 557)

One should not be mistaken about the meaning of “âme” in the above passage: in accordance with his opposition to the Cartesian dualism, Diderot views it as a material principle (see Duflo, 2013a: 34–7). In order to understand this, let's go back to the idea that he develops, in the first dialogue of *Le Rêve de*

¹⁸ See the chapter “Nerfs” of the *Eléments de physiologie* in Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, t. XVII: 357 and *Réfutation d’Helvétius* in Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, t. XXIV: 557.

d'Alembert, while comparing a human being to a harpsichord: the idea that men are “instruments doués de sensibilité et de mémoire” (Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, t. XVII: 102). Under the pen of the materialist philosopher, “sensitivity [*sensibilité*]” takes a specific meaning. First, this is a physical sensitivity that he presents as the “propriété générale de la matière ou résultat” or the “produit de l’organisation” (Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, t. XVII: 105 and RH: 481).¹⁹ It is then as a material substance that human beings would be blessed with sensitivity. This sensitivity would diversify in all the organs so that it would result in different sensations in each of them (see Zummo, 2010).²⁰ These sensations would themselves be reported and collated at the brain—which for that reason is called, the “origine du réseau” (Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, t. XVII: 148).²¹ In *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*, in order to illustrate the specific role of the brain with regard to the rest of the body, Diderot uses the famous image of a spider—embodying the brain—alerted by the shaking of the lines of its web, representing the impressions of the other organs.²² More particularly, Diderot considers that the brain is the seat of memory, a “faculté organique” (Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, t. XVII: 102), which would render man: (i) conscious of the continuity of his own identity²³ and (ii) able to think and reason because it would allow him to have more than one idea in mind at the same time and thus, to perform the various operations of the mind—comparison and analogy²⁴ (see Creighton, 1956). It is therefore from matter that Diderot manages to explain the ability to think, to reason.

The harmony characteristic of the human body would be especially affected by the relations of the brain with the organs that are more directly connected with it - particularly organs located around the abdomen. From this perspective, Diderot seems to grant a specific role to the diaphragm, the muscle that separates the thorax from the abdomen, which reflects the influence of the Encyclopedist physicians—and of the vitalist physicians who started, from the Tome VIII, to write the medical

¹⁹ See also Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, t. XVII: 333.

²⁰ “Mais cette sensibilité pure et simple, ce toucher, se diversifie par les organes émanés de chacun des brins ; un brin formant une oreille, donne naissance à une espèce de toucher que nous appelons bruit ou son ; un autre formant le palais, donne naissance à une seconde espèce de toucher que nous appelons saveur ; un troisième formant le nez et le tapissant, donne naissance à une troisième espèce de toucher que nous appelons odeur ; un quatrième formant un oeil, donne naissance à une quatrième espèce de toucher que nous appelons couleur [...] Le reste des brins va former autant d’autres espèces de toucher, qu’il y a de diversité entre les organes et les parties du corps.” (Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, t. XVII: 145-6). This way of considering human body can be viewed as close to the vitalist medicine of the 18th century (see Duflo, 2013a: 72)

²¹ This allows the Diderot to solve the issue of the unity of being: “c’est le rapport constant, invariable de toutes les impressions à cette origine commune qui constitue l’unité de l’animal” (Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, t. XVII: 154).

²² This is through the character of Mademoiselle de l’Espinasse that Diderot introduces this image—“Imaginez une araignée au centre de sa toile. Ébranlez un fil, et vous verrez l’animal alerte accourir. Eh bien ! si les fils que l’insecte tire de ses intestins, et y rappelle quand il lui plaît, faisaient partie sensible de lui-même ?” ; image completed by her interlocutor, Doctor Bordeu—“Je vous entends. Vous imaginez en vous, quelque part, dans un coin de votre tête, celui, par exemple, qu’on appelle les méninges, un ou plusieurs points où se rapportent toutes les sensations excitées sur la longueur des fils.” (Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, t. XVII: 140).

²³ “c’est la mémoire de toutes ces impressions successives qui fait pour chaque animal l’histoire de sa vie et de son soi” (Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, t. XVII: 155).

²⁴ “c’est la mémoire et la comparaison qui s’ensuivent nécessairement de toutes ces impressions qui font la pensée et le raisonnement” (Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, t. XVII: 155).

articles of the *Encyclopédie* (see Duflo, 2013a: 61–85). According to them, the diaphragm would be one of the three main organs of the “Œconomie animale”²⁵ together with digestive organs and the brain. In the article, “Epigastrique, (région) Physiolog.”²⁶ it is presented as the true center of the nervous and aponeurotic system since it would communicate its “force sensitive, c’est-à-dire la tension, la mobilité, l’activité, le ton qu’excitent les sensations & les affections de l’âme” to all the parts of the body—and *vice-versa*. But it would have “une correspondance plus particulière avec les membranes du cerveau.”²⁷ For this reason, its disturbance or alteration would cause a disequilibrium which would give rise to mental phenomena (such as nightmares²⁸) and even mental pathologies²⁹ (such as melancholy,³⁰ frenzy³¹ and “paraphrénésie”³²).

If Diderot characterizes a human being by the harmony between the organs of his body, then woman such as he described her, in his various writings, appears to be a separate being marked by the disharmony of her organism. The reasons for this would be: (i) the excessive delicacy and sensitivity of her organs, and in particular her diaphragm and uterus, which are said to have a particularly disruptive influence on her brain (Diderot, Œuvres: 949), but also (ii) as Steinbrügge (1995) points out, her lack of control over her own sensuality, and more generally, her passions. Let’s deal successively with these two reasons.

(i) In his essay “Sur les femmes,” first published in April 1772, in the *Correspondance littéraire*, Diderot, indeed, attributes to women a stronger sensibility. He supposes that they have “une âme plus mobile” and “des organes plus délicats.” Of course, the former feature refers to the mobility of the diaphragm. Besides, Diderot takes another look at the classical idea according to which women would be the slaves of their uteri. In “Sur les femmes,” the organ is said to be “susceptible de spasmes terribles, disposant d’elle[s]” (Diderot, Œuvres: 952) - in the same manner as the dog’s nose has its soul. Here again, Diderot is in line with the physicians of the *Encyclopédie*³³ who consider that the matrix, like the diaphragm, has a direct connection with the brain, so that its disruption would “*sympathetically*” affect the latter and then be responsible for psychic phenomena, especially mental pathologies referred to as hysterical because of their physiological origin (melancholy, vapors, etc.).³⁴ Thus, Diderot claims that the manifestations of the uterus—that he goes as far as to call “bête

²⁵ Art. Œconomie, XI: 363.

²⁶ Art. Epigastrique, (région) Physiolog., V: 792. This article was written, before the Tome VIII, by Arnulphe D’Aumont which was not a vitalist but a mechanist physician.

²⁷ Art. Epigastrique, (région) Physiolog., V: 792.

²⁸ Art. Cauchemar, II: 783.

²⁹ On mental pathologies in the *Encyclopédie*, see Rey (1989).

³⁰ Art. Mélancholie, X: 308–11.

³¹ Art. Phrénésie, XII: 530–1.

³² Art. Paraphrénésie, XI: 921–922.

³³ According to Biasci (2017), such an idea would reveal the influence of the Hippocratic tradition—according to which women would have an immanent specificity whose seat would be the uterus—on Diderot.

³⁴ See, for instance, Art. Fureur utérine, *nymphomania, furor uterinus*, VII: 378–81; Art. Hystérique, adj. ὑστερικὸς, *uterinus*, (Med.), VIII: 420 ; Art. Hystérique, (*passion ou affection.*), VIII: 420; Art. Mélancholie, X: 308–11; Art. Vapeurs, *en Médecine*, XVI: 836–7.

féroce”—create in women’s imaginations “des fantômes de toute espèce” or “[des] idées extraordinaires” (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 952). As Steinbrügge (1995) points out, in “Sur les femmes,” Diderot refers to the uterus as the most important organ in the constitution of women's ability to feel and to know³⁵, which brings us to the second point.

(ii) According to Diderot, the mobility of a woman's diaphragm and the manifestations of her uterus would be such that the two organs would take control of her mind. For this reason, Diderot considers that they are not masters of themselves — they are said to be deprived from “cette fermeté naturelle ou acquise” (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 953). Within Diderot’s conception, women typically correspond to the kind of person for whom, to take the words of Mademoiselle de l’Espinasse in *Le Rêve de d’Alembert*: “l’origine du faisceau” is “[s]ous l’anarchie, où tous les filets du réseau sont soulevés contre leur chef, et où il n’y a plus d’autorité supreme.” (Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, t. XVII: 168) This must have consequences on women’s achievement of operations of the mind. For instance, in *Réfutation d’Helvétius*, to explain Helvetius' observation according to which there would be very few women of genius (see Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, t. XXIV: 550-1), Diderot emphasizes the responsibility of uterine phenomena such as menstruation, pregnancy and delivery, which would prevent women from benefiting from an education consistent with the development of a potential genius. Thus, to Helvétius’s accusation against the bad education that they receive, he adds:

Mais leur organisation délicate, mais leur assujettissement à une maladie périodique, à des grossesses, à des couches, leur permettent-ils cette force et cette continuité de méditation que vous appelez la créatrice du génie et à laquelle vous attribuez toute importante découverte ? Elles font les premiers pas plus vite, mais elles sont plutôt lasses et s’arrêtent plus promptement. (Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, t. XXIV: 550-1)

Now, women's lesser ability to perform the operations of the mind would have moral consequences that Diderot seeks to highlight in “Sur les femmes”. According to the materialist philosopher, morality is embedded in human physiology which prompts the human species to pursue self-preservation (Duflo, 2013b: 397–420). This tendency towards self-preservation takes the form, at the individual level, of the search for pleasure and the avoidance of pain—in a nutshell, the pursuit of happiness.³⁶ But although he considers that the search for pleasure is what leads to virtue and, consequently, that virtue contributes to happiness, he does not believe that virtuous actions necessarily arise from the pursuit of any kind of pleasure. For instance, Diderot insists that self-preservation requires the assistance of our fellow human beings and that it is threatened by their hostility. So that all self-gratifying actions which would be detrimental to the other may be the source of greater pains to come, for the one who committed it. This is what we can derive from the following example, exposed in *Réfutation d’Helvétius*:

³⁵ See Steinbrügge, 1995, p. 46.

³⁶ See, for instance, the chapters “Volonté” and “Passions” of the *Eléments de physiologie* (Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, t. XVII: 483-498). Thus, Diderot agrees with Helvétius that “[p]laisir et douleur sont et seront toujours les seuls principes des actions des hommes” (Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, t. XXIV: 538). However, he criticizes Helvétius for having reduced the motivation of human action to *physical* pleasure and pain.

Si un homme seul était plus fort que tous les hommes qui l'entourent, peut-être vieillirait-il sans avoir d'autres idées claires que celles de la force et de la faiblesse ; mais il ne tarde pas à connaître le ressentiment, puisqu'il l'éprouve, et à savoir que la flèche qui le frappera par derrière traversera sa poitrine, l'étendra mort sur place, et que cette flèche peut partir de la main d'un enfant. Qu'en conclura-t-il ? Qu'il est dangereux de faire injure à l'enfant ? (Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, t. XXIV: 607)

Thus, what would lead the strong man to abstain from injuring his fellows is the prospect of the consequences of the latter's resentment, which he would foresee because of their identical physiology.³⁷ This illustration shows that the practice of virtue, for Diderot, relies on the pursuit of one's own *well-understood* happiness, that is to say, on his right anticipation and calculation of pleasures and pains. Now, such operations require experience and the use of reason,³⁸ the latter being lacking in women, as Diderot writes in "Sur les femmes":

[N]oubliez pas que, faute de réflexion et de principes, rien ne pénètre jusqu'à une certaine profondeur de conviction dans l'entendement des femmes ; que les idées de justice, de vertu, de vice, de bonté, de méchanceté, nagent à la superficie de leur âme ; qu'elles ont conservé l'amour-propre et l'intérêt personnel avec toute l'énergie de nature (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 958)

As a result, they would have a stronger tendency than men to some vices such as, for instance, pride,³⁹ "machievellianism"⁴⁰ and seduction which seems to be their privileged means to reach their ends.⁴¹ Thus, consistent with the materialist philosophy he advocates, Diderot roots the physical, intellectual as well as moral inferiority of women in physiology. This is why he considers women's inferiority as a law of nature.

1.2. Questioning Historians' Accounts of the Mariana Islands

³⁷ If Diderot recognizes that human beings are characterized by an identical physiology, he nevertheless considers that none of them can be reduced to another, with regard to his physiological organization. And this is what gives rise to distinct characters among human species. Indeed, following him, a distinct physiological organization should lead to feel distinct impressions and thus to combine distinct ideas: "chaque homme est entraîné par son organisation, [...] à combiner de préférence telles et telles idées plutôt que telles ou telles autres" (Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, t. XXIV: 540). Now, Diderot emphasizes that, with regard to organization, no individual can be reduced to another: "[E]st-il possible que l'organisation étant différente, la sensation soit la même ? Telle est sa diversité, que si chaque individu pouvait se créer une langue analogue à ce qu'il est, il y aurait autant de langues que d'individus ; un homme ne dirait ni bonjour, ni adieu comme un autre" (Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, t. XXIV: 489). He then distinguishes different kinds of characters with distinct intellectual and moral dispositions which precisely find their roots in physiological organization: "[L]'homme apporte [...] en naissant des dispositions organiques et naturelles à dire et faire des sottises, à se nuire à lui-même et à ses semblables, à écouter ou négliger les conseils de ses parents, à la diligence ou à la paresse, à la justice ou à la colère, au respect ou au mépris des lois" (Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, t. XXIV: 680).

³⁸ "Un homme naturellement méchant a senti par l'*expérience* et la *réflexion* les inconvénients de la méchanceté ; il reste méchant et fait le bien." (Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, t. XXIV: 516)

³⁹ "L'orgueil est plus leur vice que le nôtre." (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 951)

⁴⁰ Diderot, *Œuvres*: 958.

⁴¹ "Si vous les aimez, elles vous perdront [...] Toutes méritent d'entendre ce qu'un [...] poète [...] adresse à l'une d'entre elles : 'votre cœur insolent Tend bien moins à l'amour qu'à subjuguier l'amant' [...] Elles simuleront l'ivresse de la passion, si elles ont un grand intérêt à vous tromper ; elles l'éprouveront, sans s'oublier. Le moment où elles seront tout à leur projet sera quelquefois celui même de leur abandon" (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 951).

The idea that women's inferiority to men constitutes a law of nature is explicitly stated in a chapter of the *Histoire des deux Indes* devoted to the Mariana Islands and the “singularités qu'on y a observées” (Raynal, 1780, book VI, chapter 22: 88)⁴². The chapter includes two paragraphs attributed to Diderot, calling into question “les relations anciennes ou modernes” à propos de “la supériorité que le sexe le plus délicat avait pris sur le plus fort dans les Mariannes” (Raynal, 1780, book VI, chapter 22: 88)⁴³. These two paragraphs are an opportunity for the philosopher to express his reservations about testimonies, reservations that Rioux-Beaulne (2005) already sees at work in the *Encyclopédie* with regard to travel accounts and ethnographic descriptions.⁴⁴ For example, in the article “Besançon (Géog.)”,⁴⁵ Diderot urges us to question testimonies of some philosophers concerning the so-called “merveilles” of a cave located in the surroundings of the city. According to the author, their only interest is to “apprendre à douter”. He refers to them as “des faits faux” reported by “des philosophes” that “d'autres philosophes reçoivent, impriment, et accèdent de leur témoignage”. The article “Agnus Scythicus, (Hist. nat. bot.)”⁴⁶ is another opportunity for Diderot to warn against the testimony of people vested with authority, such as “des gens dont les lumières & la probité ne sont pas suspectes” which have nevertheless given rise to or perpetuated “la superstition & le préjugé” about the plant.

In the chapter of the *Histoire des deux Indes* about the Mariana Islands, Diderot invites us, this time, to doubt the testimony of historians. According to him, “l'unanimité des historiens” is not sufficient proof of the truth to call into question the generality of the superiority of men over women:

Les témoignages réunis de tant d'écrivains qu'on voudra, ne sauraient prévaloir contre une loi bien connue, générale et constante de la nature. Or, partout, excepté aux îles Mariannes, on a trouvé et l'on a dû trouver la femme soumise à l'homme. (Raynal, 1780, book VI, chapter 22: 89)

Not only is the case of the Mariana Islands contrary to experience (“partout [...] on a trouvé et l'on a dû trouver la femme soumise à l'homme”) but this contradicts a “loi de la nature”. The natural law under discussion here belongs to what commentators usually refer to as the “code de la nature” and, more generally, Diderot's “théorie des trois codes”- in reference to the words of the philosopher in the *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*, the *Observations sur le Nakaz* or in the *Histoire des deux Indes* (see, for instance Duflo, 2013b, p. 416 and Stenger, 1996). According to this theory, civil and religious codes - containing civil and religious laws respectively - must not contradict the code of nature, which brings together all the rules governing the “ordre physique”. As we showed in section

⁴² Note that this contradicts Stenger's (1996) thesis that, for Diderot, women's inferior status was not inscribed in nature

⁴³ This extract from the *Histoire des deux Indes* is not by Diderot, but it precedes the paragraphs attributed to him and includes the idea that they are discussing.

⁴⁴ See, for instance, the articles Dydime, s. m. (Géog. mod. & Divination.) (V: 174), Besançon (Géog.) (II: 212) and Agnus Scythicus, (Hist. nat. bot.) (I: 179-80).

⁴⁵ Art. Besançon (Géog.), II: 212.

⁴⁶ Art. Agnus Scythicus, (Hist. nat. bot.), I: 179-80.

1.1, Diderot believes that, in this physical order, men prevail over women, which results in their physical and intellectual superiority.

A serious examination of the case of the Mariana Islands should therefore lead us to relativize its significance and even to doubt its veracity. To be admissible and to call into question the general character of the superiority of men over women, it should itself find a foundation in the physical order:⁴⁷

Si l'on veut que je me prête à cette exception, il faut l'appuyer d'une autre : c'est que dans cette contrée, les femmes l'emportaient sur les hommes, non seulement en intelligence, mais en force de corps. (Raynal, 1780, book VI, chapter 22: 89)

But it is clear that Diderot has doubts about such a possibility:

Si l'on ne m'assure pas l'un de ces deux faits, je nie l'autre à moins toutefois que quelque dogme superstitieux n'ait rendu leurs personnes sacrées. Car il n'y a rien que la superstition ne dénature, point d'usage si monstrueux qu'elle n'établisse, point de forfaits auxquels elle ne détermine, point de sacrifices qu'elle n'obtienne. Si elle dit à l'homme, Dieu veut que tu te mutiler, il se mutilera. Si elle lui dit, Dieu veut que tu assassines ton fils, il l'assassinera. Si elle lui dit, aux isles Mariannes, Dieu veut que tu rampes devant la femme, il rampera devant la femme. La beauté, les talents et l'esprit, dans toutes les contrées du monde sauvages ou policées, prosterneront un homme aux pieds d'une femme : mais ces avantages particuliers à quelques femmes n'établiront nulle part la tyrannie générale du sexe faible sur le sexe robuste. L'homme commande à la femme, même dans les pays où la femme commande à la nation. Le phénomène des isles Mariannes seroit dans l'ordre moral ce que l'équilibre de deux poids inégaux, suspendus à des bras égaux de levier, seroit dans l'ordre physique. (Raynal, 1780, book VI, chapter 22: 89)

The case of the Mariana Islands is considered by Diderot either as “peu vraisemblable” (Raynal, 1780, book VI, chapter 22: 89) or as something close to what he refers to as “des phénomènes trompeurs” in *Pensées sur l'interprétation de la nature*, that is to say, phenomena “qui semblent, au premier coup d'œil, renverser un système, et qui, mieux connus, achèveraient de le confirmer” and for which “il faut travailler à la séparation des causes, décomposer le résultat de leurs actions et réduire un phénomène très-compliqué à un phénomène simple”.⁴⁸ Diderot invites us to go beyond the misleading appearances of countries where a woman governs, or, even worse, superstition. Thus, the wonders of the Besançon cave or of the lamb of Scythia and the superiority of women over men in the Mariana Islands are placed on the same level, in that they would be the fruit of superstition, the latter distancing us from the truth. The difference for the case of the Mariana Islands, such as Diderot describes it, is that superstition seems to bring the code of religion into conflict with the code of nature which is likely to lead to moral corruption.

⁴⁷ Although Diderot's analysis of the Mariana Islands does not fall within the realm of natural history, it does seem consistent with the *Pensée VIII* of the *Pensées sur l'interprétation de la nature* in which Diderot states that : “On peut comparer les notions, qui n'ont aucun fondement dans la nature, à ces forêts du Nord dont les arbres n'ont point de racines. Il ne faut qu'un coup de vent, qu'un fait léger, pour renverser toute une forêt d'arbres et d'idées.” (Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, t. IX: 34)

⁴⁸ See *Pensée XLVI* in Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, t. IX: 74-5.

Diderot concludes his two paragraphs on the Mariana Islands by stressing the importance of doubting testimony that runs counter to experience and of not allowing oneself to be subjugated by any kind of authority, be it religious, political or intellectual:

Le phénomène des isles Marianes seroit dans l'ordre moral ce que l'équilibre de deux poids inégaux, suspendus à des bras égaux de levier, seroit dans l'ordre physique. Aucune sorte d'autorité ne doit nous amener à la croyance d'une absurdité. (Raynal, 1780, book VI, chapter 22: 89)

He thus takes up a central theme of the article of *L'Encyclopédie* *Agnus Scythicus*, (Hist. nat. bot.)⁴⁹ according to which no authority whatsoever constitutes, in matters of testimony, a guarantee of truth. The admissibility of testimony, the article says, is a question of belief, a belief that must be granted only after a methodical examination, for which Diderot provides guidelines.

2. An Historical Conjecture about Women's Submission to Men: Five Stages Theory and Sexual Division of Labor

In the subsequent book of the *Histoire des deux Indes*, in a chapter devoted to the situation of women on the banks of the Orinoco at the time of the arrival of Europeans in America (see Raynal, 1780, book VII, chapter 17: 166), Diderot uses a historical conjecture that is an indirect answer to the inadequacy of historians' accounts of the Mariana Islands⁵⁰. Through his conjecture, the author seeks to highlight the influence of progress on relations between men and women, and in particular on the condition of women. This leads him to revisit an idea that appears more or less explicitly in several of Diderot's writings (see Pujol, 2021), particularly in discussions on luxury; the idea to which “il y a [...] un terme dans la civilisation” (Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, t. XXIV: 721); a term beyond which humans' happiness and morality are compromised. This is what Lotterie (2006) calls “*the paradox of perfectibility*” which is common to several thinkers of the French of Enlightenment, among which Rousseau. Sometimes, to explore this idea, as in the *Histoire des deux Indes*, Diderot resorts to historical conjecture. This is the case, for example, in the *Mémoires pour Catherine II* or in *Réfutation d'Helvétius*, where the author analyses the effects of luxury by comparing 18th-century European societies with, among other things, a hypothetical state of nature that predates society. However, the conjecture he uses in Book VII of the *Histoire des deux Indes* takes on a special form. It takes the form of a stages theory similar to that of Adam Smith.

2.1. Economic Progress and Improvement in the Condition of Women

⁴⁹ Art. *Agnus Scythicus*, (Hist. nat. bot.), I: 179-80.

⁵⁰ Interestingly, these two passages from the *Histoire des deux Indes* are associated with the essay “*Sur les femmes*”, in one of the manuscripts in the Vandeul collection of Diderot's writings, following a thematic logic. This collection was probably produced as part of a posthumous publication project of the philosopher's works, which never saw the light of day (voir Goggi, 2013).

Diderot begins by introducing his conjecture by generalising to “toutes les regions barbares” a fact that concerns the banks of the Orinoco, namely that women there live under the oppression of men (Raynal, 1780, book VII, chapter 17: 167). He then compares the condition of women in different kinds of societies — the “peuples sauvages,” “peuples pasteurs,” “peuples agricoles” and “nations policées” (Raynal, 1780, book VII, chapter 17: 167-8). Soon, this comparison takes an historical turn and proves to be a conjecture about the evolution of the condition of women with the development of societies. The starting point of this conjecture is the same as in the *Mémoires pour Catherine II* and *Réfutation d’Helvétius*: a savage state in which isolated human beings have to gather in order to fight nature, a redoubtable enemy.⁵¹ Now, in the *Histoire des deux Indes*, Diderot does not limit himself in opposing a savage state to a civil one as he does, for instance, in the aforementioned writings. Close to the four-stages theory, usually associated with the French and Scottish Enlightenment (see Meek, 1976), he identifies various degrees of civilization, corresponding to successive stages of development, or in Meek’s (1976) words, to successive modes of subsistence.⁵²

Singularly, Diderot’s variant of stages theory is not composed of four but of five stages, the four first stages being relatively familiar: (i) the savage stage, (ii) the pastoral stage, (iii) the agricultural stage and (iv) the commercial stage (Raynal, 1780, book VII, chapter 17: 167). However, the last stage is quite specific to Diderot. Let’s call it (v) the gallant stage—Diderot refers to the “nations galantes” (Raynal, 1780, book VII, chapter 17: 167-8). Diderot assimilates this stage to the European societies of his time. All along this history of civilization—and consistently with what Meek (1976) considers as one of the characteristics of the four-stages theory—material comfort progresses, and customs change correspondingly. Each stage refers to specific mores, granting a specific status to women, which would influence family ties. Of course, in all stages, a constant remains, that is, women’s submission to men, even if this submission expresses itself differently, according to their status. As a result, men would be in a position to determine women’s status according to their own needs. In other words, they would take the initiative of the sexual division of labor.

Diderot considers the sexual division of labor to be increasingly favorable to women, in the successive stages of history. This would be the consequence of the growing esteem that they would receive and which itself would arise from the progress of material comfort (see Tomaselli, 1985). Indeed, Diderot assumes that this progress results in more time dedicated to leisure, as less effort is needed to

⁵¹ For instance, in *Mémoires pour Catherine II*, Diderot writes that “Si l’homme trouve en naissant un ennemi, et un ennemi redoutable, si cet ennemi est infatigable, s’il est sans cesse poursuivi, s’il ne peut se promettre quelque supériorité que par des forces réunies, il a dû être porté de très bonne heure à cette réunion de forces. Cet ennemi, c’est la nature, et la lutte de l’homme contre la nature est le premier principe de la société. La nature l’assaille par les besoins qu’elle lui a donnés et par les dangers auxquels elle l’a exposé ; il a à combattre l’inclémence des saisons, les disettes, les maladies et les animaux.” (*Mémoires pour Catherine II*: 174–5).

⁵² On the continental variants of the four-stages theory applied to women history, during the eighteenth century, see Tomaselli (1985).

survive.⁵³ In the savage state, in which the “savages” would constantly fight for their survival, men use their physiological superiority to give themselves the most esteemed tasks—hunting and fishing—and to concede to women the most degrading, typically, gathering. Such a tyranny, the author writes, would be the price paid by women to benefit from men’s protection in a hostile environment:

Chez les peuples qui n’accordent leur estime qu’à la force et au courage, la faiblesse est toujours tyrannisée, pour le prix de la protection qu’on lui accorde. Les femmes y vivent dans l’opprobre. Les travaux regardés comme abjects sont leur partage. Des mains accoutumées à manier des armes ou la rame se croiraient avilies par des occupations sédentaires, par celles même de l’agriculture. (Raynal, 1780, book VII, chapter 17: 167)

The “peuples pasteurs” would benefit from a safer existence than the “savages” which would allow them to “s’occuper un peu davantage du soin de la rendre agréable” (Raynal, 1780, book VII, chapter 17: 167). As a result, relations between men and women would no longer be based on physical necessities only but also on sentiments arising from the possibility of an aesthetic judgment, afforded by leisure. In the agricultural stage, Diderot writes, the “relations des deux sexes se perfectionnent” (Raynal, 1780, book VII, chapter 17: 167). They are rationalized for patrimonial considerations because of the institutionalization of private property and the inequality of fortunes deriving from it. This evolution is supposed to attract “des égards aux femmes” —to women of superior rank, of course—and to give them “quelque dignité” (Raynal, 1780, book VII, chapter 17: 167). The process goes on in commercial societies in which “[e]lles reçoivent une nouvelle importance de la création des arts et du commerce”. The sexual division of labor becomes more favorable to them. Because of the extension of their commercial relationships, men must now associate “la vigilance des femmes” to their “talents.” In the commercial stage, women’s role is actually restricted to private activities—“des occupations obscures ou sérieuses”—consisting in watching the family home but also the men’s shop floor, in order to allow them to dedicate themselves to commercial activities. Now, far from being depreciated, such activities are said to arouse the “autorité, le respect et l’attachement de tout ce qui les entoure” (Raynal, 1780, book VII, chapter 17: 167). Finally, in the last stage, “les femmes sont recherchées avec empressement, et pour les qualités aimables qu’elles tiennent de la nature, et pour celles qu’elles ont reçues de l’éducation” (Raynal, 1780, book VII, chapter 17: 167-8)

Up to the commercial stage, Diderot views such an evolution as desirable. Far from regretting women’s exclusion from the public sphere, he claims that the private activities to which there are restricted in the commercial stage renders them virtuous (see Meeker, 2003: 82–3):

Comme l’habitude de la galanterie, du luxe, de la dissipation, ne les a pas encore dégoûtées des occupations obscures ou sérieuses, elles se livrent sans réserve et avec succès à des fonctions dont elles se trouvent honorées. La retraite qu’exige ce genre de vie, leur rend chère et familière la pratique de toutes vertus domestiques. (Raynal, 1780, book VII, chapter 17: 167)⁵⁴

⁵³ A similar idea can be found in the four stages contained in Du Pont de Nemours’ *Table raisonnée des principes d’économie politique* (1775). On Du Pont de Nemours’ historical conjecture, see Meek (1976).

⁵⁴ Note that this contradicts a position defended some thirty years ago, in 1745, in a paper published in the third volume of the *Mercur de France* under the title “Réflexion sur le courage des femmes” (Diderot, 1745: 55-75)

We saw in the first part that Diderot, in several of his writings, attributes to women a natural propensity to vices and a lack of control over their passions (see *supra*, §1.1). However, he also believes that this is not inevitable: “Dans les grands accès de passion, dans les délires, dans les périls imminents”, he writes in *Le Rêve de d’Alembert*, “si le maître porte toutes les forces de ses sujets vers un point, l’animal le plus faible montre une force incroyable” (Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, t. XVII: 168). Although this idea did not apply to women especially, nonetheless still in *Le Rêve de d’Alembert*, Diderot gives two illustrations, *via* Bordeu, of women succeeding in recovering from vapors:

MADemoiselle DE L’ESPINASSE – Dans les vapeurs, sorte d’anarchie qui nous est si particulière. BORDEU - C’est l’image d’une administration faible, où chacun tire à soi l’autorité du maître. Je ne connais qu’un moyen de guérir ; il est difficile, mais sûr ; c’est que l’origine du réseau sensible, cette partie qui constitue le soi, puisse être affectée d’un motif violent de recouvrer son autorité. MADemoiselle DE L’ESPINASSE – Et qu’en arrive-t-il ? BORDEU – Il en arrive qu’il la recouvre en effet [...] Une femme tomba à la suite d’une couche, dans l’état vaporeux le plus effrayant ; c’étaient des pleurs et des ris involontaires, des étouffements, des convulsions, des gonflements de gorge, du silence morne, des cris aigus, tout ce qu’il y a de pis : cela dura plusieurs années. Elle aimait passionnément, et elle crut s’apercevoir que son amant, fatigué de sa maladie, commençait à se détacher ; alors elle résolut de guérir ou de périr. Il s’établit en elle une guerre civile dans laquelle c’était tantôt le maître qui l’emportait, tantôt c’étaient les sujets. S’il arrivait que l’action des filets du réseau fût égale à la réaction de leur origine, elle tombait comme morte ; on la portait sur son lit où elle restait des heures entières sans mouvement et presque sans vie ; d’autres fois elle en était quitte pour des lassitudes, une défaillance générale, une extinction qui semblait devoir être finale. Elle persista six mois dans cet état de lutte. La révolte commençait toujours par les filets ; elle la sentait arriver. Au premier symptôme elle se levait, elle courait, elle se livrait aux exercices les plus violents ; elle montait, elle descendait ses escaliers ; elle sciait du bois, elle bêchait la terre. L’organe de sa volonté, l’origine du faisceau se roidissait ; elle se disait à elle-même : vaincre ou mourir. Après un nombre infini de victoires et de défaites, le chef resta le maître, et les sujets devinrent si soumis que, quoique cette femme ait éprouvé toutes sortes de peines domestiques, et qu’elle ait essuyé différentes maladies, il n’a plus été question de vapeurs. (Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, t. XVII: 168-70)

BORDEU – une jeune femme avait donné dans quelques écarts. Elle prit un jour le parti de fermer sa porte au plaisir. La voilà seule, la voilà mélancolique et vaporeuse. Elle me fit appeler. Je lui conseillai de prendre l’habit de paysanne, de bêcher la terre toute la journée, de coucher sur la paille et de vivre de pain dur. Ce régime ne lui plut pas. Voyagez donc, lui dis-je. Elle fit le tour de l’Europe, et retrouva la santé sur les grands chemins. (Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, t. XVII: 170-1)

What leads these women to become masters of themselves and to acquire a certain harmony between their various organs, this is to be active as recommended by Bordeu (see Lotterrie, 2013: 129–132).⁵⁵ This is also a recommendation that Diderot addresses, in “Sur les femmes, when he states that: “[I]es distractions d’une vie occupée et contentieuse rompent nos passions” (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 949–50). The

and attributed by Booy to Diderot (see Booy, 1976). In this work, the author precisely accuses the sexual division of labor established with the birth of commerce. The reason that he put to the fore contrasts with the one advanced in “Sur les femmes.” According to him, by restricting women to domestic activities and extracting them from the public sphere, such a division of labor would prevent them from experimenting and acquiring self-control. The contradiction between “Réflexion sur le courage des femmes” and “Sur les femmes” could lead us to call into question the provenance of the former paper. However, it remains that the ingredients of these orthogonal positions are exactly the same—self-control, progress, men’s despotism.

⁵⁵ Note that his recommendation is consistent with the prescriptions included in the article *Vapeurs*, *en Médecine* of the *Encyclopédie*, in which the pathology is said to be stimulated by greed, physical idleness, frivolity, vanity or debauchery. See Art. *Vapeurs*, *en Médecine*, XVI: 836–7. Far from being original, such a therapy was already defended by Leibniz (see Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques*: 1247).

Histoire des deux Indes enables us to understand that, for him, the activities that make women masters of themselves are private occupations. But the philosopher does not believe that these occupations are accessible to women in the society of his time. In 18th century European societies:

“[l]a femme couve les siennes [passions]: c’est un point fixe, sur lequel son oisiveté ou la frivolité de ses fonctions tient son regard sans cesse attaché.” (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 949–50)

As we have mentioned, Diderot equated the society of his time with the gallant stage. Although he views women status as progressing at each stage with material comfort, he does not believe that it comes along with an increase in women’s morality. If the adversity to which the savage is confronted in order to satisfy his basic needs, in the first stage of history, would not be conducive to women’s morality, as shown by the illustration of the alleged infanticide of the Native American from the banks of the Orinoco River,⁵⁶ the opulence of the gallant stage would not be less corrupting.

2.2. Economic Progress and the Threat to Male Authority

Interestingly, in “Sur les femmes”, Diderot presents women as “autant de thermomètres des moindres vicissitudes des mœurs et des usages” (Diderot, *Œuvres*: 958) in that their morality would reflect the customs and the state of society. This idea is also apparent in the five stages theory that he develops in the *Histoire des deux Indes*, in the chapter devoted to the situation of women on the banks of the Orinoco.

As we showed in the previous section, women’s morality depends on the status that men grant to them (see *supra*, §2.1). The sexual division of labor at each stage has, according to Diderot, a moral and an economic incidence that the mores of women allow to measure. Indeed, the changes in women’s mores that he describes throughout his conjecture reflect his conception of the evolutions of societies; a conception which is regarded as cyclical by the literature.⁵⁷ It is already at work in Diderot’s other writings such as the *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*, the *Réfutation d’Hévétius*⁵⁸ but also the

⁵⁶ “La tyrannie exercée contre les femmes sur les rives de l’Orénoque encore plus que dans le reste du Nouveau-Monde, doit être une des principales causes de la dépopulation de ces contrées si favorisées par la nature. Les mères y ont contracté l’habitude de faire périr les filles dont elles accouchent en leur coupant de si près le cordon ombilical, que ces enfants meurent d’une hémorragie. Le christianisme n’a pas réussi à déraciner cet usage abominable. On a pour garant le jésuite Gumilla qui, avertit que l’une de ses néophytes venait de commettre un pareil assassinat, alla la trouver pour lui reprocher son crime dans les termes les plus énergiques. Cette femme écouta le missionnaire sans s’émouvoir. Quand il eut fini, elle lui demanda la permission de lui répondre ; ce qu’elle fit en ces termes: « Plût à Dieu, Père, lui dit-elle, plût à Dieu qu’au moment où ma mère me mit au monde, elle eût eu assez d’amour et de compassion, pour épargner à son enfant tout ce que j’ai enduré et tout ce que j’endurerai jusqu’à la fin de mes jours ! Si ma mère m’eût étouffée en naissant, je serais morte ; mais je n’aurais pas senti la mort, et j’aurais échappé à la plus malheureuse des conditions [...] » (Raynal, 1780, book VII, chapter 17: 168)

⁵⁷ On the materialist roots of Diderot cyclical view of history, see Mason (1996). Some of the literature identifies an ambiguity in the conception of history – cyclical or linear – which Diderot adopts in the *Histoire des deux Indes* (see Strugnell, 1999). Generally speaking, for many commentators, Diderot’s thought combines the idea of progress with a cyclical theory of history (see, for instance, Proust, 1967, pp. 447-8; Duchet, 1995, pp.430-8 and Rioux-Beaulne, 2005).

⁵⁸ See Goggi (1997).

*Apologie de l'abbé Galiani*⁵⁹. And it is erected as a law of nature in an excerpt from the *Histoire des deux Indes*, which draws a parallel between the evolution of societies and their government:

Partout les révolutions dans le gouvernement se succèdent avec une rapidité qu'on a peine à suivre. Il y a peu de contrées qui ne les aient toutes essayées, et il n'en est aucune qui, avec le temps, n'achève ce mouvement périodique. Toutes suivront plus ou moins souvent un cercle réglé de malheurs et de prospérités, de liberté et d'esclavage, de mœurs et de corruption, de lumière et d'ignorance, de grandeur et de faiblesse; toutes parcourront tous les points de ce funeste horizon. La loi de la nature, qui veut que toutes les sociétés gravitent vers le despotisme et la dissolution, que les empires naissent et meurent, ne sera suspendue pour aucune (Raynal, 1780, book XIX, chapter 2)

This conception of history leads Diderot to emphasize the existence of a limit to the progress of industry above which more material comfort would engender moral corruption and, paradoxically, economic decline.⁶⁰ This limit corresponds to an optimal state of society between nature and civilization, but the philosopher believes that such a state is unstable. Obviously, in Diderot's stages theory, this optimal state corresponds to the commercial stage.

After the commercial stage, Diderot believes that more material comfort is corrupting, which would again be apparent in women's character that would tend, this time, to be vicious. In the gallant stage, men would become sufficiently wealthy to turn away from productive activities, so that leisure would become idleness. Interestingly, in his *Apologie de l'abbé Galiani*, while defending against physiocrats⁶¹ that the industrial sector gives rise to a net product, Diderot explains the process by which the progress of industry leads to the development of idleness and, in fine, to decline: "[c]'est par la manufacture que tout s'achemine à rien", he writes⁶². The *Apologie de l'abbé Galiani* illustrates how Diderot views the transition between the commercial and the gallant stages. The starting point of this transition is the existence of a net product in the industrial sector which leaves manufacturers with the choice of continuing production by allocating the income generated to the creation of additional wealth, or remaining idle and enjoying the product of other people's work.⁶³ In the last case, Diderot says, the idleness of manufacturers must be compensated by the labor of additional persons – especially farmers⁶⁴ – to whom the income created in manufactures is directed, so that the inactivity of some makes the work of others. Here is what Diderot writes about one of these idlers and how he generalizes his point to a global level:

⁵⁹ “[I]l y a un terme à tout” (Diderot, 1770, pp. 107).

⁶⁰ About the vision of progress during the Enlightenment and the “paradox of perfectibility,” see Lotterrie (1998).

⁶¹ On Diderot's criticism against physiocracy in *Apologie de l'abbé Galiani*, see Hamel (2019). Diderot's criticism can be linked to the criticisms directed against the physiocrats in the *Histoire des deux Indes*. On this last point, see Ohji (2006).

⁶² see Diderot, 1770, p. 109.

⁶³ Curiously, Diderot does not seem to consider the same phenomenon with the net agricultural product.

⁶⁴ Indeed, Diderot believes that the industrial sector is at the origin of the development of the agricultural sector not only because manufacturers use agricultural products in their production but also because they consume them in order to satisfy their proper needs. Thus, he considers that the expansion of the agricultural sector is limited by the extension of the industrial sector (see Diderot, 1770: pp. 108-9)

Voilà donc un oisif qui boit, mange, et dont il faut suppléer les bras. Si ces oisifs se multiplient, il faudra que les représentants dans les champs se multiplient à proportion. (see Diderot, 1770: pp. 108-9)

This passage from the *Apologie de l'abbé Galiani* can be related with Diderot's description of the stage gallant in the *Histoire des deux Indes*. In the gallant stage, men would no longer have to make an effort to satisfy their needs but simply to prevent boredom.⁶⁵

Vient enfin le temps où l'on est dégoûté du travail par l'accroissement des fortunes. Le soin principal est de prévenir l'ennui, de multiplier les amusements, d'étendre les jouissances. (Raynal, 1780, book VII, chapter 17: 167)

As a result, there would be no more sexual division of “labor” but rather a sexual division of “leisure”. Women would acquire a new status—a public one, this time⁶⁶—which would consist in entertaining men with “les qualités aimables qu'elles tiennent de la nature, et pour celles qu'elles ont reçues de l'éducation.” By contrast with the “occupations obscures ou sérieuses” of the commercial stage, women's activities are now described as frivolous and libertine—they henceforth get “l'habitude de la galanterie, du luxe, de la dissipation” (Raynal, 1780, book VII, chapter 17: 167). As a result of men's own idleness, they would now become idle, spending their time in gallant affairs. However, as we have seen, Diderot considers frivolity and idleness as unfavorable to women's control of their passions (see *supra*, §2.1). But that is not all!

Paradoxically, the conclusion of Diderot's conjecture is that luxury leads men to grant too much importance to women jeopardizing their authority over them:

Leurs liaisons s'étendent. La vie retirée ne leur convient plus. Il leur faut un rôle plus éclatant. Jetées sur le théâtre du monde, elles deviennent l'âme de tous les plaisirs, et le mobile des affaires les plus importantes. Le bonheur souverain est de leur plaire, et la grande ambition d'en obtenir quelques préférences. (Raynal, 1780, book VII, chapter 17: 168)

Thus, women's subjugation to men, though a natural law, would not be stable. Contrary to what some of the literature claims⁶⁷, the challenge of men's authority in the gallant nations does not come from an intentional attempt by women to act directly on history but from men's authority itself. The consequences are the following:

Alors renaît entre les deux sexes la liberté de l'état de nature, avec cette différence remarquable que dans la cité souvent l'époux tient moins à sa femme et la femme à son époux, qu'au fond des forêts ; que les enfants confiés en naissant à des mercenaires ne sont plus un lien ; et que l'inconstance qui n'aurait aucune suite fâcheuse chez la plupart des peuples sauvages, influe sur la tranquillité domestique et sur le bonheur chez les nations policées, où elle est un des principaux

⁶⁵ Of course, Diderot is well aware of wealth inequalities within the society of his time, which is supposed to be represented by the gallant stage. Thus, in *Réfutation d'Hévétius*, he emphasizes that only the rich live in idleness, the poor still being obliged to accomplish laborious task in order to satisfy their basic needs (Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, t. XXIV: 718-22).

⁶⁶ On Diderot's warning on the dangers of women's acquisition of a public status, see Meeker (2003).

⁶⁷ See, for instance, Meeker, 2003: 83.

symptômes d'une corruption générale et de l'extinction de toutes les affections honnêtes. (Raynal, 1780, book VII, chapter 17: 168)⁶⁸

It is tempting to compare this passage with the exchange between Orou, an inhabitant of Otahiti, and the European chaplain he is hosting, in the *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*. In both writings, it is a question of condemning the unnatural laws which, by prohibiting adultery, push people to lie, to suspect, to tyrannize each other. And, moreover, these lies and suspicions would be harmful and even fatal for children. The gallant stage corresponds to a state of widespread corruption in which the idleness of both men and women, associated with civil and religious codes at odds with the physical order, threatens the order of society.

3. Everything Carries Within Itself a Secret Germ of Destruction

Thus, the ultimate effect of progress would be to call into question women submission to man, which Diderot yet considers to be a constant in nature, as the case of the Mariana Islands illustrates. Is this a contradiction? Not if we bear in mind the idea that Diderot also presents as a law of nature in the *Histoire des deux Indes*⁶⁹ and that he expresses in his *Satire contre le luxe à la manière de Perse* with the following formula: “tout porte en soi un germe secret de destruction.”⁷⁰ Now, this law of nature seems to prevail over the law governing the submission of women to men, because the authority of men goes the same way as anything else. What Diderot's five stages theory shows is that calling into question the submission of women to men should lead to the dissolution of morals, threaten not only the social order but also the economic order.

We concluded the section 2 on the moral consequences of the gallant mode of subsistence. However, Diderot's *Apologie de l'abbé Galiani* allows in turn to highlight the economic effects of the moral corruption which characterizes this last stage, that is, economic decline. As we have seen, idleness constitutes the specificity of the gallant stage. According to what Diderot writes, in the *Apologie de l'abbé Galiani*, it is made possible by the emergence of a net product in the industrial sector which offers the opportunity to the manufacturers to enjoy the fruits of other people's work, instead of expanding their own production. Paradoxically, Diderot considers that the appearance of idlers leads to the necessity of an increase in the number of workers in the fields. He thus establishes an interdependence between the industrial and the agricultural sectors through the net product earned in the former and the idleness which derives from it. Indeed, not only the idle consume agricultural

⁶⁸ Under such laws, says Orou: “On se blâme, on s'accuse, on se suspecte, on se tyrannise, on est envieux, on est jaloux, on se trompe, on s'afflige, on se cache, on dissimule, on s'épie, on se surprend, on se querelle, on ment ; les filles en imposent à leurs parents, les maris à leurs femmes, les femmes à leurs maris ; des filles, oui, je n'en doute pas, des filles étoufferont leurs enfants, des pères soupçonneux mépriseront et négligeront les leurs, des mères s'en sépareront et les abandonneront à la merci du sort, et le crime et la débauche se montreront sous toutes sortes de formes.” (Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, t. XII: 608)

⁶⁹ See Raynal, 1780, XIX, 2, .

⁷⁰ See Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, t. XVI: 556. On the delicate interpretation of the *Satire contre le luxe à la manière de Perse*, see Pujol (2021).

products in order to satisfy their proper needs, they also buy manufactured goods produced with the help of materials from agriculture by workers who need to satisfy their proper needs. However, the increase of the net industrial product and, with it, of idleness has for limit the population which can work in the fields and the available lands. Once this limit is reached, the agricultural production decreases and the net industrial product starts to decline until it becomes null (see Diderot, 1770: pp. 108-9). As a result, the immorality of women is not only the measure of the moral corruption of the whole society but also the harbinger of its economic decline and destruction. Progress then, like the authority of men, carries within itself the germ of its own destruction.

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⁷¹ Bracketed names notify that the attributed author of the text did not sign it.

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