

AUGUSTINUS P. DIERICK, UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

## Money, Morality and Politics in the Eighteenth Century: Diderot's *Voyage en Hollande*

### I Introduction

Diderot lived in Holland from the 15th of June to the 20th of August 1773, and again from the 5th of April to the 15th of October 1774. He recorded his impressions shortly afterwards, in a work whose published title is *Voyage en Hollande et dans les Pays-Bas autrichiens*.<sup>1</sup> In choosing Holland as his destination, Diderot can hardly be called original. As Yves Benot points out in the foreword<sup>2</sup> of his exemplary edition of Diderot's work, "... depuis Guez de Balzac et Descartes, elle est devenue une seconde patrie de l'intelligentsia française et l'on trouve aisément de quoi se documenter correctement sur les Provinces-Unies dans les librairies parisiennes" (5).

Nor, one should add, did he show much originality in his presentation. By the eighteenth century, travel literature on Holland already had its own tradition, and Diderot hardly departs from it. What Diderot claims about Holland consists mostly of clichés, often merely copied, sometimes wrongly, from other sources. Benot has claimed that "les emprunts sont extraordinairement étendus"; they include in particular lines from Aubert La Chesnaye des Bois' 1750 text, *Lettres hollandaises*, quotes from Janiçon's *État présent de la République des Provinces-Unies* (1729-30), of which a summary had already made by de Jaucourt in his article "Provinces-Unies" for the *Encyclopédie* (Benot, 11). These borrowings are all the more problematic because Diderot does not even bother bringing his sources up to date, which leads him into situations of blatant anachronism. This is indeed not vintage Diderot, which explains why the text is seldom discussed or even mentioned.

The most intensive part of the *Voyage* consists of strictly informational materials. At least in the organization of this section Diderot shows some originality, in that for each aspect of social, political and cultural life of the country he chooses one representative. The individual chapters have titles

like "L'homme d'état ou Du Gouvernement," "Le notable ou De la noblesse," and "L'homme de loi ou De la magistrature." The content of these chapters shows, however, that although Diderot took his own advice seriously, namely, "Ayez lu tout ce qu'on aura publié d'intéressant sur le peuple que vous visiterez" (23), he seldom went beyond this. True, the presentation is here and there interrupted by lively and sometimes amusing anecdotes illustrating some point or other. But these anecdotes, too, are part of an existing folklore about the Low Countries, such as Grosley's *Voyage en Hollande*, published posthumously in 1813, C.A. Pilati Di Tassulo's *Voyages en différents pays de l'Europe* of 1777 (Benot, 17-18) and Mme du Bocage's *Recueil des Oeuvres* of 1762 (cf. Benot, 31). The informational chapters are followed by a "Voyage dans quelques villes de la Hollande," and finally a "Retour en France" by way of the Austrian Netherlands. Diderot's personal travel experiences carry somewhat more weight, though unfortunately he more than once falls into the trap against which he warns his readers in his "Préliminaire," "c'est prendre, en tout genre, des cas particuliers pour des faits généraux" (24)

If so little new information about the United Provinces is conveyed in the text, if Diderot's own observations add so little to our knowledge either of the country visited or of the visitor himself, why then should the text hold any interest for the student of the eighteenth century? To be sure, any document concerning the perception of one nation by a citizen of another has some intrinsic value, and any document by Diderot holds some interest for the Diderot scholar. But I believe the interest of this particular text is of another nature, one which reveals itself only if we delve beneath the surface and consider both the context and the subtext of this document and what it tells us about the audience, the contemporary "implied readers" addressed in it. It is precisely in this respect that the *Voyage* becomes interesting, for not only does it present a discourse in which the mostly neutral surface

description refers to a tacitly understood contemporary polemic: this contemporary debate itself is a function of an *episteme* which an "archeology of knowledge" as practised by Michel Foucault can help unearth.<sup>3</sup>

## II The bourgeoisie and luxury

To get a first idea of these various discourses, let us look at the text of the first chapter more closely. Diderot first introduces geographical details about Holland which might strike any visitor to that country. He remarks on its unfriendly climate, its vulnerability vis-à-vis the sea, and concludes: "Naturellement le pays n'est pas trop habitable, cependant il n'y en a guère au monde de plus riche et de plus peuplé relativement à son étendue, effet de l'industrie, de l'activité, de l'économie, du travail assidu et de l'amour du gain" (33). These remarks are completely in line with what most travellers have to say about Holland in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, though there are already contained in this passage a considerable number of what were at the time "buzz-words": "industrie," "activité," "économie," "travail" and especially "amour du gain." If we look a little further on, when the subject of population is once again broached, these reader-oriented signals become even clearer: "ici les villes, les bourgs et les villages se touchent et la population s'en accroît sans cesse. Les républiques se recrutent aux dépens des monarchies" (26). This remark, one senses, no longer fits the neutrality of mere description; it indicates a political polemic of which Diderot is one of the main exponents. That in matters of economy and prosperity the republican form of government is superior to that of the monarchy is one of the givens of this text, and it is therefore indicated that we read the descriptions of Holland always with an eye on France, its institutions and its policies. Finally, when Diderot writes on the absence of misery and tyranny in Holland (39), it is clear that a contrast between the printed descriptions of the United Provinces and the unprinted description of France is intended. The question of government is indeed one of the main topics of significance in the *Voyage*.

Shortly after the passage last quoted, Diderot writes: "Il n'y a point de marché public, ce sont des négociants qui font le commerce du blé. La concurrence des vendeurs fait le prix. La libre

importation et exportation engendrent la fécondité. On y éprouve la cherté, mais jamais la disette." In a perhaps not altogether sincerely modest phrase, he adds: "Je laisse tout cela à discuter aux économistes" (34); by the time this phrase is uttered, the reader has already gained sufficient information to draw his own conclusion as to the relative superiority of the Netherlands over France. Once again, what is reported on the surface is mere observation. In reality, of course, Diderot has, in just a few phrases, touched upon some of the most important topics of eighteenth century politics and economics: the relationship between government and trade, the question of price and price-fixing, the question of the significance of trade for the prosperity of a nation.

Let us return for a moment to Diderot's praise of Holland's wealth as exemplified especially by the capital city of Amsterdam. Diderot writes: "Amsterdam est le grand marché de l'univers; ses bâtiments y déposent des quatre parties du monde tout ce qu'il est possible d'imaginer d'utile et d'agréable;" and further on "Rien sur toute la face du globe ne réveille l'idée d'une aussi prodigieuse opulence. Qu'était-ce que Sidon et Carthage en comparaison?" (144). This is one of the most common stereotypes employed by travellers to Holland. Soon, however, a different theme is sounded, also a familiar one in the eighteenth century, but discordant to the tone adopted until now, namely that of the *dangers* of luxury and abundance. If Diderot writes on the one hand, "Les diamants chez les dames, les boucles, les couteaux, les ciseaux, les chaînes d'or; les bagues, les anneaux qu'on voit aux doigts des bourgeoises et même des paysannes prouvent la richesse du pays," (106), he also notes: "La corruption des mœurs fait des progrès, elle marche d'un même pas avec le luxe et la richesse" (91). Apparently, then, Diderot finds himself on the horns of a true dilemma - one which all of the eighteenth century was not able to solve: how to reconcile material progress, which is universally seen as a good, with the increase in luxury, which is a power that corrupts.

The attack on luxury is an age-old one, generally phrased in moral terms. Voltaire, writing under the heading "Luxe" in his *Dictionnaire philosophique*, gives both the critical tradition and his own sly answer to it: "On a déclamé contre le luxe depuis

deux mille ans en vers et en prose, et on l'a toujours aimé" (Voltaire, 291)<sup>4,5</sup> Diderot himself knew how to play on this theme: in an imaginary conversation with Jakob Grimm, which he published in the *Salon* of 1767, he posed the question and then "moved on to a 'Satire against Luxury after the manner of Persius' that far transcended the bounds of the subject with which he had begun" (Manuel, 417). Faced with the venality of his time, he launched into a tirade in which he "made of that fault the symbol of the whole of France, a world consecrated to the worship of gold that ruined moral character in all ranks of society from the highest to the lowest" (Manuel, 418). It is not surprising, therefore, that Diderot, in looking at Holland, points an accusing finger at this tendency towards luxury, and anticipates that form of corruption of which the evidence is so clearly visible in France. What Diderot does not seem to have noticed is the contrast between the exigencies of an austere Calvinist creed and the ostentation of both public and private life - a main theme of Simon Schama's 1987 book, *The Embarrassment of Riches*, and one on which Norman Hampson has also commented (p. 45): "L'esprit d'épargne et de frugalité du XVIIe siècle calviniste cède le pas à des habitudes plus aristocratiques. Les Hollandais deviennent plus enclins à investir leurs économies à l'étranger et la classe prospère des rentiers a moins de réticence à étaler sa prospérité dans des résidences de campagne et des vêtements coûteux." The absence of even a reference to this contradiction indicates Diderot's lack of a true personal insight into the culture of Holland.

What makes the theme of luxury so revealing in the discussions of the eighteenth century and again in the nineteenth, is that it is inextricably linked to the self-definition at which the bourgeoisie had arrived by this time. As René Rémond has pointed out, the bourgeoisie "est d'abord une bourgeoisie de marchands, de négociants" (59) (although there is also an intellectual bourgeoisie). Rémond adds: "La bourgeoisie n'est pas un ordre: ce n'est qu'une couche sociale à l'intérieur du tiers état ... Ce qui fait le bourgeois, au sens moderne du terme, c'est moins son statut que son activité professionnelle, le métier qu'il exerce et dont il tire ses revenus, son niveau de vie et aussi son genre de vie, c'est à dire sa façon de dépenser ou d'épargner, de faire fructifier son argent, enfin des facteurs qui relèvent

de la culture et de l'éducation" (69-70). Because professional activity is the crucial element in this definition, and because this in turn is related to income and status, it is obvious that any evidence of mismanagement of finances must endanger the relative respect which the bourgeois feels he can claim in the social order. On the other hand, accumulation of wealth in the hands of this class cannot manifest itself in the same way as it does in the aristocracy: capital and interest are the tools with which the social status of the middle class is established; consumption of the products of these tools (the consumption in effect of the "tools") beyond a certain point endangers the social status arrived at through these implements. For these reasons, therefore, the bourgeois can be defined, as Ulrich Pallach does, as a person of the 'juste milieu,' neither prodigal nor avaricious: "die Satire brandmarkte den verschwenderischen Parvenü wie den Geizigen, der 'Bourgeois gentilhomme' und den 'Avare'" (Pallach, 121). Ostentation and the love of luxury would indicate first of all a corruption of the bourgeois' original self-image.<sup>6,7</sup>

Probably even more important in the negative assessment of luxury in the second half of the eighteenth century is the consideration that bourgeois ostentation becomes one more means, or at least one more sign of the intention, to break down the barriers between classes. In the words of Albert Hirschman, "the new goods constitute a threat to the social order and hierarchy as inferior ranks of society get hold of them or covet them" (*Shifting Involvements*, 55). Hence the "general hostility towards the new wealth" (46) at the time Diderot wrote his *Voyage*. Even Adam Smith, in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* of 1759,<sup>8</sup> as well as in the Fourth Chapter of Book III of *The Wealth of Nations*, shows a singular ambivalence towards the increase in riches to which he is a witness. This diatribe against "trinkets of frivolous utility" stands in sharp contrast to the elaborate defence of the free market forces and the belief in the blessings of material progress elsewhere. Smith is not unique, Hirschman writes, for "[his] ambivalence reflects that of generation after generation of Western intellectuals both celebrating and vilifying material progress" (*Shifting Involvements*, 50).

Although the most famous spokesman against luxury is of course Rousseau, before him people like

Quesnay and Forbonnais had already warned against *specific forms* of luxury. In the case of the latter, these attacks can be seen to involve not primarily a moral or social dimension; rather, they are bound up with the whole question concerning capital, investment, industry and commerce, of which luxury is but one aspect.

Whether or not it was "as a way to exonerate oneself from the charge of avarice," as Schama contends (334), the fact remains that Dutch ostentation drained capital away from investment, expansion, and the creation of new capital. Diderot himself remarks: "il faut que cette gangrène qui commence finisse à l'aide de l'extrême abondance, de l'ambition et de la vie oisive et molle, par éteindre le goût du commerce" (82). Bonet comments on this passage: "Des remarques analogues figurent, on dirait rituellement, dans la plupart des livres sur la Hollande depuis le début du siècle" (p. 17, n. 3) - indeed, Simon Schama points out that the increase in luxury in Holland was already evident in the second half of the seventeenth century. But in a more important sense Bonet misses the point made by Diderot, namely the connection between Dutch prosperity acquired through commerce, and an ostentation which would endanger the very taste for commerce which makes this prosperity possible.

Luxury as an economic problem is debated extensively in the eighteenth century.<sup>9</sup> The consumption of luxury goods in the nation state had become of crucial importance to its economy, particularly in France and in the Old German Reich (Pallach, 82). Louis-Sébastien Mercier, for example, in his *Tableau de Paris* writes: "Il est très-sûr que, si les riches interrompaient pendant une année le cours de leur folles dépenses, il y aurait la moitié de la capitale, qui tout-à-coup ne pourrait plus subsister."<sup>10, 11</sup> In France, criticism tended for a long time to be concentrated on the excesses of the court, particularly after a series of financial crises in the latter half of the century, though it can be argued that the latter's expenses contributed positively to certain sectors of the economy. With the increased wealth engendered by economic expansion, the question of luxury became even more urgent, but it also shifted ground: it is the bourgeoisie which now increasingly becomes the target of criticism (Pallach, 91).

The French monarchy had long favoured the production of quality goods for the wealthy classes; beginning around 1740, there was a gradual increase in income throughout French society, and the newer well-to-do classes demanded goods of lower quality and price. In Holland and England, where there was freedom to produce such goods, the economies kept pace with this demand; in France, the government continued to dictate rules and regulations against the demands of producers and merchants. This question of state intervention generated increasingly heated economic, political and social arguments around the time of writing of Diderot's *Voyage*, which contains multiple echoes of it. In particular the clash between physiocrats and mercantilists forms the background to much of what Diderot writes in the *Voyage*.

### III Mercantilists, physiocrats and liberals

Ever since Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) it has been customary to speak of two basic, opposite groups of economists in pre-Revolutionary France, which he characterized as mercantilists and physiocrats, and which preceded his own "classical" liberal, national economic system. As Pierre Deyon, Gömmel/Kumpel, and others have pointed out, however, in doing so, Smith compared two very different things: whereas the physiocrats understood themselves as a "school," and were concerned with the formulation of a politico-economic "system", mercantilism never was a true system.<sup>12</sup> It had grown from a tradition of several centuries, had no consistent or generally accepted principles, and was primarily a patchwork of practical rules for the conduct of commerce and the state. Nevertheless, it is useful to contrast these two systems because they represent the two fundamental ways in which French economic policy was formulated towards the middle of the eighteenth century. Only the coming of the French Revolution, the triumph of Adam Smith's economic theory, and the Industrial Revolution finally made them obsolete.<sup>13</sup>

Traditionally, mercantilist have been supposed to consider money, wealth and prosperity as equivalents. Though this assessment is not quite correct,<sup>14</sup> it is true that the central concern of the mercantilist system is the role of money. In the sixteenth century the relationship between the increase in precious metals, money in circulation, and inflationary prices had been debated intensively.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with prices moving downwards again, the debate was concentrated on the real effects of money in circulation. The mercantilists concluded that money in circulation stimulates the increase in prosperity of a country, even though it cannot be equated with the wealth of the country.<sup>15</sup> This distinction between money and wealth, clearly perceived by early mercantilists, was, however, easily forgotten in practice by subsequent theoreticians, as can be seen from the fact that people like John Law were intent on promoting export as the only way in which a country like France, lacking precious metals, could increase their supply. The mercantilists' concern to establish a favourable trade balance therefore has to be seen in the light of their conviction that it is the only way to guarantee a more favourable distribution of precious metals.<sup>16</sup> Stimulus of commerce and trade was for these various reasons a main plank in the mercantilist platform, and one major way of redressing the balance of trade was the replacement of imported goods by domestically produced goods. In this context especially, luxury goods come under close scrutiny.

State intervention on a massive scale, especially under Colbert, increasingly had a negative effect, however, and frequently markets were lost because of a distinct lack of flexibility. High import duties and the attempt to stop exports of grain led to inflation in the price of manufactured goods. In the wake of these developments, mercantilist thinking underwent significant changes. More and more, merchants and entrepreneurs began to demand reforms, which, around 1700, began to be formulated in the writings of especially Sebastien de Vauban and Pierre le Pesant de Boisguilbert. Under their impact, France began to conclude more liberal trade agreements, especially after the Peace of Utrecht in 1713. Nevertheless, by the second half of the eighteenth century the system had, in the eyes of many, become discredited,<sup>17</sup> and a new school of economists saw its chance.

The first important challenge to mercantilism was extended by François Quesnay (1694-1774), in his 1756 article "Fermiers" in the *Encyclopédie*. In a second article, "Grains," Quesnay developed a more general view on economic matters, while through his 1758 *Tableau économique* he established himself as the leader of a veritable school of economists, the

physiocrats.<sup>18</sup> In his *Dialogue sur le commerce* of 1766, Quesnay specifically combats the preoccupation of the mercantilists with the balance of trade and the reserve of money. Although his ideal is economic liberty, his model nation is a closed one, without exports. This ideal is to be realized not by trade barriers, but by developing the interior economy, and by eliminating the need to sell to the outside. Happy nations, according to Quesnay, are those who do not need trade, who do not have to be middlemen accepting money, like the Dutch. From what we have already seen, this is hardly a conclusion about Holland, nor about commerce, with which Diderot was likely to concur. His praise of Holland in the *Voyage* points to an opposite conviction, though Diderot's praise of commerce and his relative neglect of the agricultural theories of the physiocrats are determined by reasons additional to strictly economic ones.

The conflict between mercantilists and physiocrats came to a head towards the middle of the eighteenth century, in the conflict over access to capital for investment on the one hand, and in the different visions of France as a producing, progressive nation on the other.

In eighteenth-century France there was a fundamental lack of capital to develop industry. There were basically two sources of capital: interest and commercial profit. Christina Morrison has argued that commercial profit played a minor role in funding industry, that it was rather the "rentes foncières" which supplied funds, though a strict division of these two sources of capital cannot be made, since both types were usually found together in wealthy families (66). The major source of capital was the accumulated "rente foncière"; but precisely this source was prevented from being used effectively because of an important dilemma which is frequently discussed in both mercantilist and physiocrat theories. For different reasons, both schools of thought favoured low interest rates. Unfortunately, while low interest rates are indeed beneficial for industry as well as agriculture, they also prevent a rapid accumulation of capital. Moreover, the tendency to spend accumulated interest on luxury goods, combined with the reluctance to save which we mentioned earlier, prevented capital from being readily available. Predictably, in this situation, physiocrats and

mercantilists separated once again in regard to the involvement by the state: "Les mercantilistes souhaitent une intervention de l'État en faveur de l'accumulation du capital ... Les physiocrates en revanche, croient à un ordre naturel que toute intervention de l'État peut troubler" Morrison, 69).

The physiocrats saw in Holland the perfect example of rapid economic development because of the fundamental non-interventionist stance of the state (Deyon, 67), and it therefore serves as a counter-example to France in many writings of the eighteenth century. Diderot's *Voyage*, as we have seen, is no exception, and in this respect Diderot appears to be a committed anti-mercantilist. What is overlooked in such comparisons between Holland and France, however, is the difference between their economic structures. The French economy, after all, was based on both agriculture and commerce/industry as sources of income, whereas a country like Holland was dominated by commerce and trade. It is therefore with some justice that Christian Morrison interprets the conflict between physiocrats and mercantilists as in essence corresponding to the "division entre une France maritime (les provinces côtières tournées vers le commerce extérieur et l'industrie) et une France terrienne dont les physiocrates ont été les brillants défenseurs" (72).

It must be added, however, that the physiocrats did not hold full sway in late eighteenth century France. Not only did mercantilists continue to set important parts of the economic agenda, but the physiocrats were also attached by yet another "school" that Auriau terms the "école populationniste" of "libéraux éclectiques" (20). They, like the physiocrats, were concerned with the issue of the supply of grain, but they quarrelled with the exclusive emphasis on agriculture and internal trade, and sought a synthesis between internal and external trade.<sup>19, 20</sup> Their solutions were not to impose a tax on land, nor a direct personal tax (which they considered unfair), but an indirect tax especially on luxury goods (less onerous to the consumer). They saw that agriculture was only one element in the total economy; that there was a need to compete in external markets with the same aims in mind as the internal market: the creation of relative riches (Auriau, 106). Although they did not stress industry, they accepted it as a creator of wealth. Unlike the physiocrats, they did attach significant value to precious metals; they accepted

the fact that prices depend on supply and demand, and attacked artificially high prices, which they saw in Holland. But they shared the physiocrats' interest in commercial freedom,<sup>21</sup> which they viewed within a larger context of property rights, population growth, the promotion of families, social equality and the separation of the legal and executive branches of government. It is perhaps with this group of liberals that Diderot is most easily identified, though there is some wavering in his loyalties.

Although in the debate about the importance and status of the bourgeoisie in eighteenth century France the political aspects are clearly the most important, the debate also takes place at least partly on moral grounds, since politics constitute, in the self-understanding of the eighteenth century bourgeoisie, a kind of public morality rather than *Realpolitik*.<sup>22</sup> Take for example one of the most obvious characteristics of the merchant class, its desire for wealth and profit. If we place this desire, as Albert Hirschman<sup>23</sup> does, in the context of the theory of the passions, which had a certain currency in the eighteenth century, we discover that there is a definite link between commerce and questions of a moral nature. According to Giambattista Vico, for example, "Out of ferocity, avarice, and ambition, the three vices which lead all mankind astray, [society] makes national defence, commerce, and politics, and thereby causes the strength, the wealth, and the wisdom of the republic" (*Passions*, 17). What this means is that society channels passions into interests which have a civilizing effect. These ideas were given perhaps their classical form in David Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*, in which "Hume envisioned the reshaping of raw, selfish interests into virtuous concerns amidst the hustle of the marketplace" (Schuler/Murray, 589). In this fashion a moral dimension is attributed to a human activity which on the surface appears as merely selfish and expedient.<sup>24</sup> Hirschman argues that precisely because of the ability of commerce to civilize society and subdue the passions, the merchant had already acquired considerable prestige by the mid-eighteenth century (*Shifting Involvements*, p. 142, n.15).<sup>25</sup> Because in France trade rather than manufacturing was seen as a source of wealth, merchants, as creators of riches, were considered the most profitable members of the commonwealth.

Since economic interest is at the same time the most consistent and the most profitable for society, "the by-product of individuals acting predictably in

accordance with their economic interests was therefore ... a strong web of interdependent relationships," Hirschman writes. Moreover, such relationships extend well beyond the nation state itself, and begin to embrace the whole civilized world. "Thus it was expected that expansion of domestic trade would create more cohesive communities, while foreign trade would help avoid wars" (Hirschman, 52).<sup>26</sup>

#### IV What Diderot didn't see

A number of Diderot's remarks in the *Voyage* appear to refer to the ideas just outlined. Concerning the Dutch desire for peace, for example, Diderot writes: "L'ambition de la république est de s'enrichir et non de s'agrandir. Le Hollandais ne veut être que commerçant et n'avoir de troupes que ce qu'il lui en faut pour garder sa frontière, et de marine qu'autant que le soutien et l'accroissement de son négoce en exigent. Il ne respire que la paix ou que des guerres entre ses voisins, auxquelles il ne prend aucune part, qui les affaiblissent et qui lui laissent à lui seul le commerce du monde" (56). We must of course read in this passage once again a veiled criticism of France's own expansionary policies which lead to ruin, while praise is heaped on Holland, which lives in accord with the principles of good sense, and acts rationally in its search for peace. The passage quoted does demonstrate that Diderot accepted the notion of the civilizing force of commerce, as well as its role in the creation of material progress.

There are further references to this conviction. If commerce is a force for material growth, perhaps in fact the main motor of progress, then everything that is conducive to commerce also acquires a morally positive quality, including, above all, political systems which foster and promote commerce. Again we find this idea in Diderot's writing on Holland: "Si l'on y réfléchit avec attention, on s'apercevra que le gouvernement le plus voisin de la pure démocratie est celui qui convient le mieux à un peuple commerçant dont la prospérité dépend de la plus grande liberté dans ses opérations. Personne n'entend mieux l'intérêt d'un négociant que lui-même; au moment où quelque autorité se mêle de le diriger ou par des leçons ou par des lois, tout est perdu" (58). The passage is a powerful condemnation of the kind of state intervention practised by Colbert and advocated by the theoreticians of the mercantile system.<sup>27</sup>

Yet, as Barbéris points out, Diderot is ultimately

mistaken in his conclusion: "Si la Hollande est commerçante, ce n'est pas parce qu'elle est républicaine: la Hollande est républicaine parce qu'elle est commerçante" (263). In turning his equation around, Diderot demonstrates a general weakness in eighteenth century thought, according to Barbéris: "La pensée politique du XVIIIe siècle n'a pas été capable d'interpréter correctement le rapport des infrastructures économiques et des superstructures politiques" (263).

It is easy to admit that such "errors" in judgement occur frequently in the *Voyage*. What is of importance is to suggest at least in some cases *why* they do. A certain sloppiness in the collection of facts, a definite haste to jump to conclusions, I already hinted at in the very beginning of my argument. A certain blindness, not unusual in a visitor to another country, is also certainly involved. But there are other blindnesses here that, I believe, can only be the result of a deliberate strategy. In his wish to set up Holland as a model state, as a counter-example to France above all, Diderot simply *must* overlook most contradictions or flaws in the Dutch system which would undermine his more or less hidden agenda. It can be shown easily, for example, that Diderot's view of Holland as a haven of unrestricted free trade and a sworn enemy of monopoly is quite incorrect. Whereas Diderot writes, "il n'y a point de monopole; la puissance d'une multitude de particuliers s'y oppose," (103) Simon Schama rightly makes the point that "whether it was desirable or not in principle, in practice Dutch capitalism depended crucially on an elaborate and extensive system of protection" (Schama, 341). Schama goes on to say: "For all the bravura and exploratory ingenuity of the great mariners, navigators and colonizers, their work was firmly bound within the Dutch imperative of opportune force for minimum risk." There were in fact a number of monopolies such as the East Indies Company. Similarly, Pierre Deyon has drawn attention to the fact that "aux tarifs anglais et français, la Hollande répondait par des prohibitions et des droits de douane aussi rigoureux" (38); moreover, "La production n'y était pas libre, les manufactures rurales se heurtaient à l'hostilité des villes, et les fabrications urbaines étaient soumises à des règlements et des contrôles" (39). Typical also was the conservatism of the Amsterdam Bank, a true watchdog of business. We must assume, therefore, that both the polemics Diderot uses to undermine any Colbert type of mercantilism, while deliberately overlooking the protectionist features

which exist in the Dutch system, are inspired by the one purpose: to establish the link between freedom of trade and *political* liberty. Only this subtext could explain Diderot's refusal to undermine his praise of Holland.

Other eighteenth century travellers to Holland have commented on its high indirect taxes, on the large national debt and on the high rate of unemployment, especially in a number of manufacturing cities, including Leyden, where Diderot spent some time. About all of this Diderot is curiously silent. He might also have considered the negative consequences of Dutch colonial expansion, though it is true that imperialism as a necessary consequence of commerce and capitalism could not have been foreseen in all its ramifications at that time. Nor was it perhaps within his capacity to realize that Holland was already in decline precisely because of its exclusive reliance on commerce, at a time when industrialization had become a possibility. But the gap between Holland and other European nations, notably England, later France and also Germany, was indeed widening. The lack of manufacturing was a crucial element in the Dutch losing the race with Britain, though the neglect of manufacturing in favour of trade was, as George Rudé has pointed out, a common attitude even in Britain; it was "not so much the wealth and ingenuity of her manufacturers as the prosperity and extent of her overseas trade" which impressed people most, and thus the banker, not the industrialist who was king (57).

In fact, at the time of Diderot's visit, parallels rather than contrasts between Holland and France could already be observed; but those would of course not have suited Diderot's agenda. I have already commented on Diderot's inability to reconcile the apparent contradictions between ostentation, commerce and Calvinism. Even if he had grasped the contradiction, he would have glossed over it, for he could not abandon his song of praise, since progress and freedom are precisely those things he admires most in the Dutch Republic and which he wants to use as arguments against the policies and restrictions governing French trade and thus limiting the progress of the bourgeoisie. To admit that the Dutch elite showed in Schama's words, "no special propensity to avoid consumption in favour of savings and investments" (298), a fact ultimately largely responsible for the economic and

financial decline of the United Provinces, would once again tend to undermine Diderot's arguments in favour of the Dutch model.

More serious are the shortcomings of Diderot's view of the very nature and consequences of a free market economy and unrestricted capitalism. In his adherence in the main to the demands for freer trade and his rejection of state interference,<sup>28</sup> Diderot overlooks the fact that the commercial classes, as Dante Germino writes, "however much they intended to advance freedom, were in effect advocating a new ruling class based on commerce to replace the old one based on landed wealth" (156). Similarly, the fact that in Holland Diderot saw few poor people might be explained by the fact that the economy was still based primarily on commerce, and thus showed few of the contradictions of capitalism which in England were beginning to surface under the impact of the Industrial Revolution.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, unlike Ferguson, who was very much aware of the danger of considering social motivation only in the light of commercial interest, and who considered that this could lead to the decline of a nation into submission and despotism (Batscha, 58), Diderot seems not to have considered such developments as a possibility in Holland. It appears safe to assume, from his diatribe against greed, that he would share Ferguson's conviction that those who see the profit motive as the main motive for human behaviour, without trying to integrate it into a more general system of practical political action, distort the total picture of social reality; but at least in his image of Holland this issue is not raised, presumably again because, in his desire to adopt Holland as a model, he does not want to cloud the issue by doubts of this kind. The one point where he expresses reservations is in his warning against using foreign troops to defend the country.

Had Diderot had less of a political agenda, and been more observant of truly economic issues, his almost exclusively positive evaluation of Holland and "progressive" countries like it might have been somewhat tempered. Even in purely political matters, Diderot's assessment of the Dutch Republic's political structure is remarkably generous. Even the very nature of the Dutch Republic, its being an oligarchy rather than a democracy, seems to have escaped him. George Rudé writes: "While ...



Dutch Patricians were staunch republicans and would tolerate no encroachments from the Stadholder and his landowning supporters, they were equally unwilling to surrender any of their privileges in favour of a wider urban democracy" (Rudé, 116). It is true that Diderot was not an altogether uncritical admirer of the contemporary Dutch form of government. He particularly condemned the move in 1747 to make the Stadholdership hereditary, since it made Holland once more resemble a monarchy like France. Specifically on this topic, Diderot here is fully in line with most visitors to the Netherlands, who tend to distinguish between government and people. A.R. Myers writes: "foreign observers were not impressed by the Netherlands' system of government, and there was no desire to import it ... The great achievements of the seventeenth century had been effected almost in spite of the defects of the States General, and in the eighteenth century the decline of the Netherlands in power and prestige had been hastened by the inertia, timidity and corruption of the patrician class" (132).

#### V A change of mode of thought

What I said at the beginning about the various levels of discourse in the *Voyage* becomes particularly relevant at this point. Diderot's factual errors concerning Holland could be called errors on the first level, that of description and report. They result from false information gathered from his readings, or from his Dutch sources, in the form of both persons and stories reported. We must also, I have suggested, not forget a certain "conscious" blindness and the suppression of facts for the sake of an argument: such "errors" are part of Diderot's strategy in creating a subtext. Next there is the context, the errors or false judgements due to Diderot's particular situation in time and space: they are the result of his being a foreigner, of his education, of his personal preferences and prejudices. And lastly, there are the unavoidable limitations of every thinker which result from his being caught in a certain fundamental mode of perceiving the world, a certain mode of thought. What is fascinating in the case of Diderot is that he writes precisely in a period during which, according to Michel Foucault, one of these modes of thought (what in *The Archeology of Knowledge* he calls the "archive" (129),<sup>30</sup> undergoes a radical process of change:

Les dernières années du XVIIIe siècle sont rompues par une discontinuité symétrique de celle qui avait brisé, au début du XVIIe, la pensée de la Renaissance; alors, les grandes figures circulaires où s'enfermait la similitude s'étaient disloquées et ouvertes pour que le tableau des identités puisse se déployer; et ce tableau maintenant va se défaire à son tour, le savoir se logeant dans un espace nouveau. (*Les Mots et les choses*, 230).

Foucault goes on to define this change in three main categories "la Grammaire Universelle," "l'Histoire Naturelle," and "l'Analyse des Richesses," as they were established in the classical period (the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries). It is, in the broadest terms a change from *order* to *history*: "C'est cette Histoire qui, progressivement, imposera ses lois à l'analyse de la production, à celle des êtres organisés, à celle enfin des groupes linguistiques. L'Histoire *donne lieu* aux organisations analogiques, tout comme l'Ordre ouvrait les chemins des identités et des différences *successives*" (*Les mots et les choses*, 231). According to Foucault, therefore, this crucial change should become visible precisely in the domain which we have been examining, that of money with all its social, political and moral ramifications ("l'analyse des richesses"). And indeed, if we compare Diderot's treatment of economic matters with that of Adam Smith, three years after the *Voyage en Hollande*, we can observe at least one major shift: that towards a new definition of "work."

Smith did not, as is sometimes maintained, *invent* work as an economic concept, for this notion exists already in the work of Cantillon, Quesnay and Condillac. Moreover, for Smith, as for them, work still serves as a measure of value. But, as Foucault writes: "il le déplace: il lui conserve toujours la fonction d'analyse des richesses échangeables; cette analyse cependant n'est plus un pur et simple moment pour ramener l'échange au besoin (et le commerce au geste primitif du troc); elle découvre une unité de mesure irréductible, indépassable, absolue" (*Les mots et les choses*, 235). He continues:

Du coup, les richesses n'établiront plus l'ordre interne de leurs équivalences par

une comparaison des objets à échanger, ni par une estimation du pouvoir propre à chacun de représenter un objet de besoin (et en dernier recours le plus fondamental de tous, la nourriture); elles se décomposeront selon les unités du travail qui les ont réellement produites. Les richesses sont toujours des éléments représentatifs qui fonctionnent: mais ce qu'ils représentent finalement, ce n'est plus l'objet du désir, c'est le travail.

At this point one might remember also Karl Marx's idea that it is "not money that renders commodities commensurable. Just the contrary. It is because all commodities, as values, are realised human labour, and therefore commensurable, that their values can be measured by one and the same special commodity, and the latter be converted into the common measure of their values, i.e. into money" (*Capital*, 106). In this system, Marx writes "price is the money-name of the labour realised in a commodity" (114). When in the *Voyage* Diderot gives, in his chapter entitled "L'habitant du pays ou Des mœurs", an eight-page list of prices of all manner of goods and services and expresses their value or cost in amounts which he meticulously transcribes from Dutch to French currencies, he is expressing precisely the kind of taxonomic and comparative approach of which Foucault says that it belongs to the old "archive." For Diderot, the mere mention of a price suffices to express something intrinsic about an object or service; neither within the mercantile system nor that of a freer trade could Diderot have found a crucial role for labour to play; this would have to wait for the advent of the industrial society and its theorizers.

Limited by their focus on commerce and the exchange of goods as the prime source of income, the mercantilists, some physiocrats and liberals, as well as Diderot and most of the *philosophes*, failed to imagine that industry, which would base itself on a completely new set of measurements — of which work becomes the central item — would revolutionize the world economy. Nor could they anticipate that the step from commerce to industry would be more crucial in creating new wealth than the more traditional commerce practiced by the Dutch.<sup>31</sup> It is the industrial bourgeoisie which is creative, and which augments the quantity of consumer goods in an absolute sense (Barbérís, 197). The future therefore belonged not to Holland but to England.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Two versions of these notes exist in manuscript; the first printed publication dates from 1819; subsequent publications were in 1876, 1971 (within the *Oeuvres complètes* of the Club du Livre Français), and in 1982. All references in brackets refer to the 1982 (Benot) edition.

<sup>2</sup> References to Benot are to his "Introduction" in the 1982 edition of the *Voyage*.

<sup>3</sup> In *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault writes: "The positivity of a discourse ... characterizes its unity throughout time, and well beyond individual oeuvres, books and texts. This unity certainly does not enable us to say of Linnaeus or Buffon, Quesnay or Turgot, Broussais or Bichat, who told the truth, who reasoned with rigour, who most conformed to his own postulates ... But what it does reveal is the extent to which [they] were talking about "the same thing," by placing themselves at "the same level" or at "the same distance," by deploying the same conceptual field ... Different oeuvres, dispersed books, that whole mass of texts that belong to a single discursive formation ... all these various figures and individuals do not communicate solely by the logical succession of propositions that they advance, nor by the recurrence of themes ... they communicate by the form of positivity of their discourse or, more exactly, this form of positivity (and the conditions of operation of the enunciative function) defines a field in which formal identities, thematic continuities, translations of concepts, and polemical interchanges may be deployed. Thus positivity plays the role of what might be called a *historical a priori*" (127).

<sup>4</sup> It is after all precisely this coveting of goods, the desire for prosperity which is considered by others, among them Voltaire himself, to be the prime motor and motivation of progress. Without it, mankind would, under the best of circumstances, remain slothful, under the worst a slave of its passions (see below).

<sup>5</sup> "Moreover," Manuel continues, "the worship of gold and the pursuit of luxury flow inevitably from even the most happy conditions. Subscribing to a circular vision of history, Diderot argues that, even granting the Physiocrats their argument about the benefits of agriculture, such beneficence of necessity engenders commerce, industry, an increase in population, a division of fortune, and the view of all

circular vision of history, Diderot argues that, even granting the Physiocrats their argument about the benefits of agriculture, such beneficence of necessity engenders commerce, industry, an increase in population, a division of fortune, and the view of all activity in the light of the criterion of usefulness and profit" (Manuel, 418).

6. It is important to point out that in German scholarship the term "Bürger" and its derivatives carry a somewhat different connotation, especially since W. Sombart. As Wilson/Ritchie points out, Sombart "defined the bourgeois not in terms of function but of the attitude of mind which pursuing his functions bred in him. To Sombart, the bourgeois seemed essentially a psychological phenomenon", i.e. a person particularly endowed with the capacity to think in terms of figures and characterized by the habit of rational calculation, especially in money matters (581). This hard-nosed, practical inclination does appear to coincide, however, with what Barbéris sees as typical of the bourgeois: "Le Bien, le Juste, le Raisonnable, valeurs bourgeoises, définissent la vie comme organisation. Le monde et la société sont pour la Bourgeoisie des données qu'il nous appartient d'organiser, de recréer, en somme, selon des critères d'efficacité rationnelle" (107).

7. A notable exception in this respect is David Hume. For him, Schuler/Murray write, luxuries have primarily positive qualities: "No longer feared as a corrupting influence, luxuries introduce civilising tastes to the wider community with the spread of affluence" (590).

8. One could go one step further and point to the more fundamental question which surfaces at the end of the eighteenth century: that of social and intellectual progress and its relation to morality. Leslie Sklair has written that in Turgot's theory of progress, as in that of other contemporaries, this problem "does not arise in any form other than superficial recognition that not all change need necessarily be for the good": Turgot's claim that "the advance of the sciences and arts actually relieve man's bondage to nature, and that the progress of society thus becomes a self-perpetuating process" glosses over the problem of moral progress (19). By contrast, Rousseau tackles this subject head on, and in a brilliant and spectacular way.

9. Ulrich Christian Pallach writes: "Der Begriff 'Luxus' gehörte im 18. Jahrhundert nicht nur zum

Vokabular moralisierender Kritik, er war eine tragende Kategorie politisch-sozialen und ökonomischen Denkens und Handelns geworden" (90). Pallach correctly establishes the link between luxury as an economic factor and the sociopolitical implications of luxury: "Luxus als demonstrativer Verbrauch prestigebehafteter Objekte was symbolisches Handeln mit politisch-sozialen Implikationen, und zugleich ein wirtschaftlich relevantes Handeln, beide von langer Tradition."

10. 12 vols., Amsterdam 1782-88, vol. 1, 298.

11. "Zum Standardvokabular der Luxuskritik im 18. Jahrhundert gehört die Feststellung, daß der Luxus ständig zunehme" (Pallach, 128).

12. "Le mercantilisme en tant que système de pensée et d'intervention a été défini par les libéraux de la fin du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, pour désigner et disqualifier ceux dont ils répudiaient les arguments et les pratiques" (Deyon, 47, cf. Gömmel/Kumpel, 80).

13. "Der tiefgreifende Wandel, der die Französische Revolution für Politik, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft in Frankreich auslöst, entzieht ebenso wie das Anbrechen der Industriellen Revolution der Konkurrenz zwischen merkantilistischen und physiokratischen Wirtschaftskonzepten ihre Grundlage" (Gömmel/Kumpel, 80).

14. Montchrétien, for example, defines the wealth of the state as "l'accommodement des choses nécessaires à la vie et propres au vêtement" (Gömmel/Kumpel, 84); Vauban, in his *Projet d'une dîme royale* of 1707, writes, "Ce n'est pas la grande quantité d'or et d'argent qui font les grandes et véritables richesses d'un État ... La vraie richesse d'un royaume consiste dans l'abondance des denrées, dont l'usage est si nécessaire au soutien de la vie des hommes qu'ils ne sauraient s'en passer" (Gömmel/Kumpel, 84). Most mercantilists focus their attention on manufacture, artisanat and entrepreneurship, which is capable of constantly producing new goods. Although they do not neglect agriculture altogether, they do not make it the centerpiece of their thought (Sully being an exception). Rather, their interest is increasingly captivated by technical innovation and the increase in manpower which allows the production costs to be lowered. Here especially Holland is cited

demand as it determines the price of goods (cf. the *Dictionnaire économique* of Noël Chomel of 1709).

15. "Die zentrale Hypothese, die dem geldtheoretischen Verständnis der französischen Merkantilisten zugrunde liegt, besagt, daß Geld zwar nicht mit dem Reichtum des Landes gleichzusetzen ist, daß der wirtschaftliche Wohlstand aber durch eine Zunahme des Geldumlaufs entscheidend angeregt wird" (Gömmel/Kumpel, 88). P. Harsin writes of the mercantilists, "On cherchera à multiplier la quantité de métaux précieux non pas, parce qu'en elle se trouve concrétée la véritable et seule richesse, mais parce que la prospérité économique, le développement industriel et commercial, l'augmentation de la population, accompagnent et suivent un accroissement du stock monétaire" (quoted in Gömmel/Kumpel, 88).

16. A more lasting discovery by the mercantilists was the importance of the *speed* with which money circulates in an economy. This notion of the "vitesse de la circulation de la monnaie" was introduced by Boisguilbert in his *Détail de la France* of 1695.

17. However, in Prussia mercantilism was just reaching its zenith at this time.

18. Among Quesnay's disciples are Victor de Riqueti, Marquis de Mirabeau (1715-1789), Paul-Pierre Mercier de la Rivière (1720-1794), Guillaume-François Le Trosne (1728-1780), Nicolas Baudeau (1730-1792), and Pierre-Samuel Dupont de Nemours (1739-1817), while sympathizers include the Marquis de Gournay, the Abbé de Mureau, Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot and Charles-Alexandre de Calonne.

19. In a more general sense, they tried to reconcile "leur désir de liberté de commerce avec l'impératif social qui constitue à leurs yeux la nécessité de voir même les plus pauvres se procurer une nourriture abondante mais à bon marché" (Auriau, 51).

20. According to Forbonnais, "la force d'un État relativement à ses finances consiste à ne rien exiger des Particuliers que sur le superflu dont ils jouissent."

21. Auriau writes that physiocrats and liberals deserve little credit for sharing their conviction that

freedom in commerce was necessary: "A l'époque il n'y avait point de raisons sérieuses de redouter que l'exportation produisît en France une hausse considérable" (55).

22. Deyon claims that in writings of Charles Davenant and Monchrétien the stress on the nonourable state of the merchant suggests to him, "Il n'est plus question ici seulement de système économique, mais aussi de morale et de philosophie sociale" (57).

23. *The Passions and the Interest*, esp. pp. 55-60.

24. Similar ideas are expressed by Adam Ferguson in his *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), in which the civil or "refined" society is equated with the "commercial" society. One is also reminded of Montesquieu's use of the term "doux commerce" (Hirschmann, *Passions*, 60).

25. An extended argument that there is a great deal of glory in commerce is made in Abbé Gabriel François, Coyer, *La Noblesse commerçante* (London, 1756). Pierre Barbéris claims a similarly exalted status for the merchant in the period preceding the Revolution because the merchant's activities coincide with the maximum of well-being possible in society at this stage. Barbéris writes: "le commerce nous apparaît dans la littérature pré-révolutionnaire comme nimbé de gloire et d'honneur;" the commercial nation is seen as a "paradis terrestre, dont on perçoit déjà comme un rayon réchauffant dans les tableaux hollandais: maisons luisantes, riches étoffes, amoncellements de fruits et de cristaux" (245).

26. In this context one might quote the words of William Roberts (in his *View of the Progress of Society in Europe* of 1769): "Commerce tends to wear off those prejudices which maintain distinctions and animosity between nations. It softens and polishes the manners of men" (Quoted in Hirschman, *Passions*, 61).

27. It echoes the comments by Davenant in 1771 that "le négoce est par sa nature affaire de liberté; il trouve ses chemins et dirige au mieux ses entreprises; toutes les lois qui tentent de la limiter, de la réglementer et de l'orienter peuvent être utiles à des intérêts particuliers, mais sont bien rarement avantageuses au public" (Quoted by Deyon, 68).

<sup>28</sup>. Diderot exhorts his readers: "protégez l'industrie, mais gardez-vous de lui commander" (58).

<sup>29</sup>. George Rudé claims that the poor may have in fact constituted about a fifth of the population (90).

<sup>30</sup>. Foucault writes: "The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events. But the archive is also that which determines that all these things said do not accumulate endlessly in an amorphous mass ... it is that which, at the very root of the statement-event, and in that which embodies it, defines at the outset *the system of its enunciability*" (129).

<sup>31</sup>. The basic flaw in the system, namely the accumulation of capital without actual production, is also not dealt with in contemporary theory. Barbéris writes: "Quiconque a réussi par la thésaurisation et l'épargne, à se constituer une réserve d'or, peut assurer sa subsistance et continuer à s'enrichir sans avoir à produire personnellement des biens nouveaux" (196).

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