

## Diderot and the education of the people

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In 1773, Diderot, normally so attached to his home comforts, began a long voyage – the only one he would make outside France. He decided to travel to Saint Petersburg to thank Empress of Russia Catherine the Great for having bought his personal library. The latter had been gracious enough to add that the sale would be made “on the sole condition that use [of the library] be reserved for M. Diderot, until such a time that it pleases Her Majesty to request it”. There was another gesture of generosity, too: Diderot would receive an annuity of three hundred pistols, allowing him to live comfortably until the end of his days. For Diderot had sold his library to provide a suitable dowry for his much-loved daughter Angélique, the only of his children to reach adulthood.



**Figure 1: Catherine the Great of Russia (1729–1796), Empress of Russia (1762–1796); Denis Diderot.** Both painted by the painter Dimitri Levitzky, 1735–1822; the portrait of Diderot was painted during his stay in Petersburg. (First portrait: Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow; second portrait: Geneva Musée d’Art).

On his way to Russia, Diderot began by spending two months in The Hague at the home of the Russian ambassador, Prince Dimitri Galitsine. It was there that he was given a posthumous work by Helvétius entitled *A Treatise on Man*. Diderot read the publication carefully and, on his return, wrote his *Réfutation suivie de l'ouvrage d'Helvétius* (which would be published in the periodical *Correspondance littéraire* from January 1783 to March 1786, i.e. two years after Diderot's death).

This text is scathing about one of Helvétius's arguments in particular, and one which is of direct concern to us: innate or natural intellectual differences – i.e. aptitudes. For Helvétius, individuals are strictly identical, which means that only education makes them different. Diderot refuses to accept this hypothesis; while education should not be neglected – far from it, as the chosen text clearly shows – it requires an enabling environment. If natural talents exist, they also need to be educated. But conversely, without natural dispositions and a taste for the affairs of the mind, education is ineffective.

On arriving in Petersburg in the month of October, in the midst of festivities held in honour of the marriage of the Grand-Duke, Diderot had some trouble finding a place to lodge, rest and come round after his journey. But, once settled, the philosopher was treated to the warmest of welcomes from *this great and amiable sovereign*. *She has*, he wrote to Sophie Volland, *the soul of Caesar and all the charms of Cleopatra*. In this same letter (CLXXXVI), he also writes:

*I saw the Sovereign, I saw her every day. I saw her tête-à-tête: from three o'clock, always until five, sometimes until six.*

We know little else about these interviews: their number, the proceedings, who set the subjects, and whether they were prepared in advance or, on the contrary, improvised and then recorded in abridged form by Diderot. All we have are the *Mémoires* – and even these were not available in France until 1899. There are sixty-six in all, covering the most varied of themes: "The administration of justice", "Luxury", "On tolerance", "Intolerance", "Divorce", and even "A reverie of mine, Denis the philosophe". They also vary vastly in length: some are *bona fide* essays (such as "Historical essay on the police force in France from its origins to its current extinction"); some are very brief notes.

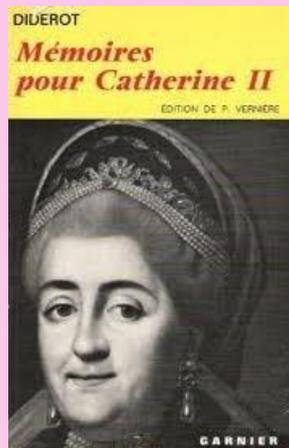
Of course, many of the texts – more than a third – are concerned with education: "The cadet school", "On the girls' boarding house", "On the education

of foundlings”, “Private education – The fundamental flaw of this education”, or simply, “Public schools”. It is this last article that we will focus on in this analysis. It perfectly distils the originality of Diderot’s position, particularly in comparison with his contemporaries, the most famous among them J.-J. Rousseau, author of a treaty on education.

### 1. Diderot in the words of Catherine the Great

“Your Diderot is an extraordinary man; I emerge from my interviews with him with my thighs bruised and quite black. I have been obliged to put a table between us to protect myself and my limbs from his gesticulation.<sup>1</sup> The author of these *Mémoires*, described here in a letter from Catherine the Great to Mme Geoffrin, was indeed an extraordinary man. ‘I tell Your Imperial Majesty everything that crosses my mind ...’ declared Diderot, his words punctuated by an occasional tap of the imperial thighs.”

[Extract of a review by Blake T. Hanna, in *Études françaises*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1966, of a re-edition by Paul Vernière of the *Mémoires pour Catherine II* (Garnier, 1966)]



### 2. The journey of the *Mémoires pour Catherine II*

“And so, the Empress’s library contained a report on her discussions with Diderot [...] Reincorporated into the tsars’ personal library, its existence was discreetly revealed to Maurice Tourneux, the editor of Diderot’s *Œuvres complètes*. The latter discreetly made himself a copy in 1881. In 1899, he published the interviews, rearranged in coherent groups, in his *Diderot et Catherine II* (Calmann-Lévy). Deposited at the

1. [Translator’s note] English translation cited in Havelock Ellis, *The New Spirit*, London, Walter Scott, 1921, p. 47, available on <https://archive.org/details/newspiritwithnew00elli>.

Imperial Library, the manuscript was once again mislaid during the revolution of 1917. Rediscovered in 1952 in the National Archives of Moscow, it is now conserved in the Manuscripts Department at the library of the Winter Palace [...]

We have a librarian's indiscretion to thank for the publication of *Diderot et Catherine II*. The copy made – hastily and surreptitiously – by Tourneux was littered with errors [...] Using a microfilm of the original, the editor of the *Mémoires* detected in Tourneux's text a total of 445 errors in 399 pages,<sup>2</sup> some of which literally disfigure the text. 'In short,' Vernière declares, 'rarely has it been necessary to correct such a dangerously corrupted text'."

[Ibid.]

### **"TO EDUCATE A NATION IS TO CIVILISE IT"**

*Your Majesty has founded two boarding houses, which prepare pupils of rare worth. But these two great houses cannot accommodate all children; and among those who remain scattered and neglected across the empire, perpetuating ignorance and prejudices, there are certainly some that nature has destined for great things [...]*

*In all lands, almost all men who distinguish themselves in the sciences and arts are of lowly origin, and the reason for this is simple. These common ranks produce a thousand men for every nobleman. The former are raised more severely. Less dear to their poverty-stricken parents, they are less corrupted; they do not think that one knows everything without having to learn it; they worry themselves; they work; they are in haste to transcend their mediocre station, which is their only means to procure the comforts of life they are denied, or to console themselves with the good opinion of society, the esteem of their peers, and the consciousness of their own value.*

Wise words. The same ideas, in fully developed form, can be found in his *Plan d'une université ou d'une éducation publique dans toutes les sciences*, which he wrote for Catherine the Great directly upon his return from Russia in 1775. Notably, the idea that

*A university is a school whose door is open indiscriminately to all the nation's children [...]*

which he develops as follows:

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2. [BibNum note] As regards XXV, *Public schools*, Tourneux's text from 1899 did not appear erroneous to us, and it is therefore this edition we have chosen to publish.

*I say indiscriminately, because it would be as cruel as it is absurd to condemn the subaltern ranks of society to ignorance. Such ranks contain knowledge of which society cannot be deprived without suffering the consequences. As the number of thatched cottages and other private dwellings compared to that of palaces is of a ratio of ten thousand to one, it is ten thousand times more likely that genius, talents and virtue will emerge from a cottage than from a palace.*

But there is more to come:

*The less opulence surrounding the newborn infant's cradle, the more parents appreciate the necessity of education, and the more seriously and sooner the infant will become assiduous.*

On this point, then – and it is certainly not the only one – Diderot clashes with his friend/enemy, Rousseau. In *Émile*, the latter writes:

*The poor man does not need to be educated. His station gives him a compulsory education. He could have no other. On the contrary, the education the rich man receives from his station is that which suits him least, from both his own point of view and that of society.<sup>3</sup>*

While Diderot accepts this last assertion, and we will see below the rationale he provides, this does not prevent him concluding that the poor man also needs education.

Education, for Rousseau, is negative. It is a process of undoing all the evils that society has produced and of returning, as far as is possible, to a state close to that of nature. Furthermore – and this is the theme of Rousseau's first *Discourse* – knowledge does not lead to virtue. Quite the reverse. This is very much at odds with Diderot's view, as the first paragraph of the *Plan d'une université* demonstrates quite clearly:

*To educate a nation is to civilise it. To stifle its knowledge is to push it back to a primitive barbarian condition. Greece was barbaric; it educated itself and flourished. What is it today? Ignorant and barbaric. Italy was barbaric; it educated itself and flourished. When the sciences and arts drifted away, what did it become? Barbaric. Such was also the fate of Africa and Egypt; and such will be destiny of all empires in all lands on earth and in all centuries to come.*

But there is also another, very concrete argument in favour of educating children belonging to the lower classes. It is found in the following footnote in the text on public schools, and could have almost been written today:

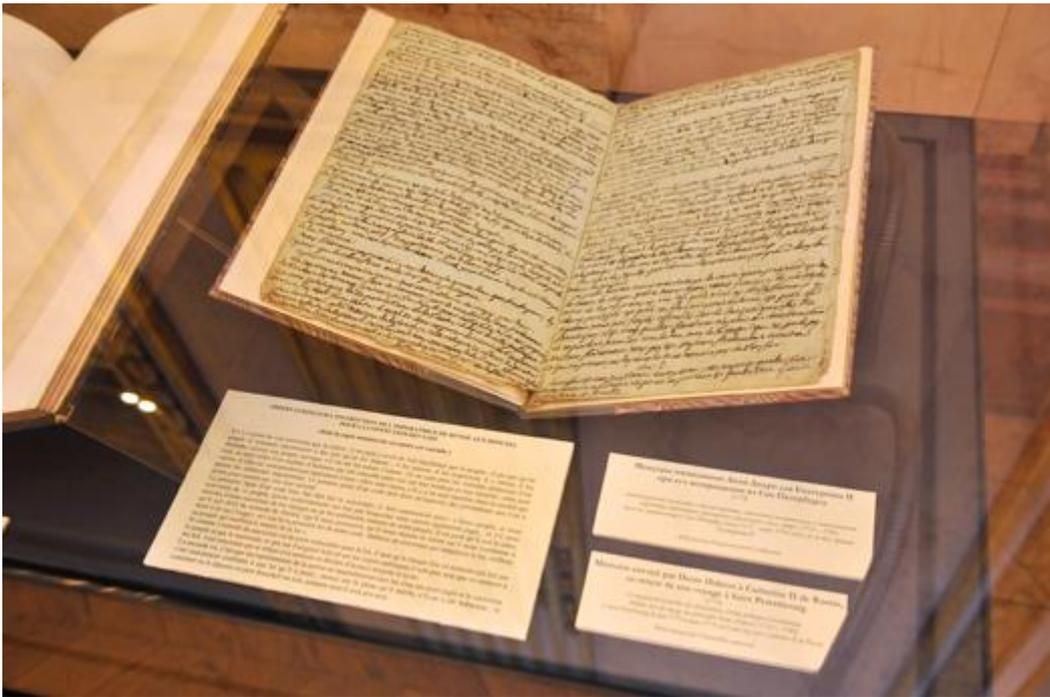
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3. [Translator's note] Translation by Allan Bloom, *Emile, Or, On Education*, Dartmouth College Press, 2010, p. 179.

*It is from the low or lowliest stations in society, where children remain without education of any kind, that villains of all hues originate. In Paris attempts were made to take them from their parents, and this act of violence sparked revolt. Instead they should have been obliged to attend public schools and have been given bread in these schools.*

Hence why Diderot concludes:

*Be that as it may, for all empires, the lower stations in society will be the breeding ground of the present and future morals, knowledge, talents, glory and illustriousness of their nations.*



**Figure 2: Essay sent by Diderot to Catherine the Great upon his return from his visit to Saint Petersburg (1774).** A manuscript copy of this essay is held at the French National Assembly and was presented at the France-Russia exhibition at the National Assembly Library (June 2010). (Photo © Assemblée Nationale, Paris)

### **"BUT WHAT IS THIS EDUCATION FOR?"**

*What importance can we ascribe to it? To what end does it lead us? To be more or less agreeable in society; to outstrip a rival in winning a woman's affections; to dine on intimate terms with a lord; to please; to be welcomed by viziers afflicted by the deepest boredom, whom we amuse; to win a kind of esteem from a people that will soon be short of bread and for whom the only thing remaining is the circus; to drink delicious wines; to make charming trips to the countryside; to be rewarded, in the end, for ten years of court fatigues, by a position one has snatched by one's merit. That is our sole reward, and we exploit it to the full.*

These lines are taken from a text entitled "Private education – The fundamental flaw of this education. Competition for places – The remedy for this flaw". It concerns the education administered in the only two educational institutions that existed in Russia at the time (and which Diderot alludes in the first line of the text on public schools), that is to say the girls' boarding house and the cadet school. Diderot had clearly visited both and obtained very detailed information on how they were organised, for he devotes a special interview to each institution.



**Figure 3: Tuchkov buyan, or the Saint Petersburg Cadet School.** It was built on the banks of the Neva by the architect Antonio Rinaldi from 1763 to 1772. (Photo WikiCommons; author: Potekhin CC-BY-SA).

The flaw in these schools is that they lack "emulation", and to remedy this, he suggests replicating

*what we do: diligent pupils receive special ranks. These special ranks are contested every eight days. Some ranks confer honour; some disgrace. Every week the pupils change ranks. Twice a year there are public exercises for each class, from the youngest infants to the eldest. The subject of these exercises is announced in a printed programme. These programmes are distributed to all homes. Academicians, educated men, parents, friends, acquaintances: all citizens are invited. The guests attend, and all pupils in attendance are seated on high benches. All the guests are permitted to question them on the subject announced in the programme; they answer, and are applauded or booed. Those who are not sufficiently prepared to enter these exercises are presented to their parents and the public as idlers and simpletons; they lie low, and it takes months before they dare show themselves again.*

Such competitions were used to evaluate pupils, and later on, to recruit adult men on the basis of merit rather than birth or fortune. This is why Diderot repeatedly recommends such a system and attaches great importance to it. Indeed, Diderot's underlying objective is political. It entails creating a new

society in Russia, one with an enlightened middle class. Was Diderot aware of the impertinence and scope of his curriculum?

*When this would be but a charming reverie, Your Majesty will smile, and the dreamer, who has no ambition other than to confide to Your Majesty his honest and preposterous thoughts, will have all the reward he could hope for.*

Or, in the interview on public schools:

*I sense the great importance of the subject to be discussed, and little is required for me to give up altogether, so beyond me does it seem.*

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Nonetheless, far from cutting himself short, Diderot pursues his task to its conclusion, scorning not even the slightest of practical details. He considers the shape of classrooms – he prefers circles (that is, amphitheatres) – because the master can make himself better heard and supervise the pupils, and also remarks:

*Too many children should not be entrusted to one schoolmaster. This point is important.*

But the most important point is elsewhere:

*Her Imperial Majesty desires that the education provided in her public schools be civil, that is to say concerned with the good of society, and suitable, at least from its earliest stages to a certain level, for all ranks and all individuals. She desires that a child having followed the whole curriculum be an honest and very educated child in every respect. For this, I believe one should consider three grades in such a system of education.*

The first is *Common to all children, even the most inept*. At this level, teaching is fundamentally and uniquely utilitarian. It consists in the acquisition of reading, writing and basic arithmetic. On this subject, we can cite Voltaire, who in 1766 wrote:

*It seems to me essential that there should be ignorant beggars. If you were trying to exploit a piece of land like me, and if you owned a few ploughs, you would think the way I do. It is not the manual labourer who needs education, but the good bourgeois, the townsman.<sup>4</sup>*

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4. Cited by Dolle, J. M., *Politique et pédagogie : Diderot et les problèmes de l'éducation*, Paris, Vrin, 1973; [Translator's note] English translation cited in Xavier Martin, *Human Nature and the French Revolution: From the Enlightenment to the Napoleonic Code*, Oxford, Berghan Books, 2001, p. 139.

But this first level of education has another effect – a secondary effect admittedly, but nonetheless an important one. It is that it detects the “inept”, a category Diderot defines in the *Plan d’une Université*:

*By inept I mean a pupil with neither willingness nor talent. It is better to risk sending genius astray than to deprive the subaltern professions of a multitude of children and abandon them to all the vices that follow on from ignorance and idleness.*

The same recommendation is found in the text on public schools. The consequence is the following:

*In going about things like this, we will see classes become more enlightened as they move up the grades. The number of students will decline, leaving for the last stage of the education only those truly marked out by nature to become poets, philosophers, orators, scholars, etc., all of whom are useless to society if they do not excel.*

The transition to the second grade, *Which a child can pursue to a greater or lesser extent*, is not related to the age, but to the abilities of each pupil:

*Each class should be considered as a whole, each with its own divisions; and the time spent by the pupils in each of these divisions must be determined by their progress alone. There are pupils who learn quickly and easily, and others whose minds are late in developing, and slow. [...] One must not allow a student to advance one step in his career if he does not know what goes before and what he is capable of learning.*

At this level the subjects studied are essentially scientific: basic geometry, mechanics, geography, anatomy and experimental physics. This curriculum is a manifesto against Jesuit education:

*Our education, confined to the study of languages, has until now been monastic. It appears that all the children shut up in our colleges are destined either for the magistrature or the Church. For six or seven years we are exposed to a language we do not learn. Until the present reign things have remained as they were taught under Charlemagne, a time when the study of Latin, used in all civil affairs, was indispensable.*

Diderot himself had experienced such teaching in his hometown of Langres. Quickly acknowledged as a prodigious student – he won every prize going – he was tonsured at the age of thirteen and destined to become a canon. But he quickly renounced such a career to devote himself to study, thereby leaving this ecclesiastical office to his younger brother, Didier-Pierre, who was in fact far better suited to it.

The third and final grade is reserved to a select few, for it *leads to erudition*. The *Plan d'une université* reads:

*A nation must be populous and rich if lots of these individuals are to think while others work without this entailing unfortunate consequences.*

In this same work, he suggests a useful role for this group of men: to compose school books, or textbooks of sorts.

*Why are these abridgements so rare? It is perhaps because this is work for methodical and profound men alone. It is no easy matter for a half-scholar, or even a scholar, to order truths, define terms, discern what is elementary and essential from what is not, be clear and precise [...] This is an undertaking to be shared among all the scholars of Europe.*

Once again, Diderot knows what he is talking about, after years spent writing articles for the *Encyclopédie*. He ends the paragraph on a quip:

*Let Her Imperial Majesty tell M. d'Alembert: "Monsieur Alembert, write me every school book on the science of mathematics, and write them M. d'Alembert will, and well.*

### **"THAT THEY MAY LEARN EQUALITY"**

Three categories of pupils attend the public schools: scholarship pupils, who belong to the subaltern classes, and boarders and day pupils from well-to-do classes. Diderot is well aware that this mixing of classes is not always straightforward:

*I have noticed that the boarders and day pupils look down on the scholarship pupils. I can think of no other remedy to this drawback than absolute separation, either in two boarding schools, or one.*

This, however, is not an adequate solution, because contempt among children from different backgrounds can arise even within one category of schoolchildren. Among boarders, for example, some are richer than others, and this arouses jealousy. In this case, Diderot adopts the opposite position:

*that they may mix together and learn equality; that a high-born boarder be equally subject to the rule of the schoolmaster as the common boarder; and that the latter may take revenge if the other is insolent. I would refrain from encouraging quarrels between them, but I would not be angry if one occurred.*

Diderot clearly takes a virile approach to education. He is not averse to youngsters fighting, using up their excess energy and as it were toughening

themselves up in such jousts. In the interview on the cadet school, he justifies this point of view by recalling a personal memory:

*I remember that when we were the age of these children, my companions and I had the idea to demolish one of the bastions in my town and spend a week in prison. And yet it was said that the parents of the town had never seen such a happy clutch of children. I regret that this education, which produced robust bodies and strong, courageous and free souls, has been succeeded by effeminate, pedantic and rigid education.*

Scholarships are reserved for poor children, in whom, as we have seen, Diderot places his highest hopes for society, and whom “the college adopts”:

*I would wish that parents forfeit all authority over their children for the duration of the education. Absolutely no financial outlay will be required of them. They would like to improve their lot, which would have to be resisted [...] As there cannot be as many scholarships as there are destitute children, an available scholarship will encourage competition. This will be a new means of emulation for parents and children.*

Finally, there are the day pupils, and these are the ones who must be watched over most closely:

*I would impose on these children a school uniform. The register would be called by the schoolmasters, and absences would be checked. Without these measures, they would be apt to play truant, as we say. Only genuine sickness would be considered a legitimate excuse. The pupil who cannot be induced to respect the rules is engaged in an activity which is uncongenial to him; he must be promptly sent elsewhere.*



**Figure 4: Plaque inaugurated in January 1991 on the façade of the Naryshkin mansion in Saint Petersburg** (where Diderot stayed on the invitation of the diplomat Prince Alexis Vassilievitch Narychkine, 1742–1800).

As the issue at stake is equality, let's now turn to Diderot's views on girls' education. He devotes two interviews to the subject, or more precisely, to Her Majesty's "girls' boarding houses". Though the interview seems to relate to the education of young noblewomen, this is never made explicit. One thing seems clear to Diderot: *no form of enclosure is too severe*.

This is why, in the second interview, the "house" is described as a "convent" for the education of *mothers, wives and learned, honest and useful female citizens*. Thus, taking the education that he himself provided his daughter as an example, he recommends *a basic anatomy lesson using injected wax models that are true to nature but do not arouse disgust*, a practice he justifies in the following terms:

*The body is such an important part of each man! The frail machine of woman is so subject to disturbances! A woman becomes a mother, and a smattering of anatomical knowledge greatly befits her both before, during and after becoming one!*

The – slightly unexpected – result of this education is as follows:

*It is thus that I nipped my daughter's curiosity at its root. Once she knew everything, she no longer sought to know anything more. Her imagination abated and her morals were left purer than ever.*

These anatomy lessons are also lessons of morality, and exclusively feminine morality at that. For, not only is Angélique capable of recognising inappropriate reading material – *Candide*, for instance, is *a reprehensible book* – she dismisses the young swain who recommended it to her. Hence the conclusion of the interview:

*Thus forewarned, my daughter could listen to all the sweet nothings in the world: but who was the fool? It was the sweet talker whom, after hearing him out, she looked at scornfully over her shoulder or left behind in a burst of laughter.*

### **"TO HER IMPERIAL MAJESTY"**

As with all the texts that make up the *Mémoires pour Catherine II*, the interest of this text resides in the delicate position in which Diderot finds himself. Having journeyed to Russia to thank the sovereign for her generosity, Diderot also wished to make himself useful. Caught between showing the necessary respect for such a noble benefactor, and intoxicated by the plans bubbling in his

head, he moved constantly back and forth between what was feasible and what was not. Converting the Empress to the philosophy of the Enlightenment, and founding a new society – in a country he knew little, but well enough to realise that everything had to be begun afresh – was, he knew, a chimera and dream. He thus ends his long “Historical essay on the police force” on an ironic note:

*I take the liberty of conveying these reveries to her Imperial Majesty, so she understands the great difference between the ideas of a poor devil who takes it upon himself to spout politics under his drainpipe and the thoughts that cross the mind of a sovereign. There you have, Madam, the full scope of the force we call philosophy. Smile at it, and when you have smiled, I will have obtained from Your Majesty all the justice I promised myself [...] Nothing is easier than managing an empire with one's head resting on a pillow. Then everything goes as planned. When one is confronted with reality and obliged to get down to work, I believe it is quite another thing. Her Majesty was gracious enough to tell that she had often read several volumes before coming across a sensible line. I dare ask from her nothing more than one last quarter of an hour. And even that is asking too much.*

*I present her my profound respect and very humble excuses.*

Yet it can also be argued that it is this ambivalent position that gives his remarks on education all their originality. For Diderot, this was also an opportunity, just as “the compilation of the *Encyclopédie*” had been, to reflect and study. Above all, it was also the opportunity to try to put his ideas and theories into practice.



*(June 2013)*

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