

Burning Laws and Strangling Kings? Voltaire and Diderot on the Perils of Rationalism in Politics

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Abstract: The thinkers of the French Enlightenment are frequently depicted as political rationalists, meaning that they advocated subjecting all laws, institutions, and practices to the withering light of reason, and discarding those found wanting by its standards. However, two of the most prominent philosophes, Voltaire and Diderot, were in fact *opponents* of the kind of political rationalism that they are often thought to have embraced. Both of these thinkers rejected the idea of a single “rational” political order, advocated gradual reform rather than wholesale change, and denied that the steady application of reason could produce inevitable or endless progress. In effect the Enlightenment was a “revolt against rationalism” (as Peter Gay has called it) not only in the epistemological, psychological, and ethical spheres, but also in the political one.

Despite the seemingly unshakable moniker “The Age of Reason,” it has long been known, at least among those familiar with the scholarly literature on the period, that almost none of the key thinkers who made up the Enlightenment believed that reason alone could or should rule the world. On the contrary, most of the leading thinkers of the eighteenth century held that it is not reason but the passions or sentiments that serve as both the chief motivating force of human action and the ultimate basis from which moral norms are derived. Hence, as Sylvana Tomaselli writes, “it would be mistaken to think of reason as the rallying cry of Enlightenment thinkers except in so far as it was opposed to faith, and the Age of Reason opposed to the Age of Superstition. If one’s gaze shifts away from the battles with *l’Infâme*, then the ‘Age of Sentiments,’ ‘Sentimentality,’ ‘Feelings,’ ‘Passions,’ ‘Pleasure,’ ‘Love’ or ‘Imagination’ are apter titles for the movement of ideas in the eighteenth century.”¹ Moreover, Enlightenment thinkers were consistent—even obsessive—in their denigration and mocking of system-building. They advocated relying on experience and experiment rather than on a priori first principles, and, so far from having boundless confidence in the power of unaided reason, they continually stressed the limits and fallibility of human

¹Sylvana Tomaselli, “Reason,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Enlightenment*, ed. John W. Yolton (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 446.

understanding.² The Enlightenment conception of reason was, in short, far humbler than that found in the great metaphysical thinkers of the seventeenth century such as Descartes, Malebranche, Spinoza, and Leibniz. Thus, Peter Gay rightly declares that “the Enlightenment was not an Age of Reason, but a Revolt against Rationalism.”³

Yet it is still frequently claimed that the thinkers of the Enlightenment—especially the French Enlightenment—embraced rationalism in the *political* sphere, meaning that they advocated subjecting all laws, institutions, and practices to the withering light of reason, and discarding those found wanting by its standards. Many critics have contended that this kind of political rationalism invariably leads to misguided attempts at social engineering and upheavals like the French Revolution, and contrast it with a more practical, pragmatic outlook that aims to repair or reform existing institutions rather than to form a wholly new “rational” order from scratch. The view of the philosophes as misguided political rationalists in this sense has a long and distinguished history. It arose soon after the end of the French Enlightenment, when thinkers such as Edmund Burke and Joseph de Maistre blamed the philosophes and their writings for prompting the excesses of the French Revolution.⁴ This view was carried on in the nineteenth century by thinkers as diverse as G. W. F. Hegel and Alexis de Tocqueville, and it reached a kind of high point during the Cold War, when the dangers of rationalism in politics were a key area of concern for scholars ranging from Michael Oakeshott and Friedrich Hayek to Isaiah Berlin and Jacob Talmon.⁵

²D’Alembert’s “Preliminary Discourse” to the *Encyclopedia*, for instance, famously contrasts the inductive and empirical “systematic spirit” (*esprit systématique*) of his own age with the deductive and rationalist “spirit of system” (*esprit de système*) of the seventeenth century. See Jean Le Rond d’Alembert, *Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopedia of Diderot*, trans. Richard N. Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 22–23, 94–95.

³Peter Gay, *The Party of Humanity: Essays in the French Enlightenment* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), 270. See also Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, vol. 2, *The Science of Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), 187–207.

⁴See Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J. C. D. Clark (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 249–52, 275–77; and Joseph de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, trans. Richard A. Lebrun (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 47–48.

⁵See G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 328–55; Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, trans. Alan S. Kahan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 195–97, 200–202; Michael Oakeshott, “The New Bentham,” in *Rationalism in Politics, and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), 137–40; Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 54–56; Isaiah Berlin, “The Counter-Enlightenment,” in *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 243–46; and Jacob L. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970), *passim*.

Today, the idea that the philosophes were political rationalists is simply taken for granted by many political theorists and philosophers. It is true that scholars who specialize in the thought of one or the other of the philosophes—some of whom will be cited later in this essay—often recognize that they were far from believing that reason could solve all political problems. Yet the handful of more nuanced studies of individual philosophes has done little to change the general view of the French Enlightenment, especially because political theorists and philosophers rarely pay much attention to thinkers of eighteenth-century France outside of Montesquieu and Rousseau; the idea that the other philosophes were utopian rationalists is left largely unquestioned in the literature. Predictably, critics of the Enlightenment often take special aim at the philosophes and their alleged rationalism, such as when John Gray claims that they all “subscribed to a single project,” namely the ill-conceived endeavor to “supplant the diverse traditions and religious beliefs by which humanity has hitherto been ruled with a new morality whose authority is rational and universal.”⁶ It is not only the Enlightenment’s critics who take this view, however: scholars who seek to defend other eighteenth-century thinkers and contexts often make an exception for the French Enlightenment, conceding that the philosophes exemplify the worst aspects of the period. Gertrude Himmelfarb, for instance, contends that the French and British Enlightenments constituted separate and fundamentally different “roads to modernity”—the former radical, abstract, foundationalist, and rationalist and the latter sensible, empirical, pluralist, and pragmatic. She aims to encapsulate the French Enlightenment with the phrase “the ideology of reason,” since (she claims) the “exalted mission” of the philosophes was “to make reason the governing principle of society as well as mind, to ‘rationalize,’ as it were, the world.”⁷

Even scholars of the French Enlightenment frequently subscribe to this view. In the chapter on France in the widely cited *The Enlightenment in National Context*, for example, Norman Hampson claims, much as Tocqueville had, that the inability of the philosophes to influence policy in *ancien-régime* France led them to become radicals rather than reformers—thinkers who approached politics through abstract speculations and “messianic dreams” rather than concrete ideas for practical improvement.⁸ Likewise, Maurice Cranston writes that Voltaire and the *encyclopédistes* “aspired to realize in France the Baconian dream of the sovereignty of reason” via a

⁶John Gray, *Voltaire* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 17; see also 20, 22, 50–51. See also John Gray, *Enlightenment’s Wake: Politics and Culture at the Close of the Modern Age* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 31, 65–66, 101, 122, 167.

⁷Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Roads to Modernity: The British, French, and American Enlightenments* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 19; see also part 2 more generally.

⁸Norman Hampson, “The Enlightenment in France,” in *The Enlightenment in National Context*, ed. Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 46–47.

kind of enlightened monarchy,⁹ and Louis Dupré contends that “the philosophes regarded it as their task to emancipate the whole political system from its past tradition and to bring it in conformity with reason.”¹⁰ Montesquieu is sometimes singled out as an exception to the rule, but this only serves to underscore the fact that most scholars see the other philosophes as reckless rationalists. Indeed, Montesquieu scholars frequently contrast his moderation and pragmatism with the radicalism and rationalism of the rest of the French Enlightenment, such as when David Carrithers claims that “his rejection of geometrical spirit sets Montesquieu apart from the later, more doctrinaire, reformist *philosophes* who sought to define a perfect world and get there—whatever the cost.”¹¹

Different critics emphasize different elements of this charge, but in general they combine three related allegations. First, they claim that the philosophes believed in the existence of a single ideal form of government or set of laws that can and should be applied universally—the government and laws that accord with “reason” or “nature.” There can be no room for a sensible compromise or a “best in the circumstances,” according to this view, but only a perfect (because perfectly rational) order. Tocqueville, for example, claims not only that the philosophes sought to replace “complicated and traditional customs” with “basic and simple principles, derived from reason,” but that “the political philosophy of the eighteenth century consisted of this single idea.”¹² Second, the critics continue, because the philosophes saw traditions, customs, and existing arrangements as little more than burdens to be overcome, they advocated eliminating the old order completely so that society could be rebuilt anew on a more rational basis, much as the French revolutionaries later sought to do. As Oakeshott writes, if “the blank sheet of infinite possibility ... has been defaced by the irrational scribbings of tradition-ridden ancestors, then the first task of the Rationalist must be to scrub it clean: as Voltaire remarked, the only way to have good laws is to burn all existing laws and to start afresh.”¹³ Finally, the critics contend, the

⁹Maurice Cranston, *Philosophers and Pamphleteers: Political Theorists of the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 1; see also 3, 7–8.

¹⁰Louis Dupré, *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 181.

¹¹David W. Carrithers, “Introduction: An Appreciation of *The Spirit of Laws*,” in *Montesquieu’s Science of Politics: Essays on “The Spirit of Laws,”* ed. David W. Carrithers, Michael A. Mosher, and Paul A. Rahe (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 15. Similarly, Himmelfarb admits that Montesquieu is an exception to her larger thesis, asserting that he was “more representative of the British Enlightenment than of the French.” Himmelfarb, *The Roads to Modernity*, 15; see also 18, 21, 151, 160–63.

¹²Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, 196.

¹³Michael Oakeshott, “Rationalism in Politics,” in *Rationalism in Politics, and Other Essays*, 9. Oakeshott maintains in this essay that the key progenitors of rationalism

philosophes thought that once rational laws have been put in place, the ultimate result will be inevitable and possibly endless progress in all human realms; the steady application of reason can and will lead to a kind of utopia, or at least the continual improvement of human life. As Berlin states, the philosophes believed that once the comprehensive rational order has been effected, it will “rescue men from political and moral injustice and misery and set them on the path of wisdom, happiness, and virtue.”¹⁴

Of the leading thinkers of the French Enlightenment, Voltaire and Diderot might seem at first glance to be among the best exemplars of this tendency toward political rationalism. Voltaire’s celebrated catchphrase, “*écrasez l’infâme*” (crush the infamous), is frequently understood as an uncompromising call to destroy the church or even the old regime altogether, and Gustave Lanson famously claimed over a century ago that Voltaire’s *Letters Concerning the English Nation* “was the first bomb dropped on the *ancien régime*.”¹⁵ Voltaire scholars have often celebrated his political rationalism, such as when Constance Rowe asserts that Voltaire “defined for all thinking people those universal claims of reason which he believed should be enforced by the State.”¹⁶ Likewise, in his massive biography of Voltaire, Theodore Besterman portrays him as an almost unqualified believer in “progress through reason,” even going so far as to declare that “nobody could read ten consecutive pages from his pen without realising that belief in perfectibility . . . was as close to him as his skin.”¹⁷ Diderot, for his part, is notorious for declaring his longing for the day when the last king would be strangled with the entrails of the last priest, and the *Encyclopedia* that he edited is often referred to as a *machine de guerre*—the war being, of course, against the old regime and all it stood for. Indeed, Anthony Strugnell argues that late in life Diderot adopted “the most uncompromising radicalism” and even that

were not the philosophes but Bacon and Descartes, both of whom attempted to formulate new, infallible techniques of inquiry that would yield certain and universally applicable knowledge. He acknowledges that both of these thinkers harbored doubts about the techniques that they developed, but claims that rationalism arose from “the exaggeration of Bacon’s hopes and the neglect of the scepticism of Descartes.” Oakeshott speaks only vaguely of later “commonplace minds” who corrupted or simplified the thought of these “men of discrimination and genius,” but his earlier depiction of the philosophes in “The New Bentham” suggests that he saw them as having played a large role in this process. See “Rationalism in Politics,” 22.

¹⁴Berlin, “The Counter-Enlightenment,” 244.

¹⁵Gustave Lanson, *Voltaire*, trans. Robert A. Wagoner (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1960), 48.

¹⁶Constance Rowe, *Voltaire and the State* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), 6.

¹⁷Theodore Besterman, *Voltaire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 361, 364; see also 298, 300.

he was “the first effective advocate in the modern world of social and political reconstruction through violent revolution.”¹⁸ Geoffrey Bremner, for his part, contends that the fundamental impetus behind all of Diderot’s thought was the desire to impose order on the world, to make it rational and unified—in the political sphere just as in the psychological, aesthetic, and ethical spheres.¹⁹ The idea that Voltaire and Diderot were political rationalists and advocates of revolution was also advanced by the French revolutionaries themselves, who canonized Voltaire, moving his remains to the Pantheon in 1791, and then embraced Diderot as one of their own in 1796, when, in the midst of the Thermidorian reaction, a number of his previously unpublished writings were released, including the *Supplement to Bougainville’s Voyage*, *Jacques the Fatalist*, *The Nun*, and the poem that includes the line about strangling the last king with the entrails of the last priest, entitled *Les Eleuthéromanes*.²⁰

I will argue in this essay, however, that Voltaire and Diderot were not in fact political rationalists in the sense outlined above. Indeed, each element of this charge is dubious as applied to these two thinkers. First of all, neither Voltaire nor Diderot believed in a single “rational” political order that could or should be applied universally; on the contrary, they both insisted that regimes and laws must be suited to a society’s particular circumstances. Further, so far from advocating wiping the political slate clean in order to form a wholly new order, Voltaire and Diderot both showed a strong preference for gradual reform, and—despite the later co-option of their writings and reputation by the revolutionaries—they were both lifelong opponents of a general right to revolution. Finally, these two philosophes were neither utopians nor naive optimists: they believed that progress, while possible, is far from inevitable, cannot be endless, and will not be uniform. None of this is to say, of course, that they wholly rejected any role for reason or critical reflection in politics: as we will see, they were liberals and reformers, not apologists for the status quo. But nor were they the radical, naively optimistic, abstract rationalists that they have so often been supposed to be.

¹⁸Anthony Strugnell, *Diderot’s Politics: A Study of the Evolution of Diderot’s Political Thought after the “Encyclopédie”* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), 207, 228.

¹⁹See Geoffrey Bremner, *Order and Chance: The Pattern of Diderot’s Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), especially chap. 4.

²⁰It should be noted, however, that Voltaire fell out of favor among the revolutionaries soon after his apotheosis in 1791 (Rousseau being much more in vogue in the later, more radical stages of the revolution), and Diderot was largely ignored by the revolutionaries both before and after the brief period when these works were published in 1796. See Renée Waldinger, *Voltaire and Reform in the Light of the French Revolution* (Geneva: Librairie E. Droz, 1959), 82–86; P. N. Furbank, *Diderot: A Critical Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 456–60.

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Voltaire and Diderot were both, broadly speaking, liberals—they both advocated religious toleration, freedom of expression, commerce, legal reforms to limit torture and other inhumane practices, and so on—which is why they both expressed a good deal of admiration for the government and society of eighteenth-century England.²¹ Voltaire's embrace of England's liberal mixed regime was not confined to his early *Letters Concerning the English Nation* (1733), but rather spanned his career. As late as the entry on "Government" in his *Questions on the Encyclopedia* (1771), we still find him affirming:

In the end this is what English legislation has achieved: the restoration to all men of all those natural rights of which nearly every monarchy deprives them. These rights are: total freedom in matters affecting one's person and one's possessions; the right to speak to the nation through the medium of one's pen; to be judged in criminal matters only by a jury of independent men; to be judged in all cases only in accordance with the precise wording of the law; to follow peacefully any religion one wishes, eschewing posts available only to Anglicans. . . . I venture to say that if the human race were assembled to make laws, people would make them like that for the sake of their security.²²

Diderot's admiration for England's government and society is not as well known as Voltaire's, but it was no less fervent. Late in life, he went so far as to refer to the English government as

that Constitution which, if not perfect or free of faults, is at least the most well-suited to the condition of the country, the most favorable to its commerce, the most appropriate to the development of genius, eloquence and all the faculties of the human mind; perhaps the only one, since man lived in society, in which the laws have ensured him his dignity, personal liberty and freedom of thought; where the laws have made him, in a word, a citizen, that is to say, an integral and constituent part of the state and the nation.²³

²¹This use of the term "liberal" is, of course, anachronistic when applied to eighteenth-century thinkers, but Voltaire's and Diderot's political outlooks fit readily into the tradition that we now call "liberalism" or "classical liberalism."

²²Voltaire, *Questions on the Encyclopaedia*, in *Voltaire: Political Writings*, ed. David Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 60–61. Wherever possible, I have cited widely available English translations of the works of Voltaire and Diderot for ease of reference for nonspecialist readers, although I have occasionally altered the translations slightly for the sake of a more literal rendering. Where reliable English translations are not available, I have cited standard French versions; in these cases, the translations are my own.

²³Denis Diderot, *Histoire des Deux Indes*, in *Diderot: Political Writings*, ed. John Hope Mason and Robert Wokler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 189.

Yet, as we will see in this section, neither Voltaire nor Diderot believed that liberal regimes such as the one found in England were the only rational or legitimate form of government. In fact, they both disavowed the notion of an absolute, universal standard of political legitimacy, arguing instead that regimes and laws must be suited to a society's particular circumstances. There is, for them, simply no such thing as a single "rational" order that could serve as a model for all others.

Throughout his long career and voluminous writings, Voltaire never put forward an ideal regime or set of laws that he conceived of as universally applicable, or even appealed to a universal standard of natural law to judge existing ones.²⁴ In some ways this is not particularly surprising, since almost all of his political writings were occasioned by a specific problem or controversy; his ideas for reform were deeply embedded in the circumstances of eighteenth-century France, not abstract speculations meant to be applied to all possible situations. He goes further than this, however, and suggests that no single blueprint *could* be applicable to all situations—that there is no such thing as a single best regime or set of laws, since "best" is always relative to the character of the people and a host of other factors.²⁵ This helps to explain why his political preferences seemed to vary so drastically: he supported a mixed government with a strong Parliament in England; a more popular republic in Holland and Geneva; a strong monarchy in France (in hopes of diminishing the abuses of the clergy, nobility, and *parlements*); and an even stronger and more centralized one in Frederick's Prussia and Catherine's Russia. No single, "rational" regime or set of laws could possibly fit societies with such varied circumstances and histories. Still further, Voltaire believed that human nature itself undermines the possibility of constructing an ideal or "rational" regime; human beings are sufficiently selfish and foolish that it is impossible to guarantee that any person or group of people will rule well, no matter what institutional arrangements are put in place. As he writes, in a line that encapsulates his political theory as well as any other, "People ask every day whether a republican government is preferable to government by a king. The argument always ends up with agreement that men are very difficult to govern."²⁶

²⁴On Voltaire's refusal to use natural law as a standard by which to judge existing regimes and laws, see Merle L. Perkins, "Voltaire's Principles of Political Thought," *Modern Language Quarterly* 17, no. 4 (1956): 298–300.

²⁵See, for example, Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, trans. Theodore Besterman (New York: Penguin, 2004), 190–94. While Voltaire *did* occasionally suggest that France should be ruled by a uniform civil and criminal code—largely in hopes of curbing local abuses of power like those of the *parlement* of Toulouse that led to the infamous trials of Jean Calas and Pierre-Paul Sirven—he never suggested that this code would be applicable in all times and all nations, or could be constructed wholly in accordance with reason. See, for example, Voltaire, "Commentary on the book *On crimes and punishments*," in *Voltaire: Political Writings*, 278.

²⁶Voltaire, *Questions on the Encyclopaedia*, 37.

In contrast to his hero John Locke, who argued that illiberal governments could not legitimately lay claim to the allegiance of their citizens—and in fact that absolute monarchies could not properly be considered civil societies at all²⁷—Voltaire never posited a universal standard for political legitimacy. Thus, while he generally favored liberal laws, institutions, and practices, he never suggested that all nations must adopt them. This can be seen especially clearly in one of the most frequently criticized aspects of his thought, his penchant for “enlightened despotism.” While Voltaire believed that illiberal regimes often unduly coerce those who live under them, he also held that various factors in the historical development of nations like Prussia and Russia—in particular the need to weaken traditionally privileged bodies such as the nobility and clergy—justified the illiberal rule of Frederick and Catherine.²⁸ Moreover, as much as Voltaire admired the English system, he was adamant that it could not be simply duplicated in France or elsewhere. He stresses that the English regime was liberalized only recently, that it was preceded by centuries upon centuries of tyranny, slavery, religious persecution, and civil war, and that it only came about through a confluence of unique factors, ranging from the fact that Britain is an island (which diminished the need for a large standing army) to the obstinate and freedom-loving English “spirit.”²⁹ Thus, immediately after the encomium of England quoted above, he rhetorically asks, “Why then are these laws not followed in other countries? Is that not the same as asking why coconuts flourish in India, but do not do very well in Rome?”³⁰ As Peter Gay writes:

Voltaire was too good a historian to forget that institutions cannot be simply transplanted from one country to another. England had a vigorous tradition of parliamentarianism, hence the strengthening of the legislature was the road to freedom; France’s legislative bodies had fallen in desuetude or had become spokesmen for class interests, hence in France the road to freedom lay in the strengthening of the king’s ministers. While

²⁷See John Locke, *Second Treatise*, §§ 90–91, in *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 326–27.

²⁸It should be noted, however, that Voltaire distinguished between “absolute” and “despotic” authority, favoring the former in some situations but not the latter. He argued that even “absolute” rulers must rule through and be bound by laws; what he advocated in the case of Frederick and Catherine was rather (extreme) centralization than despotism. Thus, he could perhaps be more accurately described as a proponent of “enlightened royalism” than as one of “enlightened despotism.” See, for example, Voltaire, *The A B C, or Dialogues between A B C*, in *Voltaire: Political Writings*, 98; and Voltaire, *Thoughts on Public Administration*, in *Political Writings*, 221. See also Cranston, *Philosophers and Pamphleteers*, 42; and Gay, *The Party of Humanity*, 29–30.

²⁹See Voltaire, *Questions on the Encyclopaedia*, 56–60.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 61.

Voltaire held his political values from the beginning of his life to the end, he understood that the forms in which they could be realized were various.³¹

In short, Voltaire's liberalism was far more pragmatic than rationalist.³²

Like Voltaire, Diderot never outlined an ideal regime that could serve as a model for all others, and he generally refrained from appealing to a standard of natural law in judging existing ones.³³ He too stressed that circumstances are decisive in determining which laws should be adopted, and thus he sought to discourage attempts at general reform based on abstract, "rational" conceptions of political right. For instance, in his commentary on Catherine's supposedly enlightened "Code" for Russia, he warns her, "I do not know if the Code can ever be as short, simple and clear a work as you imagine."³⁴ Even if a particular law is "good and useful in one circumstance," it is often "bad and harmful in another," and thus wise laws and political decisions require a detailed knowledge of a society's complex history, traditions, and other circumstances.³⁵ As Sankar Muthu notes, this is one of the grounds on which Diderot attacked colonialism: "imperial rule over far-flung territories is unlikely to yield just political institutions; foreigners will be unlikely to know the local circumstances better than indigenous peoples themselves. Moreover, no universally valid, privileged political ideology exists that could guide a would-be conqueror."³⁶ And, just as in the case of Voltaire, there has been little consensus about Diderot's ultimate political preferences: he is sometimes depicted as a proponent of constitutional monarchy, sometimes as a republican or democrat, and sometimes even (in light of his ambivalent relationship with Catherine) as an advocate of "enlightened

³¹Gay, *The Party of Humanity*, 92.

³²Lester Crocker rightly claims that Voltaire was a "pragmatist" who advocated "a limited correction of abuses, not an endeavor, based on abstract truths, to change the bases of society and direct it anew toward a 'rational-natural' ideal" (Lester G. Crocker, *Nature and Culture: Ethical Thought in the French Enlightenment* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1963], 450).

³³Arthur Wilson notes that while Diderot occasionally appealed to the idea of natural law in his *Encyclopedia* articles, he essentially discarded this idea in his mature political thought (Arthur M. Wilson, "The Development and Scope of Diderot's Political Thought," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 27 [1963]: 1873).

³⁴Diderot, *Observations sur le Nakaz*, in *Diderot: Political Writings*, 149.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 88; see also 92, 113. See also the editors' introduction in the same volume, xxxiii–xxxiv.

³⁶Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 79–80.

despotism."³⁷ Once again, no regime is simply the "best" or applicable everywhere and always.

While Diderot went much further than Voltaire in condemning both the absolutism of the French monarchy and the "enlightened" despotisms of Frederick and Catherine, he too refrained from making blanket statements about what is universally necessary for a state to obtain political legitimacy.³⁸ He recognized that appeals to abstract standards of right are likely to do far more harm than good, especially because the stability of a government and its laws depends so heavily on public opinion, which in turn depends more on custom and tradition than on abstract reason.³⁹ Further, Diderot too acknowledged the need to accept imperfections in politics. When Louis XV stripped the Parisian *parlement* of its powers in 1771, Diderot condemned him for doing so, despite the fact that (as he explicitly admits) the *parlement* had

³⁷See Cranston, *Philosophers and Pamphleteers*, 99. This last reading, at least, is almost certainly erroneous: despite his occasional praise of Catherine and some of her reforms, Diderot was a steadfast opponent of enlightened despotism. For instance, he writes to Catherine that "all arbitrary government is bad; I do not except the arbitrary government of a good, firm, just, and enlightened master. Such a master accustoms people to respect and cherish a master, whoever he is. One of the greatest misfortunes that could befall a free nation would be two or three consecutive reigns of a just and enlightened despotism. Three sovereigns in a row like Elizabeth, and the English would have been imperceptibly led toward a slavery of indeterminate length" (Diderot, *Mémoires pour Catherine II* [Paris: Garnier, 1966], 117–18). For an account of the relationship between Diderot and Catherine, see Arthur M. Wilson, *Diderot* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), chaps. 37 and 44.

³⁸Diderot's *Encyclopedia* entry "Political Authority," admittedly, seems to posit a rather strict standard for political legitimacy, suggesting that all rightful authority is derived from a social contract, and thus that all regimes must be both limited and based on the consent of the governed. See Diderot, "Autorité Politique" (article from the *Encyclopedia*), in *Diderot: Political Writings*, 6–11. As several scholars have noted, however, this entry was in fact drawn in large part from the abbé Girard's *Synonymes françois* rather than written by Diderot himself. See John Lough, *Essays on the "Encyclopédie" of Diderot and D'Alembert* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 427–29; Jacques Proust, *Diderot et "l'Encyclopédie,"* 2nd ed. (Paris: Armand Colin, 1967), 560. That this entry does not entirely reflect Diderot's considered views is suggested by the fact that it contains several other statements that diverge sharply from the rest of his writings, such as the claim that every individual "has one supreme master . . . to whom he belongs completely. That is God, whose power over His creatures is always direct" ("Autorité Politique," 7). More importantly, in his mature writings Diderot moved away from the Lockean viewpoint according to which all illiberal regimes can and indeed should be overthrown. Even in the midst of applauding the American colonial rebellion, he insisted that political authority can end up being legitimate whether it begins "with the consent of the subjects or with the strength of the master" (*Histoire des Deux Indes*, 201).

³⁹See Diderot, *Observations sur le Nakaz*, 96–97.

been Gothic in its views and customs, opposed to all reform, intolerant, and a foe of the philosophes; it was still preferable to endure these ills rather than to eliminate the *parlement's* powers, he maintained, since it was one of the few bodies that prevented the king from exercising absolute and arbitrary power.⁴⁰ Nor did Diderot think, any more than did Voltaire, that England's model could or should be applied universally; even in the tribute quoted at the beginning of this section, he notes that the English model is "if not perfect or free of faults . . . at least the most well-suited to the condition of the country."⁴¹ Like Voltaire, then, Diderot not only refused to put forward any single ideal regime, but also understood the real-world model that he most often lauded to be importantly flawed and limited in applicability.

In short, Voltaire and Diderot both consistently eschewed abstract, "rational" political blueprints, believing that such blueprints necessarily ignore the diversity of circumstances and the complexity of human life. Neither of them posited an ideal regime that could serve as a model for all others, and they both emphasized the importance of context in determining which laws a society should adopt. All of this, of course, undercuts the foundations on which any charge of political rationalism must rest—since there is, for them, simply no "rational" order to appeal to—but it still might be claimed that Voltaire and Diderot were radicals or revolutionaries, thinkers who wanted to (as they themselves seem to suggest) burn laws and strangle kings in order to eliminate the injustices that they saw all around them. As we will see in the following section, however, this part of the charge is doubtful as well, in spite of what some of their rhetoric, ripped from its context, might seem to imply.

II

While neither Voltaire nor Diderot believed in a single "rational" set of laws that could be universally applied, both of them hoped that France would move in a broadly liberal direction—that different religious beliefs and practices would come to be tolerated, free expression permitted, commerce promoted, more humane criminal laws adopted, and the like. Yet, as we will see in this section, they did not insist that such changes must be made all at once, or that the social, political, and legal slate must be wiped clean in order to make room for a more liberal order. On the contrary, they advocated piecemeal reform and consistently opposed the "spirit of system" that leads people to try to overthrow the old order with the aim of imposing abstract, "rational" ideals on society from above. Once again, they were certainly not mere advocates of the status quo; they *did* want to "change men's

⁴⁰See Diderot, *Mémoires pour Catherine II*, 18–19.

⁴¹Diderot, *Histoire des Deux Indes*, 189.

common way of thinking,"⁴² to use Diderot's famous line from the *Encyclopedia*, and to move their societies in a more liberal and humane direction. But their outlook would be better categorized as reformist, gradualist, or meliorist than as rationalist, radical, or revolutionary.

It is not hard to understand why scholars have so often painted Voltaire as a political rationalist, because a number of his bolder claims, removed from their proper context, do seem to point in this direction. For instance, he writes in his *Treatise on Tolerance* that "past eras must be treated as if they had never been. One must always start from the present, from the point to which nations have thus far evolved."⁴³ And, in the passage that Oakeshott singles out, he asserts in his *Philosophical Dictionary* that "if you want to have good laws, burn what you have, and create new ones."⁴⁴ Yet the context of these kinds of passages generally belies a purely rationalist reading, and often even points toward the opposite, the importance of historical context and gradual reform. The line from the *Treatise on Tolerance*, for instance, appears in a chapter entitled "To show how tolerance may be permitted," which is addressed to political and ecclesiastical legislators, urging them to see that even if religious toleration may have proven difficult to institute in the past, the obstacles to such a policy no longer remain. Contrary to what the quoted passage itself might seem to imply, then, the historical context is in fact crucial to Voltaire's argument: his claim is that France's present legislators need not be unduly influenced by past conflicts between Catholics and Protestants, given that other nations have enjoyed relative peace after introducing religious toleration and that "all educated persons nowadays" view religious enthusiasm with derision.⁴⁵ In other words, his broader point is less that we must always ignore the past than that it is no longer appropriate, in mid-eighteenth-century France, to persecute people on the basis of religion, just as it is no longer appropriate to punish people for witchcraft.⁴⁶ A change in circumstances allows or justifies, and sometimes even requires, a change in policy—a sentiment that Oakeshott himself embraces.⁴⁷

⁴²Diderot, "Encyclopedia" (article from the *Encyclopedia*), in *Rameau's Nephew, and Other Works*, trans. Jacques Barzun and Ralph H. Bowen (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1956), 296.

⁴³Voltaire, *Treatise on Tolerance*, in *Treatise on Tolerance, and Other Writings*, ed. Simon Harvey and trans. Brian Masters (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 25–26.

⁴⁴Voltaire, *Pocket Philosophical Dictionary*, in *Voltaire: Political Writings*, 20.

⁴⁵Voltaire, *Treatise on Tolerance*, 25.

⁴⁶See *ibid.*, 26.

⁴⁷Voltaire made this point even more clearly in "Republican Ideas," an essay in which he poses as a "member of a public body" writing to his fellow citizens in Geneva: "When times have palpably changed, there are laws that have to be changed. . . . If a republic has been created during a time of religious war, if during

Similarly, the point of the line from the *Philosophical Dictionary* about burning existing laws seems to be to emphasize the difficulty of establishing good laws rather than to actually advocate wiping the legal slate clean. This line comes in the entry on "Laws," which stresses the great arbitrariness and inconsistency of laws, both within and between nations, and the great cruelty that is frequently inflicted in the name of the law. The immediate context is a comparison of these irregular laws with irregular city streets, and the burning of the laws with the Great Fire of London: "London only became worth living in since it was reduced to ashes. Since that time, its streets have been widened and straightened. Being burnt down made a city out of London. If you want to have good laws, burn what you have, and create new ones."⁴⁸ Yet Voltaire is not arguing that all existing laws should be eliminated, any more than he is advocating deliberately burning down the whole of Paris. After all, the entry as a whole shows him to be quite pessimistic about the possibility of devising and implementing a good set of laws: time and again he points to the influence of particular and short-term interests, ignorance, and superstition on legal codes.⁴⁹ And, as we have seen, he makes no effort—in this entry or elsewhere—to devise a perfect, uniform set of laws, or even to appeal to a universal standard of natural law in judging existing ones. Voltaire believed that laws could be made *better*—if, for instance, they were reformed in a more humanitarian direction along the lines suggested by Beccaria⁵⁰—but certainly not perfect. To suggest that Voltaire was actually in favor of devising a new set of laws from scratch would seem to drastically overestimate his expectations from politics.

This more realistic or chastened reading of Voltaire is reinforced by his consistent opposition to a general right to revolution and to the spirit of system throughout his career. As David Williams writes, despite the fact that he was later apotheosized by the French revolutionaries, "Voltaire was never an advocate of revolution. The upheavals of 1789 would have appalled him, the power of the mob terrifying him as much, if not more, than that of

these troubles it has removed sects that are hostile to its own from its territory, it has behaved wisely, because it saw itself as a country surrounded by those stricken with the plague, and feared that someone might bring the plague in. But when those dizzy times have passed, when tolerance has become the dominant dogma of all respectable people in Europe, is it not a ridiculous barbarity to ask a man who has just settled in our country and brought his wealth to it: 'What religion do you belong to?'" (Voltaire, "Republican Ideas," in *Voltaire: Political Writings*, 199–201).

⁴⁸Voltaire, *Pocket Philosophical Dictionary*, 20. This reflection may have been inspired by a similar one in René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 116–17.

⁴⁹See especially Voltaire, *Pocket Philosophical Dictionary*, 19–20, 22.

⁵⁰See Voltaire, "Commentary on the book *On crimes and punishments*."

autocrats.”⁵¹ Voltaire’s hesitations about extending political power to the masses are rightly derided today, but they do underline the fact that in French politics he was an advocate of the *thèse royale*—the idea that the nobility and priests were the true despots, and that the only effectual means of curbing their power would be a reforming king with broad, centralized authority—rather than the inventor of a new *thèse bourgeoise*, let alone a *thèse sans-culotte*. Voltaire was far too much a realist to suppose that radical changes—even if based on sound principles—would always turn out for the best. While there may be a few ostensibly rationalist moments in his writings, then, his general approach is one of pragmatism and reform rather than ignoring the past and wiping the slate clean. “His tactics were those of attrition, not of devastation, of practical gradualism, not of doctrinaire violence,” writes William Bottiglia. “It is true that he fought with a fanatical zeal, yet his ends were moderate. He believed in small steps rather than great leaps because he understood the difficulties and the risks of social change and did not want a whole way of life to be suddenly engulfed in a diluvial disaster.”⁵² Thus Gustave Lanson, the scholar who proclaimed that the *Letters Concerning the English Nation* was the first bomb dropped on the *ancien régime*, also asserts that “Voltaire was, beyond any doubt, a conservative,” or rather “a conservative in the manner of any true liberal.”⁵³

What, finally, of Voltaire’s famous catchphrase, “*écrasez l’infâme*”? There has been a good deal of scholarly dispute about what exactly he meant by *l’infâme*; it is generally accepted that he was referring above all to religious intolerance, repression, and fanaticism, but at times this catchphrase has also been interpreted as a call to arms, to tear down the old order in its entirety. However, not only was Voltaire adamant about preserving the French monarchy, he also never advocated the elimination of the church, nor even a complete separation of church and state (as Diderot did). Indeed, at one point—in a letter to a fellow philosophe, d’Alembert, no less—Voltaire equates crushing *l’infâme* with nothing more than getting France to the point that England had already reached: “I would like you to crush *l’infâme*, that is the great point. It must be reduced to the state where it is in England. . . . That is the greatest service one can render to mankind.”⁵⁴ And England, it will be recalled, had an established church, as Voltaire himself carefully notes elsewhere.⁵⁵ In fact, Voltaire explicitly states in his *Treatise on Tolerance* that “I do not say that all those who profess a different religion from that of the

⁵¹David Williams, introduction to *Voltaire: Political Writings*, xiv.

⁵²William F. Bottiglia, introduction to *Voltaire: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. William F. Bottiglia (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1968), 7; see also 12.

⁵³Lanson, *Voltaire*, 159.

⁵⁴Voltaire to Jean Le Rond d’Alembert, 23 June 1760, in *Complete Works of Voltaire*, ed. Theodore Besterman, vol. 105 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1971), 409.

⁵⁵See especially Voltaire, *Letters Concerning the English Nation*, ed. Nicholas Cronk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 24, 26, 33.

reigning prince should share in the places and honors available to those who are of the prevailing religion. In England, Roman Catholics are considered as belonging to the party of the Pretender, and are therefore denied office; they even pay double tax; yet they still enjoy all the other privileges of the citizen."⁵⁶ Voltaire *did* steadfastly advocate religious toleration and rail against the excessive economic and political power of the clergy in eighteenth-century France, but he was far from exhorting people to crush the church or the old order altogether.

Diderot was far more cautious than Voltaire with regard to rhetoric about burning all laws or wiping the slate clean.⁵⁷ As we have seen, he frequently sought to discourage attempts at general reform, such as when he cautioned Catherine that social and political changes must be made in accordance with the evolving desires of the people and the development of Russian civilization. This is a recurring theme of Diderot's works. In one of his contributions to the abbé Raynal's *History of the Two Indies*, he offers a word of caution that could have come from Burke's or Oakeshott's pen: "The state is a very complicated machine which one can neither assemble nor set in motion without knowing all the pieces. You cannot press nor loosen a single one without disturbing all the others. . . . All innovations should be gradual, born from need, inspired by a kind of public clamor, or at least in accord with general wishes. To create or destroy suddenly is to corrupt the good and make the evil worse."⁵⁸ Diderot certainly did not oppose all innovation, but his message is generally one of moderation: existing institutions and arrangements should not be lightly tampered with, especially on the basis of some abstract conception of a perfect order. Hence, Lester Crocker summarizes Diderot's "overall view" by stating that he "is a man of the Enlightenment, a meliorist, and a reformer within the limits of the possible."⁵⁹

All of that said, Diderot *did* sometimes advocate overthrowing a particular government or ruler—especially colonial rulers—and late in life he even seemed to condone tyrannicide in exceptional cases. Many of Diderot's works condemn, in extraordinarily harsh language, the violence and injustices perpetrated by the European powers against their colonies in the

⁵⁶Voltaire, *Treatise on Tolerance*, 20; see also 24–25.

⁵⁷Diderot is sometimes quoted as insisting that "we must trample mercilessly upon all . . . ancient puerilities" and "overturn the barriers that reason never erected," but in these lines he is clearly referring to the arts and sciences and *not* politics. His complaint in this passage is that in the arts and sciences "achievements that ought to have been regarded only as first steps came blindly to be taken for the highest possible degree of development, and so, instead of advancing a branch of art toward perfection, these first triumphs only served to retard its growth by reducing all other artists to the condition of servile imitators" (Diderot, "Encyclopedia," 298).

⁵⁸Diderot, *Histoire des Deux Indes*, 209.

⁵⁹Lester G. Crocker, *Diderot's Chaotic Order: Approach to Synthesis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 163.

Americas, Asia, and Africa.⁶⁰ In some of his contributions to the *History of the Two Indies*, he goes so far as to call on indigenous peoples to revolt against the colonists, arguing that it is necessary to speak in the only language the colonists seem to understand: violence. To the Hottentots who faced incursions from the Dutch, for instance, he urges, "Do not address them with representations of justice, which they will not listen to, but speak to them with your arrows. . . . Take up your axes, bend your bows, and send a shower of poisoned darts against these strangers. May there not be one of them remaining to convey to his countrymen the news of their disaster!"⁶¹ He also applauds the American colonial rebellion and exhorts them to remain strong in their fight against oppression.⁶² Still further, on rare occasions Diderot also appears to hint at the legitimacy of tyrannicide, praising the likes of Brutus and applauding the trial and execution of Charles I by Cromwell and his compatriots.⁶³ Far more often, however, he advocates simply speaking out against abuses of power. In his diatribe against the authoritarianism of Frederick, Diderot stops short of sanctioning resistance, instead only arguing for freedom to criticize the government. In response to Frederick's insistence that a good citizen must respect the government under which he lives, Diderot writes:

What do you call respecting the form of government under which one lives? Do you mean that one must submit to the laws of the society of which one is a member? There is no difficulty about that. Do you proclaim that if these laws are bad then one must remain silent? This is perhaps your opinion, but how then will the legislator discover the failings of his administration, and the faults of its laws, if no one dares raise his voice?⁶⁴

This line between active resistance and speaking out against bad laws, with the latter justifiable and the former not, occurs frequently throughout Diderot's mature writings.⁶⁵

Further, even in the instances in which Diderot *did* advocate colonial rebellion or hint at the legitimacy of tyrannicide, he never envisioned the institution of a wholly new order; brief violence may be necessary to eradicate

⁶⁰The leading studies of Diderot's hostility to colonialism are Yves Benot, *Diderot, de l'athéisme à l'anticolonialisme* (Paris: Maspero, 1970); Muthu, *Enlightenment against Empire*, chaps. 2 and 3.

⁶¹Quoted in Muthu, *Enlightenment against Empire*, 110–11.

⁶²See Diderot, *Histoire des Deux Indes*, 198–204.

⁶³See, for example, Diderot, *Lettre apologétique de l'abbé Raynal à Monsieur Grimm*, in *Oeuvres philosophiques*, ed. Paul Vernière (Paris: Garnier, 1990), 640; Diderot, *Réfutation d'Helvétius*, in *Oeuvres politiques*, ed. Paul Vernière (Paris: Garnier, 1963), 466. See also John Hope Mason, *The Irresistible Diderot* (London: Quartet Books, 1982), 330–31, 345–46.

⁶⁴Denis Diderot, *Pages contre un tyran*, in *Oeuvres politiques*, 144.

⁶⁵See Mason, *The Irresistible Diderot*, 327.

a glaring injustice, but Diderot was insistent that attempting to overturn all existing arrangements would lead to nothing but disaster. In the *Supplément to Bougainville's Voyage*, for instance, the character B (who seems more or less to speak for Diderot throughout) insists, "We must speak out against senseless laws until they're reformed and, in the meanwhile, abide by them. Anyone who on the strength of his own personal authority violates a bad law thereby authorizes everyone else to violate the good. Less harm is suffered in being mad among madmen than in being wise on one's own."⁶⁶ And, as John Hope Mason has been at pains to point out, even in Diderot's contributions to the *History of the Two Indies*, many of which are full of impassioned protests against the oppression of tyrants and colonizers, there is still "no vision of a new order, no call for or belief in popular or particular revolt in any European context."⁶⁷ Indeed, at one point in this work Diderot warns:

A government is always a very complicated machine. . . . It has to deal with so great a number of concerns, internal and external, that once it comes to its dissolution, either through the ineptitude of the leader or the impatience of the subjects, it can only have the most frightening consequences. If, on account of their impatience, the subjects come to break the yoke under which they are weary of groaning, a nation advances more or less rapidly to anarchy, through waves of blood.⁶⁸

Or again: "The chimera of equality is the most dangerous of all beliefs in a civilized society. To preach this system to the people is not to recall its rights, it is to invite the people to murder and pillage; it is to unchain domestic animals and transform them into wild beasts."⁶⁹ In all, it would be hard to argue that Diderot advocated overturning France's *ancien régime*—or any order, for that matter—in its entirety.

The idea that Diderot was not an advocate of eliminating the old order seems to be contradicted, of course, by his most infamous line, his alleged proclamation that "man will never be free until the last king is strangled with the entrails of the last priest." This is, however, not only a misquotation, but a misquotation of a dubious source: the line derives not from a serious philosophical work or even a political pamphlet, but from a poem that was written as a kind of New Year's Eve joke. Every New Year, Diderot and some of his compatriots would gather at the Baron d'Holbach's house in Paris for a feast, and whoever found a bean in his cake would be named

⁶⁶Diderot, *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*, in *Diderot: Political Writings*, 74. For a useful analysis of Diderot's reformist (but not revolutionary) intentions in this work, see Dena Goodman, "The Structure of Political Argument in Diderot's *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*," *Diderot Studies* 21 (1983): 123–37.

⁶⁷Mason, *The Irresistible Diderot*, 10; see also 343–44; and see the editors' introduction in *Diderot: Political Writings*, xxviii–xxix.

⁶⁸Diderot, *Histoire des Deux Indes*, 170.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 197; see also 199.

“King of the Revels.” In 1772, when Diderot had been selected (perhaps by design) for the third straight year, he composed a playful ode abdicating his throne and passing judgment on tyrants, in part provoked by the fact that Louis XV had just stripped the Parisian *parlement* of its judicial powers.⁷⁰ It was in this mock production of calculated hyperbole that he has one of the characters say,

nature made neither servant nor master;
I want neither to give nor receive laws;
and so one would plait the entrails of a priest,
for want of a rope, to strangle kings.⁷¹

These lines are, however, not even Diderot’s own; rather, they are a close paraphrase of Jean Meslier’s *Testament*, which was written decades before Robespierre and his compatriots were even born (no later than 1729).⁷² Thus, these infamous lines are in fact someone else’s words, put in the mouth of a character in a poem written as an elaborate joke; to suggest that the revolutionary sentiment contained in them is an accurate reflection of Diderot’s thought, particularly when it runs so directly against the grain of his more serious writings, seems misleading indeed.

It is, of course, impossible to resolve here the much-debated issue of the extent to which the philosophes “caused” the French Revolution—as if it were possible to weigh the impact of, say, the *Encyclopaedia* against that of the price of bread in Parisian shops.⁷³ What can be said with some certainty, however, is that Voltaire and Diderot themselves opposed, on principle, the idea of total revolution, especially based on an abstract conception of a perfect, “rational” order. As Robert Wokler writes, in a statement that clearly applies to Voltaire and Diderot, among many others:

The diverse policies put forward by eighteenth-century political theorists had been designed to stave off rather than promote revolution, to safeguard and not subvert authority, or, rather, through drastic reform to thwart an uprising that would otherwise explode the governments of their day. Not one of the major political thinkers of the Enlightenment advocated revolution before 1789, whatever debt their more incendiary

⁷⁰See Wilson, *Diderot*, 599–600.

⁷¹The French original reads “la nature n’a fait ni serviteur ni maitre; / Je ne veux ni donner ni recevoir de loix; / et ses mains ourdiroient les entrailles du prêtre, / au défaut d’un cordon pour etrangler les roix.” A critical edition of the poem can be found in Herbert Dieckmann, “Three Diderot Letters, and *Les Eleuthéromanes*,” *Harvard Library Bulletin* 6 (1952): 69–91; for the quoted passage, see 87.

⁷²See Herbert Dieckmann, “The Abbé Jean Meslier and Diderot’s *Eleuthéromanes*,” *Harvard Library Bulletin* 7 (1953): 231–35.

⁷³This is a paraphrase of a similar sentiment in J. H. Brumfitt, *The French Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman, 1972), 138.

disciples later professed to owe them, and whatever might in fact have been the practical implications of their doctrines.⁷⁴

It is true that Voltaire and Diderot sought to undermine some of the intellectual pillars on which the old regime rested, from the divine right of kings to the legitimacy of the church's extensive temporal powers. Further, all of the reforms that they advocated, taken together, would indeed have resulted in a largely new political order. As we have seen in this section, however, they sought to institute these liberal reforms gradually, not to overthrow the old regime all at once. And, as we will see in the following section, they did not believe that these changes were inevitable, or that they would lead to endless progress if they *were* instituted; these thinkers were far from being the naive optimists and starry-eyed utopians that they are sometimes thought to have been.

III

The third and final element of the charge of political rationalism, namely, that the philosophes believed that the steady application of reason can and will lead to an ideal society or to nearly endless progress, is perhaps the most dubious of all as applied to Voltaire and Diderot: both of these thinkers were deeply and manifestly—one wants to say instinctually—antiutopian. Neither of them believed that progress toward the liberal political practices and institutions they favored was in any way inevitable or could possibly be endless or uniform, and while they believed that these practices and institutions would improve people's lives in important ways if they *were* introduced, they did not believe that *any* political order could solve all human problems. The notion of progress as an intrinsic law of history—an idea that can be found in the writings of other philosophes such as Turgot and Condorcet, although it truly came into its own only with the rise of German Idealism—is utterly foreign to the thought of Voltaire and Diderot. They were both far too realistic, too alive to the drawbacks of even their relatively enlightened age, to be dupes of the sort of faith in the "historical process" that came to enthrall later generations of thinkers. While they believed that some scientific, economic, political, and even moral improvements were *possible*, and in fact had already occurred in eighteenth-century Europe, they persistently mocked naive optimism and ideas of inevitable and endless progress.⁷⁵

⁷⁴Robert Wokler, "The Enlightenment Science of Politics," in *Inventing Human Science*, ed. Christopher Fox, Roy Porter, and Robert Wokler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 326.

⁷⁵That the philosophes were far from unqualified believers in progress was demonstrated decades ago by Henry Vyverberg, *Historical Pessimism in the French Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958).

It is truly remarkable that naive optimism is so often attributed to an era whose most famous author's most famous book is *Candide*; the Enlightenment is thought to be Panglossian when it was Voltaire who *invented* this term of derision.⁷⁶ The basic facts of Voltaire's story are well known: the protagonist is a disciple of Doctor Pangloss, who is himself a disciple of Leibniz and his philosophical optimism. From the outset, however, *Candide* endures a long series of unrelenting misfortunes that make it impossible for him to continue to believe that ours is "the best of all possible worlds"; each turn of the story further undermines Pangloss's optimistic outlook. Through this story Voltaire impresses upon the reader, as no philosophical reasoning could, that naive optimism is unwarranted and foolish.⁷⁷ As Roger Pearson writes, "rape, pillage, murder, massacre, butchery, religious intolerance and abuse, torture, hanging, storm, shipwreck, earthquake, disease, cannibalism, prostitution, political oppression and instability: all is well."⁷⁸ And the story of *Candide* is no anomaly: Voltaire ridiculed optimism in a myriad of other works as well, perhaps most famously in his poem on the Lisbon earthquake and the entry in his *Philosophical Dictionary* entitled "All is well."⁷⁹

Of course, in the final pages of *Candide* the title character learns to ward off boredom, vice, and poverty and to find relative contentment through the working of his land or cultivation of his garden.⁸⁰ As David Wootton

⁷⁶Maurice Cranston, for one, seems to see no conflict here: "Voltaire, in his celebrated novel *Candide*, mocked optimism, but the Enlightenment itself was an age of optimism. Although the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 shattered belief in a benevolent Deity, nothing seemed able to modify the *encyclopédistes'* faith in progress" (Cranston, *Philosophers and Pamphleteers*, 6).

⁷⁷It should be noted, however, that Voltaire had shown a degree of sympathy with Leibniz's optimism earlier in his career. Scholars have traditionally maintained that Voltaire's optimistic worldview was shattered by the Lisbon earthquake in 1755, as well as a series of personal misfortunes in the years leading up to it. Recently, though, several scholars have persuasively argued that Voltaire's views were actually far more consistent than this traditional explanation implies, and that he believed throughout his life both that personal happiness is often attainable but also that such happiness should not lead us to the kind of optimism that dismisses the suffering of others. See the discussion in the translator's introduction to Voltaire, *Candide, and Related Texts*, trans. David Wootton (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), viii–xxxiii.

⁷⁸Roger Pearson, *The Fables of Reason: A Study of Voltaire's "Contes Philosophiques"* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 113.

⁷⁹See Voltaire, "Poem on the Lisbon Disaster," in *Candide, and Related Texts*, and Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, 68–74.

⁸⁰See Voltaire, *Candide*, 79. The famous final line, "Il faut cultiver notre jardin," can be literally translated as "it is necessary to cultivate our garden," although Wootton renders it as "we must work our land." The question of what this line is supposed to convey has provoked a great deal of scholarly discussion and debate; see especially William F. Bottiglia, *Voltaire's "Candide": Analysis of a Classic*, 2nd ed. (Geneva: Institut

notes, judging by the conclusion it seems that Voltaire advocates replacing Pangloss's optimism (the claim that this is the best of all possible worlds) not with outright pessimism (the claim that it is the worst of all worlds) but rather with meliorism, or the claim that the world can be made better.⁸¹ Yet a better world is only a possible, not a necessary outcome, and one that human beings must create for themselves, not one that is written into History or preordained by God. And even this possibility seems to be more an individual affair than a societal or global one: Voltaire gives little indication that a perfect society—perhaps even a good one—is within human reach. From his garden Candide can watch boats carting people into exile, and others carrying severed and stuffed heads to be presented to the sultan.⁸² Even El Dorado, the fairy-tale utopia that he discovered in the New World, had ultimately proven insufficiently enticing, and he continued on his travels after a relatively short stay there.⁸³ In the end, *Candide's* meliorism seems to consist as much in an escape from the world's troubles as in a solution to them.⁸⁴

This somewhat gloomy view of the world is in harmony with Voltaire's historical works, many of which are filled with repeated statements that (as a character in one of his stories puts it) "history is but a tableau of every crime and catastrophe."⁸⁵ Almost the entire "Recapitulation" of Voltaire's *Essay on the Mores and Spirit of Nations*, for example, is dedicated to showing that "in general all of history is a collection of crimes, follies, and misfortunes, among which one sees a few virtues and a few happy times, just as one discovers a few scattered houses in a barren desert."⁸⁶ Such rhetorical flourishes are slightly misleading, however, because Voltaire *did* think that the world had improved in important respects. For instance, in *The Age of Louis XIV*, he describes in detail the way in which the conditions of mid-eighteenth-century France were unquestionably an improvement

et Musée Voltaire, 1964), 96–138; David Langdon, "On the Meanings of the Conclusion of *Candide*," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 238 (1985): 397–432.

⁸¹See Wootton's introduction to *Candide, and Related Texts*, xv.

⁸²See Voltaire, *Candide*, 76–77.

⁸³See *ibid.*, 41. For a helpful discussion of this episode, see Haydn Mason, *Candide: Optimism Demolished* (New York: Twayne, 1992), 54–57.

⁸⁴Several scholars have emphasized, however, that Candide's affirmation that we must cultivate our garden is *not* meant to rule out political engagement or a duty to do what we can to help others. See especially Langdon, "On the Meanings of the Conclusion of *Candide*," and Lanson, *Voltaire*, 129.

⁸⁵Voltaire, *The Ingenue, in Candide, and Other Stories*, trans. Roger Pearson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 221.

⁸⁶Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*, ed. René Pomeau, vol. 2 (Paris: Garnier, 1963), 804.

over those of the same nation little more than a century earlier, when “the streets of Paris, narrow, badly paved and covered with filth, were overrun with thieves”; when the “spirit of discord and faction . . . pervaded every community in the kingdom”; and when “the French nation was steeped in ignorance” to the point where people believed unreservedly in astrology, sorcery, and exorcism.⁸⁷ Eighteenth-century France may not have shined in the arts to the degree that it had under Louis XIV, Voltaire concedes, but the lives of most people were far more tolerable. Yet he did not believe that this progress had been inevitable, or that further progress would necessarily follow. (In the entry on “Politics” in the *Questions on the Encyclopedia*, with tongue only partly in cheek, he looks forward to a day “in another ten or twelve centuries, when men are more enlightened.”⁸⁸) Thus, even John Gray—no admirer of Voltaire—concedes that “he was too alive to the quiddities of human circumstances and too alert to the sufferings of individual human beings to subscribe unambiguously to any grand scheme of human progress.”⁸⁹

In fact, one of the main purposes of Voltaire’s historical works was to *refute* the idea that history is teleological or heading toward some perfect end point. Many of the best-known historical works of the eighteenth and preceding centuries—works like Bossuet’s *Universal History*, which drew Voltaire’s particular ire—envisioned history as a divinely guided or controlled process, a succession of events that were dictated by God either through miraculous intervention or (more often) through His power over the hearts and minds of human beings. In deliberate contrast to this view, Voltaire points time and again to the utter unpredictability of events and the important role often played by seemingly minor causes. In *The Age of Louis XIV* he goes so far as to attribute the fall of the Duke of Marlborough, the turning out of the Whig party, and the end of the War of the Spanish Succession to the personal affronts shown by the Duchess of Marlborough when she refused to give Queen Anne a pair of gloves that she desired and spilled some water on the dress of one of the Queen’s favorites: “such trifles changed the face of Europe,” he writes.⁹⁰ In short, Voltaire believed that even if humanity had made real progress in certain realms, this progress was not, and could not be, inevitable, endless, or all-embracing.

Diderot did not devote nearly the amount of attention to history that Voltaire did, but it is abundantly clear that he was far from subscribing to

⁸⁷Voltaire, *The Age of Louis XIV*, trans. Martyn P. Pollack (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1961), 17–18.

⁸⁸Voltaire, *Questions on the Encyclopaedia*, 84.

⁸⁹Gray, *Voltaire*, 12; see also 45.

⁹⁰Voltaire, *The Age of Louis XIV*, 238. This is not to say that Voltaire admits *no* impersonal forces acting in history, such as those produced by economic and technological advances, but rather that he does not see such forces as determining the entire course of history.

any simple notion of progress. Indeed, at times he appears to decry the onslaught of civilization in a manner reminiscent of Rousseau, particularly in the *Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage*, where he seems to depict the Tahitians as natural, innocent, contented, and free, in stark contrast to the Europeans, who are artificial, corrupt, miserable, and enslaved to morality, religion, and custom.⁹¹ It is fairly clear, however, that Diderot did not ultimately believe that primitive societies were as idyllic as this narrative seems to imply at first glance. Elsewhere, he takes careful note of "the hatred which one tribe of primitive men bears against another, their hard life on the edge of subsistence, the persistence of their wars," and so on.⁹² Moreover, the reader learns toward the end of the *Supplement* that even Diderot's (by and large fictitious) Tahitians were quite calculating and ruthless in their own way.⁹³ Diderot's primary aim was surely to use Tahiti as a foil with which to point out the flaws of the Europe of his day rather than to demonstrate the actual superiority of the primitive way of life. Elsewhere, he forcefully affirms that eighteenth-century Europe had in fact made important advances: "Whatever Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the fanatical enemies of the progress of the human spirit may say," he proclaims, "it is difficult to read the history of the barbarous centuries in the life of any people without congratulating oneself upon being born in an enlightened century and in a civilized nation."⁹⁴

Yet whatever advantages "enlightened" and "civilized" Europe may have had, Diderot did not believe that the gains that had been made were inevitable, or that future progress could be indefinite. Rather, he seems to have subscribed to a cyclical view of history, according to which all societies go through periodic stages of youth, growth, maturity, and decline. He claims that all societies

follow, more or less often, a regular circle of prosperity and misfortune, liberty and slavery, morality and corruption, enlightenment and ignorance, greatness and weakness; all pass through every point of this fatal horizon. The law of nature, which wills that every society should gravitate towards despotism and dissolution, that empires should be born and die, will not be suspended for any exception.⁹⁵

⁹¹See especially Diderot, *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*, 41–45. In one of his contributions to the *History of the Two Indies*, Diderot goes so far as to say that "the history of civilized man has been only the history of his misery. Every page has been covered in blood, some with the blood of oppressors, others with the blood of the oppressed" (Diderot, *Histoire des Deux Indes*, 199; see also 193–97).

⁹²*Ibid.*, 191.

⁹³See especially Diderot, *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*, 60, 63–64.

⁹⁴Diderot, "Histoire de la Russie depuis l'an 862 jusqu'en 1054," ed. Jochen Schlobach and Jeanne Carriat, in *Oeuvres complètes de Diderot*, vol. 18 (Paris: Hermann, 1984), 354.

⁹⁵Diderot, *Histoire des Deux Indes*, 207.

Elsewhere, he reiterates that “the fate which rules the world wills that everything will pass away. The happiest state of an individual and a nation has its end. Everything carries within itself a hidden germ of destruction.”⁹⁶ Thus, it seems extraordinarily doubtful that the “enlightened” and “civilized” nations of Europe will always remain so. Even in the *Encyclopedia* entry in which he famously lauds the “march of the human spirit” that occurs when useful knowledge is disseminated and everyday life is made easier, Diderot also insists that all things have their limits and that progress is always eventually brought to a halt.⁹⁷ He did seem to have some hope that the New World, which was still in its youth, could carry on the torch of liberty and civilization, but even his high hopes for the American colonies were tinged with an awareness that nothing lasts forever: “May they postpone, at least for a few centuries, the decree pronounced against all earthly things: the decree which condemns them to have their birth, their time of vigor, their decrepitude, and their end!”⁹⁸

Nor did Diderot believe that Europe had experienced progress in all respects. Their achievements in developing “civilization” and spreading “enlightenment,” for example, were not necessarily accompanied by similar advances in morality, toleration, or compassion. In a letter to Mme de Mauv, his mistress for a brief time, he wonders, “Do you think that men ever become better? It is certain that we are not as barbarous as our fathers. We are more enlightened. Are we better? That is another thing.”⁹⁹ In fact, Diderot seems to have harbored serious doubts that simultaneous progress in all realms was a real possibility. In the *Encyclopedia*, he attempts to split the difference between Hobbes’s claim that people are naturally hostile and must be restrained by law and force, on the one hand, and Rousseau’s claim that people are naturally good and are corrupted by such “civilizing” mechanisms, on the other, asserting that “man’s goodness and wickedness remain constant, his happiness and suffering circumscribed by limits he cannot breach. All the benefits of human industry are balanced by evils, all natural evils by good works.”¹⁰⁰ In other words, no society can overcome the very definite limits set by human nature, and no progress will be free of accompanying faults. Thus, Diderot laments elsewhere in the *Encyclopedia* that “even though the world is getting older, it is not changing;

⁹⁶Diderot, *Salon de 1767*, ed. Annette Lorenceau, in *Oeuvres complètes de Diderot*, vol. 16 (Paris: Hermann, 1990), 556.

⁹⁷See Diderot, “Encyclopedia,” 289.

⁹⁸Diderot, *Aux insurgents d’Amérique*, in *Oeuvres politiques*, 491.

⁹⁹Diderot to Mme de Mauv, ? May 1769, in *Correspondance*, ed. Georges Roth, vol. 9 (Paris: Minuit, 1963), 61. See also Diderot, *Observations sur le Nakaz*, 92, 98.

¹⁰⁰Diderot, “Hobbisme” (article from the *Encyclopedia*), in *Diderot: Political Writings*, 28.

individual man may be improving, but the mass of mankind is getting neither better nor worse."¹⁰¹

In short, Voltaire and Diderot were far from being the naive optimists or believers in inevitable and endless progress that the philosophes as a group are so often claimed to have been. They saw most of history as a story of oppression and misery, and it was this bleak view of the past that led to their belief in "progress," such as it was. In other words, they did believe in progress in the sense that they thought the Europe of their time constituted an improvement in many ways over what had come before it, but they did not believe that there was any kind of supernatural agency, transcendent design, or Hegelian dialectic that meant that it *had to be* better than what came before it, or that the future would be better still. They were well aware that throughout history civilizations had come and gone, and would likely persist in doing so; that even the progress that had been made in eighteenth-century Europe had generally been a mixed bag, with all of the advances and improvements complemented by important drawbacks and limitations; and that there is no reason to think that progress will continue indefinitely, or that a perfect society will ever be within human reach.

Conclusion

It would of course be an overstatement to say that Voltaire and Diderot saw no role for reason in politics. They continually sought to critically reflect (and encourage their fellow citizens to critically reflect) on the political practices and institutions of eighteenth-century Europe, and they certainly would never have advocated relying solely on authority, tradition, or religion as a source of political ideals. Given the liberal and reformist character of their outlook, it is not hard to see why traditionalist and religious conservatives have long held them as adversaries.¹⁰² Yet it is equally clear that Voltaire and Diderot were not political rationalists in the sense alleged by their critics. They both consistently eschewed abstract, comprehensive, "rational" blueprints for society and argued that context is crucial in determining which laws and institutions a society should adopt. Further, they advocated gradual or piecemeal reform and strongly opposed the "spirit of system" that leads people to try to overthrow a political order on the basis of some abstract notion of right. Finally, they derided naive optimism and faith in inevitable

¹⁰¹Diderot, "Foreword to Volume VIII of the *Encyclopédie*," in *Encyclopedia: Selections*, trans. Nelly S. Hoyt and Thomas Cassirer (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 114.

¹⁰²On the conservative hostility to the philosophes—especially Voltaire—in eighteenth-century France, see Darrin M. McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

progress, continually stressing the limits imposed by human nature and the nature of society. Whatever might be said of them, they did *not* think that reason could or should be the sole guide of political life. On the contrary, their thought was fundamentally pragmatic and reformist: in politics, as in everyday life, we must cultivate our gardens, but should not expect perfection.

Why, then, has it become so common to see these thinkers—and the thinkers of the French Enlightenment more generally—as radical, utopian rationalists? Answering this complex historical question fully would require at least an article of its own, but some preliminary suggestions are possible here. It must be admitted, first, that some of the lesser philosophes, such as Mably, Morelly, and Helvétius, *did* adopt a fairly rigid political rationalism. Yet it must also be recalled that these thinkers came in for frequent and often fierce criticism from Voltaire and Diderot themselves, as well as from other leading philosophes such as Montesquieu and d’Alembert. Further, there is no question that the outlook of Voltaire and Diderot is far removed from principled conservatism or traditionalism; neither of these thinkers hesitated to condemn the abuses of the throne and altar of the *ancien régime*. Yet we have seen that criticism—even severe criticism—does not necessarily entail rationalism, radicalism, or utopianism. It seems that it was in large part the politics of the French Revolution and its aftermath that prompted the philosophes as a group to be seen in the same, rationalist light. As several scholars have noted, both the defenders and the critics of the French Revolution had a vested interest in depicting the philosophes as political rationalists and precursors to the revolution—the defenders in order to claim the authority of the philosophes for their cause, and the critics in order to show that the crisis was brought on by a relatively small cabal of instigators, rather than by fundamental and deep-seated problems in the *ancien régime*.¹⁰³ Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, critics of liberalism from both sides of the political spectrum, from the eighteenth century to the present, have had a vested interest in perpetuating this caricature of the philosophes: given the degree to which the Enlightenment inspired and encouraged liberal values, practices, and institutions, a depiction of the philosophes as reckless radicals and naive optimists would be bound to shape the way liberalism itself is viewed.

It is precisely because our view of the Enlightenment so greatly colors our view of liberalism and the modern West that it is important not to let the politics of the French Revolution and liberalism’s critics fundamentally shape our

¹⁰³See, for instance, Stephen Bird, *Reinventing Voltaire: The Politics of Commemoration in Nineteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2000), chap. 1; Daniel Gordon, *Citizens without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670–1789* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 127; and Bernard N. Schilling, *Conservative England and the Case against Voltaire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950), chaps. 11 and 12.

view of the Enlightenment today. Recall that among the leading thinkers of the Enlightenment, Voltaire and Diderot are generally thought to have been among the most clearly rationalist in the political realm—the “tough cases,” as it were. After all, the third towering figure of the French Enlightenment, Montesquieu, has long been regarded as an antirationalist, and for good reason: his discussion of the many factors that go into forming “the spirit of the laws” was meant to discourage attempts at general reform, especially based on abstract principles. Indeed, Montesquieu proclaims that the entire reason he wrote *The Spirit of the Laws* was to teach a lesson of political moderation.¹⁰⁴ The opposition to political rationalism was just as forceful among the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment: David Hume was, of course, a skeptic who distrusted grand schemes to reform society, and Adam Smith similarly derided the “man of system” who “seems to imagine that he can arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as the hand arranges the different pieces on a chess-board.”¹⁰⁵ Even Kant, who moved away from the mainstream of eighteenth-century European thought in several important respects, accepted that in politics “a complete solution is impossible” since “one cannot fashion something absolutely straight from wood which is as crooked as that of which man is made.”¹⁰⁶ The need for moderation and for accepting imperfections in politics was a constant theme in the writings of all of these thinkers. Thus, it seems that the Enlightenment was in many ways a “revolt against rationalism” not only in the epistemological, psychological, and ethical spheres, but also in the political one. It may be too much to hope that the epithet “the Age of Reason” will ever be put to rest for good, but a careful reading of the works of Voltaire and Diderot should—contrary to many expectations—push us a little further in that direction.

¹⁰⁴See Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Anne M. Cohler, Basia C. Miller, and Harold S. Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 602.

¹⁰⁵Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1976), 233–34.

¹⁰⁶Immanuel Kant, *Idea for a Universal History with Cosmopolitan Intent*, in *Basic Writings of Kant*, ed. Allen W. Wood (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 125.