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Saggi

Historiographical heritages: Denis Diderot and the men of the French Revolution

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Abstract. Was Denis Diderot “the master of Danton”, as the historian Aulard asserted, or was he “the master of Brissot” as Jean Dautry stated? Or rather, was the philosophe the true inspiration of Babeuf? From a general point of view, research on the circulation and heritage of Diderotian political ideas in Europe has mostly been interpreted in relationships of analogy or in contrast with the event, ideas and men of the French Revolution. This article aims to analyze the debate on the most recent historical readings that have reawakened the hermeneutic dialectic on the relationship between the political thought and works of Denis Diderot and the spokesmen of the French Revolution. The significance of this study thus lies in its focus on the most recent historiographical readings on the uses of Diderotian stratified production, which over time have distorted his political vocabulary. At the present time, we have some data – from the cross-analysis between the study of unpublished sources and new research perspectives on political traineeships and clandestine circles – —on which to base future research: on the eve of the Revolution, Diderotian thought circulated in clandestine pamphlets and, in those same years, some men of the future Constituent took inspiration from the philosophe. Therefore, the category of “general will” in use among the men of the Constituent and the Legislative (Thouret, Brissot) seems not to be of Rousseauian derivation only.

Keywords. Diderot, French Revolution, Historiographical Heritages, General will, Men of the Constituent.

1. THE HISTORICAL BINOMIAL: DIDEROT AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

The aim of this article is to analyze the debate on the most recent historiographical readings that have rekindled the hermeneutic dialectic on the relationship between the political thought and works of Denis Diderot and the spokesmen of the French Revolution. Over time, the literature on Diderot has become stratified and distorted his political vocabulary¹. Diverse images

¹ J. Proust, *Lectures de Diderot*, Colin, Paris 1974 ; R. Trousson, *Images de Diderot en France, 1784-1913*, Honoré Champion, Paris 1997; P. Pellerin, *Lectures et images de Diderot de l'Encyclopédie à la fin de la Révolution*, Septentrion, Lille 2000 ; *Diderot et la politique, aujourd'hui*, sous la direction de M. Leca-Tsiomis et A. Thomson, Société Diderot, Paris 2019. Leca-Tsiomis and Thomson proposed another perspective to emphasize new questions.

of Diderot have emerged: inspirer of Danton, idealist philosopher, lawyer of the *bourgeoisie*, friend/enemy of the people, and even conspirator and master of the terrorists of the year II². Most recently, the figure of the proto-Jacobin Diderot has enriched the mosaic of representations of the philosopher, but at the same time, it has posed new questions regarding the binomial of Diderot and the French Revolution³.

From a general point of view, research on the circulation and legacy of Diderot's political ideas in Europe have mostly been interpreted in terms of analogy or in contrast to the event, ideas, and men of the French Revolution. The image of the father of the nation, as well as that of moderate friend, was associated with Diderot for more than two hundred years. Some believed he was the theorist of the moderatism of Barnave and Brissot, while others took a completely opposite view and saw in Diderot the man who inspired the tyrannicide of the French King⁴.

By examining these and similar interpretations, we may state that in Diderot's writings we can see the story of the ideas of a direct and representative democracy, a general will and universal peace, and a rich corpus of knowledge matured during the Enlightenment, which was subsequently elaborated by the proponents of the Revolution in their speeches⁵. Therefore, these are the

² J. Dautry, *La révolution bourgeoise et l'Encyclopédie (1789-1814)*, «La Pensée», 38, 1951, pp. 73-87; 39, 1951, pp. 52-59.

³ According to Antony Strugnell, the ambiguity of language style in Diderot's work makes it possible on one hand to affiliate him to Robespierre but, on the other hand, to distinguish him from Robespierre, knowing that the vibrant appeal to freedom, in Diderot's case, does not coincide with the exaltation of republican virtue in Robespierre. Moreover, Strugnell argues that Diderot played a key role in developing revolutionary ideas by contributing to the establishment of the Jacobin club. A. Strugnell, *Diderot protojacobin ? in Diderot et la politique*, cit., p. 133.

⁴ On the manipulation of sources in transmission studies, see R. Tarin, *Diderot et la Révolution française. Controverses et polémiques autour d'un philosophe*, Honoré Champion, Paris 2001; P. Pellerin, *Naigeon, une certaine image de Diderot sous la Révolution*, «Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie», 29, 2000, pp. 25-44; *Les ennemis de Diderot. Actes du colloque organisé par la Société Diderot*, réunis et édités par A.M. Chouillet, Klincksieck, Paris 1993.

⁵ *Enquête sur la construction des Lumières au 20^e siècle, Autodéfinitions, généalogies, usages*, dir. F. Salaün et J.P. Schandeler Centre international d'étude du XVIII^e siècle, Centre International d'Études du XVIII^e siècle, Ferney-Voltaire 2018; about the Enlightenment as an atelier of modernity in categories and different values, see: V. Ferrone, *The Enlightenment: History of an Idea*, PUP, Princeton 2015; A.M. Rao, *Lumi Riforme Rivoluzione. Percorsi storiografici*, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma 2011. It is essential to reconsider the Enlightenment as a fundamental junction and a laboratory – together with the Revolutionary Age – in which revisions of the different human conditions during the Modern Age have been experimented with, in a secularizing sense. The liveliness of the international debate on the origins and heritage of the Enlightenment is particularly highlighted by the writings of V. Ferrone on Enlightenment and Revolution, and by F. Salaün (see particularly *Enquête sur la construction des Lumières*, sous la direction de F. Salaün et J.-P. Schandeler, Centre international d'études du XVIII^e Siè-

observations that we propose as a synthesis of the first phase of a research on Diderot's legacy in Italy, which enabled us to confirm the idea of the philosopher as the father of democratic Europe and to whom we may attribute the political culture that created contemporary Western democracies⁶.

Even today, the binomial Diderot-French Revolution is still ambivalent, as has been demonstrated by interpretations such as those by Raymond Trousson and Jacques Proust, who highlight the influence of Diderot's legacy on the protagonists of the late eighteenth century, especially the members of the Constituent and Legislative Assemblies⁷.

In 1967, Jacques Proust argued that the investigation into the success of Diderot and his works⁸ could move forward by carrying out research following a genealogical method. By examining the biographical information of Diderot's students, it would be possible to determine Diderot's influence on the men of the French Revolution. In contraposition to Daniel Mornet, who said that «dans l'ordre politique de la Révolution l'influence de Diderot fut nulle»⁹, Proust recognized the political role of the philosopher in the Revolution and identified a hermeneutical key in Diderot. The biography of the Constitutionalist Barnave – which Proust urged scholars of the eighteenth century and the French Revolution to study – was in fact paradigmatic of the research path for scholars of Diderot's legacy in the revolutionary era¹⁰. In short, it was necessary to work on the biographies of the revolutionaries and their political formation. It took almost thirty years, but Raymond Trousson and later René Tarin highlighted the importance of studying the historical binomial Diderot–French Revolution

cle, Ferney Voltaire 2018). See also the Series «L'Europe des Lumières», sous la directions de J. Berchtold, M. Delon et C. Martin, Garnier, Paris. Furthermore, see K.M. Baker, *Enlightenment Idioms. Old Regime Discourses, and Revolutionary improvisation in From Deficit to Deluge. The origins of the French Revolution*, eds. T.E. Kaiser and D.K. Van Kley, PUP, Princeton 2011, pp. 165-169.

⁶ G. D'Antuono-P. Quintili, *Diderot en Italie. Avatars, masques, miroirs d'un philosophe*, L'Harmattan, Paris 2017.

⁷ D. Mornet, *Les origines intellectuelles de la Révolution française*, Colin, Paris 1947, p. 92; J. Proust, *Diderot et l'Encyclopédie*, Albin Michel, Paris 1995³ [1967], pp. 39-41. See Pellerin, *Lectures et images de Diderot et de l'Encyclopédie*, cit.; the Diderotian legacies have been discussed in *Réception de Diderot et de l'Encyclopédie*, Journée d'étude organisée par le laboratoire EHIC - Université de Limoges, l'IHRIM - Université Lyon 2, l'IRCL - Université Paul-Valéry de Montpellier, 28/29, May 2020 organized by P. Pellerin, O. Richard-Pauchet and F. Salaün, which is the first step of a forthcoming *Dictionnaire critique de la réception de Diderot et de l'Encyclopédie*, directed by P. Pellerin.

⁸ Proust, *Diderot et l'Encyclopédie*, cit., p. 39.

⁹ Mornet, *Les origines intellectuelles de la Révolution française*, cit., p. 92.

¹⁰ Proust invited students of the 18th century to study Barnave as Diderot's reader; see Proust, *Lectures*, cit., pp. 39-42.

in a specific way¹¹. This was echoed by Yves Benot, who stressed the importance of studying the historical, political and cultural relationship between the philosopher and the men of the French Revolution¹². Benot pointed out another crucial aspect: any investigation into the circulation of Diderot's works should focus on the *milieu* of clandestinity and orality. It is known that censorship motivations pushed Diderot into clandestinity while he was still alive, a fact which is also supported by the studies of Pascale Pellerin. This investigation was based on the study of documents that, for the most part, had never been consulted, especially the revolutionary pamphlets in which the name of Diderot was often mentioned¹³. This fact is all the more important for those who study Diderot's legacy during the Revolution; in 1789, seven out of ten of his political works were still totally unpublished¹⁴. If one only examines Diderot's printed works, one risks not understanding what was going on in the context of clandestinity and in the field of orality. In a recent seminar, I argued that after being in prison, Diderot preferred alternative dissemination channels, where copies of his manuscripts circulated among the students; moreover, he also made use of disjointed political discourses. Today, the work on the legacy and success of Diderot's ideas among revolutionaries must make use of the results from various fields of research: from those on censorship to those on sociability, and from biographical dictionaries to prosopographic research. All this is useful for the purpose of international collaborative work that challenges many received ideas because, as Marie Leca-Tsiomis and Anne Thomson state, a new point of view is needed¹⁵.

Today, we have understood the neutralizing function carried out by the enemies of the *Lumières* and the *philosophes*, and we have come a long way since Morner's work¹⁶. Yet the binomial Diderot-French Revolution

appears to still be in need of a definition, and in recent years it has been the subject of new studies, which, regarding the revolutionary era, focus (even with analogical procedures) on the diverse legacies in relation to the forms of government developed by men who were culturally formed with Diderot¹⁷. Jonathan Israel brought this role of Diderot to the fore, even if it is affected by the weight of a teleologism between the Enlightenment and the Revolution; however, he insisted above all on the category 'radical' which reduces the complexity of the real political role played by Diderot himself. This is not the place to discuss the interpretations of Israel, that has already been done with fruitful results by eminent scholars¹⁸.

However, it is relevant to note that it is also thanks to Israel that in recent years much debate has returned to the politically formative role of the philosopher for the men of the French Revolution; this debate has enabled us to rethink the relationship between Diderot and the French Revolution by focusing on the categories of the people and general will that are at the center of Israel's analysis. Thanks to the philological and hermeneutic study that I carried out on Diderot's political writings, including those that have not yet been translated and published in Italian, but which will be published shortly by Giunti Bompiani¹⁹, I was able to work extensively on the categories of the people and general will. In the light of a study that I have already published²⁰, I carried out a longer piece of research on the transmission of ideas between Diderot and those revolutionaries who inherited and used those very categories: the people and general will.

¹¹ Trousson, *Images de Diderot en France, 1784-1913* cit.; R. Tarin, *Diderot et la Révolution française*, cit.

¹² Y. Benot, *René Tarin. Diderot et la Révolution française/Controverses et polémiques autour d'un Philosophe*, «Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie», 31-32, 2002, pp. 325-327.

¹³ Pellerin, *Lectures et images de Diderot et de l'Encyclopédie*, cit.

¹⁴ The political writings published until 1789 are the *Contributions à l'Histoire des deux Indes*, the *Fragments* and the *Notes écrites de la main d'un souverain à la marge de Tacite*. The latter was first published by Nageon in 1798, after the death of Diderot. Some texts with political content were already published in 1789: *Bijoux indiscrets*, *La Religieuse*, *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville*, *Neveu de Rameau*, *Salons*, *l'Encyclopédie* (articles «Droit naturel», «Autorité politique»). It would be appropriate to question the qualification of politician and perhaps expand it for the corpus des textes de Diderot discovered only in 1951 by Herbert Dieckmann.

¹⁵ *Diderot et la politique aujourd'hui*, cit.

¹⁶ M. Poirson, *La Révolution française et le monde d'aujourd'hui. Mythologies contemporaines*, Garnier, Paris 2014.

¹⁷ J. Israel, *Revolutionary Ideas: An Intellectual History of the French Revolution from The Rights of Man to Robespierre*, PUP, Princeton 2014.

¹⁸ F. Benigno, *Lumi e lanterne. La rivoluzione francese secondo Jonathan Israel*, «Rivista storica italiana», 127, 2015, 3, pp. 961-988; V. Ferri, *Che cosa è stato l'Illuminismo?*, «Diciottesimo Secolo», I, 2016, pp. 37-61. On the binomial éradication/radicalité see P. Quintili, *Diderot dans les Lumières radicales selon J.I. Israel. De quelle «radicalité» parle-t-on?* in *Les Lumières radicales et le politique. Études critiques sur les travaux de Jonathan Israel*, sous la direction de M. Garcia-Alonso Honoré Champion, Paris 2017, pp. 263-280: 265.

¹⁹ Thus far, I have referred to unpublished texts in Italian: *Contributi alla Storia delle due Indie* and some excerpts from *Miscellanea filosofica, storica etc. per Caterina II*, in D. Diderot, *Opere politiche*, a cura di G. D'Antuono, to be published by the Italian publisher Bompiani Giunti in the series *Il Pensiero Occidentale* (2020-2021).

²⁰ G. D'Antuono, *Peuple, multitude, foule, peuplade. Popolo e volontà generale nelle Opere politiche di Diderot*, «Studi Storici», 60, 2019, 3, pp. 637-664. In this study, I have analyzed the use of categories in different political writings of Diderot. In the present article, on the other hand, I refer to those published up to the years of the Directory.

2. THE USE OF THE LANGUAGE OF DIDEROT
DURING THE FRENCH REVOLUTION: *VOLONTÉ
GÉNÉRALE ET PEUPLE*

The categories *démocratie* and *consensus*, which are related to the lemmas of representation and people,²¹ have been interpreted in several ways since the post-war period, in the debate on the intellectual history of human rights.²² The same concepts were recently thoroughly examined in the context of the French Revolution, when this interpretative difference is said to have originated, due to the seeds sown by Diderot. If Italian historiography has specifically analyzed the formative processes of the different governmental strategies and constitutional projects, insisting on the dichotomy Diderot-Rousseau²³, other historians – Mortier, Strugnell, and Israel – have insisted on the semantic implications of *volonté générale*²⁴, and on those of

*peuple*²⁵, which derived from Diderot. This binomial Diderot–French Revolution has changed some consolidated interpretations, such as that of Jean Dautry (the biographer of Filippo Buonarroti), who asserted that Brissot and the Brissotines pushed through bad reforms, since they had developed social proposals that were based on a very confused idea of the people, and which they had inherited from Diderot. Moreover, the Brissotines were the antagonists of Robespierre's men, who followed Rousseau's ideas²⁶. The Brissotins, such as Barnave, and the men of the Constituent and Legislative Assemblies – whom Jean Dautry criticized – would have been those who, in the name of a democratic and pacifist education, evoked the names of the master philosophers (i.e., Diderot, Raynal, D'Holbach, and Volney) in Paris, in November 1792, at the headquarters of the British Club, according to Brissot's writings and the *Journal de Perlet*. The irenic objective could have been achieved, provided «that all nations became representative democracies and that the *volonté générale* became real and universal»²⁷.

From then on, therefore, it was a question of dealing with the image of a philosopher who was no longer only a teacher of the Brissotins, of moderates such as Barnave, and of extremists like La Harpe²⁸, but also of

²¹ J. Roels, *Le concept de représentation politique au dix-huitième siècle français*, in *Anciens pays et Assemblées d'États*, Nauwelaerts, Louvain-Paris 1969; F. Diaz, *La rappresentanza dai precedenti americani al dibattito dell'89* in "Studi settecenteschi", 10, 1987 (*Mentalità e cultura politica nella svolta del 1789*, a cura di P. Viola), pp. 53-68; G. Duso, *La democrazia e il problema del governo*, «Filosofia politica», 3, 2006, pp. 367-390; Id. *Oltre la democrazia. Un itinerario attraverso i classici*, Carocci, Roma 2004; *Il governo del popolo. Dall'antico regime alla rivoluzione*, a cura di G. Ruocco e L. Scuccimarra, Viella, Roma 2011, pp. VII-XVIII.

²² J.L. Talmon, *The origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, Secker and Warburg, London 1952. An examination of the interpretation by Talmon would also be very interesting. Jacob Talmon, indeed conceived his work in the Jerusalem of 1951, in the context of the Cold War. He claimed that totalitarianism went far back to the Enlightenment, when – in his opinion – the Communist categories of totalitarian democracy were developed. The cultures of the *contre-lumières* date back to the second half of the eighteenth century, but they experienced a revival after the Second World War, reading Diderot as a forerunner of demagogic and totalitarian cultures; see I. Berlin, *Against the current: essays in the history of ideas*, Albin Michel, Paris 1988; J. Domenech, *Anti-lumières*, in *Dictionnaire européen des Lumières*, sous la direction de M. Delon, PUF, Paris 1997, pp. 83-89; J.G.A. Pocock, *Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment, Revolution and Counter-revolution: A Eurosceptical Enquiry*, «History of Political Thought», 20, 1999, pp. 125-139; D. McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001; M. Lilla, *Les Anti-Lumières*, in *Dictionnaire de philosophie politique*, sous la direction de S. Rials et P. Raynaud, PUF, Paris 2003, pp. 16-19; J. Zaganiaris, *Qu'est que les «contre-lumières»?», «Raison politiques»*, 35, 2009, pp. 167-183; Z. Sternhell, *Les anti-Lumières. Du XVIII siècle à la guerre froide*, Fayard, Paris 2010.

²³ It is difficult to support – as Israel does – a clear dichotomy Diderot/Rousseau. For a necessary clarification on these aspects, see F. Diaz, *Introduzione*, to D. Diderot, *Scritti politici*, Utet, Torino 1967, pp. 13, 25. Diaz agreed with Paolo Alatri on the Rousseauian analysis that opened up to political, although more organic, abstract visions, compared to Diderot. See Id., *Filosofia e politica nel Settecento francese*, Einaudi, Torino 1962, pp. 350-427; P. Alatri, *Problemi critici su Rousseau*, «Nuova Rivista Storica», III-IV, 1965, pp. 417-434, 425.

²⁴ On the general will in Diderot, see A. Strugnell, *Diderot's Politics: A Study of the Evolution of Diderot's Political Thought after Encyclopédie* (1973); M. Deguergue, *La conception de la volonté générale chez Dide-*

rot, «Revue d'Histoire des facultés de droit et de la culture juridique, du monde des juristes et du livre juridique», 12, 1991, pp. 107-126; on the general will in Rousseau, its history in Hobbes and Diderot, and on the *Encyclopédie* entry *Droit naturel*, see A. Postigliola, *La Città della Ragione. Per una storia filosofica del Settecento francese*, Bulzoni, Roma 1992, pp. 199-249; Diaz, *Scritti politici*, cit., pp. 25, 564; R.-D. Masters, *La philosophie politique de Rousseau*, ENS éditions, Lyon 2002, pp. 372-384; G. Duso, *La rappresentanza politica: genesi e crisi del concetto*, Franco-Angeli, Milano 2005; S. Testoni Binetti, *Volontà generale*, in N. Bobbio, N. Matteucci, G. Pasquino, *Dizionario di Politica*, Istituto Geografico De Agostini, Novara 2006, pp. 738-740.

²⁵ On the stratified, semantic configuration of people, see F. Benigno, *Parole nel tempo. Un lessico per pensare la storia*, Viella, Roma 2013; *Essere popolo. Prerogative e rituali d'appartenenza nelle città d'antico regime*, G. Délille and A. Savelli (eds.), «Ricerche storiche», XXXII, 2-3; M. Formica, *Tra semantica e politica: il concetto di popolo nel giacobinismo italiano (1796-1799)*, «Studi storici», XXVIII, 1987, 3, pp. 699-721.

²⁶ Dautry, *La révolution bourgeoise et l'Encyclopédie*, cit.; Id., *Le pessimisme économique de Babeuf et l'histoire des utopies*, «Annales Historiques Révolution Française», 2, 1961, p. 215; *Adversaires de Diderot sous la Révolution et l'Empire*, in *Dictionnaire des anti-Lumières et des antiphilosophes (France 1715-1815)*, sous la directions de D. Masseur, Champion, Paris 2017, pp. 455-463.

²⁷ Martin wrote that the Girondins had been seduced by the Rousseau of the *Social Contract*, which allowed democracy only in a small state; see K. Martin, *French Liberal Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, Phoenix House, London 1962, pp. 192-207, 214-216, notably p. 215, where democracy elects a sovereign power of the people, which is not delegable. See also the chapter *Peace Fraternity and Nationalism*, pp. 259 ff., for a focus on the different origins of the idea of peace in Martin.

²⁸ D. Diderot, *Pensées détachées ou Fragments politiques échappés du portefeuille d'un philosophe*, textes établis et présentés par G. Goggi, Hermann, Paris 2011, p. 218; P. Pellerin, *Bourlet de Vauxcelles* in *Dictionnaire des anti-Lumières et des antiphilosophes*, cit., pp. 258-262.

revolutionaries such as Condorcet. Diderot was seen as the engine of subversion²⁹, as well as the father of representative democracy – the expression of a general will that was different from that of Rousseau.

We therefore face a historiographic tradition of radicalism in Europe; since the end of the nineteenth century, some countries (for example, France, Italy and England) have included Diderot in the Pantheon of their masters³⁰. The central point revolves around the concept of *volonté générale*, the idea that lies at the origins of the politicization processes of revolutionaries, such as Jacques Guillaume, Thouret and Condorcet, which appears to have had its origins in Diderot. It is worth dwelling on the idea of general will, which emerged in the debates of his followers. The general will was a principle that Desmoulins proclaimed in 1789, and which the constituent Thouret had already legitimized in 1788³¹. It corresponded to a recognition of what is useful to the majority of the people, in accordance with reason and with what people would have wanted, if prejudices had not stopped them. Society would be constituted of members – not all of them capable of making shrewd judgments – who would be subject to the *volonté générale*³².

In the *Fragments Politiques* and *Principes de politique des souverains*, from 1772 onwards Diderot used the category, also adopted by Holbach and Helvétius, of *volonté générale*, giving it a quite different semantic meaning from that of Rousseau. In fact, according to Diderot, in the eighteenth century the idea of ‘the people’ reflected an entity that was still in progress, different from the multitude and with the potential to emancipate themselves, and to become self-confident through education and work. It was believed that the general will sprang from personal will once the people, viewed in terms of an intermediary force, created a Constitution for themselves.

²⁹ In 1799, Lorenzo Ignazio Thjulien published in Venice the *Nuovo vocabolario filosofico-democratico*, in which he described the circulation of a new democratic political vocabulary, which had infiltrated everyday language, «il tarlo della dissoluzione che aveva sovvertito la società» in the «più insidioso» way, by acting from within. The dictionary is still emblematic of the distinct ways to judge enemies: we can find the Enlightenment, philosophers, Masons, revolutionaries, and Jacobins in the Manifesto of Pope Gregory XVI, *Trionfo della Chiesa e della Santa Sede*, in which the innovators category included the Jacobin, the atheist, the materialist, and the Enlightenment philosopher.

³⁰ The transfer between Diderot and Babeuf can be found, in France, in Taihlade's and Kropotkin's readings. G. Sencier, *Le babouvisme après Babeuf*, Rivière, Paris 1912.

³¹ See also T. Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary. The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary culture (1789-1790)*, PUB, Princeton 1996, who stressed the absence of a revolutionary, ideological conscience in this first phase.

³² Thouret uses the language style of Diderot; see T. Tackett, *Par la volonté du peuple. Comment les députés de 1789 sont devenus révolutionnaires*, Albin Michel, Paris 1997, p. 94.

However, Rousseau claimed that the general will derived from the popular conscience of man, who knew what to do once the virtues were reached. The legitimate government, being a part of the State, reflects the enactment of executive power – it must follow the general will by letting the virtues dominate. In Rousseau's thought, the ever-dominant general will always cancels the individual will. It is the latter nuance that fails to be acknowledged in Diderot's thought: the cancellation of the individual.

Indeed, in the first phase of the Constituent Assembly, the term *volonté Générale* – albeit linked to popular sovereignty – was used in a non-Rousseauian sense, as was exemplified by the young Thouret, who described the *volonté générale* using Diderot's words on the representation of the needs and desires of the whole nation, also taking into account the interests of each individual³³. Moreover, Kenta Ohji stated that in the 1770s, Diderot claimed the concept of general will in order to support the criticism of despotism, including the enlightened general will that is displayed in national representation and, under certain conditions, transforms public opinion into a political body. However, it was the dialogue between Locke, Hobbes and Montesquieu that suggested Diderot should adopt the concept of ‘the concert of wills’ rather than ‘the general will’. The concert of wills is the guarantee of democracy, and the Constitution of the nascent America is its very embodiment. While the general will can be absolutized and almost totalitarian, the concert of wills, politically speaking, ultimately forms the bed of democracy³⁴.

In the same perspective, Thouret also supported the idea of the *juge de paix*, which the Constituents developed in close relation with the concept of *volonté générale*³⁵. In fact, the popular judge was supposed to satisfy the demands of democratization and pacification of the whole nation. The *justice de paix* did not contain a Rousseau-like, popular dimension³⁶. The popular connota-

³³ There are various passages in which Thouret takes up Diderot's discourses on the laws still in force in Diderotian France, described as ‘jumbles of barbarity’. According to Thouret, the Estates General were to be an assembly based on the general will and to consider in equal way the needs and desires of the whole nation and the interest of each individual. J.G. Thouret, *Vérités philosophiques et patriotiques sur les affaires presents*, 1788. See Israel, *Revolutionary Ideas*, cit., p. 27.

³⁴ K. Ohji, *Pardelà la ‘volonté générale’. Le ‘concert des volontés’ selon le dernier Diderot in Diderot et la politique*, cit., pp. 25-26.

³⁵ J.G. Thouret, *Discours sur la réorganisation du pouvoir judiciaire*, 24 March 1790, *Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860*. Première série (1789 à 1800), XII, du 2 mars au 14 avril 1790, Société d'imprimerie et librairie administratives et des chemins de fer Paul Dupont, Paris 1881, pp. 344-348. On the proposals by the Constituents, see Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary*, cit., p. 171.

³⁶ Conversely, Pasquino saw in it a synthesis of Delolme and Rousseau; see P. Pasquino, *Il Primo Comitato di Costituzione e la teoria della “bilancia del legislativo”*, in *Rivoluzione francese. La forza delle idee e la*

tion of the institute did not reside in the social class of the justices of peace, but rather in the gratuitous service they offered the citizens, and in the fact that they had to live among the people. The constituents applied an Anglo-Dutch model, mediated by Voltaire and Diderot, devising an instrument of social harmony³⁷, thus demonstrating the remarkable polysemy of a single term. In addition to Thouret, Sieyès also recognized himself in this non-Rousseauian representation³⁸, which excluded any kind of direct democracy³⁹.

Brissot, on the other hand, tried to preserve some elements of direct democracy, to be reconciled with forms of representation⁴⁰. However, from August 11, 1792, a line was drawn between his idea of representative democracy and that of Robespierre. In a nutshell, until almost the end of that year, rather than innovating its political language, the Revolution summarized the philosophical and political Enlightenment categories. Not surprisingly, the main engravings and monumental busts that publicly portray the *Grands Hommes* of the Republic generally represent the greatest philosophers of the Enlightenment: Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, Mably, Raynal and Helvétius.

forza delle cose, a cura di H. Burstin, Guerini e associati, 1990, Milano pp. 53-69.

³⁷ J.P. Royer, *Histoire de la Justice en France de la monarchie absolue à la République*, PUF, Paris 2001³, pp. 280-331. Although Royer highlighted the link between the *juge de paix* with the Dutch model of the *vredemakers*, or *faiseur de paix*, he nevertheless stressed the indigenous origins of a proper French institute, the expression of «une justice de paix à la française (...) pour répondre au désir général des habitants des campagnes d'obtenir une justice», (ivi, pp. 285-286).

³⁸ J. Guilhaumou, *Sieyès, lecteur critique de l'article Evidence*, «Recherches sur Diderot et l'Encyclopédie», 14, 1993, pp. 125-144; P. Pasquino, *Il concetto di rappresentanza e i fondamenti del diritto pubblico della rivoluzione. E.J. Sieyès, in L'eredità della rivoluzione francese*, a cura di F. Furet, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1989; as well as Sieyès, Rousseau's heir «gave effect to the social contract (...) he saw none of Rousseau's difficulties», in Martin, *French liberal thought*, cit., p. 217.

³⁹ The context becomes more complicated if we consider McCormick's interpretation of Rousseau (*Reading Machiavelli. Scandalous books, suspect engagements, and the virtue of populist politics*, PUP, Princeton et Oxford 2018), concerning the Genevan critic of Machiavelli and theorist of a democratic government. Rousseau was against direct democracy as it was impossible to accomplish. Hence, he was far more in favour of an oligarchy. On the other hand, Postigliola defined direct democracy an élite aristocracy.

⁴⁰ F. Mazzanti Pepe, *Il nuovo mondo di Brissot. Libertà e istituzioni tra antico regime e rivoluzione*, Giappichelli, Torino 1996; Ead., *Brissot dal modello inglese al modello americano in Modelli della storia del pensiero politico. II. La Rivoluzione francese e i modelli politici*, a cura di V.I. Comparato, Olschki, Firenze, 1989. For a moderate Brissot «pointing out the moderation of his programme», see Martin, *French liberal thought*, cit., p. 252; M. Albertone, *L'apprentissage de la démocratie représentative à Paris. Brissot, Condorcet et la Constitution municipale (1789-1790)*, in *Les Défis de la représentation. Langages, pratiques et figure du gouvernement*, sous la direction de M. Albertone et D. Castiglione, Garnier, Paris 2018, pp. 197-221.

If philosophy and literature had hitherto exercised an imposing hegemony, a *tout populaire* anti-intellectualism began to emerge and reached such a frenetic crescendo that Brissot and Condorcet were expelled on the charge of aristocratism and slander. In other words, they were accused of constituting an élite far removed from the people. The final turning point was when, with regard to the beheading of the King, there was a dispute in the Assembly about an *appel au peuple ou appel au public*, a request that was an act of propaganda by Brissot. Allowing people to vote meant saving the sovereign. The popular vote was a political principle practiced by the Brissotins, but not by the Montagnards. Brissot and Danton were in favor of the *appel au peuple*, but circumstances and necessity forced them to vote against it, to prevent traditional forces from winning. When the *appel* was rejected, the Montagnards explained that the general will was not manifested in the primary assemblies. Yet, popular sovereignty failed to express itself, giving rise to an oligarchical management of the Revolution. This justification of the impossibility of implementing democracy in the assemblies has a theoretical, Rousseauian origin⁴¹ and allows us to explain the dynamics that led the Assembly to assume more radical and authoritarian forms and methods. Quite another thing was the general will that dated back to Diderot.

Since the 1770s, Diderot had dealt with the intrinsic connection between sociality and the homeland, as highlighted above all in the *Fragments Politiques*. Reflecting on the origin of the patriotic spirit, Diderot argued that indifference to the values and traditions that develops in antisocial behavior and in the enactment of the individual will would not have positive effects, nor would it strengthen the patriotic spirit.⁴² In isolation, the individual will – he reiterated, as he had already done in the *Encyclopédie* – was suspicious. Diderot was convinced that, in order to push towards the common good, it was necessary to pursue

⁴¹ J.P. McCormick recently tried to demonstrate that the Genevan was timocratic and rejected the democratic republic as theorized by Machiavelli, opening up instead to the oligarchy. Rousseau «[promotes] institutions that obstruct popular efforts to participate as free and equal citizens within republics. To keep the wealthy from dominating society and to keep magistrates from exercising excessive political discretion». See McCormick, *Reading Machiavelli*, cit., pp. 109, 112. He traces the origin of Rousseau's political historiography in the fourth book of the *Contrat social*, full of Rousseau's own efforts to concretize his abstract theorizing. Indeed, Alatri had already discussed it in terms of abstraction. Elsewhere McCormick has already addressed the matter of the origins of dictatorship; see Id., *The Dilemmas of Dictatorship: Carl Schmitt and Constitutional Emergency Powers*, in *Law as Politics: Carl Schmitt's Critique of Liberalism*, ed. by D. Dyzenhaus, Duke University Press, Durham 1998, pp. 222-226.

⁴² Diderot, *Fragments*, cit., p. 115; see F. Salaün, *Le langage politique de Diderot*, Hermann, Paris 2014.

a general will, to be deposited in the principles of written law⁴³. Thouret and Desmoulins supported this idea of general will, also included in the Constitutional Draft of February 15, 1793, written by Condorcet who, as the philosopher's pupil, had fought fanaticism and despotism for 30 years.

Condorcet was the heir of Diderot's anti-authoritarian and democratic teaching, and he was defended by Brissot until April 1792, after which time an unbridgeable divide was created between the Montagnards and the Brissotins. Within the complex revolutionary context, with regard to the wing of the Montagnards, who opted for a strong executive and a weak legislative power – at least in certain situations – Condorcet's draft was the most democratic and constitutional one; it reconciled the principles of representation with those of the general will and provided for legislative control over the executive. His Constitution of 1793 was therefore rooted in a political and scientific culture closer to that of Diderot, Helvétius, and Mably⁴⁴, in which we can also find elements of Masonic culture⁴⁵.

From 1792 and even more so during the period of the Directory, the circulation of Diderot's works increased. In 1792, Naigeon edited the article *Diderot* in the *Encyclopédie Méthodique*, and in 1798 he published the works of the philosopher. The first two volumes of *Philosophie Ancienne et Moderne*, for Panckouke's *Encyclopédie Méthodique*, constituted both a political platform from which to attack kings and priests, and a defence of Diderot and his materialistic philosophy against even the abbé Morelly, a philosophic enemy of revolutionary violence symbolised by Jean Meslier's famous phrase⁴⁶. Naigeon clearly restored to Meslier what had previously been attributed to Diderot. However, no one took any notice of these corrections, let alone the revolutionaries, their adversaries. By distancing Diderot from Meslier and from Morelly's *Code de la Nature* – attributed to the philosopher in the 1773

edition – he was trying to exonerate Diderot from the accusations aimed at him regarding the Babeuf conspiracy. In 1798, Naigeon published a new 15-volume edition of Diderot's works with the aim of dissociating his hero from any collusion with Babeuf and the conspiracy of Equals. He therefore attacked counter-revolutionaries like Fontanes and La Harpe, who took advantage of Babeuf's trial to portray the Philosopher as a bloodthirsty revolutionary. La Harpe, as a repentant revolutionary, who was arrested in 1794, was among the supporters of a conspiracy theory that was attributed to Diderot. He theorized the existence of a direct line between Diderot and Babeuf in the *Histoire de la Révolution française*, published post-mortem. This interpretation of Diderot as a leader of the subversives was conceived not during the imperial Age, but in the period of Directory, by Suard and the Abbé de Vauxcelles, in 1796, the year of anti-revolutionary propaganda against the Jacobins and the seditious Enlightenment⁴⁷. Suard had Diderot's manuscripts, including the precious *Plan de l'éducation*; however, he did not publish them, but only gave copies to Guizot, who published excerpts of them in his *Annales de l'Éducation*.

This latter representation of Diderot rekindled a far more remote reading, dating back to 1796 (the time of the *Éleuthéromanes* scandal), then forgotten until the mid-nineteenth century. In fact, after Pierre-Louis Ginguène had published the work *Éleuthéromanes* in his magazine in 1796, Jean-Baptiste Suard and the Abbé Bourlet de Vauxcelles identified in Diderot the real teacher of Danton, and the instigator of the *sans-culottes* violence of Hébert and Chaumette.

From 1790, almost all Diderot's friends spoke out against the Revolution except Naigeon⁴⁸. In the Revolution, Diderot was followed by Thouret, Condorcet, and Brissot in his political and educational project. In 1796, former friends La Harpe and Suard blamed him for the formation of a terrorist ideology; meanwhile, the men of the Directory such as Garat and Ginguène published writings on education⁴⁹. Most of Diderot's work was unknown in 1789, and it would only begin to come to light under the Directory thanks to revolutionary confiscations. In the context of the *idéologues* of the Directory, Ginguène and Garat, the role of Diderot as a mod-

⁴³ On the general will in Diderot, see Ohji, *Pardela la 'volonté générale'*, cit. I have also offered a critical reading («Studi Storici», 60, 2019, 3, pp. 637-664) of the interpretations advanced thus far by R. Mortier (*Diderot et la notion du peuple*, «Europe», 1, 1963, pp. 78-88) and Strugnelli (*Diderot's Politics*, cit.). To compare Rousseau's concept, see Masters, *La philosophie politique de Rousseau*, cit., pp. 372-384; G. Duso, *Il contratto sociale nella filosofia politica moderna*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1987.

⁴⁴ See *Il governo del popolo*, cit.

⁴⁵ At the end of the nineteenth century, in Naples, Cesare Dalbono – the first Italian translator of *Neveu de Rameau* – left us with the image of Diderot as a scientist educator, filtering a reading that was also Masonic, which had been developed by three Diderotians: Naigeon, Garat and Condorcet, members of the «Loggia delle nove Sorelle».

⁴⁶ «Je voudrais, dit-il, et ce sera le dernier, comme le plus ardent de mes souhaits: je voudrais que le dernier des rois fut étranglé avec les boyaux de dernier des prêtres»; Pellerin, *Naigeon*, cit., p. 37.

⁴⁷ «Les contre-révolutionnaires, à partir du Directoire, font de Voltaire et de Diderot les deux principaux précurseurs de la Révolution», (P. Pellerin, *Adversaires de Diderot sous la Révolution et l'Empire*, cit.). See also Dautry, *La révolution bourgeoise et l'Encyclopédie*, cit.; Id., *Le pessimisme économique de Babeuf et l'histoire des utopies*, «Annales Historiques Révolution Française», XXXIII, 164, 1961, pp. 215-233.

⁴⁸ Trousson, *Images de Diderot en France*, cit.

⁴⁹ G. Dulac, *Postface in Diderot, Fragments*, cit., p. 218; Pellerin, *Adversaires de Diderot sous la Révolution et l'Empire*, cit.

erate theorist of the Republic and *éducateur des peuples* counter-balanced the situation⁵⁰. The philosopher from Langres had been dead for a few years but already three different interpretations of his thought and his person had been developed: the 'revolutionary', the 'educator' and the 'master of terrorists'. In this article we have tried to offer a first contribution to this complex theme, showing how fundamental it is to continue the research, but declining it on the biographical method of political traineeship, as well as on biographical dictionaries and historical semantics. The intersection of the levels of the investigation must be constant; indeed, on one hand it is necessary to decipher the political thought of Diderot, and on the other to evaluate the incidence and the impact of this on the apprenticeships of revolutionaries.

At the present time we have some data on which to base future research: on the eve of the Revolution, Diderotian thought circulated in clandestine pamphlets, and in those same years some men of the future Constituent Assembly took inspiration from the philosopher. Therefore, the category of general will in use among the men of the Constituent and Legislative Assemblies does not seem to be only of Rousseauian derivation. So to conclude, we can confirm that deciphering the legacy of an author like Diderot could risk offering a partial reading if we firmly adhere only to the study of published works, considering the fact that in 1789 seven political works out ten were still completely unpublished. We agree with Yves Benot, who suggested that in order to understand the role of Denis Diderot among the men of the French Revolution, it is crucial to dig into the depths of the circuits of clandestinity and orality.

⁵⁰ École Normale Supérieure Paris, 2995, mss. *Notes diverses sur l'histoire de la philosophie. Discours du comte J.D. Garat, prononcé à une distribution de prix; Lettres de et à Garat (1793)*, mss. nn. 285, 295, 348.