Diderot

Robert McClintock

Historic melancholy again weighs down the spirit. Confidence weakens. Progress appears as a tinseled deception. Remediable problems perversely persist. Woe, the great dreams seem destined to disappoint, and those who hoped to follow a vision fluster in frustration. Life mimics art: The theater of the absurd gives way to the politics of the preposterous—assassinations, Vietnam, Watergate. . . , while inflation, pollution, famine, civil strife, and the unthinkable cataclysm haunt the miasma.

In this funk, a most disappointing dream has been that of the educators. The expectations for the redeeming power of universal compulsory schooling had been high, all too high, and many enthusiasts even held that popular pedagogy would ineluctably occasion the perfection of mankind. But after a century or more of trial, the results at best seem mixed. What was to have been a great work of enlightenment has created receptive audiences for political propaganda and commercial exploitation. What was to have been a strong bond of community has become a focus for ethnic, class, religious, and racial hostilities. What was to have been a broad causeway of social mobility has frequently functioned as a powerful tool reinforcing social stratification.

When the great dreams disappoint, reductive analysis becomes a saving panacea. One discounts the disappointment by retrospectively destroying the dream. To do this, the analyst shows that the dream was not truly dreamt. His technique is in part *ad hominem*: The revered dreamers were false exemplars, flawed, self-interested persons who are unworthy of reverence. His technique is in larger part ideological: The dream really masked a crass reality; ulterior motives moved events; appeals to principle concealed the shrewd selfishness of the powerful. Thus the reductive analyst avoids the disappointment of seeing good will and good works historically frustrated by showing the previous pretenses to good will and good works to have been nought but pretenses, ones by which malevolent interests molded the multitudes.

This article begins a series of review essays in which Robert McClintock, associate professor of history and education at Teachers College, will reassess the value for education of various figures in the Western tradition from antiquity to the recent past.

Such reductive analysis has become endemic among those disappointed by the great dream for education. The dream was not as it had seemed to have been from the common school through the medical school. The rhetoric of enlightenment through education cloaked more sinister policies. Educators who preened as the servants of the people's future worked really to perpetuate the positions of those who had won power in the past. Mass schooling was not a form of liberation, but a medium for social control. And on examination, the motives of the great reformers prove seriously suspect: At best, their professed love of humanity turns out to be a love for humanity structured in a very particular way, one in which the reformers' self-interests worked out to be well served.

Faced with a plethora of revisionist studies, a few can draw further inspiration from them, resolving to rise to yet greater effort, to hold to yet more rigorous standards. But for many, incessant revisionism engenders a certain sloth: for them it is not simply that in the past valid aspirations had been pursued with inadequate effort and uprightness, but that somehow the aspirations themselves had been tainted. If the aspirations have been tainted, the uncertain reason, perhaps quiescence, taking things as they come, is preferable to an active course that may lead us in spite of ourselves into the exploitation of others. Thus revisionism can beget withdrawal, at which point, if not before, one would be wise to turn to Diderot.

Denis Diderot dreamt the liberal dream. This Arthur M. Wilson shows with wonderful sympathy and detail in his magnificent biography, *Diderot.*[1] The person therein depicted took his stand for tolerance, secularism, materialism, and enlightenment. He devoted twenty-five of his prime years to the then dangerous drudgery of editing a great encyclopedia, one the purpose of which was no less than that of "changing the general way of thinking." Diderot covered a tremendous range in his writing: philosophy, technology, pornography, politics, drama, art, the novel; a teeming power of invention characterized it all. Diderot possessed strong, adamant convictions, but these convictions do not become tedious because they hold within them tremendous tensions: He naturally couched his monologues in the form of dialogues. Wilson's portrait, which is by no means uncritical, displays an expansive, likable, most exemplary man.

To be sure, Diderot's work can be subjected to reductive analysis. John Lough, in his thorough but rather unimaginative study, *The "Encyclopédie,"* gives a careful account of the content of the *Encyclopédie*, as well as much information on the contributors and subscribers to it.[2] From this and from Wilson's account, it is clear that the *Encyclopédie* to which Diderot dedicated himself was a bourgeois encyclopedia, one that reflected the tastes and interests of the rising professional and industrial groups. Further,

1 Arthur M. Wilson. *Diderot.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1972.

2 John Lough. *The "Encyclopédie."* New York: David McKay, 1971.

Diderot devoted great personal energy to the most bourgeois part of the *Encyclopédie*, to the numerous articles explaining current technical processes. The *Encyclopédie* itself was a significant example of the potential uses of large-scale capital in publishing, and when it was threatened with proscription at the behest of theological opponents, one of the most effective arguments in its defense was the appeal to the protection of capital—by banning the work the government would arbitrarily destroy the substantial property invested in it by subscribers and publishers. Here was a prime example of the relation between the demand for tolerance and capitalistic free enterprise, and the very considerable price of the *Encyclopédie* made it clear that the fruits of this demand were to be enjoyed by men of means, not by the populace at large.

Reductive analysis of Diderot's work, however, is ultimately tangential. That a person's work accords with his self-interests and class interests is to be expected and properly becomes a mark against him only if that is all there is to his work. Like anyone, Diderot had to cope with his cares, and in doing so he was not above the very bourgeois course of investing a substantial sum with a tax-farmer. But such investments were not the goal and purpose of Diderot's life. The goal and purpose for Diderot was to take part to the maximum of his ability in the never ending struggle against ignorance. He is one of the great dreamers of the liberal dream for education because of his extraordinary capacity for taking part in this struggle. His example teaches several things about the dream that it may be well to remember.

For one, the struggle against ignorance takes place first within oneself. On this, Diderot is exemplary: he had a ceaseless drive to overcome his ignorance. He left little documentation of his formal education. Wilson thinks it probable that Diderot almost completed studies for a doctorate in theology. It is fairly certain that pursuit of a formal, clerical education drew Diderot at sixteen to Paris, where he studied theology for ten years or so, probably under the auspices of both the Jesuits and the Jansenists at one time or another. This capacity to touch both the theological poles then within Catholicism gives a clue to the character of Diderot's studies: He was much more committed to study, to the pursuit of learning, than to theology, to a particular body of religious doctrine. Wilson recounts how, when Diderot completed his master of arts degree, a family friend asked what Diderot wanted to be, and the youth replied, "Nothing, nothing at all. I like study; I am very well off, very happy; I don't ask anything else." When the account of this reached Langres, Diderot's paternal subsidy decisively stopped, which simply had the unexpected effect of confirming Diderot in his bohemian life of study for its own sake.

Tolerance was the energizing principle of Diderot's studies: He was willing to attend to a great variety of matters, reserving judgment on each until he had managed to understand it. Here was a fundamental element in Diderot's dream

of liberalism: He was confident in the superior capacity for study possessed by the truly tolerant person. Possessing this confidence, he was quite willing to let others try what seemed to him erroneous paths: As he had done, they would see things for themselves and then choose the better way with all the more conviction. Thus Diderot, the great philosopher of materialism, was not particularly upset when his wife insisted on bringing up their daughter in the Catholic faith; as long as his views were not excluded, she would find out for herself, as she did. The universal enlightening that Diderot envisioned was not one in which a higher truth was taught to all; rather it was one in which each employed a capacity to study divergent views tolerantly, thus to arrive at a closer approximation of the truth.

Manifestly, such a dream was and is a dream: judging by results, one must conclude that then and now continuous self-enlightenment is far from universal. Yet here is another feature of the dream it would be well to remember. Meaningful aspirations are ones open to subjective, not objective, fulfillment. Thus the martyr dies the happy death while the mogul suffers the unending torment of unsatisfying satisfactions. In large part, the current crisis in liberalism is rooted in the expectation of the would-be liberal that his aspirations ought to have resulted by now in objective fulfillment; and in the face of the flagrant fact that they have not done so, the disappointed liberal ceases to be capable of drawing subjective fulfillment from efforts to move one step closer to the still distant goal.

Diderot did not confuse the inward and the outward in this way, for he did not have to suffer the cant of institutionalized liberalism. He did not have to listen to the unending claims of achievement by educators, politicians, and businessmen, to the sterile celebrations of the best year yet, to the pious proclamations that we are going forward—always forward, never backward, to right or left, up or down, but inevitably, monotonously going forward—to meet new challenges, exciting new challenges, with the confident expectation of new and even better achievements. Such claims debase the quality of liberal aspirations; they destroy the dream by confusing it with reality. The human reality is far too complicated to be encompassed in any single dream, and to pretend otherwise is to truncate reality and to trifle with the dream.

For Diderot, reality was rife with ignorance, intolerance, misery, injustice, sickness, cruelty, poverty, and death. He did not expect it to be otherwise. At the same time, reality was redeemed by love, hope, fellow feeling, joy, ambition, kindness, probity, expansive virtue, intelligence, humor, beauty, and erotic release. He did not expect it to be otherwise. In the midst of this teeming, mixed reality, toward what did Diderot aspire to work? Toward universal enlightenment, toward maximizing each man's understanding and control of the teeming reality that his life would always be. For Diderot, this aspiration was a dream, not a reality at which he might arrive: It denoted not a condition to be achieved,

but the intention that would inform his every act within a world that would always be, among many other things, an intricate intermingling of intelligence and ignorance. Such the world still is, and Diderot's intention continues valid.

Because Diderot's liberalism defined for him the character of his intention, not the array of his anticipated achievements, it gave him a tremendous self-sustaining power in the face of adversity. True, in part this power was inborn—he had too much vitality to be daunted. But there were times when his vitality might well have agreed with friends like Voltaire, who were advising him to be prudent, to desist from his labors, even to flee Paris. But Diderot knew what his intention was: It was not to flee, not to desist; it was to see the *Encyclopédie* through to completion, to make it what it might be, to be determined enough not to give in to the mere threat of persecution. Diderot thought of himself as a Socratic figure and he was sufficiently committed to his purpose to foresee that he might have to risk a Socratic end.

In a sense, Diderot's capacity to sustain himself in his labors enabled him to enjoy something of a Socratic afterlife without, as it turned out, his having to suffer martyrdom. Socrates would be poorly remembered without Plato and his commemorations of the dead teacher's life. Diderot surely realized that Naigeon, his younger disciple, "Diderot's ape," as some put it, was not Plato, and Naigeon's account of the master turned out reverent, a mine of information, but devoid of the genius that could command the interest of posterity. Happily, however, Diderot managed to play Plato for himself by keeping much of what he wrote in manuscript and leaving it to posterity to find and publish what proved to be many of his best works: *Rameau's Nephew, D'Alembert's Dream, Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage, Refutation d'Helvétius,* and *Jacques le fataliste,* among others. This was a stratagem of prudence. Unlike the *Encyclopédie,* which was to be used *hic et nunc,* these writings concerned timeless principles. Early in his career, Diderot had been imprisoned for speaking too plainly on matters metaphysical and was loathe to repeat the experience unnecessarily. The same confidence in his intention that made him determined to complete the *Encyclopédie* made him willing to hold his other writings for posterity: What he had to say in them would be of interest then, if it was of interest at all, and he was confident that the works would have their effect long after he was impervious to persecution.

This "appeal to posterity," which Wilson so effectively shows Diderot to have made, indicates a third and final matter that one might keep in mind about the liberal dream of enlightenment through education: The educative effort can take many forms, even reliance on posthumous publication. With institutionalized liberalism, the intention to educate has been circumscribed to the area where achievement is most ostensible, that is, to formal schooling. So much has this been the case, that many see the liberal dream of enlightenment through education to be synonymous with reliance on state supported systems

of universal schooling. To be sure, many Enlightenment thinkers, Diderot included, called for the creation of such systems, but to call for the creation of a system is not to counsel reliance on it, and the complexity at least of Diderot's pedagogical practice suggests that the proper pursuit of the liberal dream should be far more many-sided than it has become with institutionalized liberalism.

Diderot was associated—exactly how is a matter that merits further study—with an essay, *De l'Education publique,* which appeared in 1762. This called for a system of primary and secondary schools, universities, and professional schools, all under state supervision. In all probability, the plan was not Diderot's, but many of its features were like those Diderot later set forth in his *Mémoires pour Catherine II* and in his *Plan d'une université pour le gouvernement de Russie.* In these Diderot discussed with considerable detail many of the stock educational themes of institutionalized liberalism: a system of public schools that would "give value to the talent of each and would open every opportunity to genius, no matter in what station nature had placed it"; special provisions for the education of orphans; an enlightened military education; and extensive provisions for the higher learning that would maximize its value to the nation. But the selective eye of institutionalized liberalism is liable to forget that there was much more to these *Mémoires,* that they set forth a many-sided program of civic pedagogy in which all things—the laws, drama, the city, styles of commerce and industry, patterns of tolerance, of consumption, of law enforcement, of family structure, of governmental example, of linguistic usage, of publishing—were seen as decisive matters in the education of the public. And the sum conduced far too much to the moral independence of the people for Catherine II to long consider adopting its provisions.

In contrast to Catherine II's policies, Diderot's own practice more closely lived up to the comprehensiveness of his pedagogical vision. The *Encyclopédie* reached only a limited number of users, but in Diderot's lifetime, his *Encyclopédie* was much pirated, and since then it has continued its work by having redefined the nature and purpose of an encyclopedia in such a way that powerful resources for intellectual and spiritual self-reliance have come within the reach of far greater numbers of people. Likewise, the function of his innovations in drama, of his art criticism, of his novels, and of his philosophic essays was to provoke others to greater awareness, to greater tolerance, to fuller self-command. He saw the importance of public schooling in making the sundry agencies of enlightenment accessible to all. But these divers agencies were the crucial ones for enlightenment, for if they did not serve one well in one's pursuit of enlightenment, no amount of greater access to them would have much beneficial effect on the common life.

Diderot's dream was the liberal dream, and it includes the drive toward universal schooling. But if the near approach of that part of the dream has yielded

disappointing results, it does not show that the dream was deceptive, for the part is not the whole. The whole dream was to make the whole culture work for, not against, intellectual and moral autonomy. Much remains if even the schools are to be made to work well toward *that* standard, and much, much more yet requires thorough reformation if our common culture, if our experience of justice, law, work, consumption, leisure, entertainment, reverence, love, and festival, is to conduce to our mutual enlightenment. In short, the dream is still a dream, and so it will remain. Diderot does not point the way to its fulfillment. Rather, Diderot exemplifies the imagination, dedication, and vitality needed to keep dreaming the dream. That is enough.