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Diderot's  *Supplément*

A Study in

## Historical Precociousness

Casting anti-colonialism as an exclusive product of the nineteenth and twentieth-century colonial experience, though a dominant trend among historians, is tremendously misleading. Such reductive generalizations tend to gloss over significant ideologies or events simply because they complicate the distinct periods which historians have retroactively applied. Indeed, insofar as European domestic colonial opposition is concerned, several articulate and forceful challenges to the colonial enterprise were certainly put forth prior to the nineteenth century. Denis Diderot's novella entitled *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville* stands out on several counts in this oft overlooked field of early-modern European anti-colonialism. Diderot's work cogently attacks the ideology of empire while simultaneously undermining the "noble savage" or "natural man" orthodoxy through which proponents of empire typically viewed the colonial Other. In its place, Diderot posited an image of these "others" as profoundly cultured beings, rather than being mere caricatured projections of the European imagination that the "noble-savage" paradigm made them appear to be. As such, Denis Diderot's novella deserves to be considered by future historians as an important example of proto-anti-colonial literature.

Precise working definitions of the terminology used in this study are critical to its methodological approach and the contextualization of its central concepts. The western psyche often perceives the term "anti-colonialism," somewhat erroneously, as an ideology which promulgates a visceral disgust and rejection of Europeans in addition to a rejection of all forms of colonial rule. This perception, however, is one which largely grew out of the specificities of twentieth-century colonial experience. To attribute similar ideological proclivities to Diderot simply because of his shared rejection of empire would be to commit the grave historical error of viewing the past through the lens of the present. Indeed, anti-colonialism in the twentieth century, fanonian sense of the term would have been reprehensible to Diderot; though he was most certainly a radical, forward-thinking philosophe, he was fundamentally a man of his time.

with its European neighbors. Oriental civilization was, in the mind of the eighteenth-century European, the primary, if not the only, feasible claimant to the title of culture

Any scholar so inclined will have difficulty locating hints of Diderot's future philosophical radicalism in what Diderot himself often described as an idyllic, pastoral childhood in the town of Langres. Diderot's early life and upbringing were in fact rather pious and his family had deep clerical roots. According to Diderot's celebrated biographer Arthur Wilson, Diderot's family was "not only intimately familiar with the tradition of the church but also not in the least rebellious against it." It was thus in large part Diderot's life in Paris, the friendships he forged and the social circles in which he was an active part, which made him the formidable philosophe he became.

Arguably the most significant of the relationships that Diderot built was his storied rapport with another major thinker of eighteenth-century France, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose caustic assaults on European mores impacted much of his thought (the exchange was, to be sure, reciprocal). Rousseau was, however, one of the principal exponents of the "noble-savage" theory, which Diderot categorically rejected in *Supplément*. Furthermore, Rousseau's articulation of this exceedingly popular idea was both tremendously influential among his contemporary thinkers and was largely representative of their own approaches. The fact of Diderot's longstanding close relationship with Rousseau and their eventual estrangement renders likely that Diderot based, at least in part, his refutation of "noble savagery" in *Supplément* on Rousseau's understanding of the concept.

Rousseau expounded the most on "noble savagery" in his work entitled *A Discourse on Inequality*. He began therein with a bitter rejection of the decadent, corrupt and immoral civilization he perceived all around



Peruvian princess named Zilia. Zilia, the story's heroine, after being kidnapped by Spanish conquistadors, is transferred to a French ship and upon arrival in France is invited by the ship's captain, Déterville, to live at his mother's chateau in the countryside. Zilia agrees and the rest of the novel is principally concerned with her first impressions of French institutions, habits, and customs "which are defamiliarized and as a result denaturalized under her ingenuous gaze." Years pass and Zilia assimilates herself to French culture. Though she kept "souvenirs" of her Peruvian past in her personal library, these objects seem to be displayed in a staid and rather uninspired manner. Rather than being representative of something living and vibrant, Peruvian culture was clearly consigned to an inferior position and was firmly fixed as "a pre-colonial tradition." The civilizing mission was thus complete. The erstwhile savage had undergone an internal transformation, a revolution of mind, and had, both in body and spirit, become civilized simply as a result of her contact with "superior" French culture. *New Voyages*, a non-fiction work published by Baron de Lahontan in 1703, is similarly dependent on the noble-savage paradigm in its depiction of the Other. The primary structure through which "noble savagery" is presented therein takes the form of a discourse that occurs between Lahontan and an Amerindian he encounters named Adario. The reader learns through this dialogue that Adario's tribe, the Huron, lack all attraction to material goods and enjoy "robust physical constitutions." Furthermore, Adario asserts that in his tribe property rights do not exist, and as a result the gradations of wealth and the social interdependence they necessarily bring are entirely absent. Adario also exclaims at one point, in reference to his tribe, that "the scope of our imagination cannot extend one thumb's length beyond the earth's surface." As Sankar Muthu asserts in *Enlightenment against Empire*, "Hurons are free because they are their own masters, enslaved neither by their appetites nor by other people who claim superiority." These characteristics are highly evocative of the savage, natural and fundamentally pre-cultural simplicity which Rousseau attributed to his primitive man in *Discourse*. As such, Lahontan and Madame de Graffigny's works both present their colonial "subjects" as essentially void of all prerequisites for culture or civilization and thereby as imaginative caricatures of the European mind. This view, popular as it was, tacitly reinforced the ideology of empire that Diderot categorically rejected in *Supplément*.

Attributing a marked anti-colonial position to Diderot's *Supplément* makes it tempting to identify similar anti-colonial predispositions elsewhere in the vast corpus of his works. Such direct links are, however, exceedingly difficult to locate. It is, though, possible to note the presence of sentiments and insinuations suggestive of such a position in

several of his œuvres, albeit not the existence of an overarching anti-colonial system of thought outside of Supplément. For example, in the article he contributed to "L'Encyclopédie" entitled "Political Authority" and first published in 1751, Diderot states unambiguously that "No man has received from nature the right to command others" and that "power that is acquired by violence is only usurpation." Given the centrality of the colonial enterprise in state affairs during Diderot's time, it is difficult to imagine how he could have written these words without realizing their implications. Indeed, it is far more likely that he specifically had the colonial endeavor in mind but was cautious about being specific because of the well-known censorship powers that the Ancien Régime actively employed.

Other examples of this anti-colonial tendency can be drawn from Diderot's numerous uncredited contributions to Abbe Raynal's banned colonial history entitled *Histoire des Deux Indes*. Besides subtly and sometimes explicitly decrying the colonial enterprise, Diderot also made numerous allusions to a coming revolution in which he believed the

endured and the dangers he surely faced. They then turn to discussing the fact that Bougainville writes about having encountered, on even the remotest of islands, various species of animals. In

This country is yours! And why? Because you put your foot here! If a Tahitian landed on your coast and engraved on one of your stones or on the bark of one of your trees: This



population (which serves the interests of all). Instead of vilifying sexual relations which occur outside of marriage, the Tahitians encourage all sexual liaisons between fertile partners and celebrate the birth of all children regardless of their parental status. After reflecting on all he has learned of Tahitian culture the chaplain remarks plainly "this passion which produces so many crimes and ills in our countries would be here absolutely innocent." The significance of this phrase is twofold. For one, the chaplain (and through him Diderot) is saying that "this passion" has an equivalent in Tahitian society and is thereby identifying a cross-cultural similarity which could serve as a basis for understanding the shared humanity of Tahitians and Europeans. Secondly, the chaplain is asserting that the Tahitians have made out of this instinct a culture which does not ascribe to nature the status of sin but was rather a system for the greater good. He seems to laud this achievement and is thus implicitly admitting that Tahitians have admirably reconciled their natural urges with the demands of their civilized existence.

Later in this dialogue between Orou and the chaplain the Tahitian speaks more of the negative aspects of life on his native island. The reader learns that the Tahitians constantly have "neighboring enemies to fight" and a "need for soldiers." All is most certainly not peaceful and innocent in this supposedly primitive society. These "savages" do not live an almost heavenly, edenic existence. Societal structures exist not only for reproductive purposes but also for common defense. Tahitian culture evidently interacts with other groups as a cohesive unit; it is a cultural group which, like any other, defines itself by what it is against, both figuratively and literally. Diderot thereby directly contrasts Tahitians with Rousseau's pre-cultural, peaceful and fiercely independent image of the "noble savage."

The fifth and concluding chapter of *Supplément* revolves around a dialogue between A and B in which they review the stories that they have read and discuss their implications. It is at this point that Diderot brings his discourse full circle and posits what was surely a major component of his philosophical outlook (not only in relation to colonialism). Early in the chapter, upon being asked by A how he understands the meaning of the word "mores," B responds "I understand a general submission and a consequent behavior to good laws or bad ones. If the laws are good, the mores are good. If the laws are bad, the mores are bad." Here Diderot again forwards his image of human beings as profoundly cultured and formed in large part by the society in which they find themselves. The mores of Tahitians were not determined by something etched into nature, but were in fact malleable and determined by the Tahitians themselves. Tahitians were, like Europeans, products of their environment. To compare their two

cultures side by side would be to assume that they had enough common bases, besides their shared humanity, upon which to base such a claim. European civilization, therefore, could not have been superior to anything. It could have only been different and incomparable. Diderot thereupon subverted the "civilizing mission" that rested on this supposed superiority and was at the center of the logic of empire.

Diderot further addresses this issue through A and B later in the chapter. When A asks B if it is in fact necessary to civilize the Tahitian "savage," B responds pointedly in saying,

If you intend to be the tyrant, civilize him. Poison him as best you can with a morality contrary to nature...Do you want him to be happy and free? Don't intervene in his affairs.

"Civilize" as used in this quote essentially implies raising the Tahitians to the cultural standard that was Europe. Since, however, the Tahitians were in Diderot's mind radically different people, "civilizing" them was a course of action which would flout the moral equivalency of their culture with that of Europe and would only yield tyranny. The two previously demonstrated points that Diderot makes in this final chapter, that culture forms morality and that "civilizing" is thus implicitly moralizing, are tied inextricably together with a short yet profound phrase which A pronounces in the last lines of *Supplément*. "Take the frock of the country where one is going and keep that of the country where one is." The moral here is quite clear: morality is a relative, fluid concept which fluctuates widely in different contexts. The Tahitians were their own people and should thus be allowed to continue to pursue their society's vision of the "good life" as they saw fit. Colonialism, as Diderot suggests in this text, inevitably sets one culture above another regardless of the fact that cultures are context specific and thus incommensurable. If one takes "frock" to be a metaphor for culture Diderot was therefore promulgating a culturally relativist worldview which, as expressed in *Supplément*, argues specifically against colonialism and its discontents.

There are many historians and literary theorists who scoff at the possibility that Diderot was assaulting the foundations of colonialism in *Supplément*. Their arguments typically take one of two positions. First, they claim that the novella is more of a clarion call to sexual libertinism than anything else. This, however, is a *prima facie* reductive view which virtually ignores the multifaceted centrality of sex to the human experience and thereby its tremendous metaphorical capacity. Secondly, there are many who say that *Supplément* is primarily a critique on European culture done through the mouthpiece of the Tahitian foreigner. This claim is certainly true in part. It is hard to imagine, however,

how Diderot could have chosen such strikingly current interlocutors and used such referential diction without having understood what they implied. In literature everything is included by choice and as such nothing can be said to exist in a vacuum.

Denis Diderot was, even in a period noted for its sparkling minds, a radically unique talent. One specific way in which this radicalism manifested itself in his career was through the assault he launched on the lucrative state-sponsored colonial enterprise in his work entitled *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*. In undermining the image of the colonial Other, which had been largely defined through the noble-savage trope, and in asserting the fraternity and common origin of all humanity, Diderot postulated a view which framed colonialism as wildly unjust and necessarily inhumane. In the epoch following the writing of *Supplément* both the colonial enterprise itself and the field of anti-colonial literature which it influenced were to be tremendously expanded.

*Supplément*, however, appears to have been largely forgotten or misconstrued because of its genesis in an era noted for a widespread support of the colonial endeavor.

Historians would do well to eschew assumptions of cultural uniformity in future studies of anti-colonial thought. Indeed, such presumptuous generalizations are indicative of a superficial approach to historical research. *Supplément*, more than two centuries after it was first published, should now be allowed to take its place in the pantheon of anti-colonial literature.

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**Andrew Menfi**

## **Committed to the End: Confederate Soldier Combat Motivation in the Final Days of the Confederacy**

In his wartime diary on January 1st 1865, Private Henry Robinson Berkeley of the Confederate Army lamented the coming of the New Year. Berkeley had much to anguish over, for over the preceding months the Confederacy had suffered a miserable

Private Henry Berkeley was representative of the thousands of Confederate soldiers who fought in the final months of the American Civil War; they chose to keep fighting out of a higher commitment to duty and honor. Though thousands of soldiers deserted when the cause seemed lost, thousands more chose, remarkably, to remain in service. Despite the hardship that Confederate soldiers experienced and the clear signs in the final months that victory was impossible, their dedication to these tenets of ideology overrode any practical expectation of military victory. Although other

study is a problem that needs to be addressed in order to get a complete understanding of Confederate soldier ideology. This study therefore fills an under-emphasized gap and rectifies this problem.

Jason Phillips' *Diehard Rebels* is the most in-depth study that discusses why Confederate soldiers fought in the final actions of the war, but it is limited. Phillips specifically focuses on the men who refused to stop fighting and "submitted to unending carnage and squalor because they expected to win." Optimistic beliefs in invincibility and inevitability of Confederate victory certainly contributed to late-war combat ideology. However, Phillips' study is not comprehensive enough because Confederate soldiers who stayed committed because they always believed in victory were a minority. Phillips does not mention soldiers who continued to fight yet did not necessarily believe in absolute victory.

In contrast, this study of late-war Confederate soldier combat motivation is comprehensive. Phillips does not mention notions of duty and honor that permeated soldiers' writing because these concepts do not fit within the scope of his specific argument. Though my study found evidence of some soldiers continuing to fight out of belief in eventual military success, my study also found that repeated military disasters caused soldiers' belief in victory to deteriorate. However, repeated defeat did not have as noticeable an effect on soldiers' dedication to duty and honor, by far the most commonly cited reasons for fighting. Phillips also overstates soldiers' belief in inevitable victory because the time-period for his study is significantly broader than my own. While this study focuses on the final nine months of conflict, Phillips looks at the final two years of the war after the Battle of Gettysburg. Thus, Phillips was much more likely to find belief in victory in the final two years, rather than the final nine months. Even though Gettysburg was one of the infamous turning points of the war, Confederate forces still had a chance at victory.

This study looks at the final nine months of the conflict, right after the fall of Atlanta to Union forces in September of 1864, because this moment arguably marked the end of the Confederacy having any chance at victory. The fall of Atlanta was significant because not only was it a huge tactical victory for the Union, but it was also a huge political victory that occurred at a key time. The Confederate strategy never required a full military victory; it only required Confederate forces to hold out long enough for a Northern peace movement to gain enough momentum and force an armistice, or for foreign powers to intervene on the side of the Confederacy.

The political stakes were high at this point because in November of 1864, President Abraham Lincoln was up for re-election against George McClellan, who ran on a platform of peace. In the early months of 1864, Union forces incurred catastrophic





honor, and he refused to desert his cause and shame himself. Lieutenant Thomas J. Key from Arkansas had a similar view on honor and desertion. On November 7th 1864, Thomas wrote bluntly in his diary that "desertion was disgraceful" and he would never consider it. Thomas feared disgrace, which kept him fighting until his regiment surrendered in the final days of the conflict. Many Confederate soldiers stayed faithful to a futile cause and rejected desertion as an option in order to uphold their honor by staunchly fighting for their homeland.

In addition to honor, the other key concept that kept Confederates fighting was their commitment to doing their duty. This study defines duty as the moral obligation to fulfill a commitment to a group, person, or idea. Many Confederates who participated in the final stages of the fighting expressed duty as their explanation for why they did not leave. For instance, the Alabamian James Williams wrote to his wife in December of 1864, "I am so wedded to my pride and my duty, that I would not leave my forts while a fight appeared imminent." It is important to clarify that for Confederate soldiers, duty was a multifaceted commitment. Combatants conveyed that they fought to fulfill their duty to multiple groups, ideas, and people. It is also important to explain that these different commitments often overlapped in some form.

Many soldiers expressed that they fought out of a duty to their country or to their state. Confederates often felt compelled to continue to fight for their country out of a sense of duty, even when defeat appeared inevitable. Private Henry Trueheart wrote in December of 1864, "We are rendering more services to the country than we could possibly do in any other capacity... I have come as near the performance of my duty as men generally do." William Clement from North Carolina conveyed a similar devotion to country. When offered a leave of absence in December of 1864, Clement wrote that he "would not accept that unless I thought my country did not need my services any longer." Duty to country was plainly a significant motivating factor for combatants at the end of the war.

On a more personal level, numerous Confederates also felt that they had a commitment to continue to fight to defend their home and their family. For almost the entirety of the war, Union armies invaded the South, and fought on Southern soil. Southern men felt that it was their duty to try and hinder northern armies intent on invading and devastating their homeland. This sentiment exacerbated toward the end of the war when Union armies adopted a total war strategy, which called for widespread destruction of civilian supplies, infrastructure and property. These actions by the Union inspired Thomas Key to keep fighting. Key wrote in his diary in November of 1864, "My heart is so much depressed with the sad intelligence from dear home that I have thought of but little save the barbarous treatment that my family

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temporary furlough or permanently. Henry wrote in his diary, "I told them that I did not think this was a time for men to be going home, that General Early needed every man which he could possibly get and many more than he had, and that if we did [not] stand to our guns, the Yanks might get to our homes before we did." Henry's duty to defending his home is quite apparent. Even if victory proved impossible, many soldiers felt obligated to defend their home and their family from foreign invaders.

Most men who chose not to desert did so out of their personal adherence to honor and duty, and not out of fear of punishment. Punishment for desertion in the Confederate armies rarely ended in execution, even for repeat offenders. Given the numerical superiority of Union forces, the Confederacy could not afford to execute valuable servicemen. Most officers punished deserters with some form of temporary confinement, only to release them quickly back into service.

The already lax punishments became even looser later in the war when Confederate soldiers were in even higher demand. In August of 1864, President Jefferson Davis drafted an official pardon to every Confederate deserter in custody, releasing them from any punishments. This policy arose out of desperation for more men. Five months later, General-in-Chief Robert E. Lee wrote a second pardon, likewise releasing every deserter in custody at that time. The risks for desertion were not high for Confederate soldiers, especially in the final months of the conflict. This is most likely why, in the entire sample size for this study, not a single soldier expressed fear of punishment from deserting, while the majority expressed fear of not fulfilling their duty or dishonoring themselves.

Not only did most Confederate soldiers not express fear of punishment for desertion, but it was not difficult for soldiers to find an opportunity to desert and succeed if they had wished to do so. For instance, the Confederate Army's organizational system for record keeping was inefficient and clumsy. This inefficiency stemmed from the problems that came with the brand-new institutions that Confederate officials had quickly built for the use of their new country. In addition, confusion stemming from invasion and destruction of records also led to problems. Given the state of the country, not only was it difficult for the war department to keep track of soldiers, but to find and capture deserters as well. Another major factor was that Southern soldiers fought on southern soil, often only a few miles from their homes. It was common for soldiers familiar with the local land to just slip away from their post and go home.

Given the motive and opportunity towards the end of the conflict, Confederate soldiers deserted in droves. In a letter to his father in March of 1865, Private Edward

over 100,000 men deserted their posts. Desertion was common, relatively easy, and generally without harsh punishment for Confederate soldiers in the final months of the war. This demonstrates that most soldiers who chose to remain in service did so because of a commitment; most were not forced to remain by their superior officers.

Confederate soldiers expressed other reasons for remaining in service to the end, but for most soldiers they were secondary motivations when compared to duty and honor. Some other motivations for combatants included camaraderie, religion, and vengeance. Though several examples certainly exist of soldiers fighting for these motives, soldiers also professed fighting for notions of duty and honor, and did so in greater numbers and with more intensity. For instance, cavalryman W. W. Heartsill conveyed in the May 17th entry of his diary his great desire to "make one mighty effort to avenge our brothers who so nobly gave their lives for their country." However, in the final nine months of the war Heartsill did not express this desire for vengeance any more than this single instance. Yet, Heartsill wrote in his diary a month earlier his fear for "eternal shame and disgrace...if we do not rise in strength and, at least make one determined effort to retrieve our misfortunes." A month before this, Heartsill wrote that his regiment fought because "we feel that we do but our duty". Examples of Heartsill mentioning duty and honor as a motivation to continue fighting repeatedly occur, unlike vengeance. In this way, Heartsill is representative of the majority of Confederate soldiers in that duty and honor usually trumped other motivating factors.

The belief in inevitable Southern victory as a motivating factor that existed even in the late stages of the war, but over time it declined for most soldiers significantly. Repeated military setbacks made many of even the most stubborn soldiers eventually admit that their cause was lost. Sergeant Edwin Fay was one such soldier who believed that the war was winnable up until the final days. On May 5th 1865, after Union forces took the Confederate capital of Richmond and General Robert E. Lee surrendered the largest Confederate Army, Fay wrote in a letter to his wife, "I firmly believe that the Confederacy will gain its independence." However, Fay could only keep this faith for so long. A few days later, Fay learned of the surrender of the Army of the Tennessee, meaning that there was only a single substantial Confederate Army remaining in the field. After hearing of these events, Fay admitted in a letter home on May 10th, "Truly the Lord has forsaken his people-I fear the subjugation of the South." Given enough time, most Confederate soldiers gave up hope of victory.

Even though repeated defeats caused many soldiers to give up on victory as a motivating factor, most who refused to desert did not renounce their commitments to honor and duty. The majority of soldiers who remained did not necessarily connect duty and honor to victory. Many Confederates believed that they could fulfill their duty and stay honorable by fighting, even if they did not think they were going to

achieve independence. Texan Henry Orr explained such thoughts in a letter home, in which he wrote that the Confederacy would probably soon "be broken by the advance of a brutal foe, and if such is the case, it will behoove us as soldiers in defense of our state and our Confederacy and as freemen struggling for independence to confront and if possible defend our country from every attempt of invasion, devastation, and ruin." Even though Henry admitted the Confederacy would probably lose, this only compelled him to keep fighting out of a duty to defend his broken country. When belief in victory faded for soldiers, duty and honor still forced many Confederates forward.

Once the conflict was over, every remaining Southern soldier needed to admit defeat, but even though they had lost, many combatants did not regret that they had fought. Though Confederate soldiers certainly regretted that the Union defeated them, many were satisfied that they had fulfilled their duty and kept their honor. After Union troops captured Private Louis Leon and ended his service, he wrote in his diary, "The four years that I have given to my country I do not regret, nor am I sorry for one day that I have given. My only regret is that we have lost for which we fought." W. W. Heartsill felt quite similarly once the army he belonged to surrendered. On May 20th when he mustered out, Heartsill proudly wrote in his diary that "as a company of Confederate Soldiers, we have to the utmost of our ability DONE OUR DUTY...we have been honorably discharged, we can look back with pride... and we can honestly

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