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Understanding the Counter-Enlightenment Discourse through Palissot's *Les Philosophes*

Karşı Aydınlanmacı Söylemi Palissot'nun Les Philosophes'undan Hareketle Anlamak

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ABSTRACT

Although *Les Philosophes* was an ordinary comedy, and Palissot was far from the caliber of Molière or Voltaire, it successfully consolidated conservative criticisms of the philosophes within a satirical framework, enjoying a successful three-month run in 1760. The reason behind its success was that it was at the center of a debate between the Enlightenment philosophers and the Counter-Enlightenment figures. In addition to being an example of 18th-century French comédie, the play serves as a valuable source for understanding the key points of conservative discourse of the time. While Palissot seemed to focus on attacking individual philosophes' personalities, he paired these attacks with conceptual critiques, and directed the most of his criticism primarily at Diderot and Rousseau. The play remains significant for two reasons: First, it captures almost all of the concerns and arguments of the conservative reaction to the Enlightenment. Second, it sheds light on Enlightenment thinkers' personal and intellectual struggles. This paper examines Palissot's *Les Philosophes* not as a mere literary dispute but as a rich text that reveals the Counter-Enlightenment discourse that emerged in the second half of the 18th century.

Keywords

Counter-Enlightenment, Enlightenment, Palissot, Denis Diderot, Conservative Discourse

ÖZ

Les Philosophes sıradan bir komedi olmasına ve Palissot yetenek bakımından Molière'den ve Voltaire'den oldukça uzak olmasına rağmen, muhafazakâr eleştirileri alaycı bir çerçevede birleştirerek 1760 yılında üç ay süren bir sahne başarısı elde etmiştir. Oyunun başarısının nedeni, Aydınlanma filozofları ile Karşı-Aydınlanma figürleri arasındaki tartışmanın merkezinde yer almasıdır. 18. yüzyıl Fransız komedisi türüne bir örnek olmasının yanı sıra, oyun, dönemin muhafazakâr söyleminin temel noktalarını anlamak için değerli bir kaynak olarak değerlendirilmelidir. Palissot, ilk bakışta filozofların kişiliklerini hedef alıyor gibi görünse de, bu saldırıları aydınlanma filolarının kullandığı kavramlara yönelik eleştirilerle birleştirmiş ve eleştirilerinin çoğunu özellikle Diderot ve Rousseau'ya yöneltmiştir. Oyun iki açıdan önemini korumaktadır: Birincisi, Aydınlanma'ya karşı muhafazakâr tepkinin hemen hemen tüm kaygılarını ve gerekçelerini ortaya koymaktadır. İkincisi, Aydınlanma düşünürlerinin kişisel ve entelektüel mücadelelerine ışık tutmaktadır. Bu makale, Palissot'nun *Les Philosophes* yapıtını basit bir edebi tartışma olarak değil, 18. yüzyılın ikinci yarısında ortaya çıkan Karşı-Aydınlanma söylemini açığa çıkaran zengin bir metin olarak incelemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Karşı Aydınlanma, Aydınlanma, Palissot, Denis Diderot, Muhafazakâr Söylem

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INTRODUCTION

In May 2, 1760, Palissot's[4] *Les Philosophes*, a three-act play, made its debut at Comedie Française, France's premier theater. On its first night, large crowds made a long queue and waited outside for hours for tickets (Barbier, 1857, pp. 248-250). The number of people who attended the première was 1439 and it generated 4,379 francs in revenue (Lancaster, 1951, p. 797). A fervent counter-enlightenment figure, Élie Catherine Fréron (1719-1776) wrote that he had never seen "such great crowds of people" and none of the works of Molière, Racine, Corneille or Crébillon attracted such attention and drew many spectators (Fréron, 1760 III, p. 214). Pierre-Louis d'Aquin (1720-1796), in his periodical literary newspaper *Le Censeur hebdomadaire*, stated that "the people laid siege to the doors of the Comédie-Française," and *Les Philosophes* excited an unparalleled curiosity and interest, even when compared to the most celebrated dramas (d'Aquin, 1760, p. 368). Friedrich Melchior, Baron von Grimm (1723-1807), a close friend of Denis Diderot, said that if France had achieved a military victory on the day of *Les Philosophes*' premiere, it would have gone unnoticed by the Parisian public, as everyone was solely talking about the play (Grimm & Diderot, 1878, p. 368).

The play was an instant success and for the next three months, it attracted more than twelve thousand people. In addition to its success on stage, the play's subsequent

[4] Charles Palissot de Montenoy (1730-1814) studied philosophy at the age of eleven, defended his thesis in theology at twelve, and received his bachelor's degree in the same faculty at fourteen (Palissot, 1777 p. xj). Palissot's father wanted his son to study both law and medicine, which would allow him to have multiple career options by the time he turned twenty. While Palissot's father offered this broad foundation for his son's education, he strongly favored a career in the church. He believed that he could help secure a promising future for his son because he had influence and connections in that area. While Palissot deeply respected his father and did not wish to disappoint him, he had a personal aversion to a religious career path. This created an internal struggle between honoring his father's expectations and his desire to follow his own aspirations for him and he devised a plan to navigate this conflict. After completing his religious studies, Palissot moved to Paris to join the Congregation of the Oratory. This institution of the Church allowed its members to have church-related privileges while not obliging them strictly to a clerical life. Palissot's true intention wasn't to remain with the congregation but to distance himself from his father, hoping that being far from him would make it easier to express his reluctance to pursue a career in the church (Palissot, 1777 p. xij-xiij). Palissot's love of poetry and literature pulled him toward theater and he composed his first literary work, a tragedy, at sixteen. At nineteen, he wrote a second tragedy, which was performed two years later under the title Zarès in 1751 (Palissot, 1777 p. xiij). After his initial success in theatre, Palissot was admitted to the Academy in Nancy, found by the King of Poland who was impressed by Palissot's literary abilities at such an early age. It was also during this period that he found a benefactor, the Duc de Choiseul who introduced him to other influential people such as Princess de Robecq. Palissot also became acquainted with Fréron, who actively mocked and satirized Enlightenment philosophers through his journal, *L'Année littéraire*. Fréron later supported Palissot's infamous play, Les Philosophes, helping him gain attention in Parisian literary circles.

publication by Nicolas Bonaventure Duchesne,[5] also garnered unexpected acclaim. At the first glance, the play had nothing extraordinary about it. Most critics regarded Palissot as a mediocre writer, and even his supporters, such as Fréron, praised *Les Philosophes* for its popularity and success rather than its literary merit. As Louis Petit de Bachaumont (1690–1771) aptly remarked in his *Mémoires secrets*: "Les Philosophes, a play whose only remarkable quality is its success" (Bachaumont, 1830, p. 68). There was nothing new or innovative in Palissot's style. In *Les Philosophes*, Palissot employed a conventional 'forced marriage' plot and uses many of the fixed types. Cydalise, a wealthy widow, plays a figure of authority, manipulating events and creating obstacles for two young lovers: her daughter Rosalie and her lover Damis, the story's romantic hero. Cydalise falls under the influence of a group of manipulative and malevolent philosophers and believes that Damis, who is in reality an earnest and principled young man, is not worthy of her daughter. She breaks off their match and wants her daughter to marry a self-proclaimed philosopher, Valère. During the second act, Valère and his philosopher friends, Dortidius and Théophraste, reveal their real motives: these self-serving men plan to use Cydalise's wealth and connections to advance their own positions and gain favor among true intellectuals. At the end of the play, Cydalise realizes the malevolent intentions and ambitions of the philosophers and reunites her daughter with her lover, giving her permission for their marriage. In the end, truth and sincerity triumph over pretension, deceit, and hypocrisy.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, French theatre borrowed heavily from Italian commedia dell'arte and incorporated its fixed character types (known as tipi fissi in Italian), such as servants, valets, domineering fathers, lovers, and widows. Palissot, in *Les Philosophes*, adhered to the dramatic conventions of his time and based his play on the traditional rules of the French satire. In the play, Cydalise is a vain and fickle widow who is easily influenced by trends. Her shallow personality leads her blindly adopt new and dangerous philosophical trends. Rosalie is a good-natured, sincere girl who symbolizes plain and true emotion and authenticity. Damis embodies traditional and conservative values. Dortidius, Théophraste, Valère and Crispin are manipulative, self-serving, and opportunistic pseudo-intellectuals who conceal their malicious actions under the guise of philosophy. This polemical nature of the play captured the public's attention. However, the Parisian literary scene has never been short of polemics between

[5] Nicolas Bonaventure Duchesne (1714–1773) was a French publisher and bookseller active in the mid-18th century, a period when Enlightenment thinkers and Counter-Enlightenment writers were producing works in rapid succession. He became well-known for publishing works that played significant roles in the intellectual and cultural debates of the Enlightenment. Duchesne published controversial texts and satirical works that captured the dynamic and turbulent atmosphere of the Enlightenment. Marie-Madeleine Duchesne, Nicolas Bonaventure Duchesne's wife, was also a publisher and played a significant role in the book trade during the 18th century. After Nicolas Bonaventure died in 1773, she continued the publishing business and proved her competence in a male-dominated industry.

different literary camps, and being polemical alone is not sufficient to explain Les Philosophes' unprecedented popularity as a comedy. *Les Philosophes* was not merely a simple literary dispute, as Palissot later described it in his autobiography (Plomteux, 1777 p. xxxviij); rather, it was the culmination of coordinated attacks orchestrated by the anti-philosophe members of Parisian society. Toward the middle of the 18th century, France was deeply divided intellectually and ideologically. A new way of understanding the world and human experience—a new philosophy—emerged and challenged the established philosophical, political, and cultural order. All the conservative and traditional camps in the French literary and political scene were unhappy with the new philosophy and its proponents, who later came to be known as the Enlightenment philosophers, or Les Philosophes. There have always been philosophers and thinkers who critiqued various aspects of French culture, politics, and philosophy during the Ancien Régime, such as Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) and Voltaire (1694–1778). However, one remarkable philosopher transformed this scattered opposition into a systematic intellectual movement: Denis Diderot. The greatest project embodying this intellectual movement was the *Encyclopédie*, and all the characters in Palissot's *Les Philosophes* were caricatures of Diderot and his fellow "philosophes", such as Helvétius, Rousseau, and Duclos, who contributed to the *Encyclopédie*. Palissot's attack broke the conventions of French theatre. He deliberately targeted the Encyclopedists to ridicule and discredit them. Although he changed the names—Diderot became Dortidius, and Rousseau was depicted as Dortidius' valet, Crispin—everyone in the audience knew who he was attacking. When we place *Les Philosophes* in the broader context of the Enlightenment versus Counter-Enlightenment struggle and view it as the culmination of this conflict within popular culture, it becomes clearer why it gained such popularity despite its mediocrity. With this perspective, *Les Philosophes* transforms from merely a play used in a smear campaign into a valuable source for identifying, analyzing, and understanding the Counter-Enlightenment discourse in 18th-century France.

Enlightenment and the Encyclopédie

Before Diderot was hired by the famous printer André-François Le Breton for the *Encyclopédie* project, he was an up-and-coming intellectual who translated the Earl of Shaftesbury's *An Inquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit* and wrote two unpopular books: *Philosophical Thoughts* (1746),[6] a collection of essays on God, deism, and skepticism, and *The Indiscreet Jewels* (1748),[7] an erotic tale. Although he was not a famous writer at the time, his books were considered sufficiently dangerous by the authorities, and Diderot was arrested while his apartment was being searched for writings that attacked religion

[6] Fr. *Pensees-philosophiques*.
[7] Fr. *Les Bijoux indiscrets.*

and morality (Bonnefon, 1899, p. 203). Shortly after his interrogation, Diderot, who was deemed "a blasphemer" and a "libertine," was sent to prison at the Château de Vincennes (Bonnefon, 1899, p. 203). He was placed in solitary confinement, and after 102 days in Vincennes, Diderot promised never to publish "immoral" or "blasphemous" works again and signed a statement. After his release, Diderot devised a new strategy and devoted all his energy to the *Encyclopédie*. Aware that his philosophical writings could lead to further persecution and imprisonment, Diderot wrote in secrecy, always keeping his works in his drawer, intending them for posterity.[8]

Diderot, in the *Encyclopédie*, brought together the prominent thinkers of his time, accurately defined by Peter Gay (Gay, 1966, p. 3) in his canonical work *The Enlightenment* as "a loose, informal, wholly unorganized coalition of cultural critics, religious skeptics, and political reformers." Through this project, he transformed the philosophes into a cohesive movement. Not all the ideas in the *Encyclopédie* were completely new or original. Many of them emerged in the late 17th century and developed and evolved over time. However, there had never been a movement organized under a single banner that aimed to carry out a program of freedom, social justice, cosmopolitanism, and humanity, all based on a secular worldview. The old-style metaphysician philosopher transformed into the "philosophe", who was not just a philosopher but also a social reformer, innovator, and activist. This didn't mean that all the philosophes acted like an army battalion, united behind a single leader to finalize an order. As Peter Gay states, "they were a party without a party line" (Gay, 1966, p. 6). When threatened by censure, they supported each other. At other times, they criticized one another and penned refutations against each other. Despite all their differences, one thing united them all: rejecting external frameworks that predetermined the outcome of an inquiry and being true to the nature of the phenomena they examined. Diderot's remark about how he viewed his philosophical endeavors summarized the Enlightenment philosophes' attitude toward knowledge. They sought to understand what they studied, but if their attempt to reach the truth failed, they believed the honorable thing was to accept it. They held that only this attitude could free humanity from the physical and intellectual chains imposed on it in the past. Diderot and d'Alembert, the *Encyclopédie*'s co-editors, turned this attitude into a motto-like statement:

> Encyclopedia. This word signifies chain of knowledge; it is composed of the Greek preposition ἐν, in and the nouns κύκλος, circle and παιδεία, knowledge. Indeed, the purpose of an encyclopedia is to collect knowledge disseminated around the globe; to set forth its general system to the men with whom we live, and transmit it to those who will come after us, so that the work of preceding centuries will not become useless to

[8] His works, such as *The Nun* [Fr. *La Religieuse*] and *Rameau's Nephew* [Fr. Le *Neveu de Rameau*], were published posthumously.

> the centuries to come; and so that our offspring, becoming better instructed, will at the same time become more virtuous and happy, and that we should not die without having rendered a service to the human race (Diderot, 2022, pp. 635–648A).

The *Encyclopédie* was the moment when this new philosophy—the philosophy of Enlightenment—became concrete and visible to others. This endeavor was not merely another encyclopedic project that cataloged knowledge one field at a time. Instead, the *Encyclopédie*, with its diverse collaborators, proposed an entirely new way of analyzing, understanding, and interpreting human experience across every intellectual and practical domain. The philosophes were advocating for a different cosmos, a new sense of self, and a reimagined conception of science, art, and philosophy. This vision required breaking away from the old and venturing into uncharted territory, with the promise of leading humanity toward a better future.

However, moving toward a better future required admitting that most traditional ways of conducting personal, social, and political activities were flawed and needed rigorous examination. Above all, no matter how ingrained our customs, traditions, and ways of life are in our personal and social identity, intellectual and political elites had to accept that they were ignorant of many things and that what they considered truth was probably not. This new philosophical spirit was bold, daring, and threatening to those well-established in the status quo. From their perspective, this was an outrageous attack on everything valuable, stable, and sacred. They asked: "Who are these vain and arrogant people, these so-called philosophes, who suggest that we should abandon our ancestors' ways and venture into something completely new in the name of reason and liberty?" For the conservative establishment, the philosophes appeared to be a group of extremists sworn to destroy God's perfect order using the arts and sciences. There had always been dissenting voices—some smug thinkers who believed in a complete remake of literature, philosophy, arts, and the social and political spheres. However, a time when so many dissenting voices united under the same project had never been witnessed before. Before it was too late, this movement of destructive voices had to be ridiculed, discredited, and silenced. This line of thinking led to the belligerent reaction of the conservative factions in France, starting in the 1740s, and the anti-philosophe sentiment quickly turned into a counter-enlightenment movement.

Palissot's *Les Philosophes* was the final blow in a coordinated assault on every front against Diderot and his fellow Encyclopedists. Like the conservative establishment, Palissot did not recognize the differences and varying philosophical tendencies among the philosophes. To him, they shared the same personality flaws and sought fame by destroying the fabric of society—the very foundation that held French society together. However, what united the Enlightenment thinkers was not a shared personality, a desire for fame, or hatred of societal order or God. For instance, when Helvétius published his

De l'esprit (1758), Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot all wrote refutations of it, demonstrating that the philosophes did not always close ranks against Counter-Enlightenment attacks (Wade, 1977, p. 3). Their philosophical quarrels were interpreted by Counter-Enlightenment figures as disputes among egotistical and self-serving individuals who could not even tolerate one another in the face of simple disagreements. For this reason, Palissot, in his autobiography, characterized the disagreement between Rousseau and his former friends as a fight among hypocritical individuals who preached open-mindedness but despised criticism (Plomteux, 1777 p. xix).

Counter-Enlightenment Discourse Before *Les Philosophes*

Les Philosophes was not the first time Palissot attacked the Enlightenment philosophes. He had already targeted them, specifically Rousseau, in his earlier one-act comedy, *Le Cercle* (1755). In the play, Palissot presents a satirical depiction of the philosophes who frequent salons. One of the characters, a poet, is ridiculed for his exaggerated sense of self-importance and his inability to recognize his mediocre talents. Faced with the failure of his play, he blames everyone but himself. In Scene VIII, Palissot specifically targets Rousseau, who appears under the guise of Blaise-Gille-Antoine, le Cosmopolite. Here, Rousseau is depicted as a philosophe who constantly presents bizarre paradoxes, not to make a genuine philosophical point but to flaunt his intelligence and gain fame and esteem. Palissot employs a three-fold critique in this portrayal. First, he attacks Rousseau's perceived "vanity", and suggests that for Rousseau philosophy merely a tool for personal fame rather than a pursuit of truth. According to Palissot, the likes of Rousseau are not true to the phenomena they study nor interested in discovering truth. Instead, they seek recognition by acting not as lovers of wisdom but as deceitful tricksters, who manipulate the average person through their rhetorical skills: Palissot makes Rousseau confess his true intentions in *Le Cercle*:

> I proclaimed all those fine ideas without believing them, thinking that a philosopher had to think, speak, write, and even dress differently from the common people. I even refused money to avoid resembling anyone else (Palissot, 1777, p. 45).

As a result of Rousseau's strategic hypocrisy, his followers feel intellectually superior simply by agreeing with him. This perpetuates a cycle of false wisdom that undermines society.

Second, Palissot criticized cosmopolitanism, and accuses Rousseau, later in Les Philosophes, Diderot, of lacking love and attachment for their country, France. In his portrayal, Blaise-Gille-Antoine, le Cosmopolite, as understood from his nickname, view patriotism as intellectually backward. He elevates himself above his contemporaries by claiming to be a world citizen and trivializes their loyalty to their countries. Palissot argues that such an attitude revealed a disdain for the "primitive" emotions, such as

national loyalty, that defined their peers. This critique took on particular resonance during the Seven Years' War (1756–1763) and the attempted assassination of King Louis XV by Robert-François Damiens, when patriotism and hatred toward the enemies of France and the monarchy were at their peak. Palissot's *Le Cercle* was influential in sparking other anti-philosophe campaigns. For instance, in 1757, a group of Counter-Enlightenment writers launched a satirical campaign against the philosophes. They coined the term "Cacouacs," which combined the Greek word *kakos* (meaning evil or bad) with an association to croaking frogs (kouax). In this way, the term "Cacouacs" symbolized both evil and a noise that caused disturbance, mocking the philosophes as loud, obnoxious, and malevolent. The campaign began in 1757 when an anonymous author wrote a piece titled "Mémoire sur les Cacouacs" in the *Mercure de France*, a prominent literary journal of the time. The article targeted the philosophes and sought to discredit their ideas (Goodman & Ferret, 2021, p. 3). Soon after, Jacob-Nicolas Moreau (1717–1804), a royalist historian who served Louis XV and Louis XVI, as well as a lawyer and polemicist, continued the campaign. He wrote *Nouveau mémoire pour servir à l'histoire des Cacouacs*, lampooning the Enlightenment philosophers and portraying them as evil barbarians, intent on destroying civilization.

Third, Palissot claimed that Rousseau put forth bizarre arguments that even the least educated person could recognize as ridiculous:

> I published that everything people have esteemed until now has only made them rogues; and that, all things considered, it is better to wager on the honesty of a fool than on that of a man of intelligence (Palissot, 1777, p. 44).

Palissot, here, distorts Rousseau's critique of civilization, arts, and sciences, as well as his praise of the moral existence of the uneducated yet honorable, into a celebration of foolishness. Yet, his blatant hatred toward Enlightenment thinkers and the new type of philosophy they practiced helps us understand how conservative factions in France perceived Enlightenment philosophy. It offers a glimpse into the Counter-Enlightenment mindset, as similar accusations were made against the philosophes by various conservative factions.

Even though Palissot claimed that his dispute with the Enlightenment thinkers was purely literary, his attacks were coordinated with more serious efforts carried out by influential circles within the French state. The first volume of the *Encyclopédie*, prepared by Diderot and d'Alembert between 1747 and 1751, faced backlash from religious groups shortly after its publication. A group of ministers at Versailles expressed outrage over this new Encyclopédie and issued an arrêt (a stop order) that banned the distribution of the first and second volumes. Encouraged by various religious entities, the anti-philosophe ministers in the king's council accused the Encyclopedists of

"attacking royal authority and inciting revolt" (Parlement de Paris, 1753, p. 32). Two things particularly infuriated the conservative establishment: the *Encyclopédie*'s alphabetical ordering and the system of human knowledge that Diderot laid out. The standard practice for encyclopedias at the time was to adopt a thematic order, beginning with the most sacred subjects, such as God and Catholicism, before addressing more trivial topics. Diderot and d'Alembert rejected this traditional approach, instead organizing all the articles alphabetically. As a result, an entry related to theology could appear next to an entry about a craft. This implied that glassmaking or surgical tools were as important as theological matters. Secondly, in his categorization of human knowledge, Diderot placed superstition under the category of the "Science of God," further challenging traditional religious hierarchies and provoking outrage among conservative circles. In addition to the structure of the *Encyclopédie*, Diderot's article titled "Political Authority" (Diderot, 2022, pp. 898–900) claimed that "no man has ever received from nature or God the right to command other men," while d'Alembert's article titled "College" (d'Alembert, 2003, pp. 664–637) criticized Jesuit educational institutions.

Both the political establishment and the Jesuits, were infuriated and alarmed by these writings, realizing that the new philosophical approach embodied in the *Encyclopédie* could not be countered solely with intellectual arguments. From 1752 onwards, the intellectual battleground shifted to the real world, and an all-encompassing assault against the philosophes began. The ban on the *Encyclopédie*, the *Cacouacs* campaign, denunciations of the Encyclopedists at every opportunity, and the character assassinations carried out by Palissot all formed the broad coalition of the Counter-Enlightenment movement.

Les Philosophes and the Counter Enlightenment Discourse

A year and a month before *Les Philosophes*' debut, another stop order was issued for Helvétius' *de l'esprit* (*on the Mind*), a systematic account of how human mind works from a naturalistic perspective. Soon, the book faced censorship and was burnt. And almost a month before *Les Philosophes*, Jean-Jacques Lefranc de Pompignan,[9] took up the vacant seat of Maupertuis at the Académie Française following his death. In his inaugural speech in 1760, Lefranc de Pompignan launched a fierce attack against the Enlightenment philosophes. His critique reiterated the usual accusations of undermining religion, morality, and traditional values (Pompignan, 1760). Palissot's *Les Philosophes* was first performed when the philosophes were in a very difficult situation and under attack from all fronts. At the time, Diderot and his fellow philosophes were

[9] Jean-Jacques Lefranc de Pompignan (1709–1784) was a poet, playwright, and member of the Académie Française.

grappling with harsh opposition. Palissot's satire brought together all the conservative arguments against the philosophes:

> The play rehashed the key accusations made in the earlier texts, presenting the philosophes as an exploitative cabal who advocated adherence to their philosophical way of life out of pure self-advancement; a grouping that was quarrelsome and divided until it came to defending the character or works of any one of its number, and that preferred vague ideas of loving 'humanity' over its own kin and countrymen (Goodman & Ferret, 2021, p. 5).

Compared to the censorship from both the Catholic Church and the French government, the stop orders issued in 1752 and 1759, and the prosecution of Helvétius's *de l'Esprit*, Palissot was a lesser foe to Diderot. However, Palissot's strategic timing made *Les Philosophes* a significant cultural event and contributed to the polarization of the intellectual atmosphere. Palissot capitalized on this environment of tension, division and hostility. By ridiculing the philosophes, he not only entertained his audience but also amplified existing criticisms against them. His portrayal of Diderot and his comrades as arrogant, detached and impractical intellectuals resonated with their opponents and fueled counter-Enlightenment sentiment.

In the play, Palissot depicted Diderot (Dortidius) as the leader of the philosophers and Rousseau (Crispin) as his valet. This was not due to Diderot's novels, which contained criticisms of the ancien régime, Catholicism, or French culture, because most of Diderot's works, apart from a few novels and a philosophical essay, were published piece by piece toward the end of the century following his death. The reason Palissot considered Diderot as the leader of the philosophes was that Diderot was the chief editor of the *Encyclopédie*. The *Encyclopédie* promised an unprecedented transformative liberation in every area of human life, provided that people used their own reason and questioned established authority. Moreover, it made the theoretical and practical knowledge necessary for this to be accessible to everyone. This emphasis on the universality of knowledge and its liberating power was perceived by the conservative faction as an attack on society itself, rooted in an unsubstantiated, purely abstract, and destructive vision. In other words, the philosophes were seen as dreamers willing to destroy everything to see if their idealistic vision could be realized. Palissot sought to highlight the impracticality of the philosophes' ideas by having Rousseau's character crawl onto the stage like an animal. This act mocked Rousseau's praise of the state of nature. While Rousseau portrayed the state of nature as "morally neutral but peaceful and relatively content," Palissot interpreted it as advocating a regression to a primitive state, which he considered self-evidently ridiculous.

In addition to claiming that the philosophes were impractical theoreticians, the Counter-Enlightenment figures criticized the philosophes' attempt to base morality on

a conception of human nature limited by experience. As a result of this naturalistic approach, the concept of humanity became the moral basis of politics. Viewing humanity as a whole and going beyond local borders was interpreted as a rejection of the particular in favor of universalism. For *conservatives*, the philosophes were abandoning their national identity in favor of the vague and abstract identity of humanity. To them, this implied sympathy toward France's enemies. This was why Palissot used the term "cosmopolite" as an insult, first targeting Rousseau in *Le Cercle* and later Diderot in *Les Philosophes*. In *Les Philosophes*, the character Dortidius—representing Denis Diderot—proudly declares his lack of patriotism with the lines:

> I care nothing for kings, nor for their strife:
> Nor siege nor fight means anything to me.
> To idlers I leave these state affairs.
> For my own land, I have but little care:
> The truly wise are citizens of the world (Palissot, 2021, p. 97).

Palissot's critique of Diderot's anti-patriotic cosmopolitanism was, in fact, a challenge to a citizenship-based understanding of politics. For Palissot, the philosophers' effort to unite people under the concept of citizenship was essentially an attempt to undermine patriotism and weaken the French people's attachment to the French state.

CONCLUSION

In his autobiography, Palissot complains about how the philosophes reacted to the reception of Les Philosophes. Rather than engaging with his critiques in a constructive manner, the philosophes launched personal attacks and dismissed his play outright. While they preached open-mindedness and empathy, their response, according to Palissot, was marked by hostility and intolerance toward dissenting views:

> Finally, my character has been slandered because, in a purely literary poem, I dared, following the example of Pope (though without imitating his sharpness or bitterness), to cast some ridicule on the bad verses or poor prose of certain authors, most of whom had attacked me in libels. At worst, I may have been mistaken in my judgments; but in that case, the humiliation would have been personal to me, for there is perhaps nothing more shameful for a writer than to have placed a Virgil among the Baviuses, unless it is to have placed a Bavius among the Virgils. One must admit, however, that when one reflects on the fact that for a little smoke, men of letters are capable of going to such cruel extremes with one another—those same men who boast of enlightening the world and consider themselves so superior to the common rabble—one is tempted to view them with pity. It is not surprising that men have fought over a horse, armor, a beautiful woman, or, above all, the defense of their homes. But one must admit that it is quite absurd for people to tear each other apart with such fury over a madrigal, a sonnet, or even a treatise on morality (Palissot, 1777, pp. xxxviij-xxxix).

In his defense, Palissot argued that he acted out of moral and literary principles, and was misunderstood and unfairly vilified. However, while Palissot portrays himself as the victim, he does not acknowledge the fact that he was the one who openly targeted

Enlightenment philosophes in multiple satirical plays. He fails to admit that his caricatured mockery of Diderot, Rousseau, and others as treacherous, pretentious, and self-serving men was a provocative act that invited retaliation. Palissot also portrays himself as a champion of literary and moral integrity, even though his works were explicitly partisan and well-aligned with the Counter-Enlightenment, anti-philosophe factions. His criticisms of the philosophes were primarily ideological and political, with literary critiques being secondary. Palissot does not mention that the philosophes, under attack from all sides, continued their work tirelessly despite great difficulties. For example, he omits the fact that Diderot was the editor of a groundbreaking project—the *Encyclopédie*—aimed at democratizing knowledge and achieving a level of comprehensiveness unprecedented in human history. Instead, Palissot portrays him as a manipulative figure who deceives people using the art of eloquence. Similarly, without addressing the confiscation of the *Encyclopédie* or Helvétius' book or mentioning that Diderot was imprisoned for his views and that Rousseau had to flee to avoid imprisonment, he seeks to damage the philosophers' reputations. In reality, every writer who contributed to the *Encyclopédie* faced a significant risk of imprisonment, denial of employment, or exile (Kafker, 1973, pp. 119-122). By doing so, Palissot uses the same arguments that political and religious authorities employed to justify confiscating the books and works of the philosophes and imprisoning them. He presents these arguments in a comedic way, portraying the philosophes as frauds who corrupt the morals of well-intentioned members of society. In this manner, he legitimizes the attacks against them.

Les Philosophes successfully brings together the concerns and arguments later echoed by critics of Enlightenment ideals, such as Edmund Burke and the Romantic movement. Furthermore, it embodies the conservative attitude towards the change and dynamism that the Enlightenment movement introduced to the cultural and political scene of 18th-century Europe. For all these reasons, Palissot's *Les Philosophes* remains a valuable source for understanding the Counter-Enlightenment sentiment and discourse in 18th-century France.

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