

# Bringing together the *Essay* and the *Second Treatise*: d'Holbach Interpreter of Locke

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*Abstract:* The present article focuses on eighteenth-century French radical and atheist philosopher Paul-Thiry d'Holbach to gauge the extent to which his political ideas may be informed by Locke's *Second Treatise*. While rejecting the Rousseauian notion of a state of nature intended as a historical period when human beings lived outside society, d'Holbach inherits from Locke the idea that particular polities are the result of a constantly renewed social contract. As the products of a covenant, governments must pursue the preservation and best interests of the 'community' or 'Nation', as Locke and d'Holbach would respectively call it, prolonged failure to do so necessarily resulting in their loss of legitimacy and ultimately paving the way to revolution. Naturally wary of Locke's decision to ground the legitimacy of an authority (and therefore a community's right to rebel against it) on its exactitude in enacting a 'Law of Nature' based, in turn, on God's will, d'Holbach replaces this 'Law of Nature' with what he terms 'amour éclairé de soi'. For d'Holbach, a person's 'amour éclairé de soi' – their realisation, that is, that their individual well being is inextricably connected to that of others – depends on their more or less intuitive understanding that an action is good in so far as it promotes happiness or pleasure and wrong when it brings about unhappiness or pain (Principle of Utility). While d'Holbach's replacement of the 'Law of Nature' with the secular notion of 'amour éclairé de soi' may seem to undermine Locke's philosophy at its very core, the reality is that the two principles are extremely close and fundamentally interchangeable. Locke's political philosophy, d'Holbach seems to wish his most perceptive readers would realise, can easily be turned into a consistent secular theory. He thus (artificially) brings together Locke's epistemology and more radical political ideas, and successfully overcomes a well-known aporia within the British empiricist's philosophical corpus, one that has been investigated by Leo Strauss and Peter Laslett, among others, and that is still the subject of much scholarly debate.

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*Keywords:* John Locke, *Second Treatise*, Paul-Thiry d’Holbach, Radical Enlightenment, political philosophy, utilitarianism.

### *Introduction*

Building on the work of Peter Laslett and Richard Ashcraft, recent scholarship has challenged the traditional interpretation of Locke as the theorist of (eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British) liberalism, placing greater emphasis, instead, on the radicality of his political thought<sup>2</sup>. The *Second Treatise* has obviously been at the centre of this shift in interpretation, and considerable progress has been made in identifying ideas and theories in this work that would have been utterly foreign to the supporters of the Glorious Revolution of 1688-89 – to that landed gentry, that is, whose interests Locke was supposedly voicing. Nevertheless, the so-called Radical Enlightenment’s debt to Locke has yet to be fully investigated, and Jonathan Israel’s publications, which have revived among eighteenth-century specialists an outdated interpretation of the author of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* as a moderate thinker, are certainly not likely to foster (at least directly) much research in this sense<sup>3</sup>. To the scholar working on the British roots of the (French) Radical Enlightenment, the name of Locke is still very much overshadowed by that of Hobbes.

The existing scholarship on eighteenth-century atheist, materialist, and determinist thinker Paul-Thiry, baron d’Holbach (1723-1789), the author of

<sup>2</sup> See P. Laslett, “The English Revolution and Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government*”, in *The Cambridge Historical Journal* 12 (1956), 1, pp. 40-55; R. Ashcraft, “Revolutionary Politics and Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government*: Radicalism and Lockean Political Theory”, in *Political Theory* 8 (1980), 4, pp. 429-86; and R. Ashcraft, “The Radical Dimensions of Locke’s Political Thought: A Dialogic Essay on Some Problems of Interpretation”, in *History of Political Thought*, 13 (1992), 4, pp. 703-72. For a traditional interpretation of Locke as theorist of modern liberalism see, for instance, H. Laski, *The Rise of European Liberalism: An Essay in Interpretation*, Allen & Unwin, London 1936.

<sup>3</sup> J. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006, pp. 51-60, especially p. 58: ‘Despite being heterodox on religious issues and vigorous advocates of toleration, Locke and Hume, like Voltaire and the great American Deist Benjamin Franklin, were politically, socially, morally, and, in some respects, religiously—and in their views on philosophy’s proper scope—essentially conservative thinkers who opposed many or most of the radical and democratic ideas of their age and, as such, were, in the main, opponents of the Radical Enlightenment’. Some interesting remarks on the reception of Locke’s ideas amongst eighteenth-century European political thinkers, both radical and not, can be found in R. Ashcraft, *Locke’s Two Treatises of Government*, Allen & Unwin, London 1987, chp. 10 (‘Locke and the Tensions of Liberalism’).

such earthshattering texts as *Le Système de la nature* and *Le Bon Sens*, and one of the most prominent figures, alongside Diderot, of the so-called *Lumières radicales*, provides an obvious case in point<sup>4</sup>. While the philosopher of Malmesbury is now recognised as a key interlocutor in the development of d'Holbach's philosophy, very little is known about the baron's attitudes towards Locke<sup>5</sup>. In the last chapter of his study of the reception of Locke in eighteenth-century France, John Yolton mentions, almost in passing, d'Holbach's endorsement of the Peripatetic Axiom (or Locke's Principle, as he dubs it), further insisting on the importance of Locke's hypothesis of thinking matter to the baron's overcoming of Cartesian dualism and establishment of a rigorous materialistic monism<sup>6</sup>. Meanwhile, Virgil W. Topazio has shown how crucial Locke's (partial) rejection of innate morality was in the elaboration of the baron's entirely secular theory of ethics<sup>7</sup>. Yet, nowhere is d'Holbach's debt to Locke more size-

<sup>4</sup> For an introduction to d'Holbach's life, works, and ideas see W.H. Wickwar, *Baron d'Holbach: A Prelude to the French Revolution*, Allen & Unwin, London 1935. See also A. Sandrier, *Le Style philosophique du baron d'Holbach: Conditions et contraintes du prosélytisme athée en France dans la seconde moitié du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Champion, Paris 2004; G. Chaussinand-Nogaret, *Les Lumières au péril du bûcher*, Fayard, Paris 2009; and A.Ch. Kors, *D'Holbach's Coterie: An Enlightenment in Paris*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1976 (reprint 2015).

<sup>5</sup> On Hobbes and d'Holbach see V.W. Topazio, *D'Holbach's Moral Philosophy: Its Background and Development*, Institut et musée Voltaire, Geneva 1956, and A. Staquet, "Hobbes, d'Holbach et la théorie des passions: Importance du passage par la physique et la théorie de la connaissance", in *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 71 (2011), 3, pp. 385-404.

<sup>6</sup> J.W. Yolton, *Locke and French Materialism*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1991, pp. 198-201.

<sup>7</sup> Topazio, *D'Holbach's Moral Philosophy*, cit., p. 37: 'With the rejection of an innate morality, Locke had taken an important step toward what was to be d'Holbach's position – the repudiation of any religious morality based upon some form of communication between God and man'. In the 'Préface' to *La Morale universelle* ([P.-Th. d'Holbach], *La Morale universelle, ou Les Devoirs de l'homme fondés sur sa nature*, Marc-Michel Rey, Amsterdam 1776, 3 vols, p.viii), d'Holbach explicitly mentions Locke while discussing the issue of innate moral ideas (here and in all subsequent quotations, the original spelling has been retained): 'En vain le profond Locke a-t-il prouvé que les idées innées n'étoient que des chimeres; [l]es Moralistes persistent dans leur préjugé [...]. Nous ferons voir [...] que l'homme ne possède en venant au monde que la faculté de sentir, & que sa façon de sentir est le vrai *Criterion*, ou la seule règle de ses jugemens, ou de ses sentimens moraux sur les actions ou sur les causes qui se font sentir à lui'. It is interesting to note how, shortly after mentioning Locke, in this passage d'Holbach goes on to quote with disapproval a famous verse from St Paul's *Epistle to the Romans* (II.15), which also appears in section 11 of Locke's *Second Treatise* and is in fact one of the clearest marks of the British empiricist's reconsideration of his original rejection of moral innate ideas in Book 1 of the *Essay*. See N. Jolley, *Locke: His Philosophical Thought*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1999, p. 198. In *La Morale universelle* (vol. 1, p. 221), d'Holbach also quotes a famous anecdote about Locke and Lord Shaftesbury, which he probably read in Jean Le Clerc's *Life and Character of Mr John Locke, Author of the Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, London 1706, originally published in French in the 6<sup>th</sup> volume of the *Bibliothèque choisie* (1705).

able than in the field of political thought – a fact which seems to have entirely escaped scholars to date. As will be outlined below, d’Holbach had a very good, first-hand knowledge of the *Second Treatise*, and, despite Locke’s famous pronouncement against atheism in his *Letter Concerning Toleration*, evidence suggests that the baron engaged closely with some of Locke’s most interesting political ideas<sup>8</sup>.

The present article aims to provide an analysis of d’Holbach’s attitudes towards Locke’s philosophy in general and political thought more specifically. Building on Yolton’s work, in a first short section I shall review some of the elements that d’Holbach borrowed from Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, paying particular attention to how the baron turned Locke’s empiricism and critique of innatism into powerful antitheological tools. Shifting the focus from the *Essay* to the *Second Treatise*, I shall then attempt to understand exactly which elements of Locke’s political philosophy d’Holbach may have retained. Looking at two regrettably little-studied works, the *Système social* and *La Politique naturelle* (both published in 1773), I shall argue that the baron inherited from Locke a strong belief, ultimately based in social contract theory, that, in order to be legitimate, a government must pursue the well-being of the community, failure to do so providing fertile ground for rebellion. As I argue, however, d’Holbach diverges from Locke in at least one important respect. Clearly aware of the theological foundations of the *Second Treatise*, in his political works the baron attempts to replace Locke’s fundamental ‘Law of Nature’ with an entirely secular principle: the ‘amour éclairé de soi’, or enlightened self-interest. He thus (artificially) brings together Locke’s epistemology and more radical political ideas, and successfully overcomes a well-known aporia within the British empiricist’s philosophical corpus, one that has been investigated by Leo Strauss and Peter Laslett, among others, and that is still the subject of much scholarly debate<sup>9</sup>. My essay will thus contribute to the study of Locke’s reception in eighteenth-century France, while at the same time shedding light on d’Holbach’s much-neglected political philosophy.

<sup>8</sup> On Locke and atheism see, for example, J. Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality: Christian Foundations of John Locke’s Political Thought*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002, chp. 8 (‘Tolerating Atheists?’), and D.J. Lorenzo, ‘Tradition and Prudence in Locke’s Exceptions to Toleration’, in *American Journal of Political Science* 47 (2003), 2, pp. 248-58.

<sup>9</sup> L. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1953, and P. Laslett, ‘Introduction’, in J. Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. by P. Laslett, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2021.

### 1. *D'Holbach and the Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

On nous assure que l'ame humaine est une substance simple; mais si l'ame est une substance si simple, elle devrait être précisément la même dans tous les individus de l'espece humaine, qui tous devoient avoir les mêmes facultés intellectuelles: cependant celà n'arrive pas; les hommes different autant par les qualités de l'esprit, que par les traits du visage. [...] Quelle distance infinie n'y a-t-il pas entre le Génie d'un Locke, d'un Newton, & celui d'un Paysan [...] <sup>10</sup>

Reacting to Helvetius' utopia of universal learning and echoing d'Alembert's words in the *Discours préliminaire* to the *Encyclopédie*, in section 96 of *Le Bon Sens* d'Holbach equates Locke's genius to Newton's and presents the achievements of both British thinkers as practically unmatched<sup>11</sup>. The immediate reasons behind d'Holbach's praising of Locke are not hard to guess. The baron could not but look with favour upon Locke's empiricist epistemology, which allowed him to dismiss the notions of both a transcendental God and an immaterial soul as incomprehensible to the human mind and ultimately chimerical: 'l'homme', d'Holbach writes in chapter II.4 of the *Système de la nature*, 'ne peut avoir d'idées réelles que des choses qui agissent, ou qui ont précédemment agi, sur ses sens; or il n'y a que des objets matériels, physiques ou naturels qui puissent remuer nos organes & nous donner des idées'<sup>12</sup>. While the French *philosophe* may be unwilling completely to break with universal moral principles, Locke's rejection of innatism provides him with solid arguments to refute Descartes' statement in the *Third Meditation* that one can conclude from the innateness of the primary idea of God to His formal

<sup>10</sup> [P.-Th. d'Holbach], *Le Bon Sens, ou Idées naturelles opposées aux idées surnaturelles*, [Marc-Michel Rey], London [Amsterdam] 1772, pp. 113-14.

<sup>11</sup> J. le Rond d'Alembert, "Discours préliminaire", in D. Diderot and J. le Rond d'Alembert (eds), *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, Briasson, David, Le Breton, Durand, Paris 1751-72, 28 vols., vol. 1, p. xxvii: 'Ce que Newton n'avoit osé, ou n'auroit peut-être pû faire, Locke l'entreprit & l'exécuta avec succès. On peut dire qu'il créa la Métaphysique à peu-près comme Newton avoit créé la Physique'. In the entry 'Génie' (vol. 7, pp. 582-84), Jean-François de Saint-Lambert proves somewhat less enthusiastic in his praises of the British philosopher: 'Il y a bien peu d'erreurs dans Locke & trop peu de vérités dans milord Shafsterbury [sic]: le premier cependant n'est qu'un esprit étendu, pénétrant, & juste; & le second est un génie du premier ordre. Locke a vû; Shafsterbury [sic] a créé, construit, édifié'. For more on d'Holbach's stance on natural inequality and rejection of Helvétius' utopia of universal learning see R. Sciuto, *Determinism and Enlightenment: The Collaboration of Diderot and d'Holbach*, Liverpool University Press, forthcoming in May 2023 in the *Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment*.

<sup>12</sup> [P.-Th. d'Holbach], *Système de la nature, ou des Loix du monde physique et du monde moral*, [Marc-Michel Rey], [Amsterdam] 1770, 2 vols, vol. 2, pp. 90-91. Similar ideas can be found in chapter I.7 (vol. 1, p. 98). See also Topazio, *D'Holbach's Moral Philosophy*, cit., p. 34.

reality. Accordingly, this aspect of Locke's philosophy is commended in both the *Système social* ('l'illustre Locke a sagement reléguées [les idées innées] dans la poussière de l'école') and *La Morale universelle*<sup>13</sup>. In the baron's hands, Locke's critique of innatism also becomes a formidable weapon against the traditional body-soul dichotomy. Nowhere perhaps is d'Holbach more explicit in drawing connections between the rejection of the notion of a self-regulating soul – which he sees as incompatible with holism – and the establishment of a rigid materialistic monism and deterministic *Weltanschauung*, than in the following passage from chapter I.10 of the *Système de la nature*:

ceux qui s'obstinent à faire de l'ame une substance distinguée du corps ou d'une essence totalement différente de la sienne [...] se fondent sur ce qu'ils prétendent que cet organe intérieur a le pouvoir de tirer des idées de son propre fond; ils veulent que même en naissant l'homme apporte des idées, qu'ils ont appellées *Innées* d'après cette notion merveilleuse. Ils ont donc cru que l'ame par un privilege spécial jouissoit, dans une nature où tout est lié, de la faculté de se mouvoir d'elle-même, de se créer des idées, de penser à quelque objet sans y être déterminée par aucune cause extérieure, qui en remuant ses organes lui fournit l'image de l'objet de ses pensées<sup>14</sup>.

Certainly filtered through Voltaire's *Lettres philosophiques*, Locke's well-known hypothesis of thinking matter from Book IV of the *Essay* also finds its place within the baron's extensive arsenal of anti-dualistic arguments<sup>15</sup>. 'De quel droit les Théologiens refuseroient-ils à leur Dieu le pouvoir de donner à cette matiere la faculté de penser?', asks d'Holbach, shrewdly fashioning himself as a defender of orthodoxy; 'Lui seroit-il donc plus difficile de créer des combinaisons de matiere dont la pensée résultât, que des esprits qui pensent? Au moins, en supposant une matiere qui pense, nous aurions quelques notions du sujet de la pensée, ou de ce qui pense en nous, tandis qu'en attribuant la pensée à un être immatériel, il nous est impossible de nous en faire la moindre idée'<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> See [P.-Th. d'Holbach], *Système social, ou Principes naturels de la morale et de la politique, avec un examen de l'influence du gouvernement sur les mœurs*, [Marc-Michel Rey], London [Amsterdam] 1773, 3 vols, vol. 1, p. 91 (ch. I.9). As for *La Morale universelle* see supra n.7.

<sup>14</sup> [D'Holbach], *Système de la nature*, cit., vol. 1, pp. 157-58.

<sup>15</sup> Voltaire, *Lettres philosophiques*, ed. by N. Cronk, in *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, Voltaire Foundation, Oxford 1968-2022, vol. 6B. For more on d'Holbach's attitudes towards Voltaire see R. Sciuto, "The Absent Guest: d'Holbach's Strategic Use of Voltaire's Texts", in L. Nicoli (ed.), *The Great Protector of Wits. Baron d'Holbach and his Time*, Brill, Leiden 2022, pp. 116-34.

<sup>16</sup> [D'Holbach], *Le Bon Sens*, cit., p. 129 (§104). See also [d'Holbach], *Système de la nature*, cit., vol. 2, p. 131 (sect. II.4).

## 2. *D'Holbach and the Second Treatise*

If the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* obviously captured the baron's attention, his knowledge of the British philosopher was not limited to this text. While systematically reviewing and debunking various proofs for the existence of God, in chapter II.4 of the *Système de la nature*, d'Holbach quotes a memorable passage from a letter that Locke sent to Molyneux on 4 March 1697 to make the point that theologians cannot possibly act in good faith when speculating about divine attributes<sup>17</sup>. A quick perusal of d'Holbach's library catalogue reveals, moreover, that, in addition to a copy of the 7<sup>th</sup> edition of John Wynne's *Abridgment of the Essay* (1752), the baron owned a 1731 French translation of *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, as well as a 1732, 2-volume Dutch edition of Locke's *Œuvres diverses*, including, among other texts, the *Lettre sur la tolérance* and the *Conduite de l'esprit dans la recherche de la vérité*<sup>18</sup>. He also possessed a 1761 miscellany of essays on education featuring Milton's *Of Education* alongside Locke's *Thoughts*, which he mentions in *La Morale universelle*, and, most importantly for our present discussion, a 3-volume, 1727 edition of Locke's *Works* containing both the *Essay* and the *Two Treatises of Government*<sup>19</sup>. D'Holbach was entirely capable of reading these texts in the original: the translator of Hobbes' *Humane Nature or, the Fundamental Elements of Policy* (the first part, that is, of the *Elements of Law*), of Akenside's *Pleasures of Imagination*, and Swift's *History of the Reign of Queen Anne*, d'Holbach acquired a solid grasp of English while still a student in Leiden and systematically used this language when writing to his correspondents across the Channel – Wilkes, Hume, and Garrick, among others<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> *Some Familiar Letters between Mr. Locke and Several of his Friends*, Churchill, London 1708, p. 180: 'all fair contenders for the opinions they have, I like mightily; but there are so few that have opinions, or at least seem, by their way of defending them, to be really persuaded of the opinions they profess, that I am apt to think there is in the world a great deal more scepticism, or at least want of concern for truth, than is imagin'd. In the *Système de la nature* (cit., vol. 2, p. 127), d'Holbach translates this passage as follows: 'J'aime beaucoup [...] tous ceux qui défendent leurs opinions de bonne foi, mais il y a si peu de gens qui, d'après la manière dont ils les défendent, paroissent pleinement convaincus des opinions qu'ils professent, que je suis tenté de croire qu'il y a dans le monde bien plus de scepticisme qu'on ne pense.'

<sup>18</sup> *Catalogue des livres de la bibliothèque de feu M. le Baron d'Holbach*, De Bure, Paris 1789, pp. 60, 22, and 174. D'Holbach's books were regrettably dispersed at an auction in 1789.

<sup>19</sup> *Catalogue des livres*, cit., pp. 48 and 174. D'Holbach also owned (p. 58) Antoine-Martin Roche's 2-volume *Traité de la nature de l'ame & de l'origine de ses connoissances, contre le système de Locke*, Veuve Lottin, Paris 1759.

<sup>20</sup> D'Holbach's letters can be read in H. Sauter and E. Loos (eds), *Paul Thiry Baro d'Holbach. Die gesamte erhaltene Korrespondenz*, Franz Steiner, Stuttgart 1986.

D'Holbach's knowledge of the *Two Treatises of Government* – or *Traité du gouvernement civil*, as the whole text was (and still is) commonly referred to in French-speaking countries – is in itself noteworthy. While David Mazel's 1691 translation of the *Second Treatise* circulated rather widely among Francophone protestant readers, it is still a fact that, as argued by Michel Baridon, knowledge of this text in *Ancien Régime* France was extremely limited – *et pour cause* – until at least the 1770s<sup>21</sup>. The *Encyclopédie* mentions it only twice, and both times in passing. In his entry 'Locke, philosophie de', Diderot limits himself to remarking that, in this 'short work', Locke 'exposed the injustice and disadvantages of despotism and tyranny' ('exposoit l'injustice & les inconvénients du despotisme & de la tyrannie'). The chevalier de Jaucourt, for his part, merely refers to the *Two Treatises* at the end of his article 'Démocratie', where Locke's work features alongside William Temple's *Essay on the Origin and Nature of Government* and Algernon Sidney's *Discourses Concerning Government*, a text which, like Locke's, was written in response to Filmer's *Patriarcha*<sup>22</sup>. Voltaire appears to have owned a copy of Mazel's translation of the *Second Treatise* but he never explicitly mentions this work in any of his texts or letters, and John Dunn has already dismissed Montesquieu's supposed indebtedness to the *Second Treatise* as a historiographical myth<sup>23</sup>. Rousseau is of course an important exception in this sense, and some interesting remarks on his attitudes towards Locke can be found, for instance, in the works of Richard Ashcraft<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> S.-J. Savonius, "Locke in French: The *Du Gouvernement civil* of 1691 and its Readers", in *The Historical Journal*, 47 (2004), 1, pp. 47-79 and M. Baridon, "Locke en France: Courants et contre-courants", in *Le Continent européen et le monde anglo-américain aux XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Presses Universitaires de Reims, Reims 1986, pp. 104-18, esp. p. 107. See also I.M. Wilson, *The Influence of Hobbes and Locke in the Shaping of the Concept of Sovereignty in Eighteenth-Century France*, Voltaire Foundation, Oxford 1973 (*Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, vol. CI), p. 163: 'In the French and Dutch gazettes of the period 1735-67, Locke's *Second Treatise* remains almost unmentioned. [...] It seems probable, therefore, from this paucity of evidence, that Locke's two treatises were either not readily available to francophone readers in the period in question, or else were far less successful than certain of his other translated works in capturing the attention of French speaking readers.'

<sup>22</sup> *Encyclopédie*, vol. 9, pp. 625-27 (here p. 626 – translation mine) and vol. 4, pp. 816-18 (here p. 818). For more on the article 'Locke, philosophie de' see Paolo Quintili's article in this collection.

<sup>23</sup> The *Traité du gouvernement civil* is mentioned in an eighteenth-century manuscript catalogue of Voltaire's library (f.11r) printed at the end of the catalogue of Voltaire's library in Saint Petersburg (*Biblioteka Voltera*, Editions de l'Académie des Sciences de l'URSS, Moscow 1961). Voltaire's copy of this book, however, has been lost. The Oxford Edition of Voltaire's marginalia (*Corpus des notes marginales*) accordingly does not list any marginal notes for this text. As for Montesquieu, see J. Dunn, *Locke. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2003, p. 8 and Wilson, *The Influence of Hobbes and Locke*, cit., pp. 99-118.

<sup>24</sup> Ashcraft, *Locke's Two Treatises of Government*, cit., pp. 278-80. A forthcoming collection of es-



In his political texts, d'Holbach engages very closely with the ideas that Locke expresses in the *Two Treatises* and in the *Second Treatise* more specifically. With the British philosopher he shares, first and foremost, the idea that a government should pursue the happiness and well-being of its citizens to count as legitimate. If Locke had identified in the 'Peace, Safety, and publick good of the People' the end to which all legislative power should strive, the French *philosophe* appears almost to echo him when, in *La Politique naturelle*, he writes that 'le Gouvernement est [...] la force établie par la volonté publique pour régler les actions de tous les membres de la Société, & les obliger de concourir au but qu'elle se propose: ce but est la sûreté, le bonheur, la conservation du tout & de ses parties'<sup>25</sup>. Importantly, this definition appears to bestow upon the government a duty not only to allow the people to pursue their interests, but also to enact measures aimed at increasing in the people themselves a (supposedly natural) desire to contribute to the well-being of society as a whole. Both d'Holbach and Locke ground their notion that a legitimate government must pursue the best interests of society in social contract theory: it is because the people have surrendered some of their natural rights and liberties and entrusted them to the authority, that the latter must further the common good. Sure enough, chapter I.2 of *La Politique naturelle* opens by dismissing the state of nature as a simple thought experiment with no foundation in reality:

La plupart des Philosophes nous parlent d'un *état de Nature* qui n'eût jamais d'existence que dans l'imagination. On croit qu'il fut un tems où les hommes vécutent épars, isolés, sans aucune communication avec les êtres de leur espece; en un mot, entièrement semblables à quelques bêtes féroces. Rien de plus chimérique & de plus opposé à la nature humaine, que cet état de Nature. L'homme, fruit d'une Société contractée entre un mâle & une femelle de son espece, fut toujours en Société; dès qu'il vit la lumiere il vécut avec ses parens, avec ses freres & ses sœurs. Ses besoins, l'habitude & l'expérience lui rendirent

says edited by Céline Spector and Johanna Lenne-Cornuez for the *Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment (Rousseau et Locke: Dialogues critiques)*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool 2022) promises to cast additional light on Rousseau's attitudes towards Locke.

<sup>25</sup> [P.-Th. d'Holbach], *La Politique naturelle, ou Discours sur les vrais principes du gouvernement*, [Marc-Michel Rey], London [Amsterdam] 1773, 2 vols, vol. 1, p. 53 (sect. II.3). Locke's original text can be read in Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, cit., pp. 353. A similar definition can be found in the *Système social*, cit., vol. 2, p. 6 (sect. II.1): 'Le Gouvernement est la somme des forces de la Société déposées entre les mains de ceux qu'elle a jugé les plus propres à la conduire au bonheur. D'où il suit évidemment qu'un Souverain n'est pas le Maître, mais le Ministre de la Société.'

cette Société de plus en plus nécessaire; il l'augmenta lui-même, lorsque sa nature eut fait éclore en lui le besoin de se multiplier<sup>26</sup>.

This, however, is but an obvious stab at Rousseau's *Second Discourse*, and evidence suggests that d'Holbach firmly believed all particular governments to be founded on a 'pacte social'<sup>27</sup>. Dismissing the possibility of express consent either because it created unnecessary theoretical difficulties or because he wished to widen the pool of potential covenant signatories, in a rhetorically very elaborate passage of the *Système social* the baron spells out for his readers the terms in which the tacit compact between people and sovereign is basically phrased:

Il subsiste [...] entre les peuples & leurs chefs un Pacte dont les articles doivent être conçus à-peu-près en ces termes. « Engagez vous à nous bien gouverner, c'est-à-dire à veiller à notre sûreté, à nous procurer le bien-être, à nous garantir de toute oppression; & nous nous engagerons de notre côté à vous obéir, à vous honorer, à nous occuper de votre bien-être & de votre sûreté. Si vous ne nous faites jouir d'aucuns biens, vous nous serez indifférent. Si vous ne nous faites que du mal, nos engagements seront nuls; *c'est vous qui les anéantirez vous-même*. Si vous nous faites endurer des maux insupportables, nous vous détesterons, nous vous traiterons en ennemi. Si nous sommes trop foibles pour secouer votre joug, nous le porterons en frémissant, vous aurez un ennemi dans chacun de vos esclaves, & vous serez à chaque instant obligé de trembler sur ce trône dont vous ne serez qu'un injuste usurpateur »<sup>28</sup>.

<sup>26</sup> [D'Holbach], *La Politique naturelle*, cit., vol. 1, pp. 4-5 (sect. I.2).

<sup>27</sup> See [d'Holbach], *La Politique naturelle*, cit., vol. 1, pp. 13-14 (sect. I.6): '[Le] Pacte Social [...] lie l'homme à la Société & la Société à l'homme. Il se renouvelle à chaque instant; l'homme tient continuellement la balance pour peser & comparer les avantages & les désavantages qui résultent pour lui de la Société dans laquelle il vit'. For more on d'Holbach's social contract theory, see C. Devellennes, "A Fourth Musketeer of Social Contract Theory: The Political Thought of the Baron d'Holbach", in *History of Political Thought*, 34 (2013), 3, pp. 459-78.

<sup>28</sup> [D'Holbach], *Système social*, cit., vol. 2, p. 12 (sect. II.1). Italics mine. See also [d'Holbach], *La Politique naturelle*, cit., vol. 1, pp. 12-13 (sect. I.6): 'Si l'homme est lié à la Société, celle-ci, à son tour, prend des engagements avec lui. Chaque individu contracte à-peu-près en ces termes avec elle. « Aidez-moi, lui dit-il, & je vous aiderai de mes forces; prêtez-moi vos secours; & vous pourrez compter sur les miens: travaillez à mon bonheur, si vous voulez que je m'occupe du vôtre: prenez part à mes infortunes & je partagerai les vôtres. Procurez-moi des avantages assez grands pour m'engager à vous sacrifier une partie de ceux que je possède ». La Société lui répond, « mets en commun tes facultés; alors nous te prêterons nos secours; nous multiplierons tes forces; nous travaillerons de concert à ta félicité; nous soulagerons tes peines; nous assurerons ton repos, & nos efforts réunis repousseront de toi les maux que tu redoutes, avec bien plus d'énergie que tu ne ferois sans nous. Les forces de tous te protégeront; la prudence de tous t'éclairera, les volontés de tous te guideront. L'amour, l'estime &

While d'Holbach may not be positive as to the form of government he deems the best, he shares with Locke a strong disapproval of despotic rule or tyranny<sup>29</sup>. Unlike the British philosopher, who, in the *Second Treatise*, often conflates arbitrary and absolute power, d'Holbach tends to keep the two notions separate, addressing his criticisms to what he dubs 'pouvoir arbitraire'<sup>30</sup>. 'Liez à jamais les mains cruelles du pouvoir arbitraire', he pleads with the British nation, whose faulty representative system, he reasons, does not place sufficient constraints on the monarch's authority<sup>31</sup>. Time and again, he draws attention to the nefarious impact of tyranny on the people's behaviour and well-being: 'Sous un Gouvernement arbitraire', he writes, 'nul citoyen n'est tenté d'acquérir du mérite & des talents; il sçait que les récompenses & les places ne sont réservées qu'à l'intrigue [...]; il devient donc intrigant, & s'embarrasse fort peu de mériter'<sup>32</sup>. And again: 'Les pays soumis au pouvoir arbitraire, ne renferment que des hommes entièrement abrutis ou frivoles, également incapables de réflexions'<sup>33</sup>. In chapter II.2 of the *Système social*, after referring in passing to the works of Sidney, he then uses a famous image from the *Second Treatise* to argue that despotism cannot possibly guarantee true peace to a country's citizens:

La tranquillité des Monarchies & des Etats despotiques ressemblent à ces maladies chroniques, qui minent peu à peu le corps de l'homme, & lui causent une foiblesse dont il ne se relève jamais. Locke compare la paix que procure le Despotisme à l'antre de Polyphème où Ulysse et ses compagnons étoient forcés d'attendre en silence leur tour pour être dévorés<sup>34</sup>!

les récompenses de tous payeront tes actions utiles & seront le salaire de tes travaux. En un mot, les biens que tous te procureront, te dédommageront amplement des sacrifices que tu seras obligé de leur faire »'. In the *Système social*, cit., vol. 2, p. 4 (sect. II.1), d'Holbach states clearly that 'pour n'être pas rédigé par écrit ou clairement énoncé [le pacte tacite que chaque citoyen fait avec la Société], n'en est pas moins réel.

<sup>29</sup> As for d'Holbach's views on the possible forms of government see Devellennes, "A Fourth Musketeer of Social Contract Theory", cit., p. 463, which, however, arguably errs in overdoing d'Holbach's republicanism.

<sup>30</sup> On the difference between arbitrary and absolute power see Jolley, *Locke*, cit., p. 212.

<sup>31</sup> [D'Holbach], *Système social*, cit., vol. 2, p. 75 (sect. II.6).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 3, pp. 18-19 (sect. III.2).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 48 (sect. III.5).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 29 (sect. II.2). The reference is to a passage in sect. 228 of the *Second Treatise* (p. 417): 'Who would not think it an admirable Peace betwixt the Mighty and the Mean, when the Lamb, without resistance, yielded his Throat to be torn by the imperious Wolf? *Polyphemus's* Den gives us a perfect Pattern of such a Peace, and such a Government, wherein *Ulysses* and his Companions had nothing to do, but quietly to suffer themselves to be devour'd'.

In keeping with the distinction he makes between absolute and arbitrary power, d'Holbach is clear that the word 'despotisme' should not, under any circumstances, be used to refer to the reign of good absolute rulers. As he writes in section II.1 of the *Système social*, 'Le pouvoir absolu, ou ce qu'on appelle le *Despotisme* seroit, dit-on, un gouvernement admirable entre les mains d'un Trajan, d'un Titus, d'un Marc-Aurele; mais un pouvoir exercé par un homme de bien, qui se conforme aux regles de la justice & de la raison, n'est plus un Despotisme, & ne doit pas être désigné sous ce nom déshonorant'<sup>35</sup>. Indeed, one can only hope that the power of a good ruler be without constraints, the baron appears to be saying in *La Politique naturelle*: 'Donnez des Trajan, des Antonin, des Marc-Aurele au monde, & alors il ne sera pas nécessaire de limiter leur pouvoir; plus leur autorité sera grande, plus leurs Sujets seront fortunés'<sup>36</sup>. Crucially, these statements are made explicitly in opposition to what Locke argues in section 166 of the *Second Treatise*, namely that the reign of an enlightened monarch is absolutely nefarious, for it instils in the people a positive image of autocracy and leaves them completely defenceless against any unenlightened despots who may follow<sup>37</sup>.

Despite these occasional divergences, d'Holbach follows the author of the *Two Treatises* (and the author of the *Vindicius Liberius*, too, incidentally) in advocating for the people (or at least for the contractors) a right of resistance to unjust authority<sup>38</sup>. As he writes in chapter II.5 of the *Système social*:

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., vol. 2, p. 14.

<sup>36</sup> [D'Holbach], *La Politique naturelle*, cit., vol. 2, p. 56.

<sup>37</sup> Indeed, in the sentence immediately preceding the passage just quoted from section II.1 of the *Système social*, d'Holbach shows perfect awareness of Locke's view on good princes as expressed in section 166 of the *Second Treatise*: 'Locke [...] remarque que souvent les meilleurs Princes, en s'attirant par leurs vertus la confiance de leurs sujets, leur ont fait un tort véritable, vû que ceux-ci, séduits par leurs bonnes qualités, leur ont adjugé des prérogatives & des droits, dont leurs successeurs moins équitables ont indignement abusé'. Locke's view was later appropriated by Diderot who, in the *Observations sur le Nakaz* (in D. Diderot, *Ceuvres complètes*, ed. by L. Versini, Paris: Laffont, 1994-97, 5 vols, vol. 3, p. 515) writes: 'si l'Angleterre avait eu trois souverains de suite, tels qu'Elizabeth, l'Angleterre était asservie pour des siècles'.

<sup>38</sup> On John Toland's views on the right to resistance see *Vindicius Liberius: or M. Toland's Defence of himself; against the late Lower House of Convocation*, London 1702, pp. 125-26: 'I have bin wholly devoted to the self evident Principle of *Liberty*, and a profest Enemy of to *Slavery* and *arbitrary Power*. I have always bin, now am, and ever shall be persuaded that all Sorts of Magistrats are made for and by the People, and not the People for or by the Magistrats: that the Power of all Governors is originally conferr'd by the Society, and limited to their Safety, Wealth, and Glory, which makes those Governors accountable for their Trust: and consequently that it is lawful to resist and punish Tyrants of all Kinds, be it a single Person or greater Number of Men.'

Un Gouvernement, quelqu'il soit, est fait pour la Nation, & non la Nation pour le Gouvernement. Les Rois sont faits pour les Peuples, & non les Peuples pour les Rois. Une Nation est donc en droit de révoquer, d'annuler, d'étendre, de restreindre, d'expliquer, d'altérer tous les pouvoirs qu'elle a donnés: quand elle combat un Tyran, elle combat un furieux, elle se défend de ses coups; *ce n'est pas elle qui se révolte, c'est le Tyran*. Si chaque individu de notre espece a le droit de se défendre contre l'agresseur qui l'attaque, *par quelle étrange jurisprudence une Nation en corps seroit-elle privée d'un droit que l'on ne peut contester au dernier des citoyens?* Un Peuple peut, non seulement résister au Tyran qui l'outrage & qui travaille à sa ruine, mais encore il peut le traiter en ennemi: s'il a violé les loix, de quel droit réclamerait-il la protection de ces loix<sup>39</sup>?

At least two things ought to be noted about the passage just quoted. The first one is that, according to d'Holbach, it is the ruler or government, rather than the Nation itself, who should normally be blamed in the event of a *general* rebellion, for, indeed, the people would have no reason to revolt against a legitimate authority that duly protected their interests. This idea, which one also finds in chapter I.3 of the *Politique naturelle* ('le Tyran, l'Usurpateur sont [...] les seuls rebelles; ils résistent à la volonté générale contre laquelle il ne leur est point permis de s'élever') has of course its source in section 226 of the *Second Treatise*, where Locke famously writes that

those, whoever they be, who by force break through, and by force justify their violation of [the Constitutions and Laws of the Government], are truly and properly *Rebels*. For when Men by entering into Society and Civil Government, have excluded force, and introduced Laws for the preservation of Property, Peace, and Unity amongst themselves; those who set up force again in opposition to the Laws, do *Rebellare*, that is, bring back again the state of War, and are properly Rebels: Which they who are in Power (by the pretence they have to Authority, the temptation of force they have in their hands, and the Flattery of those about them) [are] likeliest to do<sup>40</sup>.

<sup>39</sup> [D'Holbach], *Système social*, cit., vol. 2, p. 57. Italics mine. It is interesting to remark that the sentences immediately preceding this passage contain what appears to be a likely allusion to section 225 of the *Second Treatise*: 'Locke nous dit, qu'une longue suite d'oppressions, d'abus, de négligences, d'injustices, de prévarications font assez connoître à tout citoyen raisonnable, l'état de son pays, & en cas que pour lors la nation vienne à s'expliquer, il sçaura qu'il ne doit pas se ranger du côté des brigands & des pirates.'

<sup>40</sup> Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, cit., pp. 415-16. For more on Locke's notion that it is the government who should be taken as the true initiator of a rebellion see D. Lloyd Thomas, *Locke on Government*, Routledge, London 1995, p. 61. D'Holbach's text can be read in *La Politique naturelle*, cit., vol. 1, pp. 161-62 (sect. IV.3). Chapter II.5 of the *Système social* often comes back to this idea. See

The second noticeable thing about the quotation above from chapter II.5 of the *Système social* is that d'Holbach is arguably more careful than Locke to stress that an individual has the right to rebel against the authority under which they live only when the majority of the people – the ‘community’, as Locke would put it, or ‘la Nation’, to use the baron’s own word – withdraws its consent or trust: ‘si les Nations jouissent incontestablement du droit de punir les Tyrans qui les outragent’, he writes, ‘ce droit n’appartient aucunement au citoyen isolé; celui-ci ne pourroit sans crime se rendre juge dans sa propre cause’<sup>41</sup>. Clearly mindful of both François Ravaillac’s regicide in 1610 and Robert-François Damiens’ attempt to assassinate Louis le Bien-Aimé in 1757, d'Holbach then adds: ‘Le plus juste des Princes, le plus cher à son peuple ne seroit pas à couvert des attentats d’un fanatique ou d’un scélérat, s’il étoit permis à tout citoyen de juger ou de punir les chefs de la Société’<sup>42</sup>. To further dispel any accusations of preaching sedition to the French public, d'Holbach hastens to point out that under no circumstances can a person’s freedom be taken as involving a right to rebel against a legitimate authority: “Un citoyen”, he writes, using a word close to Rousseau’s heart, ‘n’exerce pas sa liberté en résistant à une autorité légitime; il est alors un insensé qui brise la barriere destinée à le garantir lui-même’. In support of this statement, he refers to section 230 of the *Second Treatise*, suggesting, perhaps, that he may not have thought of Locke’s ideas as diverging significantly from his own: ‘*Tout citoyen, dit Locke, qui renverse un gouvernement équitable, se rend coupable du sang & des maux de ses concitoyens. Tout souverain qui anéantit les loix, est un forcené qui s’expose à la licence des citoyens qu’il a lui-même déchaînés*’<sup>43</sup>.

pp. 56-57: ‘Il n’y a pour l’ordinaire que l’excès de la tyrannie, qui mette les nations en feu; c’est alors les Tyrans que l’on doit regarder comme les vrais incendiaires.’

<sup>41</sup> [D’Holbach], *Système social*, cit., vol. 2, p. 58. D’Holbach reiterates the idea several times in the same chapter. See, for example, p. 57: ‘C’est, je le répète, à la Nation, source unique & véritable de toute autorité légitime, qu’il appartient de juger si elle est bien ou mal gouvernée, bien ou mal représentée; si ses loix lui sont utiles ou nuisibles’. Locke is famously ambivalent on this topic. See in particular section 168, which appears initially to extend the right of resistance to ‘any single Man’ but then concludes with the following caveat: ‘Nor let any one think, this lays a perpetual foundation for Disorder: for this operates not, till the Inconvenience is so great, that the Majority feel it, and are weary of it, and find a necessity to have it amended’. For more on this topic see R. Ashcraft, “Locke’s Political Philosophy”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke*, ed. by V. C. Chappell, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994, pp. 226-51, and Lloyd Thomas, *Locke on Government*, cit., pp. 63-65, the latter being more inclined to interpret Locke as not recognising a right to rebel to single individuals.

<sup>42</sup> [D’Holbach], *Système social*, cit., vol. 2, p. 58.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 43 (sect. II.3). Another possible explanation for this mention of Locke will become

### 3. Locke's 'Law of Nature' and d'Holbach's 'amour éclairé de soi'

If d'Holbach is, on the whole, consistent in his praises of Locke and borrows extensively from him in the fields of both epistemology and politics, in at least one (or another) crucial respect he is careful to distance himself from the British empiricist<sup>44</sup>. It is often suggested that Locke did not regard his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* as religiously subversive<sup>45</sup>. And yet most of his readers, both in the early modern period and more recently, have pointed to the existence of a fundamental inconsistency within his philosophy: if on the one hand the *Essay* can be seen as naturally lending itself to radical interpretations and undermining some of the fundamental tenets of Christianity, the *Second Treatise* is best interpreted as a politically subversive text, which, however, derives the people's right to overturn an unjust ruler from a fundamentally orthodox premiss: all human beings are God's property and ought not harm themselves or other fellow human beings<sup>46</sup>. As Locke himself puts it in Section 6,

apparent towards the end of this essay. Locke's original text (p. 418) reads: 'whoever, either Ruler or Subject, by force goes about to invade the Rights of either Prince or People, and lays the foundation for overturning the Constitution and Frame of any Just Government, is guilty of the greatest Crime, I think, a Man is capable of, being to answer for all those mischiefs of Blood, Rapine, and Desolation, which the breaking to pieces of Governments bring on a Countrey. And he who does it, is justly to be esteemed the common Enemy and Pest of Mankind; and is to be treated accordingly.'

<sup>44</sup> At least two other passages from the *Système social* in addition to the ones quoted contain references to Locke's *Second Treatise*. In chapter II.1 (vol. 2, p. 16) d'Holbach quotes from section 175 ('Conquest is as far from setting up any Government, as demolishing an House is from building a new one in the place') to make the point that the people's consent is necessary for the establishment of a legitimate authority and that, as a consequence, a ruler who were to annex a territory by force could hardly ever rule lawfully over its citizens: 'Il n'y a que le consentement libre & subséquent des peuples, qui puisse légitimer le pouvoir usurpé d'un conquérant. Mais les peuples ne peuvent donner ce consentement que sous la condition d'être bien gouvernés. La conquête, dit Locke, est aussi peu l'origine & le fondement des Etats, que la démolition d'une maison est la vraie cause de la construction d'une autre'. The second passage is in chapter III.3 (vol. 3, p. 25): 'les loix sont faites pour les Peuples, & non les Peuples pour les loix. Une loi, dit Locke, doit disparaître, dès que la Société est plus heureuse sans cette loi'. D'Holbach's source here is section 57 of the *Second Treatise*: 'Could [those under a Law] be happier without it, the Law, as an useless thing would of it self vanish.'

<sup>45</sup> See Dunn, *Locke*, cit., p. 20.

<sup>46</sup> See Jolley, *Locke*, cit., p. 194: 'to some readers the [*Essay* and the *Second Treatise*] seem to be very different in philosophical tendency; the *Second Treatise* appears to be infused by a more dogmatic, less critical spirit than the *Essay*. Even on specific issues the relationship between the two books is problematic; for instance, Locke's position in the *Second Treatise* is not obviously consistent with the denial of innate moral knowledge which is defended in the *Essay*'.

the *State of Nature* has a Law of Nature to govern it, which obliges every one: And Reason, which is that Law, teaches all Mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his Life, Health, Liberty, or Possessions. For Men being all the Workmanship of one Omnipotent, and infinitely wise Maker; All the Servants of one Sovereign Master, sent into the World by his order and about his business, they are his Property, whose Workmanship they are, made to last during his, not one anothers Pleasure<sup>47</sup>.

Crucially, the ‘Law of Nature’ does not apply to the state of nature alone, for, at least in theory, even the positive laws of a commonwealth or civil society must be informed by it. Indeed, ‘the *Rules* that [legislators] make for other Mens Actions, must, as well as their own and other Mens Actions, be conformable to the Law of Nature, *i.e.* to the Will of God<sup>48</sup>.

As shown by the following passage from the *Système de la nature*, d’Holbach, like many of his contemporaries across the Channel, was perfectly aware of the fundamental ambiguity underpinning Locke’s philosophy:

Comment le profond Locke qui, au grand regret des Théologiens, a mis le principe d’Aristote dans tout son jour; & comment tous ceux qui, comme lui, ont reconnu l’absurdité du système des *idées innées*, n’en ont-ils point tiré les conséquences immédiates & nécessaires? [...] N’ont-ils pas vu que leur principe sapoit les fondemens de cette Théologie qui n’occupe jamais les hommes que d’objets inaccessibles aux sens, & dont par conséquent il leur étoit impossible de se faire des idées? Mais le préjugé, quand il est sacré sur-tout, empêche de voir les applications les plus simples des principes les plus évidens; en matière de religion les plus grands hommes ne sont souvent que des enfans, incapables de pressentir & de tirer les conséquences de leurs principes! M Locke, & tous ceux qui ont adopté son système si démontré, ou l’axiome d’Aristote, auroient dû en conclure que tous les êtres merveilleux dont la Théologie s’occupe sont de pures chimères<sup>49</sup>.

Now, of course, d’Holbach may well have the *Reasonableness of Christianity* or the *Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul* in mind when accusing Locke of religious conservatism, but nothing prevents us from supposing that, in the passage above, he may be alluding to the *Second Treatise*, too<sup>50</sup>. And

<sup>47</sup> Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, cit., p. 271.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 358.

<sup>49</sup> [D’Holbach], *Système de la nature*, cit., vol. 1, pp. 166-67.

<sup>50</sup> All these texts can be found in the 1727 edition of *The Works of John Locke Esq.*, a copy of which, as we mentioned previously, d’Holbach had in his library.



indeed it is quite telling that, while drawing heavily from this text, the baron is careful to cast aside Locke's notion of 'Law of Nature'. He replaces it with the idea that individuals are naturally animated by a self-interested love of other fellow human beings, a feeling which, in *La Politique naturelle*, he dubs 'amour éclairé de soi':

l'intérêt, ou l'*amour éclairé de soi* est le fondement des vertus sociales; c'est le véritable motif de tout ce que l'homme fait pour le service de ses semblables. La vertu n'est que l'utilité des hommes vivants en Société. Etre vertueux, c'est être sociable, c'est contribuer au bonheur de ceux avec lesquels notre destin nous lie, afin de les exciter à contribuer à notre propre félicité<sup>51</sup>.

It is precisely this realisation that one's own happiness is inextricably connected to society's – a realisation that d'Holbach supposes to be natural (or at least in keeping with human nature), and corroborated, in equitable societies, by education and experience – that d'Holbach takes as the foundation of social rights, duties, and, ultimately, social life itself. As he emphatically puts it in the opening section to *La Politique naturelle*,

l'homme, ayant le desir de se conserver & de se rendre heureux, en chérit les moyens; [...] né avec la faculté de sentir, il préfère le bien au mal; [...] susceptible d'expériences & de réflexions, il devient raisonnable, c'est à dire, capable de comparer les avantages que la vie sociale lui procure avec les désavantages qu'il éprouveroit, s'il étoit privé de la Société. D'après ces expériences, ces réflexions, cette comparaison, il préfère un état qui lui procure une existence agréable & conforme à son être à la solitude qui lui déplaît, qui l'inquiète, qui le laisseroit dépourvu de secours. En un mot, l'homme est sociable, parce qu'il aime le bien-être & se plaît dans un état de sécurité. *Ces sentimens sont naturels, c'est-à-dire découlent de l'essence ou de la nature d'un être qui cherche à se conserver*, qui s'aime lui-même, qui veut rendre son existence heureuse, & qui saisit avec ardeur les moyens d'y parvenir. Tout prouve à l'homme que la vie sociale lui est avantageuse; *l'habitude l'y attache*, & il se trouve malheureux,

<sup>51</sup> [D'Holbach], *La Politique naturelle*, cit., vol. 1, p. 10 (sect. I.5). See also vol. 2, p. 94 (sect. VI.22): 'Nul repos, nulle sûreté, nulle félicité pour le plus grand nombre, dans un pays d'où le pouvoir arbitraire a banni la liberté. Ce n'est que dans les sociétés où elle regne que l'on trouve de la puissance, c'est là seulement qu'il existe une Patrie. *Qu'est-ce donc que la Patrie?* dira l'esclave dont l'ame avilie n'est point accoutumée à réfléchir; *est-ce cet amour imbécille du sol qui nous a vu naître?* Non; c'est un amour éclairé de nous-mêmes qui nous apprend à chérir le Gouvernement qui nous protège, les loix qui nous assurent notre personne & nos biens, la société qui travaille à notre félicité. La liberté seule peut procurer ces avantages; sans elle il ne peut donc y avoir de Patrie; l'amour de notre pays n'est jamais que l'amour de nous-mêmes.'

dès qu'il est privé de l'assistance de ses semblables. Voilà le vrai principe de la Sociabilité<sup>52</sup>.

As the passage above already makes clear, the 'amour éclairé de soi' rests, in turn, on two fundamental principles. The first one is the hedonistic notion that human beings naturally seek pleasure and flee from sorrow, a statement that recurs almost obsessively across d'Holbach's textual corpus. To quote from the *Système de la nature*: 'un être sensible doit nécessairement chercher le plaisir & fuir la douleur'<sup>53</sup>. The second one is the identification of right or good with any behaviours that increase (general) happiness and well-being, and symmetrical-ly of wrong or bad with any actions that produce unhappiness and ill-being. The 'amour éclairé de soi', in other words, is ultimately based on that notion, so crucial to the philosophical enquiry of both Helvétius and Bentham, that is the Principle of Utility<sup>54</sup>. 'La vertu', the baron writes in chapter I.9 of the *Système de la nature*, 'est tout ce qui est vraiment & constamment utile aux êtres de l'espece humaine vivants en société; [...] le vice est tout ce qui leur est nuisible'<sup>55</sup>. And again, in the *Lettres à Eugénie*: 'par vertu nous devons entendre des dispositions habituelles à faire ce qui peut procurer le bonheur de nos semblables'<sup>56</sup>.

D'Holbach's decision to replace Locke's religiously connoted 'Law of Nature' with the more secular 'amour éclairé de soi' may appear to be a most severe blow to the British philosopher's political system. And yet, as the present article hopes to have shown, it in no way precludes the French *philosophe* from subscribing to most of the conclusions drawn in the *Second Treatise*. This is possible because Locke's 'Law of Nature' and d'Holbach's 'amour éclairé de soi', however differ-

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, p. 4 (sect. I.1). Italics mine. D'Holbach emphasises again the importance of education in ensuring that citizens realise that their happiness is contingent upon society's in chapter I.9 of the *Système de la nature* (vol. 1, p. 150). 'Lorsque notre éducation, les exemples qu'on nous donne, les moyens que l'on nous fournit sont approuvés par la raison, tout concourt à nous rendre vertueux, l'habitude fortifie en nous ces dispositions, & nous devenons des membres utiles de la société, à laquelle tout devrait nous prouver que notre bien être durable est nécessairement lié. Si au contraire notre éducation, nos institutions, les exemples qu'on nous donne, les opinions qu'on nous suggere dès l'enfance, nous montrent la vertu comme inutile ou contraire & le vice comme utile & favorable à notre propre bonheur, alors nous deviendrons vicieux & nous nous croirons intéressés à nuire à nos associés.'

<sup>53</sup> [D'Holbach], *Système de la nature*, cit., vol. 1, p. 17. D'Holbach normally replaces the somewhat ambiguous notion of pleasure with that of 'well-being'. See, for instance ibid., p. 190: 'Il est de l'essence actuelle de l'homme de tendre au bien être ou de vouloir se conserver.'

<sup>54</sup> D'Holbach was arguably aware of Helvétius' views on ethics even before the posthumous publication of *De l'Homme* in 1773.

<sup>55</sup> [D'Holbach], *Système de la nature*, cit., vol. 1, p. 135.

<sup>56</sup> [P.-Th. d'Holbach], *Lettres à Eugénie, ou Préservatif contre les préjugés*, [Marc-Michel Rey], London [Amsterdam] 1768, 2 vols, vol. 2, p. 103.

ent, are in fact fundamentally interchangeable. John Simmons has remarked that, in Locke's political theory, 'the fundamental law of nature is [...] meant to function [...] much as the principle of utility has been thought to function in some rule-utilitarian schemes'<sup>57</sup>. Locke, after all, was almost as enthusiastic a subscriber as d'Holbach to the hedonistic equation of good with happiness and pleasure (as opposed to harm), and the case has been made by A. P. Brogan that the premisses of Locke's social theory are ultimately not different from those of eighteenth-century utilitarianism, a tradition which, in fact, owes much to the British philosopher<sup>58</sup>. Both Locke's 'Law of Nature' and d'Holbach's 'amour éclairé de soi', moreover, are said to be in keeping with reason and good sense, or even to overlap with them. 'The *State of Nature* has a Law of Nature to govern it, which obliges every one: And Reason, which is that Law, teaches all Mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his Life, Health, Liberty, or Possessions', states Locke in a passage already quoted above. As for d'Holbach, in *La Politique naturelle* he defines reason as the ability to discern what is useful and what is not ('La raison n'est que la connoissance de ce qui nous est *utile* ou nuisible'), further stating that it is this mental faculty that prompts men and women to pursue their natural goal of living in society by instilling in them an awareness of some fundamental impulses and truths (which he interestingly calls 'loix naturelles'), such as the self-preservation instinct or the equation of good and useful:

Si c'est le besoin qui force les hommes à demeurer réunis, c'est le besoin encore qui leur fournit les moyens de maintenir leur association. C'est donc le besoin qui les oblige ou qui leur impose des devoirs. Les devoirs ne sont que les moyens nécessaires pour parvenir à la fin qu'on se propose. L'expérience, qui constitue la raison, nous découvre ces moyens, elle nous fait sentir leur nécessité, elle nous en montre l'application; ainsi c'est la raison qui donne à notre espèce les Loix que l'on appelle *Naturelles*, parce qu'elles découlent de notre nature, de notre essence, de l'amour qui nous attache à notre existence, du désir de la conserver, de l'attrait invincible que nous éprouvons pour l'utile & l'agréable, & de notre aversion pour tout ce qui nous est nuisible & fâcheux<sup>59</sup>.

It is reason, basically, that turns 'amour de soi' in 'amour éclairé de soi', egoistic self-interest in *enlightened* self-interest.

<sup>57</sup> J. Simmons, *The Lockean Theory of Rights*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1992, p. 50.

<sup>58</sup> A.P. Brogan, "John Locke and Utilitarianism", in *Ethics*, 69 (1958), 2, pp. 79-93.

<sup>59</sup> [D'Holbach], *La Politique naturelle*, cit., vol. 1, p. 3 and 14 (sect. I.1 and I.7).

Despite its apparent fundamental differences, d'Holbach's theory of the foundation of the rights and duties of governments is therefore not unlike Locke's. Rather it is a secular, specular version of it. As this article hopes to have demonstrated, d'Holbach actively engaged with Locke's philosophy. Fully aware of its merits as well as of the tensions within it, he tweaked it in places but eventually made it his own. In fact, the baron's decision often openly to mention or footnote Locke when borrowing or adapting any of his politically radical ideas offered eighteenth-century readers a somewhat distorted, more consistently radical image of the British thinker, one that could very easily be reconciled with the materialistic, anti-theological conclusions that d'Holbach's contemporaries were accustomed to drawing from the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* – or that d'Holbach drew from this text, at any rate<sup>60</sup>. In a bold move, d'Holbach brought together the *Essay* and the *Second Treatise*. He overcame what eighteenth-century commentators already perceived as the most glaring tension between the two texts, and claimed the British philosopher for the cause of atheism and radicalism. As recent research has shown, after all, d'Holbach was an extremely manipulative writer, one who used all available means to achieve his philosophical aims and disseminate his ideas<sup>61</sup>.

### Conclusion

The present article has shown that, unlike many other eighteenth-century French philosophers, radical thinker Paul-Thiry d'Holbach had first-hand knowledge of Locke's *Second Treatise* and drew extensively on it when penning his main political works: *La Politique naturelle* and the *Système social*<sup>62</sup>. While

<sup>60</sup> Some commentators may even argue that d'Holbach's is in fact a fairly accurate rendition of Locke's views. Locke's stance on religion, after all, has been the subject of much discussion, and some scholars, Leo Strauss, for one have seen in the British philosopher a closet atheist. See Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, cit. See also J.W. Tate, "Dividing Locke from God: The Limits of Theology in Locke's Political Philosophy", in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 39 (2013), 2, pp. 133-64, which argues for the independence of Locke's political conclusions from their alleged theological premisses, and Dunn, *Locke*, cit., p. 36: '[Locke] chose not to discuss at all the question of how men can naturally know the law of nature, the binding law of God, on which, according to the argument of the book, all human rights rested and from which the great bulk of human duties more or less directly derived. The omission has attracted much intellectual criticism from later writers on political theory. It has also earned, both at the time of publication and more recently, some suspicion that the pious tone of its discussion of the law of nature might have been evasive or insincere.'

<sup>61</sup> See Sciuto, "The Absent Guest", cit.

<sup>62</sup> More research is needed to understand whether the ideas expressed in the *Système social* and *La*

rejecting the Rousseauian notion of a state of nature intended as a historical period when human beings lived outside society, d'Holbach inherits from Locke the idea that particular polities are the result of a tacit, constantly renewed social contract. As the products of a covenant, governments must pursue the preservation and best interests of the 'community' or 'Nation', as Locke and d'Holbach would respectively call it, prolonged failure to do so necessarily resulting in their loss of legitimacy and ultimately paving the way to revolution. Naturally wary of Locke's decision to ground the legitimacy of an authority (and therefore a community's right to rebel against it) on its exactitude in enacting a 'Law of Nature' which is based, in turn, on God's will, d'Holbach replaces this 'Law of Nature' with what he terms 'amour éclairé de soi'. For d'Holbach, a person's realisation that their individual well-being is inextricably connected to that of others depends on their more or less intuitive understanding that an action is good in so far as it promotes happiness or pleasure and wrong when it brings about unhappiness or pain (Principle of Utility). While d'Holbach's replacement of the 'Law of Nature' with the secular notion of 'amour éclairé de soi' may seem to undermine Locke's philosophy at its very core, the reality is that the two principles are extremely close and fundamentally interchangeable. Locke's political philosophy, d'Holbach seems to wish his most perceptive readers would realise, can easily be turned into a consistent secular theory, and reconciled with the conclusions drawn in (or from) the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*<sup>63</sup>.

The present study is of course not exhaustive in its treatment of d'Holbach's attitudes towards the *Two Treatises of Government*. Evidence suggests that d'Holbach may have been influenced by Locke even in his views on patriarchy, slavery, and private property – and indeed further research in this area would be particularly welcome, given the influence that the baron's writings are often said to have had on the development of Marx's philosophy<sup>64</sup>. And yet, while

*Politique naturelle* match those put forward in the *Ethocratie*, a book published in 1776, and in which d'Holbach appears to target a different audience.

<sup>63</sup> This is not to suggest that d'Holbach's philosophy as a whole is consistently radical. See Sciuto, *Determinism and Enlightenment*, cit.

<sup>64</sup> For d'Holbach's views on private property see, for instance, section I.25 of *La Politique naturelle* (p. 38): 'il est impossible que l'homme se conserve ou rende son existence heureuse, s'il ne jouit des avantages que ses soins & sa personne lui ont acquis. Ainsi les loix de la Nature donnent à chaque homme, un droit que l'on appelle *propriété*, qui n'est que la faculté de jouir exclusivement des choses que le talent, le travail & l'industrie procurent; ce droit est juste & le sentiment qui en assure la possession s'appelle *Justice*. Troubler un homme dans sa liberté & dans sa propriété, c'est lui ôter les moyens de se conserver & l'empêcher d'être heureux; la loi de sa nature l'autorise à tout faire pour remplir

limited in scope, this article hopes to contribute to a large-scale re-evaluation of d'Holbach's political philosophy and of its importance in the context of pre-Revolutionary France.

'[Voilà] nos grands hommes, voilà nos Dieux': the people of France hail Voltaire and Rousseau in Pierre-Jean-Baptiste Chaussard's 1792 play *La France régénérée*<sup>65</sup>. And indeed, these were the intellectual heroes of Revolutionary France; these were the first writers to be pantheonized in the 1790s. D'Holbach's fate could not have been more different. He had published all of his works either anonymously or pseudonymously and taken all possible measures to ensure that his authorial persona would remain shrouded in mystery. His grave, like Diderot's, was destroyed when the revolutionary mob ransacked the Eglise Saint-Roch in Paris. And yet, as my new monograph project hopes to show, the members of the revolutionary assemblies were for the most part familiar with the works that we now know to be d'Holbach's: they read them and quoted extensively from them in their speeches and writings. As this article hopes to have shown, through d'Holbach's works eighteenth-century readers may have become acquainted with some of the most earthshattering political ideas advanced in the early modern period: Locke's. In them, the members of the revolutionary assemblies may have found valid arguments to prove that political power must rest with the people and that nations have a right to withdraw their trust from an unjust authority and rebel. In the *Essai sur les préjugés*, d'Holbach expressed his wish that the nascent American nation, at least, would benefit from Locke's ideas, as well as from Harrington's and Montesquieu's:

Ainsi que l'astre du jour, la lumière de la vérité semble éclairer successivement les différentes parties de notre globe; la sagesse venue du fond de l'Orient le laisse maintenant dans les ténèbres pour éclairer l'Occident. Harrington, Locke, & vous sublime Montesquieu! c'est peut-être pour l'Amérique que vos leçons sont destinées. Tout l'univers a des droits sur les lumières d'un grand homme; c'est dans ce sens que le Sage est un *citoyen du monde*; il doit servir la grande société; la vérité est un bien commun à toute la race humaine; ceux qui trouvent ce trésor sont tenus de lui en rendre compte; c'est un vol de l'en priver. L'homme n'est

ces objets; la Société doit l'en faire jouir; elle cesseroit d'avoir des avantages pour lui, si elle violoit la justice à son égard; elle ne peut lui ravir sa liberté, que lorsqu'elle devient nuisible aux autres; elle ne peut le priver de sa propriété, parce qu'elle est faite pour l'assurer'. For more on d'Holbach and Marx see, for instance, D. Lecompte, *Marx et le baron d'Holbach: Aux Sources de Marx, le matérialisme athée bolbachique*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1983.

<sup>65</sup> P.-J.-B. Chaussard, *La France régénérée, pièce épisodique en vers et à spectacle*, Limodin, Paris 1792, p. 25.

estimable qu'en raison du bonheur qu'il procure à ses semblables; l'homme de bien n'a point perdu son temps s'il a fait un seul heureux<sup>66</sup>.

But with the *Système social* and *La Politique naturelle*, he also made sure that, in the Age of Revolutions, France would not be left behind.

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<sup>66</sup> [P.-Th. d'Holbach], *Essai sur les préjugés, ou de l'Influence des opinions sur les mœurs & sur les bonheurs des hommes*, [Marc-Michel Rey], London [Amsterdam] 1770, pp. 235-36.

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