Paradoxes of Emancipation

Cristina Lasa Ochoteco[1]

ABSTRACT

This paper relates the concepts of servitude, censorship and emancipation, the point of contact between them being the idea of the necessary consent of the subject and his paradoxical wish not to be free. Étienne de la Boétie, in the middle of the sixteenth century, called it "voluntary servitude", and claimed that the master's supremacy does not lie in his power, but in the legitimacy conferred on it by the consent of the servant. During the seventeenth century, the censorship of the *Holy Office* took the place of the master and regulated free thought and the editing of books. Baltasar Gracián was one writer who confronted this difficulty with ingenuity. A century later, the ideal of emancipation reverts to Étienne de La Boétie's proposal in the sense of pointing out that the cause of not abandoning the old doctrinal tutelage does not ascribe to an external reality. One response to this paradox was the collective project of the *Encyclopédie*, led by Denis Diderot.

KEYWORDS

Voluntary servitude, censorship, emancipation, Enlightenment, legitimacy, consent.

VOLUNTARY SERVITUDE

> Surely a striking situation! Yet it is so common that one must grieve the more and wonder the less at the spectacle of a million men serving in wretchedness, their necks under the yoke, not constrained by a great multitude than they, but simply, it would seem, delighted and charmed by the name of one man alone whose power they need not fear, for he is evidently the one person whose quali-

1 University of the Basque Country. E-mail: cristina.lasa@ehu.es. This article is part of the project The Civic Constellation (Spanish National Research Plan, FFI2011-23388).

> ties they cannot admire because of his inhumanity and brutality toward them (La Boétie 1942 [1549], 8).

The *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude* is a radical text about freedom and civil disobedience. Étienne de La Boétie (1530-1563) was only eighteen years old when he wrote this short text, in a time of political revolts caused by the wars between Catholics and Huguenots. However, in this writing religious obedience is not mentioned. La Boétie made a clear distinction between God and power. Power did not have a divine origin: it was the product of human servitude.

That essay puts forward the paradox expressed by the oxymoron of the title –voluntary servitude–, a rhetorical tool which allows La Boétie to show his surprise: nations renounce their freedom for the benefit of that of one single person, whose power resides in the legitimacy men have given him, even though these are greater in number and strength. "How does he have any power over you except through you?" (La Boétie 1942 [1549], 11), he asks. After a brief argumentation about the nature of freedom and servitude, he concludes that freedom is what we are, while servitude is the rejection of self in assuming that it is free. Therefore, men who are not free have renounced their desire, as "it is true that in the beginning men submit under constraint and by force; but those who come after them obey without regret and perform willingly what their predecessors had done because they had to" (La Boétie 1942 [1549], 14).

Is it possible to break free of this servitude? La Boétie did not write the controversial *Against one* of the subtitle, according to which the *one* would be identified outside as a coercive force external to those very subjects. La Boétie defended not opposing the one: it is enough not to support him and to give him nothing, "it is not necessary to deprive him of anything, but simply to give him nothing" (La Boétie 1942 [1549], 10). It was the Huguenots who decided to publish this brief essay in 1574, with the title *Against one*, and thus justify their right to insurrection and to the revolts against persecution. La Boétie thought that, on the contrary, it is indifferent who the *one* is: "There are three kinds of tyrants; some receive their proud position through elections by people, others by force of arms, others by inheritance […] I do not ask that you place hands upon the tyrant to topple him over, but simply that you support him no longer" (La Boétie 1942 [1549], 12-13). La Boétie knew that it was all about occupying a place from which the world is organised and directed, just as some men of the Age of Antiquity, who well knew the difference between power as a place or the power incarnated in a living being, had understood it in their time:

> The kings of the Assyrians and even after them those of the Medes showed themselves in public as seldom as possible in order to set up a doubt in the minds of the rabble as to whether they were not in some way more than man, and thereby to encourage people to use their imagination for those things which they cannot judge by sight. Thus a great many nations who for a long time dwelt under the control of the Assyrians became accustomed, with all this mystery, to their own subjection, and submitted the more readily for not knowing what sort of master they had, or scarcely even if they had one, all of them fearing by report someone they had never seen (La Boétie 1942 [1549], 21).

La Boétie analyses and shows through examples taken from history, that the society whose people voluntarily submit to power has not always existed. He mentions a "bad inaugural meeting", whose most important effect is the step taken from the desire for freedom to the love of servitude. The oxymoron of the title expresses, precisely, the impossibility of rationally understanding this transformation which has no name: "What monstrous vice, then, is this which does not even deserve to be called cowardice, a vice for which no term can be found vile enough, which nature herself disavows and our tongues refuse to name?" (La Boétie 1942 [1549], 9). The author asks questions, but does not have answers. If the master's power lies in the cession which the servants make to him, it is because they have consented. They have assumed a certain type of servitude.

Censorship

A century later, in the seventeenth century, the relationship between freedom and servitude, as far as the publication of critical works is concerned, is measured by "censorship". In Spain, for example, under the reign of Felipe II and his royal favourite, the count-duke of Olivares, the *Holy Office* was made up of many Jesuits who corrected and validated (or not) all the texts written by the very members of the firm. To get rid of anyone who got in the way by exercising free thought, the Jesuits followed the Vatican tactic of *promoveatur ut removeatur,* which is to say, the tactic of promoting and ascending them within the ecclesiastical hierarchy, or the Ignatius tactic of *agere contra*, which means making them work and dedicate their time to a task which was the opposite of that which they normally did. It was to do with a true assessment of the author who it wanted to publish, and he in turn yielded to the process.

In the first instance, an internal censorship was carried out, which was done on the text itself, given that all writings which were to be published had

to carry the *nihil obstat* preceptive on the front cover. Later came the assessment of the author's personality and, finally, it was the turn of the Inquisition tribunal, which kept watch over orthodoxy and morality related to questions of faith.

Some authors were able to dodge this censorship, renouncing resignation and using ingenious resources. This was the case with Baltasar Gracián (1601-1658) who, *avant la lettre*, maintained a pragmatic position against the control of power. Gracián published most of his work under the name of a non-existent brother of his, Lorenzo, and dedicated it to a learned patron, Vincencio Juan de Lastanosa and to the viceroy of Aragón. He put his own name to, and allowed the censorship to analyse only one of his works, *El Comulgatorio,* a text of meditations with which he distracted the *Holy Office* whilst he concentrated on writing *El Criticón*. According to the studies carried out by the Gracián specialist, father Miguel Batllorí (Batllorí 1958, 174), we know that in the Provincial Letters appears the assessment of the author's personality, "a man of ingenuity and good judgement", but of *prudentia mediocris*, for which the Ignatius tactic was applied: Gracián was sent to different colleges on the peninsula, ending his days in a small village in Huesca, Grau, far away from any institutional office.

Gracián found a unique way of complying with censorship, because he used the its very limits –it is not possible to control everything–, without giving in to "servitude". Gracián, in the sense of La Boétie, restricted himself to "not giving everything". A century later, the collective project of the *Encyclopédie* responded to one of the ideals most strongly demanded by the enlightened philosophers: emancipation. This ideal updated the paradox posed by La Boétie, since enlightened emancipation did not consider an external reality as a cause, but rather stressed the consent of the subject and his wish not to be free. Therefore it was a question of an imperative calling, an appeal to the will of the subjects.

Paradoxes of Emancipation

In the eighteenth century, the idea of "emancipation" widened its semantic field and acquired a metaphorical meaning: to emancipate meant abandoning the old doctrinal tutelages and turning to a new, dynamic knowledge. The Kantian motto *sapere aude* gave it its imperative value. As a consequence, the enlightened French thinkers responded to that call for emancipation, although they did it in a different way: Voltaire dedicated most of his writings, without concessions, to denouncing the abuses carried out by the representatives of the *ancien régime*, revealing the frauds and the false beliefs on which it sustained its principles; Rousseau used his stylistic resources to raise sentiment

above reason and he searched for how to restore nature to the bosom of society, to show that the troubles which afflict the modern subject are the result of his own actions; Diderot, for his part, became involved with the scientific spirit of the time, which searched for the production of a knowledge with consequences, transmittable and universal and he stuck to the Newtonian proposal of displacing the notion of cause and putting the emphasis on the laws which rule the processes of knowledge acquisition.

Enlightened thought was steeped in the secularization process, with the appearance of the new order which would not be mild, quiet or calculated. Some philosophers understood "emancipation" to be one of the essential phases of that process, the other being "autonomy" (Todorov 2007, 11). In this context, the encyclopaedic project, with the pluralisation of truths, was a response to that call, and was only possible thanks to the commitment of one man who tried to leave empty the place of truth as cause, that is, the determination of one man, atheist and sceptic, who renounced the search for one ultimate, guaranteed knowledge.

Emancipation: the act by which some people are left outside of external power. This is the definition which begins the article EMANCIPATION in volume V of Diderot's *Encyclopédie*. I would like to underline the word "act" and consider emancipation in the sense of a decision and a conclusion which imply a degree of commitment, given that we are not talking about a deliberative process, but a separation. To break free, in this case, from the belief in an absolute truth, is not without consequences.

Certainly, in emancipation as separation we find that, that which is abandoned was an anticipated promise which contained the possibility of not coming about, an ideal. From this perspective, Freud explains how ideals work and why it is so difficult to leave the place which they occupied free (Freud 1990 [1921], 88-93). We are talking about a dialectical process between alienation and separation: alienation involves grasping that which the master demands and accepting it within the ideals of the time; separation is one of the possible responses to the appearance of the inassimilable, that which is impossible in that demand. Another kind of response is the satirical denunciation, which does not allow separation either, as in attacking that which it fights, it gives it more consistency. Voltaire wrote furious satires against the enemies of the *Encyclopédie* from his Geneva residence. Diderot, however, decided to remain silent and continue working, managing to get his articles past the censors without them realising or, at least, without them intervening. It was his way of separating himself from the master's demand, that is, of breaking free.

Diderot achieved this separation because, for him, emancipation was a forced choice: he could not in any way sustain a belief which contradicted his

principles. He was an atheist until the end of his days, and shared neither the deism of Voltaire nor that of the English philosophers, although he did share their scepticism (Mornet 1926, 44-65). It was perhaps his understanding of historical time which did not allow him to accept the notion of a rationally created order. He opposed the restoration of any kind of guarantee in place of what, until then, had been occupied by God and His representative on earth, the monarch. On 12 December 1765, Diderot writes to Damilaville, Parisian solicitor friend of the encyclopaedia makers who, at that time, was in Ferney, at the home of Voltaire. In the letter he asks him to pay his respects to the "incredible man", and to remind him of the misanthropist's fable. And he adds: "Tell him that the notion of a supreme being in a Trajan, a Marcus Aurelius, a Cato, and in so many other well made heads of men who walk under the gaze of a beneficent being who they had taken as their role model, could be an excellent notion; but let him question the history which he knows so well, and he will see that, for the rest, this has been, is, and will be a disastrous idea" (Diderot 1997 [1765], 529).

Denis Diderot (1713-1784) was the director and editor, in collaboration with d'Alembert during the first years, of the most subversive collective project of the Age of Enlightenment. The *Encyclopédie* was, in its beginnings, a proposal for the translation of the *Cyclopaedia: or, A Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* by Ephraim Chambers, an English scholar who in 1728 had discovered in crossed references a way of overcoming the difficulty which Francis Bacon (1561-1626) had encountered when trying to organise the knowledge acquired by humanity over the centuries in an effective way (Blom 2004, 11-26). Bacon had taken the classical metaphorical image of the tree of knowledge and had set up a tree which sprang up from human faculties and perceptions and which branched out in sub-divisions including all the branches of knowledge. That tree established the "Figurative system of human knowledge" with which the French encyclopaedia makers began the *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*. Rooted in the three human faculties –memory, reason and imagination–, the tree "opens"; each article being accompanied by the "branch" of knowledge it belongs to, which allows one to get round the arbitrariness of the alphabetical order and to read in a transversal way. This solved the problem inherent in starting a work in 1751 with the letter *A*, and finishing it fourteen years later, in 1765, with the letter *Z*, without the help of appendices which were to include, later, new contributions.

Diderot understood the importance of the firm and it was he who personally directed and revised all the editorial work for twenty years. The project began its life bravely, and soon became the centre of intellectual resistance against the traditional pillars of the *ancien régime*, the Church and the mon-

archy. In Bacon's "tree" theology was an independent branch from which numerous sub-divisions sprang. The encyclopaedia makers, for their part, considered it to be one of the three branches of philosophy: together with the "Science of Man" and the "Science of Nature", they included the "Science of God", subject to reason, and not faith, revelation or grace, as both the Jesuits and the Jansenists claimed. In one of the articles signed by Diderot, published in the first volume, POLITICAL AUTHORITY, he firmly declares human freedom: "No man has received from nature the right to rule over others", considering that the only natural authority is that of the father, "but this power has limits" and if the origins of other forms of authority are examined, we discover that we always return to the same two sources, "to the force and violence wielded by the strong, or to the common consent of those who submit to them". In the article Diderot implicitly denies any form of government by divine right.

We would be wrong to reduce the knowledge gathered in the *Encyclopédie* to its practical function. Its own circular structure made it, already in its own time, a controversial work, incomplete, open to new contributions, where the transmission of knowledge responded in the most effective way to the ideal of emancipation of the time: seventeen thematic volumes, with around 73,000 articles, and eleven volumes of plates, with more than 2,500 illustrations. "The advantage of containing an infinity of new things is the natural consequence of the fortunate choice of those who have devoted themselves to it [...] Genius and good taste are two very different qualities. Nature provides the first at a given time; the other is the product of centuries", wrote Diderot in the article ENCYCLOPÉDIE from volume V, which appeared in November 1755.

The team of "specialists" which made up the circle of encyclopaedia makers was comprised of a group of friends who regularly met at the house of Baron d'Holbach, a man born in the Palatinate, but educated in Paris. He was incredibly wealthy, profoundly atheist and, apart from being the host to philosophers, wrote and translated ceaselessly, and always published anonymously or under a pseudonym. He was in charge of the articles about chemistry, metallurgy and geology. D'Alembert, mathematician and member of the Science Academy, was co-director of the *Encyclopédie* together with Diderot until 1758, the year in which, for the second time, the project came under serious attack and he decided to leave the firm. Another famous collaborator was Rousseau, who had just received the Dijon Academy award and took pleasure in considering himself free of any kind of servitude. Diderot asked him to take on the subjects related to music. Joining this team later on was the scientist and doctor Jean de Jancourt, a highly cultured gentleman who had worked for twenty years on the elaboration of a specialised reference work, a comprehensive medical dictionary.

And, as the work progressed and the volumes sold successfully, other collaborators joined the original ones: Voltaire, Grimm, the naturalist Daubenton, the engineer Bellin, the grammarian Dumarchais, the watchmaker Le Roy, the lawyer Touissaint, the painter Watelet. However, the successive crises which endangered the project made it difficult to work on it, so much so that, on 8 March 1759, when news arrived that, by royal decree, the *Encyclopédie* had been banned and deprived of *privilege* (an essential requisite for its publication), many of the collaborators withdrew from the team. However, Diderot responded firmly and bravely: with or without *privilège*, the task which had been undertaken must be finished. When Catherine II ascended to the Russian throne, in 1762, she invited Diderot to reside at court and to finish the *Encyclopédie* there. Diderot understood and accepted the paradox that the firm, which was being persecuted in the country of the *politesse,* of the sciences and art, of good taste, of philosophy, was to be reclaimed from the barbarian confines of the icy north. In a letter written to his friend and speaker Sophie Volland, he tells her of the offer he has received from Russia and adds: "They are unaware that that work no longer belongs to us, but to the booksellers who have assumed all the expenses and that we could not take one single page away from them without being unfaithful to them" (Diderot, letter to Sophie Volland in October 1762).

Diderot became angry and showed a radical rejection of the knowledge which is kept in secret to be made use of privately, depending on personal interest or the preservation of certain privileges. Thus, it is not surprising that he himself reveals one of his most important discoveries: the power of resorting to crossed references, "whose silent results make themselves felt as the years go by", as he explains in the article ENCYCLOPÉDIE, from volume V. Diderot warns that the relating of concepts also makes disagreement evident, "in giving references to other articles in which solid principles defend completely opposing truths, we can destroy the whole clay building_and get rid of all the useless rubbish". Thus, for example, in the article dedicated to the word GOD, after an orthodox compilation of the different aspects of the notion, we find: "See *DEMONSTRATION, CREATION, ATHEISM, CORRUPTION*". Of course, in those other entries Diderot puts forward his materialist and evolutionist theory, according to which there is no need to sustain the belief in a creator god *ex nihilo*, nor in a supreme being, eternal and immutable, whose proclamation and in whose name nations of people have been covered in blood and fire.

Crossed references also enabled the inclusion of objections voiced by specialists to some previously published articles. For example, the article which corresponds to the word *GAGEURE* [BET], in volume VI, merely explains its inclusion in the work, given that "it provides us with the opportunity to

include the objections which have been made to the article CROIX OU PILE [HEADS OR TAILS]"; through this resource, Diderot corrects the theory of probabilities, redirecting the reader to other articles awaiting publication: "See *JEU, PARI* [BET], *PROBABILITÉ*". In other cases, we are simply dealing with a way of mentioning a book which Diderot wants to recommend the reading of without explicitly giving his reasons. This is the case, for example, with the word *FOANG*, an entry which is striking due to its lack of interest in a work of these characteristics: "small silver coin in circulation in Siam the equivalent of [...]. See *Le Journal du Voyage de Siam*, by the Abbé de Choisy".

The encyclopaedic work allowed Diderot to be released from Vincennes prison, where he had been held for publishing his conjectures about the paradox of a philosopher making himself blind in order to see clearly, in stark opposition to the notion of "innate ideas", and taking the question into the field of ethics; it also freed him from the servitude of being a man-servant, the modern form of servitude and cynicism, that which Peter Sloterdijk has termed "enlightened false consciousness" (Sloterdijk 1986 [1983], 44). In confronting censorship and gradually discovering the complicities hidden beneath relationships of power, Diderot had an inkling as to the place which the philosopher or writer could occupy, if he allowed himself to be seduced by recognition and by his inclusion in the new order: he could become an elegant man-servant, an intellectual at court or the Bar. Denis Diderot made his choice: he used the censorship which was swooping down on the *Encyclopédie* to direct his work, in an enthusiastic and determined way. Knowing its limits, in order to work precisely on them, it became the objective he needed to gather, around his person and the project, many specialists from the different branches of knowledge. Committed to this public task, Diderot did not hide its less amiable aspect: "My problems occur one after the other. I tire my eyes examining plates full of numbers and letters and, in the midst of this arduous task, my thoughts become embittered by the injustices, the persecutions, the anguish and the affronts which will result from it all", he writes in October 1761 to Sophie Volland (Diderot 1997 [1761], 359).

Some years before his death in 1778, Diderot published a sharp criticism on stoicism (*Life of Seneca*), in the time of the American Declaration of Independence.

The criticisms, once again, rained down upon him. And his response was to set about a new version of the work, which he titled *Essay on the Kingdoms of Claudius and Nero*. It took him almost two years to publish the complete version, this time outside France, although he had the consent of Le Noir, at that time Police Lieutenant in 1780. In the Second Book he analyses the work of Seneca. When he comments on Seneca's essay title *On the happy life*,

Diderot expresses the paradox of emancipation in the form of dialogue: "–In order to be happy, one has to be free: happiness is not for he who recognises any master other than his own duty. –But, is duty not tyranny? And, if one must be a slave, does it matter which master one chooses? –It matters a lot, as to free oneself from this master would only bring misfortune; with the chains of this duty all the rest are broken" (Diderot 1994 [1778], 1190).

Concluding Remarks

Via the three cases presented here I have tried to argue that the wish to be free is not present in human nature, and that the subject who assumes this contradiction has accepted to renounce comfort, to a certain extent. The difficulty of saying "no" to the master, according to La Boétie, was not a question of strength or power, but of the desire for servitude. In Gracián's case, his decision to publish turned out to be greater than the coercion of censorship, and so he used his ingenuity to cheat it somewhat. Diderot concluded that there is always a master to serve, and that it is a question of subjective choice. They are different responses to the paradoxes of emancipation.

I believe that, when the master wishes to control the elaboration of knowledge, there is no choice but to find a point of inconsistency in his own discourse and move forward, because perhaps knowledge has been, throughout history, the middle point which makes an articulation –not a solution– possible between strength and freedom. I think that in each age we can find a method of not renouncing emancipation, always provided that it is recognised that this will not be neither total, nor revolutionary, nor progressive, nor Utopian.

References

Batllorí, Miguel 1958: *Gracián y el barroco*. Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura.

Blom, Philipp 2004: *Encyclopédie*. London: Fourth Estate.

Diderot, Denis 1751-1765: *Encyclopédie*, available at http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb35153871q

Diderot, Denis: 1761: Letter to Sophie Volland of 2 October, in *Œuvres*, ed. Laurent Versini, Paris: Robert Laffont, vol. V, 1997.

Diderot, Denis 1762: Letter to Sophie Volland in October, in *Œuvres*, ed. Laurent Versini, Paris: Robert Laffont, vol. V, 1997.

Diderot, Denis 1765: Letter to Damilaville of 12 September, in *Œuvres*, ed. Laurent Versini, Paris: Robert Laffont, vol. V, 1997.

Diderot, Denis 1778: *Essai sur les règnes de Néron et de Claude*, in *Œuvres*, ed. Laurent Versini, Paris: Robert Laffont, vol. I, 1994.

Freud, Sigmund 1921: *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, trans. by James Strachey, New York: Norton & Company, 1990.

La Boétie, Étienne de 1549: *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*, trans. by Harry Kurz, New York: Columbia University Press, 1942, available at http://www.constitution.org/la_boetie/serv_vol.htm

Mornet, Daniel 1926: *French Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, trans. by Lawrence M. Levin, New York: Prentice-Hall, 1929.

Sloterdijk, Peter 1983: *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. by Michael Eldred, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

Todorov, Tzvetan 2007: *L'Esprit des Lumières*. Paris: Robert Laffont.